



CALL IT
What
YOU WANT

LAWSON LOVERS - BOOK ONE

BRITT MCKENNA

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*To Dan,
Our love story is my favorite.*

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CHAPTER 1

Avery

I'M PULLED from a deep sleep—the kind I only fall into after a particularly heavenly orgasm. The kind that makes your limbs go limp and your worries soften at the edges, allowing you to forget all the stress of your day to day and simply *relax*.

I stretch my arms above my head, feeling the silky sheets slide down my bare stomach, and I smile to myself. Last night was amazing. It'd been too long since I'd had sex. Work has kept me busy, but now that my client's press tour for his latest movie is over, I finally have a break. And I plan to spend most of it in bed, satisfying the hussy within who's missed having her every need met.

I roll onto my stomach, propping my chin on my forearms and finally lift my heavy eyelids. Sleepy eyes take in my boyfriend's rumpled black sheets. A frown tugs at my lips when I realize he's not in bed. A quick glance at the digital clock on his nightstand reveals it's barely past four in the morning. Like me, Spencer is a workaholic, but he doesn't start his day until five. Worried something is wrong, I climb out of bed and grab one of his t-shirts from the floor. I throw it on. The soft cotton falls past my lacy underwear as I venture out of the masculine bedroom to search for Spencer.

It doesn't take long to find him standing on the balcony. The sliding glass door is open. The city's ever-present lights outline his body. He's on the phone, but his posture is relaxed. Clearly, this isn't a business call.

With a wicked grin, I tiptoe towards the patio, determined to wrap myself around Spencer and lure him back to bed for some early morning delight. I'm seconds from trailing my fingers over his delicious muscles when I hear him say, "I miss you too, baby. Don't worry. I'll come over tonight and show you just how much."

I freeze. *It can't be.*

"I love you too, Stacy. I can't wait to see you."

The words are a knife to the heart. This can't be happening. Spencer and I have been together for *five years*. All my friends have been saying they think he's going to propose. In a daze, I back away from the patio.

Somehow, I make it back to Spencer's bedroom. I'm sitting on the mattress, my mind spinning, when he walks back into the room. I hadn't bothered to turn on a light, but the glow of the city shines in through the blinds.

"Shit, Avery!" Spencer exclaims. "You scared me. What the hell are you doing sitting in the dark?"

"Who's Stacy?" My voice is dull. Lifeless. The question isn't accusatory. It's just a question. One I want him to answer.

"What?" His pitch spikes. That's when I know he's guilty.

I realize I don't need an explanation. Anything he tells me is likely to be a lie, anyway. Without another word, I stand and begin to gather my belongings. I rip off his t-shirt like it burns, tossing it back on the floor with more force than necessary. I shimmy into my strapless, black midi dress.

"Avery, baby... what are you doing?" Spencer steps in my path as I try to walk into the bathroom.

"I'm leaving."

"Baby." He tries to reach for me. I brush past him before he can touch me. "Talk to me. What's going on?"

I flip on the light, then toss the few toiletries I keep at his place in my bag. I'd thought Spencer didn't like clutter—that's why he insisted I not leave too many things over here. Now, I'm wondering if he simply didn't want any other woman to realize he had a girlfriend.

"Baby?" He calls again. This time, he stands in the doorway, blocking my exit.

I square my shoulders and meet his gaze. Again, I ask, "Who's Stacy?"

"Look, I don't know what you think you heard, but Stacy is just—"

“Get out of my way, Spencer. I’m not an idiot. We’re done. I’m not going to be with someone who’s cheating on me.”

No matter how mind-blowing the sex is. If I’m being honest, it’s pretty much the only thing we have going for us.

Our relationship wasn’t always this way. Once upon a time, just a couple years out of college, Spencer and I clicked on an emotional level. We valued each other’s sense of humor and work ethic, and we dreamed of conquering New York City together. But as the years passed, our careers took over our lives. I convinced myself it was just a phase—that sex wasn’t all that linked us nowadays.

I was wrong.

“Avery.” Spencer runs a hand through his hair. He switches tactics, no longer opting for outright denial. “Stacy is just a fling. She doesn’t mean anything. I swear. It’s you and me, baby. Until the end.”

I scoff. “The end is now. Move.”

He doesn’t.

Spencer begins spewing another half-assed apology, but I wasn’t lying when I said I was done. I knock my shoulder into his chest. It only moves him back a step, but that’s all I need to squeeze out of the bathroom.

Tears begin to burn the back of my eyes as I walk to the front door, but I will them to stay back until I’m out of the apartment. I’m humiliated and hurt, but I’ll be damned if I let Spencer see that.

I’m sliding my feet into the strappy stilettos I wore on our fancy dinner date last night when Spencer makes one last attempt to convince me to stay. His fingers wrap around my elbow, holding me in place. “Avery, please. Just listen.”

I shrug off his grip. “You have five seconds, and then I’m out that door,” I say coldly.

My siblings always said I had the best bitch voice, and they weren’t lying. It’s a skill that’s served me well in the PR world, and it comes in handy now, too.

Spencer stares at me with puppy dog eyes. “I made a mistake, okay? Stacy is just someone to pass time with. You’ve been busy with Aaron Richards’ press tour. I was lonely. Can you blame me? But now that you’re back, we can go back to normal. Everything can be like it was.”

I want to vomit. “You’re pathetic,” I tell him in a cool, detached voice. “Only a child blames someone else for his choices. We’re done. Have a nice life.”

I turn my back on him and stride out of the apartment with my head held high. I pass four apartment doors before I reach the elevator. I press the button to summon it by the time Spencer comes up with a response.

“You’re a cold-hearted, bitch, Avery Lawson,” he yells down the carpeted hallway. “The only reason we lasted as long as we did is because you’re a good lay with a tight pussy.”

I glare at the man I foolishly believed was my one. “A pussy that could’ve been yours forever, Spencer, if you just would’ve shown some fucking loyalty.” The words spew from my lips like acidic venom, dripping with the evidence of my pent-up disdain. I turn back to the elevator as the doors slide open, and I step inside without a backwards glance.

The moment the doors close, I fall against the wall and tears are unleashed. As much as I project the image of a tough, no-nonsense, badass businesswoman, I have emotions just like everyone else. And right now, betrayal and heartache are suffocating me. I don’t know how I’m ever going to trust anyone else ever again.

CHAPTER 2

Adam

“I’M SERIOUS, Natasha, I don’t need a date for the launch party. It’ll be fine.” I steer my Mercedes into the left lane and slow as I hit a red light. I turn on my blinker and stare at the palm trees across the street. Their fronds sway in the breeze, setting the Los Angeles day in a classic frame.

“It will not be fine, Mr. Moreno,” my assistant objects. I hear the stress in her voice over the car’s handsfree speakers. “You know, as well as I do, that your grandfather’s company is a *family* business. And as a family business, we can’t have the papers reporting that you’re dating the pornstar who partied with you and your friends in Vegas. We need to get you a respectable date for tonight so the reporters focus on her as your new flame before any more of our board members have a coronary over your extracurricular activities.”

I groan. Natasha is right, but that doesn’t make the pill any easier to swallow.

It’s been six years since I inherited my grandfather’s role as CEO in his luxury goods company—six years of bearing the weight of the restrictions that come with the position. The company’s old-fashioned values have been smothering me since the day I took over on my twenty-fourth birthday. If I didn’t spend my entire life preparing for the job, I might’ve walked away. But being CEO of Moreno Masterpieces was what I was meant to do. Plus, the money is fucking great.

“Fine, Tasha. You win. Find me a respectable woman, and I’ll take her to Source Solution’s launch party.”

“Oh, thank god,” the middle-aged woman sighs over the phone. “Thank you, Adam.”

The light turns green. I make a left. “You’re welcome, but you owe me one.”

“I’ll be sure the girl isn’t too respectable if that makes you feel better.”

I bark a laugh and almost miss the turn into my apartment's parking lot. "You're a saint, Tasha. Where would I be without you?"

"Unemployed," she deadpans.

I laugh again. Natasha was my father's assistant once. He'd joined the company as a low-level sales representative. Then, he met my mother, the heiress of Moreno Masterpieces.

After a whirlwind romance, my parents got married, and my father rose in the ranks of the company. Sadly, he died when I was eleven.

Natasha stayed on with the company doing random administrative work until I took over.

When I saw her application to become my assistant, I threw all the others away. I'd grown up around Natasha. She was good people. And someone in my position could use all the good people they could find.

"There's another matter I'd like to discuss with you," Natasha pitches her voice low. If it weren't for the fact I knew Natasha had her own office, I'd think she was trying not to be overheard.

I put the car in park, killing the engine. I picked up the phone and pressed it closer to my ear. "What is it?"

"Brigette."

I scowl at the sound of my ex-girlfriend's name. "What about her?"

Natasha sighs. "She's filed an HR complaint against you."

She can't be serious.

"What could Brigette possibly have to complain about?"

"She says she's afraid you will fire her now that you've broken up. She says you threatened as much the last you spoke."

"Jesus Christ." I throw my head against the headrest and pinch the bridge of my nose. "We broke up months ago. And I never threatened to fire her."

What I'd said was that Brigitte only had the job at the company because I arranged it, long after we started seeing each other. I told her now that we weren't together, she needed to start pulling her weight if she wanted to keep her spot on the sales team. I wouldn't be vouching for her anymore. Her fate was in her own hands.

"I believe you, Adam, but the company still needs to do everything possible to ensure she doesn't take her complaints public and further smear your name."

Great.

"Does my grandfather know about this?"

I swear I can hear Natasha's wince through the phone's earpiece. "He is the one who requested I speak to you about it."

The fact my grandfather wasn't the one to call me is both a reprieve and an omen. He's growing tired of me. If I'm honest, he's been getting tired of me for a while. I seriously need to mend that bridge before he does something foolish—like hand the reigns of the company over to my cousin, Phillip, instead.

"Got it. Thanks Natasha. I'll handle it."

"I know you will."

I end the call, but I don't get out of the car right away. Instead, I lean back against the headrest and grip the steering wheel, trying to clear away the stress Natasha's call has induced.

It isn't her fault. She's just the messenger. I'm the one who'd been stupid enough to hang out in a Vegas hotel with a pornstar.

I'm not knocking the profession. Cassandra Star is a nice enough person. But I'd been given a clear warning from my grandfather to clean up my act and keep my personal life above board. If I couldn't do that, then I should at least make sure my antics stay out of the press. Add in this mess with Brigitte, and I find myself grateful that I'm half a world away from Spain where the rest of my family lives.

There will be a time for me to deal with my personal problems, but it's not today. Because today, I have business to attend to, and I can only pray it's successful. If it isn't, I don't know how I will convince my grandfather to keep me on as CEO.

CHAPTER 3

Avery

“Wow, Avery, this is amazing. I can’t believe you managed to pull this off in one week.”

I grin at my baby brother, admiring how grown up he looks in his designer tuxedo under the fancy hotel chandelier light. It doesn’t matter he’s six-two, and I’m only five-six. He’ll always be my baby brother.

“Are you kidding? There’s no way I was going to let anyone else coordinate your company’s launch party.” In fact, Derek’s phone call asking me to help out couldn’t have come at a better time.

Spencer and I broke up exactly one month ago, and I’d been debating whether or not to cut my losses and leave New York for a fresh start. It wasn’t like I loved The City. I had friends, and I liked my job, but everyone in New York was so focused on the rat race. They barely enjoyed life. The only reason I stayed as long as I did was for Spencer. I’d been itching to take my career to the West Coast, but Spencer loved the hustle and bustle of New York life.

Now that we are over, I had no reason to stay.

So, after speaking with Derek, I decided to move. In two days, I packed two suitcases and sublet my furnished apartment to Ike, one of my sister’s aspiring model friends at a graciously discounted rate. Then, I flew to LA. I only had one week to coordinate my brother’s launch party after his local event planner bailed. The small-time coordinator hadn’t realized how much work went into celebrating the beginning of a multi-million-dollar tech company, and they chickened out rather than risk failure.

Not that I’m complaining. Now, I get to be the one to give my brother the party of a lifetime—the one he deserves.

Although only two years younger than me at twenty-seven, Derek Lawson is far more accomplished. He graduated high school early. The same year as me and my twin sister, in fact.

And he earned his bachelor's and master's degree in computer science in five years.

When he and his childhood best friend first spoke of their idea to start their own IT company, there wasn't a doubt in my mind it would be a success. Both of them are brilliant. The only issue they had was money. Being that both of them came from solid middle-class families, they didn't have the capital to make their dreams a reality on their own. Fortunately for them, fate smiled down on them.

While working on his master's thesis, Derek had traveled abroad to conduct interviews with various government officials and business men and women. He was studying the dynamics between governments and the tech industry in foreign countries. While in Spain, he met a wealthy businessman who had an interest in up-and-coming technology companies.

According to Derek, he had dinner with the man where they discussed his potential company. After the dinner, Derek walked away with the promise of a six-million-dollar investment the moment he and Kyle, his best friend, were ready to start their company.

Now, two years later, here we are. I seriously couldn't be happier for my brother.

"Any idea where Heather is?" Derek asks about our sister, my twin.

A server walks by with a tray of champagne. I take two, handing one to my brother, and say, "You know Heather. She probably took a nap and is now frantically getting ready. She'll be here just in time to make a dramatic entrance, trust me."

Derek chuckles. "Fair enough."

I glance at the delicate silver watch on my wrist. "The doors are about to open. Let's move close to the entrance so you can greet people as they walk in. Where's Kyle?"

"Present!" Kyle Waters, my brother's best friend and business partner, pops up behind us. His voice is so close to

my ear, I jump in surprise, nearly spilling champagne on my white cocktail dress.

I spin around to face the grinning young man. “Gee, Kyle. Excited much?”

His smile grows. “You know it. You really outdid yourself, Aves. This place looks amazing.” He gestures to the finely decorated ballroom, sweeping his arm across the high-quality bar, expensive linens covering the tables and chairs, fancy place settings, and the elaborate floral centerpieces.

“Thank you,” I reply with a smile of my own. “You and Derek need to stand near the entrance and greet guests as they enter. Be sure not to speak to anyone for too long, or else there will be a backup. Encourage people to grab a drink and mingle. I’ll come get you when it’s time for the opening remarks.”

Kyle lifts his hand in a mock salute. “Aye, aye, Captain Aves.”

Derek nods along to my instructions, then says, “I know you coordinated everything, Avery, but will you promise to try and have a fun night? Let the hotel staff handle everything.”

Yeah... no way.

I’m determined to make sure this party goes smoothly for my brother. He and Kyle invited several big-name tech investors tonight, with the hopes of securing more capital so they can expand their company the moment they’re successful. I plan to help by ensuring the night proceeds without a hitch. Still, I know Derek worries about me.

So, I don my most convincing smile and say, “Of course, Derek.” I lift my champagne glass in demonstration and take a sip. “See? Already having fun.”

My brother shakes his head with a smile as I usher him and Kyle to the door.

Once they’re settled, I make my way to the bar and replace my champagne with a soda water. I’ll indulge in a glass of wine after Derek’s opening speech and dinner is served. Until then, I need to keep my wits about me.

I run a hand down the front of my form-fitting cocktail dress, wondering, not for the first time, if it's too much. Heather had dragged me shopping the day after I flew in, and my fashionable sister insisted I buy the dress I'm currently wearing. I'm not averse to wearing sexy dresses, but they're usually reserved for dates, or the odd-night when my friends can drag me to a club.

The ballroom doors open. I glance over and see several finely dressed men and women make their way inside. Derek and Kyle smile brightly as they greet their guests. I walk along the edge of the room, searching for anything out of place. I pass the doors leading to the on-site kitchen right as they swing open. A server walks out with a large tray filled with the hors d'oeuvres I personally selected. I pivot to the left to avoid a collision, but I don't see the man standing next to the table beside me.

"Oomph." I run right into him. My drink sloshes. I squeak and throw my hips back to keep the liquid from soaking my front. Soda water splashes on my ruby-red heels and the hem of the man's trousers.

"Oh, my goodness. I am so sorry!" I frantically look around for something to help clean up the mess. I only see the fabric napkins at the tables.

To hell with it.

I grab one. I'll get the hotel staff to replace it before guests are seated for dinner.

I place my half-empty glass on the table, then immediately begin blotting my dress before moving down to dry the liquid from my feet. I stand and grab another napkin and shove it in the man's chest. "Here. It's just soda-water, so it shouldn't discolor your pants, but drying the excess will let it dry more quickly."

Strong fingers wrap around the fabric napkin. I look up and suck in a breath as I take in the gorgeous man in front of me. His strong jawline sports a trimmed, five-o'clock shadow. His brown hair is artfully messy, and his green eyes gleam under the room's light. It's Adam Moreno... Derek's investor.

I am mortified.

I watch as Mr. Moreno, the Spanish billionaire who's responsible for helping my brother's dreams come true, bends to run the napkin over his expensive leather shoes.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Moreno," I feel compelled to say. I'm certain my face is red like a cherry tomato.

"You know who I am. Can't say I'm surprised." He straightens and finally locks his stunning emerald eyes on me.

His tone confuses me.

I tilt my head to the side and ask, "What do you mean?"

Does he know I'm Derek's sister?

Mr. Moreno's lips lift in an unamused smile. "Do me a favor, love. Let's not pretend our run-in was an accident. While you are undeniably gorgeous, I'm afraid I am not interested."

I stare at the billionaire with my jaw unhinged. I ignore the fact he called me gorgeous. The compliment is overshadowed by the fact he arrogantly believes I ran into him on purpose. Anger flares in my chest, and I snap my mouth closed.

My siblings accuse me of having a temper. I disagree. I'd say I'm a perfectly reasonable and level-headed person. But even a reasonable person wouldn't let this guy get away with his arrogant assumption.

No way.

"Excuse me, Mr. Moreno, but I object to your assumption."

"Oh?" He lifts a brow. Prior to our encounter, I would have thought it sexy. Now, it's annoying.

"Oh, yes." I snap back. "What makes you think I'd run into you on purpose, almost ruining my dress in the process?"

"You said your drink was soda and water. It wouldn't have ruined your dress."

I purse my lips. “Thankfully, that’s true. Still, this wasn’t intentional.” I gesture between him, me, and the half-empty glass on the table. “A server walked out of the kitchen, and I swerved to avoid running into him.”

“So you ran into me instead.”

I roll my eyes. “I didn’t see you.”

“Of course not.” His tone grates on my nerves.

“You know what? I don’t care what you think. I’ve apologized. Take it or leave it. I have things to do. Have a nice night, Mr. Moreno.”

I grab my glass and spin on my heel. I make it three steps before I hear him ask, “What’s your name?”

Seriously? I frown, then look over my shoulder in time to see his emerald eyes snap up from my backside.

Absolutely not.

I don’t know if his actions are some form of negging—insulting a woman to pique her interest and lure her to your bed—but I am not falling for it. I don’t tell him my name.

Instead, I say, “Just call me Soda Water. Enjoy your evening, Mr. Moreno.”

I walk away to the sound of a deep, throaty chuckle. I can’t decide if it’s an irritating or enticing sound.

CHAPTER 4

Adam

I STAND at the bar at Source Solutions' launch party, staring out at the crowded ballroom. There's a lot of money in here tonight. I'm probably not the wealthiest man in here, which is rare for me.

I silently applaud Derek and Kyle for reaching out to secure more capital. Lord only knows how long I'll be able to fund their startup. I'd believed it could be a long-term arrangement, but the phone call with my grandfather this evening threatened to change that.

I step out of the shower and hear a familiar ringtone. It's the theme song to the television show, The Wire. As a teenager, my grandfather and I watched the new episodes together every week. The song brings back happy memories, but my happiness is quickly replaced with unease when I realize there's only one reason my grandfather would be calling at this hour.

He's pissed. And I'm about to hear it. I debate the merits of ignoring the call for two seconds before I tap 'accept'.

"Natasha will not be finding you a date, son."

I don't balk at the greeting. Or, rather, the lack thereof.

"Very well," I reply evenly. It's not like I wanted to spend the night entertaining a stranger, no matter how beautiful she may be.

"And you will get your act together, immediately, Adam. Or you will no longer act in my stead. Is that understood?"

Even though I knew it was coming, I wince when I hear the threat. "I understand."

"Do you, Adam?" My grandfather sounds tired. "Do you understand?"

"I do."

I hear his heavy sigh. “What happened to you, my boy? You used to be so reasonable. So well-behaved. Now, I don’t even recognize you half of the time.” It’s impossible to ignore how his words sting. My grandfather’s approval has always meant so much to me.

My dad died when I was just a kid, and my mom ran off long before that. At eleven, I’d been ripped from the life I’d known and moved to live with my only living grandparents. Despite being CEO of our family’s company, my grandfather took a leave of absence to help me adjust to my new reality.

The reality of my father’s death. The reality of being a practical orphan. The reality of knowing nothing would ever be the same.

Those were tough years, but my grandfather became my rock. He’s a second father to me. I hate to disappoint him.

Which begs the question, why do I keep fucking everything up with my personal life?

Professionally, I’m flawless. Moreno Masterpieces had turned yearly profits under my grandfather’s leadership. But under my watch, it’s thrived. We’ve grown more than forty percent since I took over as CEO. We’ve invested in many corporations and acquired others. There was nothing my grandfather could complain about when it came to my work.

But the social media buzz around me? The tabloids? The gossip rags? Those, he despised.

My grandfather is a conservative man. Old fashioned. Traditional. He values a family friendly image whenever someone thinks of Monroe Masterpieces. My behavior as of late has hardly been family friendly.

I finally manage to come up with a response to my grandfather’s remark. “I know my behavior has disappointed you, Abuelo. I promise, I will work on it.”

My grandfather releases another heavy sigh. “You have one month to find a way to mend your image with the press in the States and at home.” He mentions Spain. “Or I will be

appointing your cousin as interim CEO until we can find your official replacement.”

Again, I can only mutter, “I understand.”

My grandfather’s tone softens. “You are my heir, my boy. I believe in you. I just need you to grow up a bit. Don’t let me down.”

“I won’t.”

At least, I don’t intend to.

Across the room, I watch the beauty in the white cocktail dress flit about like a hummingbird, buzzing between the bartender, serving staff, and party guests. I’m thankful I stayed on the edge of the room, unnoticed in the shadows next to the bar. I’m not sure I could hide my open admiration of the mouthy brunette with legs that make me want to wrap them around my waist as I grip her ass and take her against the wall.

Normally, I don’t mind women throwing themselves at me. Or, in the brunette’s case, running into me. But the call with my grandfather served as a reality check. I need to watch my behavior. Maybe I’d been rude when I accused the woman of running into me on purpose, but she certainly hadn’t been little miss polite.

Honestly, if I didn’t just have my entire livelihood threatened, I probably would’ve taken the woman by the hand and dragged her into the coat closet to have my way with her.

What can I say? I love a challenge. And the flare of emotion in the woman’s blue eyes screamed nothing but challenge.

“Another glass, Mr. Moreno?” The bartender, the only soul who’s acknowledged me this evening, aside from the brunette, asks.

“Yes, thank you.” I walk up to the elegantly carved bar top and hand him my empty glass. He takes it and places it in the bucket below the bar, pours the vintage cabernet into a new

glass, then hands it to me. I place a twenty in the tip jar before accepting the glass.

“Thank you, sir.”

I nod, then return to my post in the shadows.

I’ll have to go over and speak to Derek and Kyle eventually. I’ll smile and mingle with their guests, letting everyone know just how much I, Adam Moreno, CEO and heir to the Moreno family fortune, believe in Source Solutions. But first, I want to watch a certain busy body a little more. I’m wondering if she’s a member of the hotel staff, or if she was hired externally, when I see a well-dressed man approach her.

My muscles tense. To my surprise, so do hers.

The beautiful brunette had bent over to pick up a cocktail napkin from the floor when the man addressed her, and there was no missing the way her entire body turned rigid.

She rises slowly. She’s facing away from me, so I can’t see her expression, but I have a clear view of the man’s face. He’s young. Late twenties if I had to guess. He’s clean shaven, and his blond hair is slicked back with an unnecessary amount of gel. His suit is expensive, and he wears a shiny Rolex on his left wrist. Clearly, he has money. And he also knows my mysterious brunette.

The two speak. The woman keeps her head down, trying not to draw attention, but her tense body screams something is amiss. I sip my wine and continue to watch. I notice the moment the conversation takes a turn.

The stranger’s expression hardens. His charming smile is replaced with a scowl. The woman waves her hands between them, shakes her head, then moves to step around him. A growl escapes my throat when he grabs her arm.

I’ve pushed myself off the wall and am about to walk over to intervene when the brunette rips her arm away with impressive strength. She stumbles a step. The blond doesn’t even bother to reach out to help her. The brunette finds her balance, then says something to him. Based on her twisted, furious features, I doubt it’s anything pleasant.

Then, she turns on her heel and strides away. For an unknown reason, my blood boils as I notice the stranger stare at her ass.

I settle back against the wall and take another sip of wine. The brunette is nearly to the ballroom entrance, but a crowd blocks her path. She hesitates, then turns left and disappears through an inconspicuous door. The coat closet.

The moment the door closes, the blond stranger makes his move.

My instincts are on high alert as he follows the path the brunette took, leading him right up to the coat closet. “Don’t you do it, you prick,” I mutter under my breath.

The stranger looks left, then right.

I suck in a breath.

He opens the closet door and disappears inside, and I’m halfway across the room before I exhale.

CHAPTER 5

Avery

MY HEART POUNDS a painful rhythm as I walk across the ballroom. I do my best to act normal, politely smiling at the guests I pass. But, inside, I feel out of control.

Spencer is here... My freaking ex is here.

The nerve.

I thought I was imagining it when I heard him call my name. But after five years together, his voice is as familiar as my own. I need to be alone. I need to get ahold of myself. But, most of all, I need to get away from Spencer.

I cannot believe he's here.

I'm close to the ballroom entrance, so close to freedom, when I see the large crowd gathered there, waiting to speak with Derek and Kyle. My brother and his best friend smile broadly and shake the hands of a group of men and women in front of them. They chat excitedly.

Knowing I won't be able to easily skirt around the crowd, I look for an alternate escape. The only other doors lead to the kitchen or are emergency exits.

Except for the coat closet.

I make a beeline for the closet, praying to anyone who will listen that no one notices me hide away like an emotional teenager. If I were mature or well-adjusted, I would suck it up and continue to make sure Derek's launch party goes off without a hitch while ignoring Spencer's presence. Apparently, I'm neither of those things.

Moisture burns my eyes, fueled by anger and the remnants of my acute heartbreak. I move to the back of the closet, blinking repeatedly to keep the tears at bay. Really, this is more of a coat room than a coat closet. It's massive. It's larger than the LA studio I managed to lease on less than forty-eight hours notice.

I lean against an empty space, ducking to avoid hitting my head on the wood rack above, when I hear the door open. Someone steps inside the closet. I hold my breath as I wait for them to hang up their coat and leave, but the steps grow closer.

“Avery?”

What the—

No. Way.

I am too furious to speak. I release my pent-up breath in a near-silent huff.

Spencer says, “Come on, Avery. I saw you walk in here. Seriously, I just want to talk.”

Red clouds my vision. I step out from between the expensive coats and glare through tear-filled eyes at my cheater of an ex-boyfriend. “And I already told you, I have *nothing* to say to you. Other than to get out before you ruin my brother’s party.”

Spencer takes in my expression. Instead of being deterred by the emotions displayed, he decides to take a step closer. “I’ve been calling you.”

“I blocked your number.”

He looks sad. “Why would you do that?”

“Are you joking?”

“No.”

I stare at him in disbelief.

His innocent act fuels my anger. “I blocked you because you cheated on me, Spencer. We broke up. I have no need, nor any desire, to ever speak to you again. The fact you are crashing my brother’s company party to try and discuss our failed relationship is crazy, and you need to leave. Now.”

“I didn’t crash it,” Spencer counters, choosing to only focus on one part of my rant. “I was invited.”

“When we were *dating*,” I counter, unable to believe he seriously can’t see how messed up his actions are. “Now that

we're not together, you have no business being here."

"I love you, Avery. I want to fix things. What am I supposed to do?"

"Go fuck Stacy!" I barely manage to stop myself from screaming. I don't want to draw anyone to the coat closet to witness this humiliating conversation. "You said you loved her. Remember that? Or maybe you have a new flavor of the week? Use one of them to help you mend your broken, cheating heart. I don't care. But you need to get out of here and leave me alone."

He moves closer. "It's been a month, Avery. I thought you would have calmed down by now."

Tears, hot and angry, leak from the corner of my eyes. "You are so full of yourself."

Spencer sees my tears and mistakes them as a sign that I'm folding.

"Hey." He grabs hold of my elbows to bring me in for a hug. "I love you, Avery. We will get through this."

I shove him back. "You are such an ass! Listen to the words coming out of my mouth. I. Don't. Want. To. Be. With. You. Not now. Not ever again. Now, leave the party before I get security to throw you out."

I don't want to do it. I'd hate to cause a scene at Derek's party, but I cannot stomach the idea of Spencer moseying around, putting his perfect nose in my family's business. Not anymore.

Spencer's eyes flash. Finally, he registers I mean what I say. And the default emotion for this emotionally stunted man-child is frustration. He opens his mouth to, no doubt, lob some immature, but still painful, insults my way. Before he can, the closet door opens.

Strong, tan hands grab my ex-boyfriend by the collar and pull him back with impressive ease.

“Are you all right?”

I look up into Adam Moreno’s emerald eyes. *Is this really happening? Am I dreaming?*

“What?” I stutter.

Mr. Moreno looks at Spencer, who is still sprawled out on the floor, with nothing short of ire and disdain. “Did he do something to you?”

Spencer’s wide eyes would be comical if I didn’t think mine look the exact same way. I stare at my brother’s investor with obvious confusion. Moisture still brims on my bottom eyelids.

Mr. Moreno notices. His fists clench. “Why are you crying?”

I don’t have the ability to answer. I’m too stunned by the turn of events.

Mr. Moreno turns his ire onto my ex, who just now gets ahold of himself enough to get to his feet. Spencer is brushing off his pants and shirt when Mr. Moreno barks at him, “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing, man.” Spencer tries to sound at ease, but there’s a tense note in his voice. Spencer is fit, but he is at least four inches shorter and about fifteen-pounds lighter in the muscle department. If he and Mr. Moreno get in a fight, it’s pretty obvious who will win.

Why does the idea of them fighting excite me?

Down, girl, I chastise my inner hussy. It’s obviously been too long since I’ve had some action if *this* situation turns me on.

Spencer and Mr. Moreno continue to stare one another down.

Then, realization flitters across my ex's face. "Holy shit. You're Adam Moreno. The billionaire."

I watch the Spanish businessman stiffen.

Three long seconds pass. Both Spencer and I wait for his response.

Then, Mr. Moreno does something that catches me completely off guard. I may as well be knocked upside the head, tied up, and dragged away by my hair.

Adam Moreno, the sexy, but notably arrogant, man closes the distance between us. He wraps an arm around my waist and drags me into his body for a firm, intimate embrace. He leans back so he can look down at my face, but his arm remains banded around me. "I was worried about you, babe."

Babe?

"Babe?" Spencer shares my confusion out loud. Only, his tone conveys fury along with his disbelief.

Mr. Moreno ignores him. His finger trails down the side of my face, from my temple to the corner of my lips. He gazes at me with such softness—I'm not sure a man has ever looked at me this way.

He ignores Spencer's outburst and says to me, "Did this guy touch you, babe? Do I need to call security?" His hand moves to rest in the space between my shoulder and my neck. I'm certain he can feel my rapid pulse fluttering under his thumb.

Still, I say nothing.

I am an innocent bunny caught in the snare of an enticing predator. Adam Moreno should walk around with a warning label taped to his forehead. His piercing eyes are dangerous—so dangerous, I am at risk of forgetting my own name.

"I can't believe this." Spencer's sputtered words are what, at last, allows me to gather my thoughts. I draw a ragged breath and look his way.

"You're dating Adam Moreno, Avery? Really? I knew you were a slut, but I didn't peg you for a gold digging— What the

fu—?” Spencer’s expletive is cut off when Mr. Moreno grabs him by the throat and throws him back through the row of coats until his back hits the wall.

I blink, shocked. He moved so fast.

“Listen to me, you piece of shit,” Mr. Moreno growls. “If you speak to Avery again... If you touch her... If you even *look* in her direction, it will be the last thing you do. Do you understand? She. Is. Mine.”

A bolt of desire jolts through me.

Did he really just say that?

Spencer, to the surprise of no one who knows him, doesn’t argue. If Adam Moreno wasn’t so intimidating, or a man whom Spencer believed he could take if it came to a fight, my ex wouldn’t have stood down. But Spencer is nothing but a cowardly bully who will roll over like a dog when finally called out for his actions. It sucks that I overlooked the fault for so many years.

My ex grunts and nods.

Mr. Moreno throws him towards the closet door. “Get out.”

Spencer doesn’t look back at me. He slinks out the door like the snake he is.

I don’t notice Mr. Moreno close the distance between us until his breath brushes the top of my head. I look up into his lovely eyes. This time, he doesn’t touch me. I tell myself I’m not disappointed.

“Are you all right, Avery?” He repeats his original question. This time, a zip of electricity courses through me when I hear him say my name.

I hadn’t introduced myself to him, but then I remember Spencer had said my name.

My cheeks heat as I replay the mortifying scene. “I’m fine. Thank you for your help.”

“Of course.” He gives me a stunning, genuine smile.

I wait for him to say more, but Mr. Moreno just continues to smile down at me.

I clear my throat. “Yes, well... I’d better get back to the party.” I motion lamely to the closet door.

Mr. Moreno steps to the side. “Of course.”

My lips waver in an uneasy smile as I go to move past him. Before I take two steps, one of my heels snags on a scarf that had fallen to the floor during the scuffle. I try to right myself, but my other heel meets the same fate. I lurch forward. I throw my hands out to brace for impact with the floor, but they collide with the firm muscles beneath a tuxedo-clad chest.

A gasp escapes me.

Mr. Moreno’s hands hold my arms. “Careful.” His calloused fingers slide down my arms until they rest at my back. They move over my waist, settling on my hips. “You wouldn’t want to fall and ruin your dress. It already has a soda water stain.”

I stare up at him. He smiles, letting me know he’s teasing. My heart races. No one should be so attractive.

I lick my dry lips. My core tightens when I see Mr. Moreno’s eyes follow the motion. His hands remain on my hips, and I don’t try to move away. Still, the rational part of me knows I should.

Adam Moreno is gorgeous, but he’s Derek’s investor. He’s a freaking *billionaire*. I’m sure he has women throwing themselves at him every single day. Didn’t he accuse me of doing the same a half an hour ago? So why is he standing here, pressing me up against his rock-hard body like he wants nothing more than to take me, right here, in this closet?

And why does that not bother me? Am I really such a sucker for good looks and a muscled body?

Based on the way my lady bits clench as he continues to gaze down at me with those heated, emerald eyes, I know the truth.

Yes. I am that sucker.

The closet door opens, and I leap out of his arms like they burn. I turn towards the door, ready to apologize to whomever had the unfortunate luck to find us in such a compromising position, when I am confronted by a face as familiar to me as my own. Literally. Because I've seen it since the day I was born.

My twin sister, Heather, stands in the doorway. An expensive faux fur coat hangs halfway off her back. She was in the middle of shrugging it off when she noticed me.

A giddy smile pulls at her lips. "My, my, Aves. Hooking up in the coat closet? I didn't think you had it in you."

CHAPTER 6

Adam

I TUCK my hands into my pockets, and I take in the leggy blonde standing in front of me. She's beautiful, and vaguely familiar, but her looks don't hold a candle to the stunning brunette blushing furiously as she faces the newcomer. Clearly, they know each other.

I'm wondering how when the blonde chuckles. "Nothing to say, Avery?"

The brunette, Avery, shakes her head and says, "Knock it off, Heather. It's not what it looks like."

"Oh, no?" The blonde flings the expensive coat she carries on the ground, unbothered by the fact it could wrinkle. "Then care to tell me why your body was plastered all over this fine specimen." I grin as she waves her hand over me. Then, she looks me in the eye and says, "I don't believe we've met. I'm Heather Lawson, your cuddle-buddy's sister."

Lawson?

But that would mean...

"Heather, what's the hold up?" Derek's voice sounds close.

Avery stiffens, then immediately takes three steps forward so she stands at her sister's side right as Derek appears in the doorway. The co-creator of Source Solutions stands there with a happy smile that swiftly turns to confusion as he takes in Heather, Avery, and me.

"Adam?" He glances once again between me and his sisters. "What's up man? When did you get here?"

I don a smile and say, "Not long ago." I move forward, forcing the sisters to step aside so I can greet their brother. Avery's floral scent floods my nostrils when I pass. I resist the urge to pause and inhale deeply.

I go to shake Derek's hand. He catches it but draws me into a hug. I laugh and pat his back. "Nice to see you, Derek."

Derek and I met a couple years ago, and we communicate regularly about the business, but it's been a while since we've seen each other in person. I took up residence in my LA home a couple weeks ago, but I've been on a pseudo-mini vacation, traveling the States to visit old classmates and let loose a bit. Little good *that* did me.

Now, I'm determined to stay in LA and keep out of trouble. In addition to fulfilling my duties as the CEO of Moreno Masterpieces, I plan to help Source Solutions during their first financial quarter. I need this investment to be a success. I need to prove to my grandfather I'm still what's best for his company.

"You too," Derek returns, stepping back and releasing my hand. "I see you've met my sisters."

I made the connection just seconds before he entered the scene.

"Not officially," the blonde chirps with a mischievous smirk. "I'm Heather Lawson. And you already know my twin."

"Yes," I confirm with an easy smile. It will take much more than a teasing innuendo to make me blush.

But the same cannot be said for Avery. The brunette's high cheekbones are painted pink. It's a charming look.

I'm impressed when Avery clears her throat and says, "It's almost time for the opening speech, Derek. You ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," the co-founder of Source Solutions sighs.

I clap a hand on his shoulder. "You'll do great. Source Solutions is a sound company with incredible growth potential. Everyone here knows it."

"Thanks, man."

My hand falls away. I feel eyes on me. I turn and see Avery give me a curious look. Before I can do something stupid, like ask her what the look's for, Derek releases another

sigh and says, “Might as well get this over with. Aves, can you listen to my speech one more time before I go up there?”

I feel strangely bereft when her eyes snap away from me, focusing on her brother. “Of course.” She moves forward, once again giving me a whiff of her floral scent.

I’m staring after the brother and sister, wondering if the enticing smell is her perfume or shampoo, when a feminine throat clears. My pulse spikes from surprise, but I manage to keep my cool as I shift my gaze onto Derek’s other sister. Again, I get the sense I recognize her, but I can’t put my finger on how.

Heather Lawson grins. “So... you never did introduce yourself.”

I realize she’s right. “I apologize. I’m Adam Moreno.” I offer her my hand. She shakes it with strength. I appreciate it. I always feel awkward when women give me a limp hand. It’s like shaking hands with a dead fish.

A blonde brow lifts. “Adam Moreno? As in, Derek’s billionaire investor?”

“Yes.”

“Nice to meet you,” she replies.

“You, too.”

She motions to the door. “Should we go back out there, or are you going to give me the same treatment as my twin?” Her eyes twinkle in amusement. I know she’s joking, but I feel strangely compelled to set the record straight. For Avery’s sake.

“Avery fell. I was simply helping her back up.”

“Uh huh.” Heather walks out of the closet. I follow.

The crowd near the entrance has cleared. My eyes scan the ballroom, searching for an obnoxious blond whom I’d happily throw out myself if he’s stupid enough to have lingered. But I see no sign of Avery’s ex.

Good.

I do see Avery though.

She and Derek stand by the stage. Avery stands with her back to the closest wall. Derek faces her. Based on the way he moves his hands and his rigid posture, he's practicing his speech.

"She's always been his rock," Heather says by my side. I hadn't realized I stopped walking. But the moment I saw Avery, it's like my feet were glued to the floor.

"What?" I force my gaze off Avery's enticing figure under that white dress and look at her twin.

Heather motions to her siblings. "Avery's the oldest of us three. She's only got me beat by seventeen minutes, but those seventeen minutes made a difference. She's always the responsible one. The one Derek and I rely on. I'm so glad she decided to move to town and help Derek with the launch. I'm not sure how he would've handled the stress without her."

I refrain from commenting that I believe Derek perfectly capable of handling his business. I wouldn't have invested in it, or him, otherwise. Instead, I ask, "Avery moved to town?"

She nods. "Yes, a couple days ago."

What a coincidence.

"And what does Avery do for a living?"

Heather gives me a side eye. "Shouldn't you know?"

"Know what?"

"The name of your company's PR rep?"

I blink once then say, "I'm the investor. I don't necessarily know who's on the payroll."

That's a lie. I've been hands on with Source Solutions this past year—as much as I could be without hindering Derek's or Kyle's confidence in steering the company the way they want. I believe in them and their ideas, and I don't want them to mistake my interest for criticism.

So, I let them make the decisions. I do, however, know most of the major players in the company by name. But I had

no idea Derek hired Avery as the PR rep.

No wonder she was running around the ballroom, looking like she worked at the hotel, making sure everything proceeded without a hitch.

“I see,” Heather says, but her tone reveals she doesn’t believe me. “So, are you the one I should thank for Spencer Wright storming out of the ballroom when I arrived?”

Her question catches me off guard, but I don’t deny it. “How did you know?”

She smirks. “Spencer wears his emotions on his face, and it screamed jealousy. And since Spencer thinks he’s God’s gift to women, it would take quite the guy to trigger that emotion in him. A good looking billionaire, for example.”

Her words are flattering, but I know she’s not flirting. Her tone and body language are friendly, but that’s it. Which is good. Because no matter how pretty Heather is, her sister is the only woman this evening who holds my attention.

A server walks by and offers us champagne. I take one and offer it to Heather.

“No, thanks,” she says. “I don’t drink.”

I nod and keep the drink for myself. “I found Spencer harassing Avery in the coat closet. I intervened. He obviously didn’t like it.”

Heather’s eyes darken. Her easy-going demeanor disappears, replaced by a protective stance as she crosses her arms, glaring blankly ahead. “Thank you for that. Spencer is such an ass. My sister is a strong woman, but he has a way of getting under her skin and making her doubt herself. I’m so glad she dumped him.”

Don’t ask. It’s not your business. Change the subject.

“How long have they been broken up?”

Damn it, Adam.

Heather’s smile returns. “Why? You interested?”

“Just curious.”

Liar.

The truth is, I am very interested in Avery. If only to appease the hunger pains, begging for me to get a taste of her pale pink lips. But Avery works for Source Solutions. She's also Derek's sister. Indulging in my desires with her will cause nothing but trouble.

Heather watches me. Her smile grows slowly. I think she's going to call me out on my lie, but instead she says, "One month. They were together five years."

Damn.

"That's a long time to be with someone."

"A long time to be mistreated, you mean," she counters.

I nod. "That too."

"Don't tell her I told you," Heather adds hastily.

I follow her gaze and my eyes are snagged by a pair of stunning blue irises across the room.

Avery watches me and her sister with a furrowed brow. Derek says something to her, dragging her attention from us.

I let loose the breath I didn't realize I was holding. "I won't say a word."

Heather chuckles and gives me a knowing look. "Avery can be intense, can't she?"

"She can indeed."

And I hate to admit it, because there's nothing I can do about it, but I'm very interested in Avery Lawson.

CHAPTER 7

Avery

DEREK'S SPEECH IS PHENOMENAL. He comes off as charismatic, humble, yet confident. I see more than one guest share meaningful looks with their companions, silently conveying that Source Solutions is a company to keep an eye on. I am so incredibly proud of him, I could cry.

I record the entire speech for our parents. They wanted to be here, but they got caught up in Michigan taking care of Grandmom Paula, our dad's mom. She's been sick for years, but things have gotten worse lately. I'm thankful I managed a quick visit with her a few weeks ago.

Dad is hopeful she'll recover. He tried to insist Mom come to Derek's launch party as planned, but she refused to leave him alone. A tear escapes when I think of potentially losing my only grandmother. I can only imagine how Dad feels.

Fearful of crying like a baby, I force myself to think about the rest of the launch party and get to work.

Dinner proceeds without a hitch. I walk around the ballroom the entire time, only snagging bites of food when I pass by my siblings' table near the front of the room. Derek gives me exasperated glares each time I refuse his demands to take a seat and relax. Kyle and his parents, whom I've known since I was a child, laugh at my insistence that I need to monitor the rest of the guests. Heather just sips her water and smirks knowingly. I refuse to make eye contact with the other individual at the table.

Not only did Adam Moreno witness me ex treating me like trash, but then I tripped and pressed against him like a wanton hussy. I'm mortified.

So, I ignore the handsome billionaire each time I pass our table. Though, I swear I can feel his emerald eyes follow my movements around the ballroom.

The dinner plates are cleared away. Dessert takes their place. I smile to myself as I overhear the guests ooh and ahh

over the light and buttery frosting covering the chef's signature chocolate cake. I called in so many favors with my New York contacts to get Andie Oh to agree to cater Derek's event. She's expensive, but so worth it.

I am debating whether I want to risk Mr. Moreno's attention in favor of enjoying the delicious dessert and sitting down when someone taps my shoulder lightly. "Excuse me, miss?"

I turn. A tall, slim man in a light gray suit stands behind me, wearing a charming smile.

"Yes?"

"I apologize for bothering you, but I was wondering if you work at this hotel?"

It's not a ridiculous thing to wonder, considering I've spent most of the evening chatting with the bar staff and servers. "No, I don't, but I coordinated this event."

"Oh, I see. Well, you did a wonderful job. This evening has been flawless."

My returning smile is genuine. "Thank you so much. I am glad you're enjoying yourself."

He continues to smile. I wait for him to say something else, but he just stands there, looking at me.

Having met my awkward encounter quota for the night, I ask, "Is there anything else I could help you with?"

His eyes lighten. "Actually, yes. Can I get you a drink?"

I refrain from pointing out it's an open bar. "No, thank you."

"Are you sure? The wine is heavenly."

I know it is... I picked it.

I force a polite smile. "I appreciate it, but I'm technically still working. Thank you again, though, for the offer." I don't want to be rude to this guy. For all I know, he's a big-name investor. I don't want to be the reason he decides not to do

business with Derek's company. But that doesn't mean I'm going to subject myself to inane conversation with a stranger.

Unfortunately, he doesn't take the hint. "Are you sure? I've been watching you, and you've barely had a break. I'm sure you would enjoy a little wine."

And just like that, my hackles are raised. I don't like the idea of being watched, and I sure as hell don't like being pressured to do things. I prepare myself to give a firm, but not overtly rude, response, when someone else beats me to the punch.

"Owens? Is that you?"

Kill me know.

Adam Moreno sidles up next to me. He carries an amber-colored liquid in a crystal tumbler. His eyes are locked on the man in front of me.

The man, Owens, looks uneasy. His smile falters. "Moreno. Good to see you."

"Is it?" Mr. Moreno sips his drink. "I see you've met Avery." I want to kick him in the shin for telling this guy my name, especially when Owens eyes illuminate with renewed interest.

But that light is swiftly extinguished when Mr. Moreno continues, "Tell me, how is your wife? Is she here?"

Owens's face drains of color. "Um, no. She's at home."

"That's right." With his free hand, Mr. Moreno snaps his fingers. "I spoke with her father over dinner last week. He said she just reached her third trimester and was told to take it easy. I bet she's disappointed to miss the party."

A loaded pause follows. I'm torn between wanting to laugh or scowl.

Owens hadn't flirted with me overtly, but his behavior was well on the way to that. What kind of guy hits on another woman when he's married? Let alone has a pregnant wife?

A sleaze, that's who.

Finally, Owens gets ahold of himself. He mumbles something about needing to chat with someone across the room, and then he's gone. I shake my head as I watch him leave.

"Well, that's two, Miss Lawson."

My head snaps back to Adam Moreno. "What?" I ask, momentarily distracted by his stunning emerald eyes as they shimmer with amusement.

"That's the second time I've helped you evade unsavory men this evening."

I fumble for a response. "I suppose that's true. Thank you."

"You're welcome. You can repay me by having a drink with me."

I bark a laugh. It fades when I realize he's serious. His eyes glint with challenge.

My smile drops. "No, thanks."

"Why not?"

"Because there is no one else here to save me from unsavory company." The words escape my lips before I can think twice. I do not know Mr. Moreno at all. What if he doesn't find my jab playful? What if he gets mad? Turns out, I don't have to worry.

Adam Moreno releases a deep laugh. The sound brushes over me, and I am forced to admit he has an amazing laugh. "Fair enough, Avery. I only ask because I want to apologize for my behavior earlier."

My cheeks heat. *Is he talking about holding me close in the coat closet?*

"W-what do you have to apologize for?"

"For assuming you ran into me on purpose," he says.

My renewed irritation, coupled with my mortification from the closet, renders me unable to speak.

Mr. Moreno doesn't seem to notice. "Derek told me he had sisters, but I've never seen a photo of either of you. If I had, I promise, I would have recognized you."

What is *that* supposed to mean?

I debate asking, but I decide against it. This conversation is venturing too close to flirtation for my liking. Especially considering his role in my brother's company.

I choose my next words to help clear away any building sexual tension, bringing us back to neutral. "Don't worry about it. Let's give ourselves a fresh start. Hi." I hold out my hand. "I'm Avery Lawson. Derek Lawson is my brother, and I work for Source Solutions as the company's PR rep."

Mr. Moreno doesn't miss a beat. He takes my hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Avery. My name is Adam Moreno."

We shake hands.

"The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Moreno."

"Adam, please." He dons an appealing smile. "Mr. Moreno is my grandfather."

I nod and give his hand a final shake before releasing his fingers. His grip remains.

I give him a questioning look.

He returns it, a gleam in his eye. Then, he releases me.

My arm falls to my side, and I have to force myself not to open and close my hand to clear away the tingles his touch sent over my skin.

"How long have you been in public relations?" He asks.

"Since I graduated college. So, almost seven years."

"Where did you work prior to Source Solutions?"

"A PR firm in New York."

"Impressive. Did you have any famous clients?"

My eyes narrow. Slowly, I say, "A few."

"Care to namedrop?"

“No.”

He barks another laugh. I am unable to deny how much I enjoy the sound. “Why not?”

“Because my specialty in New York was re-branding for clients following reputation-damaging scandals. Part of my job involved strict confidentiality agreements.”

“Really?” He lifts a brow.

“Yes, really. Is that surprising?”

“Yes. No...” He pauses, shaking his head. “My apologies. I think I’m still surprised to learn Derek has such beautiful sisters.” His eyes travel over to the table at the center of the room. Heather and Kyle’s parents are the only ones still seated, and Adam’s attention certainly isn’t on the latter.

I brush away the confusing pang of jealousy and say, “Heather is a model. She walked in her first show at Paris Fashion Week this past spring.”

He snaps his fingers. “Of course. Heather Leigh. That’s how I know her. The name threw me off.”

“Leigh is her middle name,” I provide. My twin has been modeling since we were teenagers. She’s worked her ass off, and is now reaping the rewards. I don’t think it will be long before she’s a household name. She already has several brands reaching out to her regarding sponsorship. I am so proud of her.

“Ah,” he replies. I feel Adam’s attention return to me, but I’m looking away as I search the ballroom for Derek. I find him standing in a group of well-dressed men and women. I don’t want to bother him, so I search the room for another excuse to get out of here when Adam speaks.

“Is there a reason you aren’t a model?”

I nearly choke. “Excuse me?”

“You’re just as stunning as your sister. More so, if I may be so bold. Why aren’t you a model?”

I don't know what to say. I settle on, "Do you think every woman is dying to be a model?"

"In my experience, most would if they could."

"Well, that's not surprising. Considering who you spend your time with." I regret the words the moment they are out of my mouth.

"What does that mean?"

Do I try to diffuse this situation? Or should I just be honest?

I peer up through my lashes. I can't tell if he's upset or truly just curious. I decide I should at least apologize. "I'm sorry. That was rude of me."

"Perhaps," Adam replies evenly. "But I won't know for sure unless you tell me what you meant."

I sense he's not going to let this go. I sigh. "I searched the internet for news about Source Solutions a couple days ago. I wanted to know if the bait I'd dropped at different business news outlets was being picked up. Your recent... *vacation* popped up in the search."

He crosses his arms. It's impossible not to notice how his biceps bulge. "I see. So, because of a gossip column's salacious article, you believe you know the type of company I keep."

"Well, I obviously know one type."

His anger finally cracks through his stoic expression. "You're assuming a lot from one photograph."

I should bite my tongue. I should backtrack, apologize again, and move on. I definitely shouldn't say what I say next, "I'm in public relations, Mr. Moreno. It's my job to make assumptions about news articles, even the ones in gossip rags."

"It's Adam," he practically growls. "And you aren't my PR agent. There's no need for you to analyze my personal life."

"No, but I'm my brother's PR rep." I don't say the rest of what I'm thinking.

I don't have to. Adam Moreno might be a player, but he's far from stupid.

"Ah." His arms uncross, and he takes a long sip of his drink. "I get it. You're worried how my reputation might impact your brother's company."

I shrug. "It's not a top worry of mine, but your indiscretions are certainly on my radar."

He huffs an unamused laugh. "My indiscretions?" He shakes his head. "This certainly not how I imagined this conversation going."

Now, I'm the one confused. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing." Adam finishes his drink. It clangs loudly on the nearest table when he sets it down. "I think I'm going to mingle. Enjoy the rest of your evening, Avery. I'm sure I'll see you around the office."

With that, he walks away.

I watch his departure, and I see the tense set of his shoulders.

Way to go, Avery. Heather and Derek always tease that I'm bold, even with strangers. I say things others wouldn't dare. Normally, it isn't a problem.

But, for some reason, I feel bad about hurting Adam Moreno's feelings. Then I see him sidle up next to a stunning red-head in a slinky gold dress. He kisses her cheek in greeting, and she smiles at him like he hung the moon, and I realize my concern for his emotions is unnecessary. Obviously, he's fine.

So, I turn on my heel to find my siblings. The party's main events have passed, and I'm determined to use the remainder of the night celebrating my baby brother and his amazing accomplishments. I don't have time for rich billionaires, not even ones as handsome as Adam Moreno.

CHAPTER 8

Adam

THE SOUND of my grandfather's ringtone pulls me from a restless sleep. I reach over to my nightstand and fumble for my phone, only to realize the noise is coming from the living room. With a groan, I sit up. My head instantly throbs.

It took forever to fall asleep following the Source Solutions launch party, and it wasn't because I drank an excessive amount of alcohol or enjoyed my evening with the stunning redhead who'd all but thrown herself at me before I managed to slip out unaccompanied.

No, I spent half the night tossing and turning as images of a particular mouthy brunette occupied my thoughts. Avery Lawson, by all accounts, is off-limits. Not only is she my business partner's sister, but she's also an employee for Source Solutions. Technically, we work together. I might've gotten my ex, Brigitte, a job, but that was *after* we'd already hooked up.

I would never seduce a woman who worked with me. What's the saying? Don't shit where you eat?

In other words: don't sleep with someone you work with.

Because when it ends, which all my relationships inevitably do, you're in for a hostile work environment. Every HR department's nightmare.

So, *no*. I can't pursue Avery Lawson, not even if all I could do last night was think of what it would be like to tear that white dress from her body and run my hands over her perfect figure. I shuffle out of my bedroom and look around the living room with bleary eyes.

If it were just Avery's looks that caught my attention, I have no doubt my affliction would've been resolved by my fist in a warm shower. But I can't deny that the way Avery challenged me—the way she called me out on my questionable personal choices stoked a desire I'd never experienced.

Money and good looks afford me many advantages in life. One is women rarely turn me down. Especially the single ones. I'd like to think I'm still down-to-earth, but hearing Avery call me on my shit made me realize it's been years since anyone besides my grandfather and Natasha have done so—and those two are family. Avery's immunity to my wealth and looks is a refreshing change of pace. And I want more.

The ringtone ends, but it resumes when my grandfather calls again.

Thoughts of Avery Lawson take a back seat as alarm jolts through me when I realize my grandfather never calls me this early. He knows the time difference between us.

Did something happen to him? Is it my grandmother?

I rush across the tile floor, barely registering the cold surface against my bare feet, and dig between the couch cushions. My fingers touch the sleek device, and I slide my finger against the green bar to accept the call on the last ring.

“Abuelo?” I huff. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“No, Adam. I am not.”

Shit.

“Is it Abuela? Did she fall again? I’ve told you to live at the seaside villa. The master suite is on the bottom floor, and she won’t have to climb stairs.”

“Your Abuela is fine,” he replies. “This call is about you.”

“Me?”

“Was I not clear last night about what would happen if another scandal manifested about you?”

His harsh tone clears all remnants of fog from my mind. “You were perfectly clear.”

“Then, tell me, why did my assistant just show me an article describing an altercation you initiated during the Source Solution’s launch party?”

I blame my lack of sleep for how long it takes me to realize what my grandfather is talking about. “It’s not what

you think.” I move into my home office and power on my laptop. I need to see this for myself.

“No?”

“No,” I reply. “If the article is about what I believe, then I was assisting a young woman who was arguing with her ex. He got physical, and I intervened.”

A pause travels through our connection. If there is one thing my grandfather can’t stand, it’s abusive men. His sister, my late great-aunt, had been the victim of domestic abuse. Thankfully, she had my grandfather and the rest of her family to rely on and she got out.

The log in screen appears. I quickly enter my information. Once the screen loads, I open a browser and type in my name, then select the “news” filter. Sure enough, a stateside online blog has an article describing how I assaulted a guest of Source Solutions during their launch party. I scan the article, and my irritation reaches new heights.

The son of a bitch was bold enough to not only sign off on sharing his name, but to have his picture featured. Spencer Wright’s smarmy smile stares back at me from my computer, and I really wish I had punched him in the face.

“Who was the young lady?” my grandfather asks after he gathers his thoughts.

I answer without hesitation, “Avery Lawson.”

“And what is your connection to Miss Lawson?”

I close my laptop. I’ve seen enough. “Why does that matter?”

“I’m trying to understand why you wouldn’t allow security to handle the altercation between Miss Lawson and her ex-boyfriend when you are perfectly aware of the increased scrutiny you are under after your latest scandal.”

I know my grandfather wouldn’t really want me to stand by as a young lady is accosted by a man, but my latest misdeeds are at the forefront of his mind. He’s concerned

about my image, and what it means for the company he spent his entire life building.

“The article says you were drinking,” my grandfather states when I don’t respond. “Is that true?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I wasn’t drunk.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

I exhale. “Yes, I had a drink at the launch party.”

“I knew it.”

My grandfather’s thoughts aren’t fair. I’m certain he’d realize it after he has the chance to cool down, but right now, he is letting years of disappointment over my bad decisions influence his perspective of this situation. I need to say something that will explain my involvement that isn’t solely attributed to the impulsive personality he accuses me of, or the fact I had alcohol in my system.

That is the only reason I can think of that explains why the next words pass my lips. “Avery is my girlfriend, Abuelo. I saw her ex bothering her, and I had to intervene.”

Another beat of silence.

“So the article isn’t lying when it claims there is a romantic link between you and the girl.”

Spencer said that?

Of course, he did. The little shit needed to give the magazine a tasty twist. Or perhaps he really thought it was true. Spencer seems like the kind of man who could never accept a woman doesn’t want to be with him because of *him*. There’s always another reason. Like flaws in her personality, or that she moved on to someone else.

My grandfather waits for a response. I don’t know what to say, except, “Correct.”

“Well, this romance can’t have been going on for long,” my grandfather replies. “Considering your distasteful trip to Vegas was only a ten days ago.”

“No, it’s new,” I confirm. I dislike lying to my grandfather, but now that I’ve started, I need to follow through. At least until I can prove to him that I’m fit to continue acting as CEO. From here on out, I will make sure my behavior provides no inspiration for trashy magazines to write about me.

My grandfather heaves a sigh. The sound makes the earpiece crackle. “I hope your relationship doesn’t create any more unflattering articles about you, Adam. I hate to say it, but this is my last warning.”

Dread chills me. I swallow the lump in my throat. “I understand. You don’t need to worry. Avery is a respectable woman. She actually works in Public Relations, so she understands how important it is to maintain a positive public image.”

My grandfather huffs a genuine laugh. “Well, God knows you could benefit from her expertise.” Then, his voice turns serious. “But I mean it, my boy. I will not be able to dissuade the board from voting you out if there is another scandal. Behave yourself.”

I nod. Realizing he can’t see it, I say, “I will, Abuelo. I promise.”

The call ends. I glance at the clock on my desk and see it’s not even four in the morning. It’s too early to head in to Source Solutions. Which probably isn’t the worst thing.

I need to formulate a plan before I see Avery. I don’t know how I’m going to convince her to help me out, but I need to figure out something.

Or I can kiss all my hard work goodbye.

CHAPTER 9

Avery

“AND HERE IS YOUR OFFICE,” Kyle leads me into a massive corner office. My brother’s best friend-slash-business partner turns to face me, looking as excited as a golden retriever puppy who brought their person a stick. “What do you think?”

I take in the floor to ceiling windows and the gorgeous view of downtown, as well as the expensive modern desk and blush velvet rolling chair. “This is the office for a CEO or CFO, Kyle. It’s too much for me.”

Kyle waves a dismissive hand. “We have the entire floor of this building, Avery. There are four corner offices. Derek and I each claimed one, and we both agreed you should get one too.”

I continue to shake my head. “Surely there’s someone else higher up who’d want this space.” My job is all about image, and I know that claiming one of the best offices in the building won’t be a good look to the rest of Source Solutions employees. It screams nepotism. Because it *is* nepotism.

I wish Derek were here to have this conversation. But the success of last night resulted in a day filled to the brim by meetings with potential investors. Leaving only Kyle here to show me to my new office.

I’d spent the last week working out of my tiny apartment, or on location with the caterers and other vendors for the launch party. With the event in the rearview mirror, it’s time for me to officially settle into my job at Source Solutions. I just had no idea I’d be treated like a founding member of the company.

The excitement flickers from Kyle’s gaze. Now, he looks like sad puppy. “Derek and I thought you’d like it. We even picked out the furniture with you in mind.” He motions to the feminine chair and gold, abstract light fixtures.

I sigh. “It’s lovely, Kyle. Truly. I just think I’ll be more comfortable in a modest space. At least for now.”

My brother's best friend shakes his head. "Will you at least work in here today? When Derek gets back, we can tell him you'd prefer a different office."

"Of course." I smile appreciatively. "Thank you, Kyle. I know it's a weird request."

"Not that weird, honestly," he replies. "You've always shied away from attention."

"What does that mean?"

He shrugs again, then shoots me a boyish grin. "I just mean that when we were growing up, I noticed how you avoided drawing attention. You didn't run for captain of the cheer team even though you were one of the best on the team. You didn't like boasting about being on the honor roll. You seemed embarrassed when you were nominated to homecoming court. You seem to prefer to shine in anonymity."

I huff an awkward laugh. "Sounds like you paid a lot of attention to me growing up."

"Well, duh. I had a crush on you."

This time, my laugh is authentic. "You did?"

"Um, yeah." He rubs the back of his neck. "Have you looked at yourself? Why do you think I insisted Derek and I have sleepovers at your house instead of mine?"

My mind fills with memories of my gangly brother and his equally gangly best friend. I'd never suspected he would have a crush on me. If anything, I'd expected he liked Heather. She's always been the bombshell of the two of us. I might've been nominated to homecoming court, but Heather won queen.

"I never knew," I say with another smile. Childhood crushes are adorable.

"You wouldn't." Kyle laughs. "I was your little brother's best friend, and I wasn't exactly a stud."

"You were cute," I retort. "Everyone is awkward as a kid." Well, almost everyone. Heather missed that phase. The lucky bitch.

“Thanks for that.” Kyle’s take a step closer. His voice deepens. “But I’m not awkward anymore.” His change of demeanor catches me off guard. My eyes run over him on their own accord. Kyle’s right. He’s filled out. He’s no longer the long-limbed, quirky teenager I remember.

“No,” I chuckle uneasily. “I guess you’re not.”

Kyle takes another step. “And you don’t seem as shy. Maybe we both just needed to grow up a bit before sparks could fly.” He gives me a wink.

It dawns on me that Kyle is flirting with me. This is awkward. Not only is Kyle my little brother’s best friend, but he’s also my coworker now. That is a line I refuse to cross.

A knock sounds against the doorframe. I turn and almost gasp when I see who stands in the open doorway.

Adam Moreno.

He wears a pair of form-fitting tan trousers and brown leather wingtip oxfords. His blue button down is tucked into his waistband, and a matching leather belt accents it. His dark hair is styled neatly, and his emerald eyes create a glowing contrast with his naturally tan skin. *Damn... he’s gorgeous.*

“Mr. Moreno!” I jerk when Kyle shouts. All traces of his earlier flirtation disappear as he crosses the room to shake hands with his top investor. “We didn’t expect to see you today.”

“I imagine not.” Mr. Moreno’s tone is cool as he shakes Kyle’s hand. I stand in the middle of the massive office, feeling like a deer caught in headlights, but I have no idea why.

“Of course you’re welcome anytime,” Kyle replies hurriedly. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“No. I’m here to see Miss Lawson.” Mr. Moreno’s piercing eyes land on me.

Refusing to be cowered by his presence, I straighten. “Me?”

“Yes.”

“What about?”

“Information I will gladly share when we are alone.” Mr. Moreno shoots a pointed look at Kyle.

“O-of course,” Kyle fumbles. “I’ll see you at lunch, Avery. Good day, Mr. Moreno.” Kyle hurries out of the office.

I find myself missing Kyle’s presence when Mr. Moreno closes the office door and take three long steps into the room. My lady bits are clenching at the thought of being alone in a room with the handsome billionaire, but my brain is sounding the alarm, reminding me that men this gorgeous are not to be trusted.

“How can I help you, Mr. Moreno?” Feeling a strong need to keep as much space between me and the billionaire investor as possible, I move behind the modern desk, resting my hands on the back of the blush rolling chair.

“Adam.” He stares at my fingers drumming awkwardly on the chair. I press them into the fabric to stop the nervous tic.

“How can I help you, Adam?”

Instead of answering, he glances around the office and whistles as he takes in the view. “Nice office.”

“It’s not mine.”

“That’s not what the name plate on the door says.”

A breath blows past my lips. “Derek and Kyle want it to be my office, but it’s too flashy for a PR rep. I’m insisting on a new office.”

I’m not sure what reaction I expect, but Adam Moreno smiling so wide I can almost see his molars is not it. “Yes,” he hums, more to himself, still smiling between the words. “This is definitely going to work.”

I lock my knees against the weakening effects of his smile. “What’s going to work?”

Adam tucks his hands into his pockets and kicks one leg out in a relaxed pose. He looks like a model on a fashion

magazine. “I have a proposition for you, Avery. One that will benefit us both, I think.”

My forehead creases. “Okay...”

“May I sit?”

I motion to the chair in front of the desk. “Please.”

I settle into the rolling chair as Adam sits. I lean forward to rest my arms on the desk and lace my fingers together. “So, what is this proposition?”

Adam doesn’t hesitate. “As you know, my public image has taken a few hits these past few months.”

I nod.

“My grandfather, the most influential board member of our family’s company, has made it perfectly clear that my behavior needs to be above reproach, or I will lose my position as CEO.”

Yikes. That seems a bit harsh, but considering what I know about the Moreno family’s company, it seems in line with their emphasize on valuing family, faith, and tradition.

Adam continues, “I am not certain you are aware, but your ex-boyfriend has gone to the press over what occurred last night at the launch party.”

I suck in a breath. “What?”

“Your ex told the papers I attacked him, unprovoked. My grandfather called this morning, prepared to demand my resignation, when I came up with an idea to save my position.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I was defending my girlfriend.”

I’m not proud of how long it takes for me to connect the dots. When I do, my eyes widen with comical shock. “*No.*”

Adam leans back in the chair, watching me with eyes that see more than they should. “No, what, Avery?”

“No, I will not pretend to be your girlfriend.”

“Why?”

“Why?” I sputter back. My hands fall to my laps as I, too, lean back in my chair. “Because I didn’t ask you to intervene with Spencer. I won’t pretend to be your girlfriend just to help you keep your job.”

“What if it meant keeping Derek’s job?”

My blood runs cold. “Excuse me?”

“Would you pretend to be my girlfriend if it meant Derek got to keep his company?”

Anger flows through my body, chasing away the chill as the implication of what Adam says settles in my head. “I assumed a man as wealthy as you might be a bit ruthless, Mr. Moreno,” I say coldly. “But I had no idea you would stoop so low as to threaten a man’s life’s work just to get what you want.”

How did ever think Adam Moreno was attractive? He is as vile as a snake.

I am surprised when Adam’s expression darkens with offense. “Your accusation stings, Miss Lawson. Despite what the tabloids say, I am honorable. I would never do what you accuse me of.”

I only feel a twinge of guilt. “Then what are you saying? How does me pretending to be your girlfriend help Derek?”

“Source Solutions is a new company, and I am the primary investor. Or, rather, my family’s company is the primary investor. If I lose my position, there is no guarantee the funding for Derek will continue beyond this quarter. In fact, I am almost certain the man my grandfather will replace me with would be more than happy to pull funding for Source Solutions. He and I are rivals, and he knows Source Solutions is the one investment I’m most proud of. He’d see it fall just to spite me.”

A knot forms in my stomach. My mind swirls with the facts placed before me, and the dozens upon dozens of implications each one creates. “Derek has meetings with potential investors all day,” I tell him. “Surely some will sign on to fund Source Solutions.”

“Perhaps,” he nods. “But what happens when they hear my company pulls their funding? They won’t know it’s due to a personal matter. They will think something is wrong with the company and withdraw their support like that.” He snaps his fingers.

My heart pounds in my chest. I feel like a bird trapped in a cage with no means of escape—other than dating a stupidly hot billionaire who is a notorious womanizer.

Adam watches me patiently as I desperately try to find another solution to this mess. Minutes later, I realize there is none.

Resigned to do what I must to help ensure Derek’s company doesn’t fold one day after its grand launch, I ask, “What do you need me to do?”

CHAPTER 10

Adam

“FIRST, I need you to not look like I just asked you to walk the plank.” I’m unable to hide just how much her forlorn demeanor offends me. I know I’m a good-looking guy. And I’m charming, if I do say so myself.

“I’m sorry,” Avery snaps. “But being pseudo-blackmailed into dating a man I barely know isn’t how I expected to spend my morning. Forgive me for not being more enthused.”

I smile. I like it when she’s feisty. I prefer it to the shy demeanor I glimpsed during the launch party. “You’re perfect.”

Her cheeks turn a lovely shade of pink. “What?”

“You’re perfect. You’re beautiful, professional, and you have a backbone. You won’t have a problem withstanding the heat from the press.”

“Oh...” She fidgets in her chair. “Thank you. I guess.”

I smile again.

She clears her throat. “Okay. You don’t want me to look like my beloved pet just died. What else do I need to know about this arrangement? How long did you tell your grandfather we’ve been together?”

“I didn’t get specific, but he knows it’s new.”

“Please tell me he doesn’t think we were together during your Vegas escapade.” Her lips twist with disgust.

“No.”

“Good. I wouldn’t know how to spin a story about a girl who stays with a guy after that mess.”

Now, it’s my turn to fidget. Normally, I don’t mind being called out on my behavior—not when it’s something I actually did and not a lie or dramatization created by the press. I’m an adult, and I own my actions. But, for some reason, the idea of

Avery thinking poorly of me doesn't sit well. And I want to change it.

I straighten. "Vegas was a mistake—one I will not be making again."

"But your grandfather doesn't believe you?"

"I've worn out his good will when it comes to believing my intentions." I lace my hands together to keep from clenching them into fists. "No matter how sincere they are."

"I see." She purses her lips.

I push away the thought of me taking that plump lip between my teeth as I drive my length between those long, slender—

"So, how will this work?" Avery interrupts my wayward daydream. "I assume you have details in mind?"

"Yes." I relax back into the chair, propping my heel on my opposite leg to hide my growing erection. "Though, most of it relies on the fact you're a PR agent."

"How so?"

"I looked into your previous clients. You managed to reform Aaron Richards' reputation after his last cheating scandal. The papers write about him like he's a saint. I want you to do the same for my love life. Announce we're dating and help me convince the press I'm reformed. We can stage romantic outings. Coffee dates. Whatever you're comfortable with."

She stares at me for a beat. "You make it sound like I can just wield a magic wand and erase years of bad decisions."

"That's what you did for Richards."

"No. He made one bad decision." She holds up a slender finger. Then she motions towards me and adds, "Your reputation as a womanizer goes back for years."

"Fine." I rub my chin, noting the stubble. I'd planned on shaving this morning but forgot to in the chaos following my grandfather's unexpected call. "Forget reforming my image."

Just help me convince the press, and therefore my grandfather, that our relationship is real.”

Again, Avery stares at me. I want to know what she’s thinking behind those beautiful, ocean blue eyes, but I keep my mouth shut. Avery Lawson is not a woman I can force into anything.

Sure, I provided motivation by saying she’d help ensure her brother’s company doesn’t go under, but the decision is ultimately up to her. I can only pray she’s willing to help me.

Because, if she doesn’t, I’m pretty much done for. The press won’t rest until they find another scandal. Or make one up. I need to give them something else to focus on.

“This will only work if you aren’t sneaking around with other women.”

I blink once. “That won’t be a problem.”

“No?” She lifts a perfectly manicured brow. “Are you sure? Because if I do all this work to sell a fake relationship, and it looks like you’re cheating on me, I’m going to be irritated.”

I smirk. “Feeling possessive already, love?”

Her expression hardens. “No. I’m just not interested in looking like a fool again. We will know the relationship is fake, but no one else will.”

My smirk falls. So, her ex cheated on her. What a fucking idiot.

“I have no plan on making you look like a fool, Avery,” I say in a softer tone.

“Do you promise?” The vulnerability in those three words makes my chest tighten.

“I promise.” I never meant the words more in my life.

“Okay then.” Avery nods once, then her tone shifts.

She’s back to business. “I will write a press release for your response to Spencer’s article. In it, I will reference our new relationship, but I will emphasize that it is casual. The

press will legitimize us when they share future pictures of us spending time together. Is that okay?"

Damn, she's sexy when she takes charge.

I clear my throat and say, "Sure. Call it what you want. A casual affair. A budding romance. Whatever you wish. I trust you will use your PR magic to make sure it believable."

She opens the desk drawer in front of her and takes out a notepad and pen. She chews her bottom lip as she jots down some notes, sending another bolt of desire straight to my groin.

Down, boy. This situation is already complicated enough. Despite how beautiful Avery Lawson is, she's off limits.

Unaware of my desirous struggles, Avery continues writing and asks, "Would you like to have coffee tomorrow?"

"Coffee?"

She looks up. "Yes. Coffee. It's warm brown drink. Most people enjoy it in the morning."

I'm not entirely certain I don't blush. I can't remember the last time someone teased me. "Of course. No. I mean, yes. Coffee works."

"Good." She goes back to writing. "Is there a coffee shop you're known to frequent? One where press might catch a picture of us?"

Right. This is for the press.

I hide my ridiculous disappointment. "No. I just moved to town."

"Oh. I didn't know that." Avery pauses and taps the pen against her lips. "There's a café on the bottom floor of this building with street-facing windows. Let's meet there. I'm sure at least one photographer will be waiting to get a photo of me when they find out where I work. They'll be thrilled when they catch one of us together."

I nod. "Good idea." It's even better considering I will also be working in this building. Derek mentioned Source

Solutions had one corner office sitting empty, and it was mine if I wanted a second location to work. Typically, I work from home when not in Spain, but the idea of having an actual office again is appealing.

The fact I will get to see Avery more frequently is an added bonus.

“Wonderful.” Avery writes down one more thing, then lowers the pen and rises from the chair. “I will get right on composing the press release. Have a wonderful day, Adam.”

Pleasure hums in my chest as I hear my given name roll off her lips, but it is silenced when Avery holds out a hand. My eyes snag on the sterling silver charm bracelet encircling her wrist. “What is this?”

“A handshake, Adam.” I look up and see her lips twitch with a suppressed smile.

“I’m familiar with the gesture, Avery,” my voice deepens as I utter her name. “What I don’t understand is why we would shake hands.”

Her mouth turns down. She begins to lower her arm. I move forward and snag her hand before she can.

“Our ruse begins today, Miss Lawson.” I round the desk, still holding Avery’s hand. “It is important our relationship is as believable as possible. That means we need to practice. And I would never say goodbye to my girlfriend with a *handshake*.”

I’m undeniably pleased when I hear her take a ragged breath. “Then what do you suggest?”

My lips tilt into a knowing smile. “This.”

I lean forward. I expect Avery to step back. But she stays still. Her eyes are wide, and she holds her breath.

I consider taking this chance to press my lips to hers, but I realize that’s not how I want our first kiss to happen.

No.

When I kiss Avery Lawson, I want the world to see. Not just to sell our ruse, but to let every man who ever has, or ever will, lay eyes on her know that she is *mine*.

So, despite my rapid pulse and growing bulge, I lean forward and direct my lips to land on her soft cheek. I linger for a moment, savoring her floral scent and the feel of her skin under my lips.

Then, I lean back and shoot her a well-practiced, unaffected smile. “Have a good day, Miss Lawson.”

I turn and stride across the office, and I hear a breathless, “bye,” right before the door closes behind me.

CHAPTER 11

Avery

“I DON’T KNOW why I’m here on your fake date,” my twin sister, Heather, grumbles from behind her flat iced-vanilla latte. Her blonde locks are concealed under a baseball cap, and her eyes are covered by wide-rimmed sunglasses. If I didn’t know my twin, I’d think she was nursing a hangover. In reality, she’s simply *not* a morning person. I have countless memories of Heather snoozing our shared alarm in our childhood bedroom, making us late for school, to prove it.

“Because you and I always get coffee together.” At least, we do whenever we are in the same city.

I hope we get to do this more often now that I live in LA, but I know Heather’s blossoming model career could hamper that plan. Her modeling agency is already pressuring her to move out to NY permanently, rather than fly in for big jobs or fashion shows.

“Don’t you think we should’ve rescheduled to allow you and Adam some alone time to foster this fake romance?” She looks to the café’s entrance with a grin.

I look over my shoulder and see the door open. It’s not *him*.

My sister and I sit at a high table in the back of the café. The view of the front door is clear over the heads of the customers waiting to place their drink order at the counter.

I glance at my phone. Seven fifty-five. Adam should be here in five minutes.

I try, I really do, but I can’t shoo away the butterflies fluttering around like a cyclone in my stomach. I tell myself it’s from nerves. It’s definitely not because I’m thinking of Adam Moreno’s piercing emerald eyes and the toe-curling dimple that appears when he smi—

“I don’t understand why you guys are bothering to *pretend* to date,” Heather says, interrupting my thoughts. She twirls her latte between her palms. “Why not date for real?”

“Because Adam Moreno needs to restore his image, not get a real girlfriend.” I tell her for the fourth time since I confided Adam’s proposal yesterday after work.

I know Adam and I agreed no one would know about our arrangement, but when Heather called me last night, I couldn’t help but spill the beans. I was so nervous about the whole thing. I’m in PR, but participating in a ruse so directly is out of my wheel house. I needed my notoriously composed sister to help calm me down.

“But why you?” Heather sips her coffee.

“Because it’s my job.” I don’t tell Heather about the risk to Derek’s company. I don’t want her to worry or to accidentally spill the information to our little brother. Heather’s known to let secrets slip. Like when I had a crush on the star quarterback in high school and my sister, not so subtly, told his best friend I was looking for a date to homecoming and suggested he ask me. Unfortunately, the quarterback liked my sister. Typical.

“Hm.” Heather taps her nails on the table, staring at the door. She straightens. “There he is.”

My stomach tightens as the reality of this situation comes to a head.

Adam stands at the back of the line, standing out like a sore thumb. He’s not the only man wearing an expensive suit, but he’s the only one who exudes untouchable confidence. He’s also the only one who looks like he stepped off the cover of a fashion magazine.

“Go get him, girl,” Heather says with a wink.

I offer her a wobbly smile. Once I do this, there’s no turning back. I think of Derek and what he has to lose if this doesn’t work. That’s all the motivation I need to slide off the tall stool and glide across the café towards Adam Moreno.

Here goes nothing.

Adam is looking at the menu, seemingly unaware of the dozen women staring at him like he’s a god who just descended from the heavens.

I come to a stop at his side and blurt, “Good morning.”

Adam’s eyes slide down to mine. His lips curve into a sultry smile. “Good morning, love.” His arm snakes around my waist, and he pulls me to his side.

The movement and the endearment catch me off guard. I press my hand against his chest to keep from falling into him. I sense the disappointed coming from his admirers before I see their frowns.

“What would you like to drink?” he asks.

“Oh.” I clear my throat. “I actually already ordered.” I motion to the table where Heather sits, watching us with a wide grin.

“I see.” Adam lifts a hand to wave at Heather. She returns the gesture, then busies herself with her phone. He gives no sign he’s put out by my sister’s presence. “Mind keeping me company while I order?”

“Of course not.” I let him keep me pressed to his side. The line moves forward when a second register opens.

Adam leans down and murmurs into my hair, “You’re as stiff as a board. Wrap an arm around me.”

He’s right. I shift and wrap my right arm behind him, resting my hand on his waist.

“Better.” His breath rustles my hair before he leans back. “How was your evening?”

“Good.” We step forward again. We’re now third in line from the second register. “Yours?”

“Good.”

I nod. “Good.”

Lord, this is awkward. I didn’t expect this to be so hard, but I’m not an actress. I suddenly doubt I’ll be able to sell this relationship to the press.

“I’m having lunch with a vendor this afternoon,” Adam says out of the blue. “I was wondering if you could come with me.”

My forehead furrows. “Me?”

“Yes.” We’re second in line. “This vendor is one of my grandfather’s oldest friends. He’s practically family.”

Ah. “When is lunch?”

“Noon.”

I nod, picturing my work calendar in my head. “I should be able to clear my schedule.”

“Thank you, love.” He kisses the top of my head. I feel it all the way to my toes.

The café door opens and lets in a breeze. At the same time, I hear the click of a camera’s shutter. I stiffen. Adam’s grip keeps me from turning around.

“Don’t look,” he murmurs, “but it seems our ploy is working.”

I swallow the lump in my throat as the reality of what I’ve signed on for washes over me like a bucket of ice water. “Great.”

His thumb begins to rub comforting circles over the skin above my hipbone. I fight the urge to lean into the motion. “Try not to grimace, or the press will write off our love story before it gets past the first chapter.”

I scoff. “This isn’t a love story.”

His nose brushes my temple. I hear another camera click. “Arrangement then. You don’t have to fawn over me, but it would be more convincing if you didn’t look like you swallowed a handful of nails.”

I release a pent-up breath. “Sorry,” I mutter between my teeth. “I’ll try.”

Adam continues rubbing the space above my hip, and I force myself to relax and lean into his impressive body. We reach the register.

The barista, like almost every female in the café, is stunned by Adam’s presence. I watch her stutter a greeting and ask for his order with burning cheeks. Sympathy fills me on

her behalf. It's too early in the day to be faced with Adam Moreno's external perfection. His personality and life choices may need work, but there's no denying he won the genetic lottery when it came to appearance.

Adam orders a black drip coffee. I tell her I'm all set when she, impressively, manages to tear her attention from my fake date to ask for my order.

Adam gives the cashier his name, says thank you with a striking smile, then we move to stand near the pick-up counter to wait. The entire time, Adam's hand remains on my hip.

"Is it always like this?"

"Like what?" he asks.

"Women staring at you like you're a god?" I look around the café. Half of his admirers have abandoned their perusal, but the other half continue to sneak glances at him. I wonder how his personal life first wound up in the tabloids.

Adam is rich, but it's not like he's a celebrity. In fact, after my late-night Google session yesterday, I learned Adam is pretty hands-on with the company his maternal grandfather founded. Dozens of business magazines featured articles on how Adam Moreno is revamping Moreno Masterpieces, Inc. by diversifying their holdings and bringing in a ton of new business ventures under the umbrella company. He's the reason his family wealth graduated from the millions to the billions. By all accounts, he's very good at his job.

"I could ask you the same thing," Adam replies.

I frown. "Excuse me?"

A smirk. "Oh, that's right. You're humble."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Love, you command just as much attention as I do. You just don't notice."

The objection dies from my lips when a baristo approaches the counter carrying a medium coffee. "Dark roast for Adam."

"That's me." Adam steps forward.

I'm still rattled by Adam's unexpected remark that I don't realize I'm staring at the baristo until he shoots me a charming smile. I get ahold of myself and return his smile with a half-hearted one of my own before promptly looking away.

Adam's chest rumbles with his low chuckle as he turns to steer me towards Heather's table. "See?"

"I was staring," I counter. "He was just being friendly."

"Trust me, that man wasn't just being friendly." Adam's tone is all-knowing, and I find I don't have the energy to disagree with him.

But Adam isn't done.

Just before our arrival forces Heather's attention away from her cell phone, he leans down and murmurs into my ear, "You're sexy as hell, Avery Lawson, and the world thinks we are dating. I suggest you own it. Or else this little ruse of ours won't work." His masculine scent surrounds me, rendering me momentarily speechless.

If it weren't for the hand he has around my waist, I would've stopped walking. But gentle pressure keeps my feet moving.

We reach Heather, and my sister greets my fake boyfriend with much more enthusiasm than she had a few moments ago. It seems her early morning grouchiness has faded.

While they speak, I take a moment to silently chastise myself for being so affected by Adam Moreno and his enticing presence.

After what happened with Spencer, I told myself I'd avoid dating for the foreseeable future. I want time to figure out who I am and what I want in life. Spencer and I were together for the majority of our twenties, and I made a lot of decisions based on his desires and goals. Now, I want to think about what *I* want.

So while Adam is crazy hot, and my nonexistent sex life makes him that much more appealing, I need to remember this arrangement is for Derek and his dream of running his own

tech company. I can't let the lines blur. If I do, I know they'll be too easy to cross.

And I'm not sure I'd ever be able to cross back.

CHAPTER 12

Adam

I PICK Avery up from Source Solutions at eleven-thirty. It's a ten minute drive to Thai La Cuisine, so we will arrive at the restaurant with plenty of time to spare.

I'd wanted to tell Natasha to cancel the lunch with Giorgio Lansing the moment she told me about it this morning. Giorgio likes to give unsolicited life advice, and I'm not really in the mood for a lecture. But knowing that cancelling would only delay the inevitable, I decided to attend the lunch. This meal will be far more than a simple social event.

Giorgio runs the second largest leather goods manufacturing company in Italy. My grandfather loves using his material for our fine furniture division. And it's my job to ensure that supply chain keeps rolling our way.

I'm sitting in my car outside of Source Solutions with my windows down, ignoring the photographer snapping pictures of me from the other side of the street as I wait for Avery. We'd exchanged numbers before leaving the café this morning, so I sent her a text when I pulled up.

She steps out of the building, and I swear the clouds part and the sun shines down on her like a spotlight. Avery Lawson is truly gorgeous. It's truly a shame this relationship is a total sham. I'd love nothing more than to get her alone and see what *else* her sassy mouth can do.

"Hello." Avery slides into the vehicle. Belatedly, I realize I should have gotten out of the car to open the door for her. Next time.

"Hello, beautiful." I lean over and kiss her cheek. I linger to make sure the photographer gets the photo, then pull back.

A smirk tugs my lips when I see the red tint on her cheeks. "Ready for lunch?"

"Yes." Her eyes land on the photographer across the street, and a knowing look crosses her face. I move the gearshift to drive and pull out into traffic.

“How was your morning?”

“Fine. Yours?”

“Great. I had a nice date with a gorgeous girl this morning.”

“There aren’t any reporters around to hear you,” she teases. “No need to keep up the act.”

“Ah, but practice makes perfect,” I counter. “Besides, I did have a nice time this morning.”

I mean it. Chatting with Avery and her sister in the café had been... pleasant. I can think of no better way to describe it.

I listened to their sibling banter and laughed along with each of them as they teased one another. It’s clear they’re close. I understand why Avery decided to confide in Heather about the truth of our romance. If I had a sibling I was close to, I may have done the same.

In addition to enjoying their interactions, I answered Heather’s lobbed and loaded questions like a champ.

“Have you ever had this sort of arrangement before?”

“What if Avery meets someone she wants to date? Do you two break up?”

“Is sex off the table?”

The last question made Avery blush. I laughed out loud, drawing several curious glances our way in the café. Even now, the memory makes me smile. For me, sex is most certainly on the table.

But the prim and proper Avery Lawson has other ideas.

Or maybe I’m wrong. I didn’t miss the way Avery had shivered when I held her close to me in the café line. There’s mutual attraction here. Maybe she’d be willing to make this arrangement a little more fun.

A guy can hope.

“So, what should I know about lunch?” Her question pulls me from my lustful thoughts.

“We’re meeting Giorgio Lansing.”

“Lansing, as in Lansing Leathers?”

I shoot her a side glance before returning my attention to the road. “You’ve heard of him?”

“Heather auditioned to be their brand ambassador a few years ago,” she reveals. “She didn’t get it.”

“Small world.”

“Very.” Avery shifted in her seat. “I assume this is a business meeting.”

“Yes.”

“Do you always bring your girlfriends to business meetings?”

“Only my pretend girlfriends,” I say with a wink.

That earns me a smile.

“Seriously.” She still smiles. “Why am I coming along?”

We turn into the parking garage. “Giorgio and I do have business to discuss, but the lunch is my grandfather’s way of making sure I’m not lying about our relationship. Giorgio insisted I bring you along to meet him.”

“I see.”

“Let’s hope your acting skills have improved since this morning,” I tease.

Pleasure spirals through me at the pink blooming across her cheeks.

“I’ll do my best.”

“I don’t doubt that for a second.”

Thai La Cuisine is busy with the lunch crowd, but Giorgio, true to his controlling nature, makes sure to only dine at restaurants that take reservations. Avery and I don't have to wait long for our table, and we order water before Giorgio arrives.

The short, balding man approaches wearing an expensive three-piece suit despite the warm spring weather. I stand and hold out a hand. He bats it away and locks me in a hug. I have to bend forward to return it. He chuckles at my awkwardness.

“Adam, my boy, it's good to see you.”

I pat his back. “You too, Mr. Lansing.”

We separate, and Giorgio's shrewd brown eyes land on Avery. “And who is this lovely creature?”

Avery unfolds her long legs and rises from her seat with a bright smile. Her gray pencil skirt and pale pink blouse are professional and flattering. “Avery Lawson,” she says, holding out her hand. “It is nice to meet you, Mr. Lansing.”

The Italian's eyes gleam. “Please, call me Giorgio. And the pleasure is mine, Miss Lawson.” They shake hands.

“Avery,” she returns his nicety with another smile.

“I've known you my entire life,” I tell Giorgio after he motions for us to take our seats. “How come I can't call you Giorgio?”

“Because you haven't earned it,” he replies swiftly.

Avery politely smothers her chuckle as the waitress arrives and takes Giorgio's drink order.

When she leaves, he says, “I'm glad Adam brought you along to lunch today, Avery. He can be quite the boring lunch companion. I have high hopes you will brighten this meal.”

She grins. “I'll do my best.”

I feign insult, which earns me another charming chuckle from Avery.

Giorgio tells Avery Thai La Cuisine is his favorite Thai restaurant in the city, and he names all the dishes he's tried

along with his personal ratings. Avery listens attentively, and I'm grateful for her politeness. Lord knows not every woman I've dated would be so kind and easygoing.

When the waitress returns, Avery takes Giorgio's advice and orders the shrimp khao pad. I stick with my usual chicken pad thai. Giorgio orders a hot and sour soup and a yellow curry dish.

"So, Avery. What is it you do for a living?"

She lowers her water glass. "I'm in public relations."

"For corporations?"

"I've had many different clients in the past," she says. "In New York, most were B-List celebrities with a few notable A-listers."

"Any you can mention by name?"

She smiles apologetically. "I'm afraid not."

"Not a name-dropper. I like it." Giorgio nods approvingly. "How did you meet this ruffian?" He motions to me.

I sit back and let Avery tell the story we'd agreed upon—Avery and I met through her brother. Not a lie. Though, the timeline has been skewed a bit.

Avery weaves a convincing tale of sparks flying between us months ago, but since she lived in New York, and I wasn't settled in the US, nothing came from our mutual attraction. That, and the fact she was in a long-term relationship.

She continues and describes our reconnection the week before the launch party. Then, she tells Giorgio of her ex's abominable behavior and how I intervened—a story Giorgio, no doubt, already heard from my grandfather.

"So here I am, giving this ruffian a chance," she says teasingly, shooting me a charming wink as she does. The innocent gesture sends blood straight to my groin.

I lean my elbow on the table to close the distance between us. "And how am I doing?"

Her breath hitches, but she manages an even, "Adequate."

Giorgio and I laugh at the same time.

Our food is delivered, and the conversation moves on to more mundane topics. Every word out of Avery's mouth is charming and intelligent. Her personality is as lovely as her appearance, and I find myself becoming more and more dumbfounded how any man could ever have her and let her go.

Her ex is a fucking idiot.

When Avery excuses herself to use the restroom, Giorgio levels me with a wide, knowing grin. "That one is a keeper, my boy."

I smile behind my water glass then set it on the table. "We just started dating, Mr. Lansing."

The older man guffaws. "I don't care if you just met, boy. Avery is a beautiful young woman with a brain who doesn't melt into a puddle every time those blasted Moreno green eyes land on her." He shakes his head at my perceived naivety. "If that's not reason enough for you to not screw this up, I don't know what is."

"I have no plans to screw this up."

"Good. Because a man who's so used to getting everything he wants—and everyone he wants—needs to be challenged."

It's a struggle to keep the smile on my face. I know Giorgio means well, but I resent the implication that my life has been easy. Yes, I won the lottery when my grandfather stepped up and offered to raise me, but I'd gladly trade that if it meant the tragic events which led to me being at his doorstep never occurred.

Avery's return diminishes the dark cloud hanging over my head, but the storm doesn't completely clear until we finish our meal and say goodbye to Giorgio.

I'm driving Avery back to the office when she says, "I think that went well."

The lingering cloud doesn't stand a chance in the wake of her bright smile.

“Giorgio loved you.” I press the gas to get us through a yellow light before it turns red.

I don’t know how it’s possible, but Avery’s smile shines even brighter. “He’s nice. And he seemed amenable to increasing the supply of goods to your factories in Spain. So that’s good.”

I chuckle. “It’s more than good; it’s great. And I’m convinced your conversation buttered him up. He wouldn’t have been so amenable otherwise.”

“Well, happy to help.” She flips her hair over her shoulder with another joking wink. “Let me know if you need help closing any more business deals with your grandfather’s friends.”

“Absolutely. I’d be an idiot not to use my lucky charm.”

She turns away to stare out the front windshield, but a smile still touches her lips. “Do you think he believed we’re really an item?”

Giorgio’s words replay in my head. “Yes, he believed it.”

She sighs in relief. “Good.”

“It is,” I agree. “And it will be even better when pictures from the café are published tomorrow.”

“How do you know they’ll be published tomorrow?”

My eyes slide to her with a knowing smirk. “Because the camera loves me, and the press won’t miss the chance of reporting on a new budding romance, especially when they think it could quickly turn into a gossip-riddled mess.”

When I first started accepting social invitations from the wealthy elite around the world, I knew it was inevitable that the press would fixate on a new male socialite, especially someone who looks like me. I’m not trying to sound vain, but I’m not stupid either. I know the effect my appearance has on my popularity.

But I didn’t anticipate how the press’s interest would also attract the wrong kind of women. And how much drama that

kind of woman loved to create just to get her fifteen minutes of fame.

The press, no doubt, will believe Avery Lawson to be the same. They're in for a disappointing surprise when they learn they're wrong.

When Avery remains silent, I look over. I see her bottom lip pulled between her teeth.

I suppress the jolt of desire that sparks from the sight. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"I'm worried the press won't believe us."

"Why?"

"Because of the timing. Vegas wasn't that long ago. Someone is bound to be smart enough to be suspicious of our new relationship. Especially when they learn I'm in PR."

I think she gives the writers of the gossip rags too much credit. But I take her concern seriously, anyway.

"Okay. How do we make them believe us, then?"

Avery stares out the window. "We need to take things slow," she says decisively. "You want the press to believe you're a reformed playboy, so we need to act like it. We start by being seen on casual dates. No over-the-top PDA. And no sleepovers."

I agree with everything she said until the last part.

"Why no sleepovers? We're both adults who've been in relationships before. Don't you think the press will think it's strange if we aren't... intimate? Or at least give the illusion of intimacy?"

"We want to control the narrative when it comes to this relationship," Avery says, speaking with the experience and knowledge of a PR agent. "If we do anything that even remotely resembles your past relationships or liaisons, it will give the press the opportunity to make comparisons and assumptions about ours. It could lead them back to painting you as a philandering player and me, a ditzy gold-digger."

“Not all my girlfriends were ditzzy,” I counter as I turn into the Source Solutions parking garage.

Avery ignores me. “We need the press to think this relationship is different. Let them write about how you’ve seemed to change. Let them discuss your maturity and our budding romance as it unfolds. Minimize the suspicion so no one looks too closely at my career.”

I park in one of the reserved parking spots, close to the garage’s elevator. “Okay.”

“Okay?” She sounds surprised.

I smile. “Yes. You’re the expert. I’ll defer to your judgement. But I have one condition.”

Wariness creeps into her gaze. “What?”

I laugh. “Why do you sound like you don’t trust me?”

“Because I don’t. I barely know you.”

Instead of being offended, I take her words to heart and give her a slow, sensual smile. “Well, I’ll just have to work on that, won’t I?”

She watches me with uncertainty. “What’s your condition?”

“You said I can’t have side-flings with any women, at the risk of blowing our relationship’s façade.”

She nods. “Yeah...”

“Well, I would like to insist you cannot have side relations with any other men, either.”

She blinks. “Oh... I... yeah. I mean, I agree. I wasn’t planning on dating anyone, anyway.”

“Good.” I shoot her a smile. That was easier than I thought.

I open the car door and step out. She scrambles to do the same.

“What are you doing?” she asks when I step towards the elevator. She rounds the front of the car and reaches my side.

“Going to work.”

A cute frown creases her forehead. “What?”

I grin. “Derek didn’t tell you? I’ll be using an office at Source Solutions while in LA. It’ll allow me to be more productive than working at home.”

“I see.” Once again, she chews on her bottom lip, but she doesn’t say anything else. She presses the elevator call button, and we wait in silence for it to arrive.

As we wait, I catch myself glancing at Avery and smiling to myself as I remember our lunch together. I’d proposed this arrangement thinking it would be more difficult to pull off, but Avery is charming and being around her is more enjoyable than I could have imagined.

Dare I say, I’m actually looking forward to spending more time together.

And I can’t remember the last time I felt that way about a woman.

CHAPTER 13

Avery

Three months later.

“I REALLY APPRECIATE you taking the time to speak with me, Ms. Nelson. I understand you have a busy schedule.” I sidestep an assistant practically running down the hall. The young man shoots me an apologetic glance before he continues on his way, rounding the corner with impressive speed.

The stunning editor of one of the country’s most prolific business magazines waves a hand over her shoulder at my words. “It’s not a problem, dear. I’m eager to discuss Source Solutions’ growth over their first financial quarter.”

Her words make me positively giddy.

Derek’s been working his ass off securing new clients and obtaining a number of low-level investors. None of them have the capital to float the company if anything should happen with Adam’s investment, but it’s a start.

I follow Ms. Nelson into her office. A trio of bleary-eyed employees sit at the conference table in the room, but they jump to their feet when their boss enters.

“Ms. Nelson,” a softspoken female greets. She pushes the black-rimmed glasses up on her nose as she rushes to her boss’s side. “We have the piece on Roberto Mendoza ready for you to approve, as well as the press release from their company regarding his resignation.”

Cynthia Nelson doesn’t bat an eye at hearing the billionaire inventor’s name, nor does she react to news of his resignation. If I were a betting woman, I’d say there was a scandal involved.

“Excellent, Lauren. Leave them on my desk and clear the room. I have a meeting.”

The three employees finally look at me. I swear recognition crosses their eyes before they rush to gather their belongings and step out of the office. Lauren closes the door behind her, but not before giving me one more assessing, somewhat envious, look.

I don't have time to wonder about it before Ms. Nelson begins to speak. "I understand Source Solutions doubled their expected earnings for the quarter, and they are moving up the start date of their software research and development department."

She sits behind her sleek metal desk, motioning to the chair in front of her.

I sit. "That is correct."

"But what is this business I hear about them drafting an IPO to submit before the year is out?"

"That is not happening."

Source Solutions is nowhere near ready enough to invite the uncertainty and scrutiny that would come from going public so soon after launching. Derek and Kyle still needed to work out the culture and vision of the company before they invite outside influence to have a serious seat at the table— influences other than their private investors, of course.

"I hope not." Ms. Nelson kicks her designer pumps off and rests her heels on her desk, crossing them at the ankle. "Now, let's move on to juicier topics."

I'm confused by her unprofessional behavior. "Don't you want to read my drafted press release for your publication?" I pull the paper from the leather portfolio in my arms.

Miss Nelson waves a dismissive hand. "I'm sure it's great. You can just leave it on my desk. I'm more interested in discussing you, Miss Lawson."

"Me?"

The older blonde nods. Her plump lips curve into a knowing smile. "I want to hear all about you and your delectable boyfriend."

Ah.

Honestly, I should have expected this. Especially considering the way Lauren looked at me before she left.

For the past three months, Adam and I have maintained our fake relationship for the public eye. I've been dragged to more fancy fundraisers than I can count, and introduced to so many people it's tough to keep track.

Otherwise, my day-to-day activities remain the same.

I wake up in my tiny apartment, have coffee with Heather when she's available, go to work, then I go home and go to sleep.

Adam and I don't sneak around and enjoy private dates.

We don't make out in coffee shops, hoping no one catches us.

The public fundraising events, dinners, and art shows take up enough of our time, and they give the world what they want: pictures of us together.

We've stayed within the original rules of our fake relationship.

Though, I have to admit, I enjoy Adam Moreno's company more than I would have thought. He's funny and charming. Kind and intelligent. I could think of worse people to pretend to be my boyfriend.

When anyone asks about our relationship, both Adam and I say we prefer to keep our romance low key. The strategy helps Adam's grandfather believe he's turned over a new leaf, as well. For more than one-hundred and twenty days, no scandals have run about the handsome billionaire.

No credible ones, anyway.

A month into our ruse, a rag sheet tried to claim my lack of public appearances was due to an unplanned pregnancy. But the style section's article the following day showed me in a sleek satin gown. No baby bump in sight.

Realizing Ms. Nelson waits for a response, I say, “What is it you’d like to know?”

Her eyes twinkle. “Oh, you know. The basics. How did you meet?”

“Through my brother.”

“Ah. Yes. That’s right.” She leans forward. “And how did you snag the elusive Adam Moreno as a boyfriend? It’s no secret that he’s known as someone who sneers at commitment. What is so unique about you, Avery Lawson, that he would forgo his playboy ways and settle down?”

My forehead creases.

Her questions make her sound like the editor of a gossip column, not one of the most influential business magazines in the country.

“Adam and I have a lot in common.”

“Such as?”

Irritation flares. “I don’t mean to be rude, Ms. Nelson, but I do not see how this is any of your business.”

“I’m just curious, my dear.” But her sharp gaze makes me think its much more than curiosity fueling these questions.

I pause and take a breath.

I’d anticipated people might question the legitimacy of a relationship between me and Adam. Anyone with an ounce of skepticism could easily deduce I’m in public relations and Adam is in desperate need of a refreshed reputation.

But after three months of coasting by with no blatant accusations, I’d let my guard down.

I take this moment to raise them right back up.

Straightening my spine and exhaling, I don my stoic, PR face and reply, “While I understand your curiosity, Adam and I prefer to keep our relationship private. We don’t discuss each other with members of the press.” I offer her a professional smile. “You understand.”

Her eyes flash. She most certainly does *not* understand. At least, she doesn't want to.

But there's no way she can continue her questioning without looking extremely unprofessional.

So, with a tight-lipped grin, she says, "Of course. Do you have that press release for Source Solutions? I'd like to take a look at it before you go."

I'm sitting in the back of my rideshare, heading to my shoe-box apartment, fuming over how the conversation with Ms. Nelson devolved after I refused to give her details on my relationship with Adam.

Seriously, the woman worked for a business magazine. I went there to discuss my brother's company. Her behavior was unprofessional at best and aggressive at worst.

I'm contemplating the merits of reaching out to someone higher up at her magazine to voice my complaints when my phone rings.

I look at the screen and immediately accept the call. "Hello."

"Avery. How are you? How did the meeting with Nelson go?" Adam's smooth, accented voice sounds from the earpiece.

I scowl at the window to my right. I'd already made the mistake of scowling forward, and the poor driver asked if he'd done something to offend me.

After reassuring him that he wasn't responsible for my foul mood, I kept my heated glare on the back window for the fifteen-minute drive to my place.

"Awful," I tell Adam. "I wouldn't be surprised if Nelson throws my press release out the window and refuses to run anything about Source Solutions for the next decade."

"What? What happened?"

I gave him a brief rundown of the encounter.

By the time I finish, he's muttering curses. "Don't worry, Avery. I'll take care of it."

"No!" I've seen, first hand, what Adam does when he's upset. "You interfering will just make it worse. I'll handle it."

"How?"

I have no clue.

"I'll figure it out." The car stops along the curb outside my apartment building. I mouth goodbye to the driver and give him a wave before I slide out of the car. "Please, Adam. Don't do anything. I'm just irritated, but I'm a big girl. If Nelson does anything sketchy, I'll figure it out."

He sighs into the phone. "Very well. I won't do anything."

"Thank you."

I reach in my bag and dig for my keys. Normally, it's something I'd do prior to getting out of the car, but I was too distracted by my frustration and Adam's call to remember to do it. "Is there something I can help you with?" I ask.

"What?"

"You called." I point out, still struggling to find my keys so I can enter the apartment building. "I assume it was for a reason."

"Oh." Adam clears his throat. "Yes. I..."

His hesitation makes me pause my search. I'm not sure I've ever heard Adam Moreno hesitate about anything.

Again, he clears his throat. "I just wanted to see how the meeting went. And also to ask you—"

Whatever else Adam says is lost as I feel something hard press against the middle of my back and a deep, sinister voice demand, "Give me your purse."

CHAPTER 14

Avery

“GIVE ME YOUR PURSE.”

My mind blanks as I register the words, then feel the hard gun pressing into my back.

Oh my god.

“Avery? Who is that?”

“Drop the phone,” the sinister voice commands. “NOW!”

He presses the weapon deeper into my back. I drop the phone without a second thought. I don’t even flinch when I hear the screen crack. My pulse is racing, and my breathing is rapid.

“Good.” The robber says. “Now, give me your purse.”

I swallow and bob my head once. “Okay.” I begin to slide it off my shoulder.

From my phone, I hear a staticky, “Walk away, you son of a bitch, or you’ll regret it.”

The robber responds by kicking the device into the street.

I have my purse in my shaking hands. I turn to hand it over. Before I can, I’m pressed against the brick wall in front of me. The rough stone scratches my cheek.

The purse is ripped from my grasp, but I’m held against the wall by the daunting metal barrel. “All my money is in the beige wallet,” I manage to say in an even voice.

Please take it and leave me alone.

My neighborhood isn’t the crappiest, but it’s certainly no suburb with a friendly neighborhood watch. There are no nosy neighbors peering out their windows to keep track of what goes on. Everyone here minds their business. Well, except Mrs. Hernandez across the hall. But the kind widow’s window looks out on the other side of the street. She wouldn’t see my mugging even in she was inclined to look outside.

The robber's gun shifts against my back as he fumbles with my purse. I want to tell him to take everything, but I keep my mouth shut.

The seconds drag on. My heart feels like its bruising my breastbone. The beat accelerates when sirens sound in the distance.

Am I imagining it, or are they getting closer?

"Shit," my assailant mutters. The pressure of the gun increases. "Move to your left and walk down the alley."

Tears burn the back of my eyes. I stay right where I am.

"I said, *move*." The robber shifts the gun to the back of my head. "Move, or I will blow your brain all across this building."

I whimper.

The desire to listen and guarantee myself at least another minute or two of life is tempting, but I'm no fool. Nothing good waits for me if I let this man take me to another location. I'd rather take my chances on the here and now, even if that means these moments are my last.

When I still don't move, the man snarls. He fists my hair with the hand holding my purse and yanks back painfully. A yelp escapes my pinched lips.

I'm staring up at the dirty awning hanging over the shut-down laundromat. The part of me not rendered useless by fear says I should try to get a look at my attacker. But the grip on my head makes it impossible to turn and look.

Now, the gun's barrel is pressed against my temple. "Walk!"

I squeeze my eyes closed and brace for the end. "N-no."

Sirens blare.

They're still at a distance, but there is no doubt in my mind they are heading my direction. Hope flares as I consider Adam could have called 911. I didn't tell him I was on my way

home, but given the time of night, it wasn't a hard guess to make.

Maybe I will make it out of this encounter unscathed.

"I mean it, bitch," the robber growls when I refuse to listen. "Walk with me now or die here."

"Just take my purse," I beg. "Please."

"WALK!"

"I'm not going anywhere!" I shout.

At this point, there's no harm. The robber has made his threat. He plans to shoot me for not listening. Might as well see if he shoots me for shouting.

Angry curses follow. I'm shoved forward and my face hits the brick with a smack. Stars burst behind my eyelids.

"You got lucky, bitch. Sleep with one eye open." I hear the slap of shoes on asphalt as the robber runs away. The only sign he was ever here is the lingering smell of cigarette smoke hanging in the air.

One breath fills my lungs. Then, my entire body begins to shake.

I try to control my reaction, but there's no use. It's the result of pent-up adrenaline initiated by my body's fight or flight response. The tremors wrack my body and rattle my teeth. My knees knock together until they give out entirely.

I collapse to the ground. My forehead rests on the brick building and tears burn the backs of my eyes as my mind tortures me with thoughts of what could have happened.

I am an idiot. My actions made me the perfect target for the asshole. I know better than to talk on the phone while I'm out after dark. Or even during the day!

I am so lost in fears of what could have been and reprimanding myself for not being smart enough to prevent the situation, I don't immediately realize I'm no longer alone.

"Miss Lawson, are you hurt?" From the woman's tone, this is not the first time she asked me the question.

A gentle hand lands on my shoulder. I lean back from the brick wall and look up. Light flashes in my eyes. I wince and lift a shaking hand, shielding myself from the worst of the glow. After a few blinks, the police officers and their flashing cruisers come into focus.

“Y-yes.” I try to stand, but my legs are shaking too much.

“Take it easy, Miss Lawson,” the female officer says.

How does she know who I am?

The officer kneels next to me. Seeing the wound on my forehead, she hollers to her partner, “Radio for a medic.”

A medic? Oh, no. That’ll be crazy expensive.

“I’m fine,” I try to tell her. “I swear. I just need to clean up ___”

“AVERY!”

My mouth falls open.

It can’t be...

I look up, blinded for a moment by the headlights of a car slowing down to get a look at the scene on the sidewalk. I suck in a breath when my vision clears and I see none other than Adam Moreno jogging up to me.

And he looks furious.

CHAPTER 15

Adam

One hour earlier.

ICE CUBES CLANK against crystal as I swirl the tumbler in my hands. I'm lounging on the couch in my penthouse, struggling to find a position where it doesn't feel like I'm sitting on a cushion stuffed with pebbles.

The couch is expensive and looks nice, but it's uncomfortable as hell. I'll never understand how something that costs so much money can't bother to be nice to sit in as well.

But that's one of the flaws of the rich. They care about perception more than utility.

Just like the media and my reputation. It shouldn't matter if I spend my weekends gambling or sleeping with multiple women. Not that I'm inclined to do either, despite what the gossip rags say.

Regardless, my extracurricular activities shouldn't threaten my livelihood. It's not like I'm a Prime Minister or some other type of elected official. I am the CEO of my family's company, and I'm damn good at my job. I shouldn't be treated like an uncontrollable, adolescent teenager.

I rub my eyes. Today was a particularly annoying day of dealing with my grandfather and the board.

In addition to maneuvering around questions regarding my moderately publicized relationship with Avery, I had to justify my decision to abstain from pursuing a merger with an Italian carpenter corporation whose numbers this past year indicate a plummeting business.

Our company already has a steady influx of carpentry goods. We don't need to take on another and try to right the sinking ship. Our efforts will be better spent elsewhere.

But the board is filled with bored men who are eager for a challenge. Their pockets are already lined with gold. They don't need more money. It's just about the thrill to them.

Every move I make, I'm second guessed. And it's grating on my nerves, tempting me to say fuck it and leave the company all together.

An enthusiastic knock on the door pulls me out of my spiraling annoyance. I didn't order food, and it's way too late for the building's staff to drop by. Prepared to cast my frustration on a poor, unsuspecting soul, I stomp to the front door and yank it open with a frown.

"Hello, Adam. Long time, no see." A familiar, leggy blonde leans against the wall on the other side of the hall. With her arms and ankles crossed, her pose reminds me of her latest cover from Vanity.

"Trisha?"

Her ruby red lips stretch wide. "For a second, I thought you forgot about me."

Not likely.

Trisha and I shared a heated summer fling two years ago. The model had been touring the Spanish coast with a group of childhood girlfriends. We ran into each other at Giovanni's Vineyard outside of Barcelona, and I'd been pleasantly surprised by how down to earth and genuine Trisha turned out to be.

Our time together had been the most normal relationship I'd ever been in.

Except for Avery.

Thoughts of my fake girlfriend make me scan the hall, suddenly nervous.

Avery and I have worked hard these past months, painting the picture of a mature, secure relationship. And I've held up my end of the deal not to engage in relations with any other woman. Surprisingly, it wasn't hard to do.

Not only has work kept me busy, but I find myself genuinely enjoying my time with Avery. She's smart and sassy. Her beauty is rivaled by her humor, and things between us are easy. The only downside is our lack of physical intimacy.

I'm not going to lie... I've contemplated closing the distance between us more than once. Avery Lawson is a tempting woman, and the more time we spend together, the more I want to give in to her allure.

If she ever proposed adding a physical element to our relationship, I wouldn't hesitate to agree. I'd wrap those long, toned legs around my waist and dive my hands into her wavy brown locks, tilting her head just right so I could plunge my tongue into her mou—

“Adam?” Trisha waves a delicate hand in front of my face.

I jerk. “Yes?”

Trisha raises a perfectly manicured brow. “May I come in?”

“Of course.” I step back. I take the opportunity to adjust myself while her back is to me as she walks inside. I close and lock the door then follow her to the sitting area.

“This is lovely.”

“Thank you. Would you like a drink?”

Trisha eyes the crystal tumbler I left on the coffee table. “I'll have what you're having.”

I pour two fingers of Scotch and add a single ice cube. I hand her the drink and settle next to her on the couch. She curls into my side, and I get a whiff of her jasmine perfume.

Immediately, I think of Avery. I prefer her floral scent. After all these weeks together, I've narrowed down the aroma to lavender and lily, with a hint of vanilla. It's heavenly. I enjoy it so much, I requested my personal shopper to purchase lavender soaps and candles to keep around the house. It's not the same as Avery's signature aroma, but it's still nice.

I rest my arm along the back of the couch, careful not to touch Trisha. Her actions are innocent. We've seen each other many times since we ended our fling, and there's always been a comfortable friendship between us. But I can't dismiss the concern I feel when I wonder what Avery would think of this situation.

Trisha and I exchange pleasantries, then chat about our lives. I learn Trisha is in town for a photo shoot with a popular lingerie chain.

Her eyes twinkle as she says, "Perhaps you could drop by pick out something for that girlfriend of yours."

I keep my eyes on her and take a sip of my drink. "Maybe I will."

Her eyes dart between mine. "So, that's real then?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

Trisha rolls her eyes. "Please, Adam. You and I were exclusive during our time together, but I didn't get the girlfriend title from you or the press. You can't fault me for being surprised to hear you're in a relationship. Especially one that seems so... respectable."

I chuckle. "Are you implying I'm not respectable?"

"You know what I'm saying. I'm used to seeing scandalous photos and salacious articles discussing your love life. But things seem different now... suspiciously so."

I know it's not Trisha's intention, but I'm mildly insulted by the insinuation. It doesn't matter that my relationship with Avery isn't technically legitimate. The fact is, our time together—the laughs and smiles and good times—that's real. I don't like the idea of anyone questioning it.

My expression must reveal my thoughts.

Trisha's smile falls. "I've offended you."

"Hardly."

"Don't lie to me." She insists gently. She leans back so she's no longer cuddled against me. "I'm sorry, Adam. That

wasn't my intention."

I stare at the unlit electric fireplace in front of me. "Don't be. You're right." The words are hard to say.

"I am?"

I take another sip of my drink. This one is long. I'm going to need a refill by the time this conversation is over. "Avery is the sister of one of the founders of Source Solutions."

"The tech company you discovered a couple years ago?"

I nod. I met Derek shortly after meeting Trisha. She'd been my sounding board when I first discussed my excitement at the prospect of getting in the company at the ground floor.

"She's also in public relations."

Trisha isn't just a pretty face. She's smart, and she's capable of deducing what it is I'm not saying. "Ah."

"Yes." I finish my drink. "Ah."

I keep my gaze on the fireplace embedded into the wall. Trisha keeps hers on the side of my face. I feel the burn of her curiosity.

"So..." Trisha begins. "Your relationship is a PR stunt?"

A pang stabs my chest. I resist the urge to rub the spot. "Yes."

"But you want it to be more."

My eyes snap to hers. "Of course not."

Trisha's face fills with knowing. "Come on, Adam. It's me. You don't need to lie to me."

"Our arrangement is a mutually beneficial one, and our relationship is purely platonic."

"What does Avery get out of it?"

I explain my grandfather's ultimatum regarding me cleaning up my reputation or losing my position in the company. I tell her that Avery agreed to the ruse in order to help secure my investment in her brother's company.

Sympathy overshadows Trisha's knowing expression. "Avery sounds like a selfless, kind woman."

"She is."

"And you like her?"

"Of course, I like her."

There is nothing *not* to like about Avery Lawson. Trust me, I've tried. Even the mouthy brunette's sass is attractive to me. One thing about being rich: it's hard to find people who aren't afraid of stepping on your toes. Avery Lawson has no problem stomping her tasteful work pumps on my expensive Italian loafers.

And I enjoy every second of it.

"No," Trisha says meaningfully. "I mean, you *like* her, like her."

I run a hand down my face. I don't know what to say.

"She's beautiful," Trisha adds.

"Yes, she is."

"So why is it hard to admit you like her?"

"Because she doesn't like me. Not like that anyway."

"I find that hard to believe."

I smirk. "Just because you find me irresistible doesn't mean everyone does."

She gives my arm a shove. "Stop with the fake modesty. We both know it's not you."

We share a laugh. Quickly, my amusement fades as I think over Trisha's words. The truth is, she's right.

Over these past months, I've realized I could be interested in more with Avery Lawson. I've searched for signs she might feel the same way, but the woman is nothing if not professional. She treats our relationship like the business arrangement it is.

So, I shove the desire down. It only bubbles back up in moments of weakness. I solve that problem with a quick pump

of my fist in the shower; the vision of Avery's pouty lips at the front of my mind. The feelings are never completely gone, but at least they're masked by the euphoria of an orgasm.

When I don't say anything, Trisha asks, "What is Avery doing tonight?"

Without hesitation, I say, "She had a late meeting with an editor regarding a profile on Source Solutions."

I tell myself I only remember the event because it involves the company I've invested a lot in. Really, I remember everything Avery tells me about how she spends her day. It's a topic I enjoy hearing about.

"Have you called her to see how it went?" Trisha asks.

I frown. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because..."

"Because what, Adam?" Trisha adjusts herself so she's sitting on her legs, leaning forward. "Look, it's clear you like her. You want this relationship to be real. Tell me I'm wrong."

I rub a hand over my mouth, processing her words.

Do I want a real relationship with Avery? I certainly don't like the idea of every smile, joke, or good time spent in her presence not being real for her like it is for me.

Her company is enjoyable. Her wit, beauty, and drive are admirable. Only a fool wouldn't want to pursue her.

And I'll be damned if I'm a fool...

"Fine. Yes. I'm interested in more with Avery."

Trisha's grin is wide with victory. "Then you need to call her and tell her."

"What?" I stiffen. "Now?"

"Yes." Trisha's eyes scan the room. She sees the phone on the bar-counter separating the sitting area from the kitchen. She hops up gracefully and strides across the room to grab it. "Call her. Right now."

She tosses the phone, and I catch it against my chest. Trisha moves back to the couch, but she sits on the far end. She watches me expectantly.

I swallow the lump in my throat. "I... I don't know what to say."

"Adam Moreno at a loss for words," she tsks, shaking her head. "I never thought I'd see the day."

"Shut up."

She laughs. "Just call her and ask about her day. Start bridging the gap between what's an act and what's real. Then, take it from there."

Another sigh escapes me. I stare at my phone's black screen and debate if this is a risk I'm willing to take. It's been years, nearly a decade, since a woman has rejected me.

Something tells me Avery's rejection will hurt much more than Lucinda Allegra during my last year of secondary when I asked her to the fall formal.

But how much longer will I be able to keep up the ruse that things between us aren't real? That I'm not tempted to devour her mouth with mine every time we're together?

Not long.

I close my eyes and take a fortifying breath. "You're right."

I unlock my phone and hit the contacts button, swiping over to my favorites. Avery's name is number two. Second only to my grandfather.

"I know I'm right," Trisha says sassily. She leans against the couch's arm and lifts her glass to her lips.

Not willing to let anyone listen to my potential rejection, I hit the call button and get to my feet. I stroll to my bedroom with the sound of Trisha's laugh trailing after me.

My heart is in my throat as I listen to each ring.

Three sound before I hear a lovely, "Hello."

I force away my nerves and will confidence into my smooth voice. “Avery. How are you? How did the meeting with Nelson go?” I pace the length of the room.

“Awful. I wouldn’t be surprised if Nelson throws my press release out the window and refuses to run anything about Source Solutions for the next decade.”

My feet plant into the plush carpet. “What? What happened?”

Avery tells me of Cynthia Nelson’s behavior. How she was more focused on discussing Avery and mine’s relationship rather than the successful quarter Source Solutions just completed.

My frustration from earlier in the day finds itself a new outlet. “Don’t worry, Avery. I’ll take care of it.”

Avery is quick to try and talk me down. I’m not surprised.

The PR side of her loathes the idea of conflict. Her job is to avoid it at all costs. But I’ve been in business long enough to know you have to crack some eggs to make an omelet. And Source Solutions needs the exclusive from Nelson’s magazine to help scale up the research and design goals for the rest of the year.

“I’ll figure it out,” Avery responds when I question how she will manage Nelson.

Realizing I didn’t call to argue with her, I say, ““Very well. I won’t do anything.”

Her breathless, “Thank you,” makes my stomach clench.

I think of how to proceed with the conversation when I hear the sound of a car door shutting.

“Is there something I can help you with?”

Immediately, my thoughts make my dick stand at attention. “What?”

Seriously, what is it about this woman that makes me act like a pubescent teenager?

“You called,” she points out. Rustling comes through the earpiece. “I assume it was for a reason.”

“Oh.” I clear my throat. “Yes. I...” My words trail off as I realize I have no idea what to say.

Damn it.

Should I ask her to come over and have this conversation in person? Or should I go to her place?

Again, I clear my throat. “I just wanted to see how the meeting went. And also, to ask you if I can come over? I have a matter I’d like to discuss with you.”

Instead of Avery’s reply, I hear a gravely, threatening voice say, “Give me your purse.”

“Avery?” Dread courses through my body as my brain makes sense of what I just heard. “Who is that?”

“Drop the phone,” the voice demands. “NOW!” The shout is so loud I jerk the phone away from my ear.

Quickly, I press it back to my head just in time to hear a loud crack come through the phone. I glance at the screen and see we’re still connected.

Anger, fierce and fueled by the desire to protect Avery, overwhelms me. I don’t sound like myself as I snarl into the mouthpiece, “Walk away, you son of a bitch, or you’ll regret it.”

No response.

The door crashes against the wall as I rush out of the bedroom.

“What is it?” Trisha cries in alarm. She’s on her feet when I reach the sitting room.

“Avery’s in trouble.” I keep my phone pressed to my ear. I hear nothing but the sound of cars whipping by, but I refuse to lose the connection to her.

“Call 911,” I tell Trisha. “Tell them there’s been a mugging of a late twenties blonde on the corner of Washington Drive

and Palm Street.” I recite Avery’s cross streets from memory, assuming that’s where she went after her meeting with Nelson.

I’ve dropped her off more than once following our “dates”. I wasn’t impressed with the area. The buildings are sturdy, but they’re old. And there aren’t enough streetlights for my liking.

Unease filled me when I thought of Avery living there, but I’m not really her boyfriend. I can’t control where she lives. Now, I wish I’d tried.

“Oh, god,” Trisha breathes. In a blink, her phone is in her hand. She presses three buttons then hits the call button.

“Where are you going?” she asks when I snatch my keys and wallet from the island and head towards the door.

“To Avery.” There’s not a question in my mind if I should go or let the authorities handle the situation.

It’s a ten minute drive to Avery’s place. LA is a big city with a lot of people and a significant amount of crime. Who knows how long it will take the police to reach her?

“Be careful!” Trisha calls just before I step into the hall.

My steps are soundless against the expensive carpet as I run down the hall to the elevator. If I didn’t live on the sixteenth floor, I would take the stairs. But time is of the essence.

Less than five minutes later, I’m in the parking garage, and I’m whipping my sportscar out of the parking spot like a professional, zipping out onto the streets with one thought in my mind: I need to get to Avery.

CHAPTER 16

Avery

MY EYELIDS OPEN and close in quick succession. I think I'm imagining it, but no. Adam Moreno is really running towards me.

I take in his expensive slacks and deep blue dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, exposing muscular forearms. His brown hair stands on end, and his furious expression gives me pause. My head is a fog, clouded by fear and adrenaline. I cannot process what he has to be angry about.

The cop next to me sees the man running to me. She stands and puts a hand out in front of her. "Hold it right there, sir."

The other officer grabs the handle of the pistol on his hip, mimicking his partner's protective stance. Adam grinds to a halt. His chest rises and falls rapidly, but he's composed when he speaks to the officer.

"My name is Adam Moreno. I was on the phone with Avery when she was robbed."

The officer keeps her hand on her weapon. "What is your relationship to Miss Lawson?"

"I'm her boyfriend."

The officer turns to me. "Is this true Miss Lawson?"

For the cameras, yes.

I nod and croak, "Yes."

Her protective stance falls away. She looks back at Adam. "You said you were on the phone with Miss Lawson during the attack?"

"Yes." Adam answers, but his emerald eyes are locked on me.

The emotions swirling in his gaze catch me off guard. I've never seen him so rattled. The thought that his concern is for me does funny things to my stomach.

“I’d like to discuss what you heard. Would you mind coming with me to my cruiser for a few questions?”

Adam’s lips press together. It’s clear he doesn’t want to leave.

New sirens blare as an ambulance rolls up to the scene.

I groan when a man and woman wearing matching blue uniforms with medic patches sewed onto their shirt hustle over from the ambulance. “I don’t need a medic.”

“It’s protocol. Please allow the EMTs to check your vitals. If everything is fine, you’ll be able to go home after you make your statement,” the officer’s voice is kind, but firm.

Unwilling to argue and drag this out any longer, I nod just as the male EMT kneels in front of me.

“Hello, I’m Eric. Can you tell me your name?” He flashes a light in my eyes.

“Eric?” I mutter absentmindedly. “That’s my father’s name.”

His smile is kind. “And what’s your name?”

“Avery. Avery Lawson.”

“Nice to meet you, Avery. Can you tell me how you are feeling?”

I sit on the sidewalk and answer his questions. His partner takes my blood pressure and listens to my heartbeat.

As we speak, my gaze flits over to where Adam and the female officer talk beside her patrol car. She has a notepad in her hand and scribbles while he speaks. She pauses when asking him a question, then she’s back to scribbling.

“Everything seems to be in order,” Eric, the EMT, tells me. “You will be free to go just as soon as we identify a friend or family member who will keep an eye on you throughout the night.”

“Is there anyone else you wish to call, or will Mr. Moreno be the individual who signs off on your evening care?”

I turn my attention to the female EMT. A warm color fills her cheeks when she realizes she's revealed she knows who we are. She wasn't in hearing distance when Adam introduced himself to the officer.

The PR agent side of me is pleased that our efforts are working, and we're recognized as a couple.

But the private side of me loathes the idea of anyone knowing who I am, knowing who Adam is, and selling this story to the press. I want nothing more than to forget this night ever happened.

Before I can answer her, Adam's accented voice states, "I will oversee Avery's care. Just tell me where to sign."

Eric helps me to my feet as Adam signs the forms with the female EMT.

After giving a brief statement and my contact information to the police, Adam starts to escort me to his car.

I dig my heels into the asphalt. "Wait. My phone."

Adam follows my gaze and jogs over to retrieve my phone. I examine it after he hands it to me, wincing as I take in the shattered, half-unlit screen. Phones aren't cheap, and while I'm nowhere near broke, I'd hate to spend money on a new device.

I cross my arms, tucking the phone against my body. "I really don't need to go back to your place, Adam. I'll be fine."

Sleep with one eye open...

I ignore the memory of my assailant's threat. The man took my purse, but I won't let him take away my sense of safety. No matter how rattled I still feel. I'll get over it.

I have no choice but to get over it.

Adam hears none of it. "You heard what the EMT said. You need to be monitored for twenty-four hours to make sure you don't have a concussion." A firm hand presses on my lower back. "I have three spare bedrooms. You can take your pick."

Still, I resist.

“Adam... I’m fine.”

Lie.

“I signed paperwork saying I would look after you.” Adam leans down and murmurs into my ear so as to not be overheard by the small crowd that had gathered to watch the scene unfold. “Come home with me, Avery, or I might just lose it.”

I can’t explain why, but the sound of his voice and the feel of his breath against the shell of my ear makes my toes curl and heat warm my core.

Now is not the time to succumb to my attraction to my fake boyfriend.

But my traitorous body cares nothing about time.

“I need to get some things from my apartment.” Even as I say the words, the thought of going anywhere near my apartment— of passing by the spot where I had a gun held to my head—makes me want to throw up.

“Leave it. I’ll send someone to pack your stuff tomorrow. I have everything you need for one night.”

This time, when Adam presses against my back, I let him steer me across the street to his car. The sleek black vehicle looks out of place in this part of town.

Adam opens the door. He stays as I lower myself into the car. Then, he reaches over and buckles my seatbelt. A whiff of his cologne fills my nostrils, stoking the ill-timed heat in my lower body.

I wait until he’s buckled in the driver’s seat before I mumble, “I’m not an invalid. I can buckle myself.”

“I know.” He grabs my hand and shocks me when he brings it to his lips for a chaste kiss. “How are you? Really?”

My lip wobbles. I bite it and manage to choke out, “I’ve been better.”

The concern in his gaze threatens to steal my breath. His beautiful lashes frame vibrant green irises, and I am the center

of his attention.

A flash comes from outside the car, pulling his mesmerizing gaze off me.

“What the hell?”

“What?” I look out the front windshield. Immediately, I see the cause of Adam’s curse.

A photographer stands on the corner of the street, snapping pictures with his 200mm camera.

“Bastard,” Adam growls under his breath. He hits the ignition and starts the car. “Hold on.”

I brace myself against the side door as Adam whips out of the parking spot and speeds past the paparazzo. He takes his foot off the accelerator at the next light, but he continues to grip the steering wheel angrily.

“I apologize, Avery. I didn’t think anyone was watching my place. He must have followed me here.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Adam grits his teeth. Clearly, he disagrees. He stays quiet.

Silence settles over the luxurious German interior. In a short fifteen minutes, I walk into the penthouse of one of the most expensive residential buildings right in the heart of Los Angeles.

“Wow.”

I spin in a slow circle, taking in each piece of fine furniture and tactfully placed décor. The kitchen features high-end, stainless-steel appliances and pristine granite countertops. The fridge is one of those with a digital display on the door. It reveals the late hour, as well as the weather forecast for the week and a calendar of appointments.

Adam leans against the wall in the entryway, hands in his pockets, watching me take it all in.

“Did you decorate this place yourself?”

Adam scoffs. “Of course not. My assistant hired a firm.”

Of course.

Sometimes, I forget how the other half lives.

“Well, it’s nice.” If a little cold.

As if reading my mind, Adam says, “It’s too clinical for my taste. But it cost a decent amount, so it must be tasteful.” He pushes off the wall and walks into the kitchen. “Do you want a glass of water?”

“Yes, please.” I settle on an oak barstool tucked under the bar-height counter.

Adam opens a frosted cabinet and takes out two water cups. He fills them at the water filter built into the door of the fridge.

I spin on the chair and look at the sitting area behind me. The blinds are pulled back on the far wall, revealing a beautiful view of the hills.

My eyes drop, and they immediately zero in on two crystal tumblers on the glass coffee table. One has ruby red lipstick on the rim.

A pit forms in my stomach. “Did you have company today?”

I hear Adam approach. I look up and watch as he settles on the stool next to me. He holds out a glass. “Perdón?”

I motion to the coffee table. “There are two glasses out...”

God. Do I sound like a crazy person?

I sound like a crazy person.

I hold my breath as Adam’s eyes follows my movement. I know the moment he realizes what I’ve said.

“Ah.” He sips his water, then clears his throat. “Yes. My friend Trisha dropped by.”

Trisha.

My gut tells me he means Trisha Willems, the stunning professional model who’s been taking the fashion industry by storm. She’s one of Heather’s idols. Incidentally, she and

Adam were once an item. I found evidence of their relationship in my extensive digging I did when evaluating how best to approach my pseudo-relationship with the billionaire.

Unlike many of Adam's liaisons, Trisha presented herself as a respectable, chaste lover. There were no topless photos of her on Adam's yacht. Or extensive pornographic images to be found online.

The fact she was in this penthouse, spending time with Adam, makes my jealousy flare. And I don't know what to do about it. Adam Moreno and I are not a real item. This isn't like when I caught Spencer cheating on me.

So why does this feel so similar?

Because you like Adam.

I silence the voice with a harsh bite of my tongue. Pain is my reminder to keep my wits about me.

Adam and I have an agreement—one which we've managed to execute perfectly these past weeks. I refuse to let the vulnerability of this night's events ruin that.

"That's nice."

He takes another sip of water. "Part of me expected she'd still be here." He pulls out his cell phone and squints at the screen. His eyes dart over the phone. Then, his fingers fly over the keyboard.

"Everything okay?" I twirl my glass between my hands, annoyed at myself for feeling so nervous. I have no reason to be.

"Yes. Just telling Trisha you are all right." He taps the screen and looks up. "Are you hungry?"

"No." At the same time, my traitorous stomach growls.

"I'll order your favorite."

I lift a brow. "You know my favorite food?"

"Of course. What kind of fake boyfriend would I be if I didn't?"

Is it my imagination, or does he sound annoyed when he says the word, fake?

“All right. What’s my favorite food?” I feel like challenging him. Maybe, if he gets the answer wrong, it’ll cure me of this plaguing desire.

An arrogant glint shines in his annoyingly gorgeous eyes. He leans forward and says, “Kung Pao Chicken with Chow Mein. Heat level at seven out of ten. With crab rangoons as a side.”

For a moment, I can only stare at him.

Then, I laugh. “I can’t believe you know my exact order.” I know, for a fact, he and I only had Chinese together once.

“Nothing about you is forgettable, Avery.” Adam slips off the stool and disappears into a room off to the left, leaving me gaping after him.

What is that supposed to mean?

I spend the next several minutes trying to convince myself Adam’s words don’t mean anything. They were said nonchalantly. In a friendly tone.

They certainly weren’t meant to stoke the tempting thoughts brewing in the back of my mind, rolling to the forefront of my consciousness to dictate my actions.

No.

I need to keep it together.

Adam returns and enters the kitchen. He opens the drawer beside the fridge and takes out a takeout menu. He’s quick to dial and order our meals, adding on spring rolls, which I know are one of *his* favorites.

Not knowing what else to do with myself, I move off the bar stool and settle on the sleek leather couch positioned in front of a fancy-looking electric fireplace.

When Adam ends the call, he settles a cushions-length away from me and says, “Food should be here in thirty minutes. The restaurant is just around the corner.”

“We could have walked and picked it up ourselves,” I point out. I kick off my pumps and tuck my legs underneath my butt.

“I figured you’d rather stay inside.”

Pride flares.

“I’m not a child, Adam.”

“I never said you are,” he states. “But after the evening you had, you can’t blame me for being concerned about such things.”

Blame him? Of course not. Adam’s been nothing but patient and attentive throughout the hell that is this night. He ditched Trisha Willems for heaven’s sake... all to make sure I was all right.

And that’s precisely the problem.

I’m having a hard time distancing myself from this likeable male—the male I’ve been getting to know these past weeks—and the playboy billionaire his previous reputation painted him to be.

Clutching my water glass, I aim to sound indifferent when I ask, “So... are you and Trisha secretly dating?”

His brows furrow. “No. I gave you my word about that.”

I’m simultaneously pleased and anxious by his answer. Him secretly dating the stunning model would be the help I need to maintain distance between us.

“Oh.”

“Are you secretly dating anyone, Avery?”

I nearly choke on my sip of water. “Um, no. Definitely not.”

“Why do you day it like that?”

I snort. “Between work and the high-class functions you drag me to, I wouldn’t have time to date even if I wanted to.”

“Do you want to?”

“Do I want to what?”

“Do you want to date someone?” His tone is easygoing, but it’s easy to see the interested gleam in his emerald eyes.

The memory of a dinner from last month plays in my mind. Adam and I were supposed to eat with the CEO of one of his company’s subsidiaries, but the woman had a family emergency and cancelled last minute.

Adam insisted we hold the reservation. It was during that meal that I really let myself acknowledge there is more to the billionaire than I originally gave him credit for. He charmed me with stories of his childhood, and listened intently when I shared some of my own. I went to sleep that night thinking that was one of the best dinner dates I’d ever had. That’s when I knew I needed to keep my distance...

Honestly, I’m less worried about catching feelings for Adam. I’m more worried that the more time I spend with him, the more likely I am to give in to the lusty dreams that have plagued me every night since the moment we met.

“Avery?”

I blink. “Yes?”

Amusement flitters over his expression. “Do you want to date someone?” he asks again.

“No,” I answer. “At least, I haven’t met anyone recently who’s captured my attention in that way.”

Am I imagining it, or do his eyes dim?

“I see.” He swirls the water glass in his hand. “Tell me about Nelson.”

Happy for the change in topic, I oblige.

We spend the next twenty minutes discussing the less-than-ideal conversation, debating if we should reach out to the magazine and insist on the right to read the article before publication, and the right to veto it if we find it lacking.

The apartment phone rings. Adam answers and puts it on speaker. I hear the concierge tell him our food has arrived.

Two minutes later, there's a knock at the door. I see Adam slip a crisp twenty-dollar bill from his wallet as he goes to retrieve the food.

Wanting to help, I go to the kitchen and open three cabinets before I find the one with plates. I place two on the counter right as Adam returns with two takeout bags in his hand.

I laugh at the amount of food as he takes out the containers. "I don't think you ordered enough," I tease.

Adam grins. "My eyes might have been bigger than my stomach," he admits. "But that's the great thing about Chinese. It reheats well."

"Very true."

Adam gets serving spoons and forks, then we plate our meal in companionable silence. Balancing a full plate and glass of water in my hands, my bare feet tread across cool wood as I follow Adam to the dining room.

Plush ivory chairs are tucked underneath the modern glass top table. Adam sets his plate down then pulls out a chair for me.

"Thank you." I sit.

Adam settles in the seat next to me. For a few minutes, we eat in silence. I find myself relaxing—more than I ever have with him before.

And that's alarming. I blame the cozy chair and my comfort food.

Needing to remind myself of the professional dynamic between us, I clear my throat and pick up our earlier conversation. "Do you really think the magazine won't run the article if we ask them not to?"

Adam swallows. "I do."

"Why?"

A characteristic smirk lifts his lips. "I know the magazine's founder."

I roll my eyes playfully. “Of course, you do.”

Adam laughs. “How about we talk about something besides work?”

I stiffen. That would be a terrible idea.

But I can’t say that without looking like a crazy person.

“Sure. What do you want to talk about?” I take a massive bite of Chow Mein to save myself from speaking first.

Adam cracks a crab rangoon and pops half in his mouth. He chews and looks at me thoughtfully. I fight the urge to fidget.

“Tell me about your family.”

I swallow my food. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything you want to tell me. Derek says your parents are both psychologists?”

“Yes. They run their own clinic in Michigan.”

“None of you wanted to follow in their footsteps?”

“No, unfortunately not.” Julia and Eric Lawson weren’t ones to pressure their children into anything, but I know they would have loved if one of us decided to pursue the same career path.

“How did your parents meet?”

“Grad school.” My lips curve into a smile. “Apparently, they hated each other at first.”

“But now they’re happily in love?”

“Disgustingly so. I can’t tell you how many times their PDA embarrassed me, Heather, and Derek growing up.”

“That sounds nice.” Adam stares at his plate, twirling noodles around with one chopstick.

“How did your parents meet?” Despite my best research, I could find very little information on them.

“My father was one of many employees at my grandfather’s office. One day, my mom was visiting her father

for lunch, and they ran into each other. Rumors say it was love at first sight.”

The story is a romantic one, but Adam’s blank expression and bland tone hint otherwise.

“Where is your mother now?” I know Adam’s father, Enrique Sanz, died when Adam was just a child. We’ve already discussed it, and how his grandfather convinced his parents to give Adam the Moreno surname, rather than his father’s name.

“Traipsing around Europe, I imagine.” He lifts his gaze. “Isabella Moreno may have loved my father once, but she didn’t hesitate to leave him behind when a husband and child hindered her extravagant social life.”

That’s... incredibly sad.

I knew Adam was raised by his grandfather, but I never knew why.

“You never see her?”

“Never.” He drinks water. He goes back to staring at his food.

Feeling an undeniable need to match his vulnerability, I find myself saying, “Sometimes, I worry I’ll never find the type of love my parents have.”

Once again, Adam’s eyes meet mine.

I continue, “Don’t get me wrong, my parents are far from perfect. They argue. Sometimes, one of them has to leave the house to cool down before they say something they’ll regret. But... they always make up. No matter what life throws their way, no matter what they argue about, they always come out of it stronger.”

I shake my head and stare at the beautiful abstract painting hanging on the wall. “I’ve never had that in a relationship. Not even with Spencer. I always felt like I was walking on broken glass, doing my best not to slip and get cut. I’m starting to think I may be the problem.” My self-deprecating laugh is half-hearted, at best.

“I find it hard to believe you are the reason none of your relationships have worked out.”

A weak smile pulls my lips. “Well, I don’t know what else it could be. I’m the only common denominator.”

“Have you ever considered you just haven’t met the right man?”

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those people who believe there’s only one person out there for you?”

“Of course not.” Adam rests an elbow on the table and places his chin on his fist. “But nor do I believe I am compatible with every single woman between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five.”

“That’s a respectable lower limit.”

He smirks. “It was created after a particularly complicated experience with a twenty-four-year-old.”

I match his smirk. “I can only imagine.”

Adam steers the conversation back, “So, you think one of the men you dated in the past could have been your husband?”

I purse my lips. “Well... no. Besides Spencer, I mean.” And we both know how well that turned out...

“So, I repeat my hypothesis. You simply haven’t met the right man.”

“Well, that’s not great.” I lean back in my chair. “It’s not like I have time to go out into the world to find one of my many soulmates.”

“Not to mention, you are currently locked down by yours truly.” Adam gestures to himself with a cocky grin.

“True. I can’t exactly go on dates to find my one. Not with the paparazzi in this town.” That reminds me, I’ll need to deal with the fallout of any article or post regarding the night’s events.

Adam laughs, but it sounds a bit forced.

We take a break from speaking to eat the rest of our meal. Soon, we are both finished, and I'm following Adam back into the sitting area.

I'm confused when Adam continues down the long hall to the right. "Where are we going?"

"To your room." He looks over his shoulder. Concern covers his expression. "You look exhausted."

"Oh." That's when I realize I haven't so much as glanced in a mirror since the robbery this evening.

It hits me that I came here with literally only the clothes on my back. And a broken phone. I hope Adam wasn't lying when he said he had anything I could need.

We walk down the hall lined with black and white photographs of charming homes scattered over lush hills. The hall ends at a set of double doors. Adam turns the handle and leads me into a cozy, well-decorated bedroom.

A cream-colored duvet covers the king size bed. A white vanity table is tucked on the opposite side of the room, next to a matching dresser chest. Two glass nightstands make up the rest of the furniture in the space. It's sparse, but tastefully decorated. The minimalist look is definitely my style.

As I walk farther into the room to admire the gold-framed mirror attached to the vanity table, Adam says, "There are toiletries in the bathroom located through the door on the right. And the top two drawers in the dresser contain fresh clothes, should you wish to change."

I move to the dresser and open the drawers he mentioned. The top drawer is filled with silky panties and lacey bras. The second drawer has soft shirts and several pairs of leggings.

"Whose are these?" I don't like the idea of wearing another woman's clothes. Especially not her underwear.

"No one's. Well... I suppose they are technically yours."

"Mine?" I turn around.

Adam leans against the wall by the door, his hands tucked in his pockets. The muscles in his forearm are flexed. "I had

Natasha order clothes for you when we decided to proceed with our arrangement.”

“Your assistant bought me underwear? For you to keep here?”

He nods.

“Why would you do that?”

“We wanted our relationship to look real, didn’t we?”

“How does buying me underwear make us look legitimate?”

“My, my, Miss Lawson. You’re slipping. I thought you did your research on me.”

I bite my cheek to withhold my retort as I quickly try to figure out what in the world he’s talking about. Based on the amused smirk pulling on his lips, it’s definitely something I should know.

Adam doesn’t give me much time to think before he says, “Three years ago, one of my former flings gave an interview regarding the lavish lifestyle I rained over her. One of which included gifting her a new wardrobe. Not that notable. Until another woman stepped forward and shared the same.” He shrugs. “So, it’s become something I do whenever a new woman enters my life. Natasha would’ve found it strange if I didn’t request the same for you.”

I have many thoughts.

One: what a weird thing for a woman to expect from a lover. Then again, I’ve never dated anyone with Adam’s wealth. Maybe it’s normal for the rich and famous. Or maybe those women are just gold-diggers.

Two: I am mortified that Natasha purchased underwear for me. I pick up one of the silk items and note it is the right size. A glance at a bra confirms the same.

Third: I know it’s silly, but I hate the thought of being treated like any of the other women Adam dated. I mean... we aren’t really dating. This shouldn’t get under my skin. But it does.

I close the drawer. “I’ll be sure to tell Natasha thank you the next time I see her.” If I can get over the embarrassment.

I move to the nightstand and set my broken phone on its surface. I can feel Adam’s eyes on me. I hear him move into the room.

I keep my eyes on the phone, pretending to fumble with it, until I feel his breath on the back of my neck. I lift my chin and turn to meet his gaze. His eyes focus on my cheeks. He runs a finger over my skin. A hiss escapes me when he brushes a sensitive spot.

“We should clean this wound.” He grabs my hand and tugs me to the en suite bathroom before I can respond. The light turns on when we enter. I shield my eyes against the bright fluorescent glow.

Adam rummages in the medicine cabinet, coming out with a box of gauze and antiseptic. “May I?”

I nod and hold still as Adam moistens the gauze, then steps close and lightly dabs it on my scratches.

To distract myself, I admire the pristine marble bathroom with bronze fixtures. The shower is four times the one in my apartment. And its frosted partition gives a hint of modesty while still being see through.

“There.” Adam throws the gauze in the trash can tucked under the counter. “Better.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” His fingers tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

Despite myself, my breath hitches. My chest brushes against his, sending a jolt of awareness through me.

Adam doesn’t seem to notice. “I have a call scheduled with my grandfather in ten minutes, but it shouldn’t last longer than half an hour if you’d like to spend time together afterwards.”

My eyes dart between Adam’s lips and his eyes. I don’t know where to look. All I know is my entire body is acutely

aware of how close we stand. And how badly I want to press my lips against his.

If I want to keep things professional, the last thing we need to do is “spend time” together.

“I-I think I’ll just go to bed.” And take an ice-cold shower.

“Very well.”

Adam leans forward, filling my nostrils with the scent of his woody cologne. His lips brush my temple, and I feel like my heart is going to beat out of my chest.

“Sleep well, Avery.”

Before I can say a word, he spins and strides out of the bathroom like nothing unusual happened.

CHAPTER 17

Avery

A WARM SUNBEAM falls across my eyes, rousing me from a delightfully restful sleep. I stretch my arms and legs, reveling in the downy comforter and cozy pillows.

I roll onto my stomach and burrow into one such pillow, inhaling the lovely lavender scent. I need to figure out what detergent or softener Adam uses. Or, more likely, what his housekeeper uses.

Thinking of the clean sheets fills me with guilt.

After Adam left and I got over our heated interaction, exhaustion hit me. I didn't end up taking that cold shower. I barely managed to tug on one of the shirts from the drawer and a pair of leggings before passing out in the heavenly bed. I didn't close the blackout curtains hanging on the iron rod over the wide window. Which is probably a good thing. Otherwise, I'm not sure when I would've woken up.

With a regretful groan, I push myself up and roll out from under the covers. I pad to the bathroom, rubbing sleep from my eyes.

When I step under the shower's warm spray, I close my eyes and focus my thoughts on the list of things I need to accomplish today.

Derek and Kyle fancy themselves revolutionary bosses, and they want to create a pleasant work environment. Part of that includes no one stepping foot into the office before ten a.m. on Fridays.

I eye a bottle of shampoo then pour some into my hands and lather into my hair. I rinse and pick up the matching bottle of conditioner. I let it sit in my hair as I wash my body.

I should have plenty of time to get to my apartment to change before work. Then, I need to get to a cell phone store and buy a replacement.

Shit.

I don't have any of my credit cards.

I think I may have a debit card lying in the bottom of my bathroom drawer. The old one expired, but I used it so rarely, I haven't bothered to activate the replacement card yet.

I add cancelling my existing credit cards to the list as I rinse my body and hair. I shut off the water. I squeeze the excess water from my hair, then reach for a towel.

My fingers touch frosted glass.

I look at the top of the shower partition, but there's no towel. I peek around the structure and scan the bathroom. Nothing.

Taking care not to slip, I step onto the marble tile and tip toe around the bathroom, opening and closing the closet door and cabinets with no success. The only towel I see is the hand towel hanging beside the sink.

It's better than nothing.

Using the soft, absorbent, if small, towel, I dry off my body to the best of my ability. Then I wrap it around my hair to keep from dripping on the carpet.

I open the door connecting the bathroom to Adam's guest room. My skin pebbles when I step into the cooler air.

"Well, this is a nice way to start the day."

A scream rips from my throat as I stumble back, clutching my chest. Adam stands by my bed, a white rectangular box in his hands.

"Jesus, you scared me." One arm bands around my chest and my other hand covers my center. "What are you doing in here?!?"

It takes Adam a moment to respond. "I was dropping off your new phone."

He holds up the box. I see a picture of the latest smart phone depicted on top. His eyes drop to the nightstand. He places the box there.

I hurry forward and grab a pillow off the bed and clutch it against my front. The hand towel has fallen out of my hair. Water drips down my back from the wet strands. The tickling sensation causing me to shiver.

When Adam looks back up, I feel more confident with my shield. “You didn’t have to buy me a new phone.”

“You don’t have phone insurance.” Adam tucks his hands in his pocket. I’m beginning to think it’s his go-to move in uncomfortable situations. “I checked.”

If we were having this conversation three months ago, that would be a different story. “What do you mean you checked?”

“I called your wireless provider.”

My mouth falls open. “You know, I’m pretty sure it’s illegal for unauthorized users to access someone else’s account information.”

Adam remains unflustered. “I suppose money breeds influence. And influence motivates people to take risks and allow unauthorized users access to harmless information, such as the lack of a phone insurance policy.”

I don’t care if the information he received was harmless. It’s the principle of the matter. And the unease I feel knowing certain things are accessible to someone with money. “I could press charges.”

The way Adam smiles tells me my serious tone didn’t land its mark.

I blame the fact I’m standing here naked, dripping water on the luxurious carpet. I should tell him to get out so I can change, but I don’t want him to know how uncomfortable I am. I don’t know why. It seems like weakness. Like Adam has the upper hand. And I’m ready to have the upper hand for a change.

“By all means.” Adam motions to the new device on the nightstand. “Call the police. Press charges against an innocent retail worker who was simply trying to help a boyfriend get his girlfriend a new phone. The middle-aged mother of two was particularly motivated to help after hearing my girlfriend’s

phone was destroyed when she was robbed. I'm sure the press would eat that story up when the news inevitably gets to them."

I roll my eyes at the beginning of his speech. By the time he reaches the end, worry replaces my annoyance. "Has anyone posted anything about last night?"

His expression softens. "Not yet. I have my people contacting different outlets to feel out if they have anything in the works, but we've found nothing yet."

I press my lips together and nod, staring over Adam's shoulder. The press is ravenous for any bit of news about Adam given how lowkey he's been these past weeks. Especially since he and I have been very intentional about what photo opportunities we give of our dating life.

There's a very slim chance the paparazzo from last night won't sell his pictures to the press. It's just a matter of figuring out who he sells it to, and whether or not we want to try and suppress the article.

I'm thinking of the levers we can pull.

The easiest is the fact the investigation into the robbery is ongoing, and alerting the culprit to my connection to a wealthy business man could be dangerous...

"Avery." Adam's gentle tone regains my attention. "Do not worry. I have everything under control."

"I know."

For the first time in I don't know how long, I feel confident someone else can, and will, handle a problem for me. The desire to solve everything myself—to not rely on anyone's help—is a character flaw. One I have yet to master.

But I know Adam has the resources and determination to take care of anything. It's easy to trust him. The tightness in my chest relaxes. My arms droop a bit. Adam clears his throat.

I glance up and see him look pointedly at my chest before turning towards the door. "I'll get you a towel."

My cheeks flush when I see my nipples peeking out above the pillow. I remedy the issue and mutter a weak, “Thanks.”

But Adam is already out the door.

After Adam returns with a towel, he is quick to duck back into the hall.

I dry off then change into a pair of fancy underwear, fresh leggings and a shirt. I try not to think too much on how everything fits perfectly and feels heavenly soft.

I spend longer than necessary dallying around the bathroom. An expensive moisturizer catches my eye. I barely refrain from squealing with excitement. I’ve been dying to try the brand, but until I get my finances in order, I can’t let myself indulge in the luxury.

With eager fingers, I dab the smooth cream onto my cheeks, chin, and forehead. Gently, I rub it into my skin, in awe over how light it feels. Within a minute of applying, I swear, my skin feels softer. Next, I move on to combing out my hair, using the damp hand towel to absorb the last drops of water. I apply hair serum—another expensive brand.

When I finally run out of things to do, I force myself to put on a brave face and venture out of the bedroom. The moment I do, I’m hit with the enticing aroma of coffee.

I follow the smell to the kitchen. Adam stands in front of the stove with a spatula in hand. Sensing my arrival, he glances over his shoulder.

His eyes trail over me, taking in the tight-fitting leggings and chest-hugging shirt. “The clothes look nice.”

My blush returns. “Shut up.”

He laughs. “I just mean I’m glad they fit.”

The color in my cheeks deepen as the memory of standing naked in front of him replays in my head.

“What are you cooking?” I ask to distract myself.

“Tortilla Española.”

“What’s that?”

“A Spanish omelet. It has eggs, onions, and potatoes.” He takes a plate and slides the skillet’s contents onto it upside down. Then, he slides the food back into the skillet to cook the other side. “I could also make you regular scrambled eggs if you’d like.”

A man who can cook?

Be still my heart.

“What you’re having sounds delicious.”

“There’s a fresh coffee pod in the maker if you’d like a cup.”

“Thank you.” I move to the device. A clean mug sits beneath. I make quick work of starting the coffee maker. The water gurgles as it heats up. I turn around and rest against the counter, content to stand there in silence and watch Adam work.

A few minutes later, I have a warm cup of coffee in my hand and I’m sitting at the bar top while Adam serves me a plate of what I learn is his favorite breakfast food.

He watches as I take a bite. He looks a little anxious.

The fluffy eggs are seasoned to perfection, and the spiced potatoes and onions provide an extra burst of flavor. I cover my mouth with my hand and moan, “Oh, my god. This is delicious.”

Adam’s face breaks into a breathtaking smile. “I’m glad you enjoy it.” He plates himself two wedges of the omelet and sits next to me.

This is the second time we’ve had a meal together where it feels natural to just sit in silence and enjoy each other’s company. Since we started this whole dating ruse, we haven’t had a single meal where we weren’t watched by a restaurant

full of people, or seated in the private dining room of one of Adam's business associates. This is a nice change of pace.

A really nice change of pace.

I finish my first serving, and I cannot resist getting another. Once I polish off my plate, I lean on my elbows and sip my coffee. It's cooled to a lukewarm temperature, but its hazelnut flavor is delightful.

"Are you going into the office today?" Adam asks.

"Of course. You?"

"Yes. I'll drive."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him that's not necessary, but the alternative is paying for a rideshare. So, I say, "That'll be great. You don't happen to have a pair of tennis shoes in my size, do you?" My current outfit will pass on a casual Friday, but I won't be able to get away with being barefoot.

"I do. They should be in the front hall closet."

I smile, happy that I can skip dropping by my place until after work. "Perfect. Thank you." I feel better than I did last night, but I'm still not eager to return to the scene of my robbery.

"You're welcome." Adam stands and takes both of our plates to the sink. He rinses them and sets them down. "When do you want leave?"

I look at the stove's clock. Nine-fifteen.

"Thirty minutes?"

"Works for me."

I excuse myself to go familiarize myself with my new phone and, hopefully, log onto my banking app and cancel my stolen credit cards.

I spare a moment to brush my teeth, then approach the nightstand.

A sleek, fuchsia-colored phone sits in the box. I uncoil the charger and plug the device into the wall. It turns on

immediately, and I'm surprised when it registers my face ID and unlocks.

Surprise grows when I see my wallpaper photo is the same one from my broken device. Heather, Derek, and I grin maniacally at the camera on our last Halloween together before Heather and I went to college. We're dressed as Tigger, Winnie the Pooh, and Piglet – an homage to the first Halloween costumes our parents dressed us in after Derek was born.

My lips curl when I remember how emotional our parents got when we came downstairs in our coordinated outfits. Mom cried. And, though he denies it, we're all convinced Dad's eyes watered, too.

All my apps and contacts are also loaded on the device. I wonder how much charm Adam had to use to get that done.

I swipe the screen to my banking app and quickly log in. In a few taps, I'm at my credit card charges. A quick scan reveals no unusual activity, which is odd.

Why would the robber take my purse but not use the stolen cards? Maybe he realizes they could be traced to find his location? But that hardly means he'd be caught.

Shrugging off my curiosity, I decide to be thankful. Still, I maneuver to the "report a lost or stolen card" and go through the prompts to get my card cancelled. I do the same with my second card, then log off.

Taking the hair band on my wrist, I go to the bathroom and tame my wavy mane into a neat bun on the top of my head. The medicine cabinet has makeup basics. I dab concealer on my scratches, but leave the rest of my face naked. A few swipes of mascara, and I'm done.

I slip on a pair of socks I found in the underwear and bra drawer, then walk back into the main area. Adam exits the hall opposite mine at the same time.

He wears a sharp navy-blue suit with silver cuff links. His black shoes reflect the light from the room's recessed accent

fixtures. His thick brown hair is styled neatly towards the left, and his beard is trimmed on his neck.

Thankfully, he's staring at the phone in his hands, so he doesn't see when I discretely dab the corners of my mouth to make sure I didn't drool.

In an effort to dispel the attraction brewing on my end, I release a low whistle, then say, "Whoa. Little fancy for casual Friday, don't you think?"

Adam looks up with an easy grin. "There's no casual day for a Moreno." He winks.

I make a show of rolling my eyes, smiling to make sure he knows I'm teasing. "I should've known."

"Are you ready?"

"I just need shoes."

Adam points out the front closet. I shouldn't be, but I'm surprised to see several pairs of women's shoes spread across the bottom two racks of a yard's length shoe rack. I don't bother wondering if they are all my size.

Adam's eyes had a sweet deal if they got this treatment.

I'm wondering if I'll be able to keep all this stuff when our fake dating arrangement comes to its inevitable end when Adam comes up behind me and asks, "Will one of these work?"

"Yup!" I grab the first pair of comfortable shoes I see. They're white sneakers, with two pale brown vertical stripes.

I loosen the laces and lean against the wall.

As I slip them on my feet, Adam reveals, "I'll have Natasha arrange for the movers to bring your clothes and shoes to the apartment before the end of today. The rest will be stored in the unit I lease in the building's basement. You can go through it and bring up anything else you think you'll need."

Standing on one foot, I lose my balance. Before I hit the ground, Adam grabs me by the waist, pressing me against the

wall to steady me. His potent aftershave fills my nostrils. It almost makes me forget what shocked me into falling in the first place.

Almost.

“Movers?” I shove Adam’s hands, ignoring the butterflies his touch sends flying through my stomach. “What are you talking about?”

Adam drops his hands, but he doesn’t step back. Less than a foot separates us, but it might as well be nothing. My pulse races, and my stomach clenches.

I don’t know what to make of my body’s reactions to this man. They’ve ramped up dramatically since last night.

Adam has to tilt his chin down to look at me from his height. Confusion mars his handsome face. “Didn’t we discuss this last night? I said I’d send someone to pack your belongings.”

I gape. “I thought you meant pack for a night or two...”

“No. The movers will be packing all of your belongings.”

I desperately hope he’s not going to say what I think he’s going to say when I ask, “Why?”

“Because you are moving in with me.”

I splutter. He can’t possibly be serious.

But I notice his confusion has faded. Now, Adam gazes down at me with relaxed confidence. My shock doesn’t rattle him. He expects to get his way.

“No.” I shake my head furiously. “No way.”

“Avery... be reasonable.”

“No, *you* be reasonable. You can’t just declare I’m moving in with you. That decision requires a conversation at the very least.”

“Very well.” A hint of amusement colors his voice. “Let’s have a conversation.”

I grit my teeth. “Fine. You want me to move in. I don’t want to. There. Conversation over. I’m not moving in.”

I don’t paint a formidable image in athleisure wear with only one unlaced shoe on my feet, but I hope the bite in my tone more than makes up for it. At least I have the satisfaction of seeing the humor fade from Adam’s expression.

“Avery, think about this reasonably for one moment, and you will agree I am right. There is a photograph of us leaving the scene of your robbery. Soon, news will circulate, and people are bound to find it extremely strange that Adam Moreno’s girlfriend lives in such a sketchy area of town, let alone that he doesn’t insist on relocating her to a safer location after the incident.”

I hate to admit it, but he has a point.

But that doesn’t mean I’m going to submit to his high-handed decisions. There’s bound to be a way I can spin this story to our benefit. We can say I’m determined to make my own way in the world—to not rely on my boyfriend’s wealth. There are so many ways living on my own can work to our favor.

“Adam... I’m not moving in with you.”

“You are,” he states confidently. “Because once you get over your initial shock, you will realize it’s the best decision.” He takes a step back, and the space created between us feels like a canyon. “For now, let’s table this discussion and head to the office. I have a conference call I cannot afford to miss.”

CHAPTER 18

Avery

ADAM and I arrive at the Source Solutions office at nine fifty-eight, two minutes before Derek's earliest mandated arrival time. We are not the first here. The front reception desk sits empty, but the sound of nails clacking against a keyboard travels down the hall leading to my and Adam's offices.

Initially, I'd been irritated when Adam claimed the corner office so close to mine. I thought he would use our proximity as an excuse to drop in unexpectedly and distract me from my work. But that never happens.

One of the many things I've come to admire about Adam Moreno is his work ethic. He's not the indolent playboy, content to inherit his family's fortune.

No, Adam is determined to make his mark—to leave Moreno Masterpieces a more successful, farther-reaching corporation, which explains his interest and investment in my brother's company.

After seeing him bust his ass these past few weeks, I have a newfound respect for the handsome, Spanish billionaire. He may have had the advantage of being born into a wealthy family, but it's obvious he isn't content to rely on it.

Adam and I walk to our respective offices. I'm just about to veer off the short hall that leads to the glass door with my name on it when Adam places a firm hand against the small of my back.

“Come say good morning to Natasha.”

I want dig my heels in. Not because I don't want to say hello to the personable woman, but because my mind screams at me to not spend any more time than necessary in Adam's presence.

But even though we are the only ones in the office, aside from Natasha, I don't fight Adam as he leads me to his assistant. I can't deny I enjoy the feel of his strong fingers pressing against my back through the thin, cotton shirt.

We turn the next corner. The space opens up. Situated in the center is a massive L-shaped desk. A lovely brunette with olive skin sits behind a sleek, state of the art computer, tapping away. Subtle gray strands lighten the rich color.

Without looking up, she says, “You were supposed to be here an hour ago.”

“I slept in. The night’s events kept me up late.”

Natasha smirks. “I’m sure.”

Heat floods my cheeks. I hope she doesn’t get the wrong idea.

Natasha moved to Los Angeles one week after Adam and I agreed to our arrangement. Her arrival sparked its own rumors. Mainly, that it indicated Adam planned to remain in LA for the foreseeable future. Apparently, his assistant tends to work in Spain while he’s off working remotely in various locations.

Gossip magazines liked to speculate his decision meant we were more serious than we let on. The pregnancy article was published shortly after.

Still staring at her computer, Natasha says, “No publication has heard from the photographer last night. Or, if they did, they’re skilled liars.” She finally looks up. Her eyes soften with concern. “I am sorry for what happened to you, Avery.”

“Thank you.”

She dips her chin. “I was glad when Adam told me you agreed to move into the penthouse. I hired the best moving company. You can rest assured they will take care of your belongings.”

I grit my teeth and shoot Adam an annoyed look. I haven’t agreed to anything, but I don’t want to have it out in front of Natasha.

“Thank you,” I repeat. “And thank you for stocking the penthouse with clothes.” I gesture to my outfit. “It’s all lovely.”

She smiles. “Of course. Should you need anything else, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

The offer is genuine, but I know I won't take her up on it. Adam may be used to others running errands for him, but I'm not. I can get anything I need myself.

Adam's phone buzzes. He reaches into his pocket and looks at the screen, then frowns. "Excuse me, ladies. I need to take this."

He disappears inside his office.

I shift my weight from side to side.

I'm about to excuse myself when Natasha surprises me by saying, "I didn't want to say anything in front of Adam—Lord knows that boy hates taking credit for any thoughtful actions."

Does he?

"But he's the one you have to thank for all the clothes and shoes in his penthouse."

I blink once. "I know. I mean, I assumed he paid for them."

She tilts her head to the side, wearing a secretive smile. "No, I mean that Adam went to the stores. He made the purchases himself."

Oh.

Oh...

I stare at Natasha, struggling with what to think.

The PR side of me assumes he went to the stores with the hopes of being photographed. After all, we're trying to sell a relationship, here. What better way to do that than for Adam to be seen buying intimates for me? It's a genius idea. Even though I've seen no photos of such an outing, I'm kind of upset I didn't think of it.

But then why would Adam tell me Natasha made the purchases? Why wouldn't he share the information with me?

Natasha's voice quiets as she says, "I hope you don't find this inappropriate. It's just that Adam... Well, I haven't seen him put so much effort into a relationship before, and I know

he isn't one to easily open up. So, I figured I could tell you about his actions and let them speak for themselves."

I swallow against the lump in my throat. I really hate lying to people, especially good people like Natasha.

"Of course. I understand. Thank you for telling me."

"You're welcome." She smiles.

I find myself envious that Adam has such a caring, loyal assistant. I've interviewed more than ten this past month, and I have yet to find one who didn't come off more interested in using the job as a stepping stone to something bigger and better. No one's interested in working to establish the reputation of a brand new tech company.

Ambition is not a bad thing in an assistant, but when it doesn't come with passion, or even appreciation, for the job, I don't see it being a good fit.

"Please, do not tell Adam I said anything. He won't like it."

"I won't say a word."

We share another smile.

"Avery!" My brother's voice booms through the empty offices, making me jump.

"My, my." Natasha tsks. "He sounds worked up."

"Probably my doing." I shoot her another kind smile. "Thank you for telling me, and thank you for helping with the mess from last night."

"You're welcome, dear."

I make my way to my office. I push open my office door and immediately head for my desk. My computer is already on, so I log in and wait for it to load.

Derek is in my doorway within one minute. "Avery!" He exhales. "There you are. Why aren't you answering your phone? I've called you like a dozen times."

“You did?” I pull my new phone from the waist of my leggings and open the screen.

“Is that a new phone?”

I nod.

I tap the dark screen and see the missed call notifications and several texts, all but one is from my siblings. I look at the side and toggle the sound on. The phone chimes to let me know I’ve succeeded.

“Why do you have a new phone?” Derek asks.

“Because mine broke last night.”

“When you were robbed?”

I sigh. “How did you hear?”

“Someone tagged me in the video on social media.”

“Social media?” Not a gossip rag?

Leaving the office door open, Derek comes to stand next to me, holding his phone out in front of me. I watch a video slideshow of the photos the paparazzo took.

There’s one of me sitting on the sidewalk in front of the EMTs. One with Adam speaking to the police. One with Adam’s hand on my back, his body angled protectively over me as he glares at someone to our left. Then, there’s one of us in his car and Adam’s eyes are soft as he stares across the console at me.

The only picture missing is one of the actual robbery. Otherwise, it looks like the guy was there for everything.

“What the hell, Avery? What were you doing in that part of town?”

I square my shoulders, bracing for the impending argument. “First off, don’t curse at me. Second off, I live there.”

“What?”

“I live there,” I repeat. “That’s my apartment building.” I point to the four-story brick building in the first photograph.

“Aves.” Derek moves to stand on the opposite side of my desk. He leans on his hands and lowers his face so his eyes are level with mine. “I know what I’m paying you. You can afford an apartment in a nicer area, and one that’s closer to the office. Why do you live there?”

This is a conversation I’d hoped to avoid. I managed to not have either of my siblings over these past months, suggesting we meet out at restaurants or cafes whenever one of them wanted to hang out. With Derek so busy with Source Solutions and Heather’s packed schedule, it wasn’t difficult to do.

But, now, my secret is out. Or, at least, it’s about to be.

I know my brother. Now that the question is in Derek’s mind, he won’t rest until he gets an answer.

“I live there because it’s cheap, and I’m paying off some debt from New York.”

“Debt?” Derek straightens. “What debt? Mom and Dad paid for college, and you’ve been working for years.”

“The same debt as everyone else, Derek. Credit cards... A car...”

“You don’t have a car.”

I smack my lips closed.

Shit.

I didn’t mean to say that.

“Aves... what car are you talking about?”

I lean my head against the back of my chair and stare at the ceiling. Might as well get this over with. “It’s Spencer’s car.”

“Why the hell are you paying off Spencer’s car?”

Because I’m an idiot.

I pinch my eyes closed. “Because he has shit credit and asked me to co-sign on the loan when he bought the car. He stopped making payments after we broke up. I’m making the monthly payments so it doesn’t tank my credit score.”

“I’ll call my lawyer.”

My eyes fly open, and my head snaps down to focus on the beautiful man standing in the open doorway.

Adam's arms are crossed. His expression is furious. Déjà vu hits me. His appearance is oddly similar to last night.

A few seconds pass before I register what Adam said. "You will do no such thing."

He steps into my office. "You shouldn't be paying off that cheating asshole's car."

I jump to my feet. "It's none of your business."

"Actually, it is." He grinds his jaw. "You're my girlfriend."

I fight the urge to laugh in his face. To the world, *and my brother*, Adam is my boyfriend.

Heather knows the truth, but she agreed with me when I said I wouldn't tell Derek about my fake dating arrangement with Adam. As far as he knows, Adam and I are the real deal.

Derek had seemed skeptical at first, but he's gotten more comfortable seeing our casual affection around the office and hearing about us when the press posts articles about our relationship.

But while Derek doesn't know I'm not really Adam's girlfriend, *Adam* certainly does. This is the second time he's tried to strong-arm me into a decision, using our fake relationship as leverage.

I'm about to reach my limit.

"I have my life under control, Adam. I don't need you or my brother butting into my business."

I pause to level a glare on Derek. My younger brother's head swings from side to side as he watches Adam and I volley words back and forth.

Seeing my glare, his face hardens with determination. "Don't look at me like that. You'd react the same way if you found out one of my exes was wrangling thousands of dollars out of me after we broke up."

"You don't have any exes," I snap back.

Instantly, I regret it. That was mean. Derek's been in love with our childhood friend, Olivia, since middle school. Olivia is the daughter of our mom's and dad's best friends, Aunt Chloe and Uncle Derek.

I knew about my brother's feelings for years, but I kept it to myself. There was a time I thought he and Olivia would become an item. But then they went to separate colleges and it never happened.

I'm not sure why.

"Sorry," I murmur. "That was too far."

"It's fine." Derek clips. He resumes his angry brother routine. "What else has that asshole settled you with? It can't just be a car payment that has you living in that apartment."

Just like that, indignation returns. "It doesn't matter. I'm handling it."

"How much?"

"I said," I growl at my brother, "I'm handling it." My hands curl into fists. I've never wanted to punch a wall more than this moment.

Well, that's not true. The night I learned Spencer was cheating on me, I felt the same way. But just like then, I rein in my emotions.

Losing control serves no purpose. I'll have a single moment of gratification, followed by several days of dealing with the consequences.

Like a bruised or broken hand and a wall that'll need repair. Because with how hard I want to hit the wall, both of those things are bound to happen.

"Fine. Be stubborn and handle this problem on your own." Derek plants his hands on his hips. "But move into the new house with me."

"No!"

"That won't be necessary."

Adam and I speak at the same time.

I glare at the good-looking billionaire, silently warning him not to say what I think he's going to say.

Derek's forehead furrows. "Why won't it be necessary?"

"Because Avery is moving in with me."

My nostrils flare.

"She is?" My brother looks at me with raised eyebrows.

I grit my teeth, but manage to grind out, "We're discussing it."

Derek nods approvingly. "Good."

No, it's not good.

It's bad.

Very, very bad.

I'm finding it hard to keep things platonic between Adam and I as it is. The struggle will only be harder if we live in the same space.

"I wish you would've told me about Spencer," Derek says, his voice softens. "I always hated that guy."

I give a weak laugh. "Yeah, well... you were right."

"Did you at least confide in Heather?"

I sigh. "No."

"Mom and Dad?"

I give him a pointed look. "You're kidding, right?"

Grandmother Paula managed to recover, but my parents now alternate daily visits to her nursing home, which is over an hour away from their house. They have enough on their plates without worrying about me.

Derek shakes his head. "Why not tell anyone? Why keep it a secret?"

"Because I don't like the idea of anyone worrying about me." My arms cross protectively in front of me. "And let's skip the part where you tell me to stop carrying the weight of

the world on my shoulders. I'm aware of my character flaw. I'm working on it."

Just as soon as I find the time.

Derek chuckles. He rounds the table and wraps me in a hug.

I lift on my tiptoes and return his embrace. Derek's been taller than me for over a decade, but I'm not sure I'll ever get used to the fact my little brother is bigger than me.

"I'm glad you're all right."

"Yeah... me too."

I lean back, ending our embrace. "Did the cops catch the guy?"

"No," Adam answers for me. "But I've called in a few favors, and I've been assured they're working hard to find the guy."

I keep my mouth shut about Adam pulling favors. I don't like hearing that money can influence our justice system, even though I know the world isn't perfect.

"Thanks, man." Derek moves over and claps a hand on Adam's back. "I appreciate you looking out for my sister."

"Of course." Adam's green eyes stare into mine with an unexpected intensity that makes my blood rush. "I'd do anything for Avery."

CHAPTER 19

Adam

BY THE TIME my Rolex reads five o'clock, I am exhausted.

My eyes are dry from staring at screens all day, and my voice hurts from overuse. Eighty-percent of the day was spent on the phone, speaking to reporters, business associates, and any and all individuals I thought could help identify the fucker who robbed Avery last night.

On top of that, someone from Moreno Masterpieces is trying to sabotage me.

That was the call I received by Natasha's desk this morning.

One of my college roommates, Orlando Romero, works for the second largest leather goods supplier in Italy. He called to tell me that members of their board were discussing rumors regarding my poor business decisions for Moreno Masterpieces. They cited my peculiar interest in tech companies, stating I was moving away from the vision my grandfather had when creating the company.

Normally, I would've brushed off the rumors as just that... rumors. But coupled with the fact Orlando said they discussed my wayward behavior, and how my grandfather had put me on a figurative leash, I knew someone within Moreno Masterpieces was talking.

So, twenty percent of my day was spent trying to run down the source of those rumors without drawing too much attention. I haven't had any luck so far, but as long as I'm careful, the gossip will continue. And I'll have more chances to sniff out the party responsible.

I'm shrugging on my suit jacket as I walk out of my office. Natasha is gone for the day. She had a night at the theatre planned with the man she's seeing, so she left earlier than usual.

I'm happy she's adjusting to the move to the States. It's only temporary. My assistant didn't need to uproot her life to

come here with me, but Natasha had insisted. She said she was tired of working in different time zones, and moving would be less of a headache.

Light shines through Avery's office door. A glance confirms she's inside.

I'm not surprised.

Avery's work ethic rivals mine and Derek's. The three of us clock the most time in the office. I've confirmed as much by looking at the security badge scans.

Kyle, on the other hand, is present in the building far too little for my liking. As a founding member of the company, you'd think he'd feel a more pressing need to do his part and see Source Solutions flourish.

Naturally, I keep my opinions to myself. Like I've said, I don't want Derek or Kyle to think I'm trying to step in and take control of anything. I'm simply an investor. Their number one investor, sure, but an investor nonetheless.

I lean against the doorjamb and watch Avery type away, her eyes zipping across the screen as she does.

When there's a lull in the press of keys, I clear my throat. Her eyes fly to mine.

As always, the awareness of her beautiful blue eyes affects me in ways I can't seem to understand. There have been times when they seem to fill with desire that mirrors my own, but most of the time, there is no strong emotion accompanying her gaze.

Just the act of being watched by a woman of Avery Lawson's caliber has my blood racing and my dick eager to stand at attention.

"Hello."

"Hi." She fidgets in her seat. "Can I help you?"

"I'm on my way out. I figured we could go home together."

“Adam...” Her elbows rest on the desk and she rubs tired eyes. “For the last time, I’m not moving in with you.”

“Yes, you are, and I’ll explain why.” I step in and close the door behind me.

When I turn back around, Avery’s leaned back in her chair and rests her hands on her lap. Her demeanor conveys composure, but anger blazes in her eyes. She’s going to let me speak, but I know one wrong word will make her snap, and I’ll never be able to convince her to go along with this move.

I have to tread carefully.

“Let’s take emotion out of this conversation for a moment and think about this situation strategically.” I settle in the chair across from her, kicking up my leg to rest my ankle on my knee.

She watches me with narrowed eyes. “Fine. Strategically, I don’t think it is necessary for me to move anywhere.”

“I disagree.” My voice is level and calm. “We know news of your mugging is out there. Soon enough, people will learn you live in that part of town. How long do you think it will take before someone questions why billionaire Adam Moreno’s girlfriend lives in squalor?”

“It is *not* squalor.”

“You know how these publications exaggerate,” I continue without missing a beat. “And how long do you think it’ll be until someone throws out the notion that perhaps you and I aren’t truly dating? That as Source Solutions PR rep, you are helping me recuperate my image by pretending to date me?”

The way Avery begins to gnaw on her bottom lip tells me I’m making my point.

I go for broke. “The only way to manage this situation is for me to ride in like a white knight and carry you away to come live with me in my ivory tower.”

“I think you have the story mixed up. The prince rescues the princess *from* the ivory tower. He doesn’t lock her in it.”

“Well, this is our story. And as the white knight, I ride in and save you from living alone in a seedy part of Los Angeles.”

Avery swings her chair from side to side. She stares at the hands in her lap, still chewing on her lip.

I shoot my final shot. “We can release a statement saying you were determined to make your own way in LA, but after the robbery, you finally agreed to my months of pleading for you to move in with me.”

Avery lifts her gaze.

I know determination to be independent is one source of her resistance. By portraying her as an independent woman who didn't want to rely on her rich boyfriend, her ego will be soothed just enough to actually agree to this situation.

“I have conditions.”

My lips twitch with a barely suppressed smile. “Of course, you do.”

“We sleep in separate rooms.”

“Obviously.” Did she think I suddenly sold my spare room's bed set?

Now... that's a fun idea.

“Two, I'll do the grocery shopping and other errands for myself. I don't want anyone doing those things for me.”

That's no skin off my nose. If Avery wants to spend the little free time she has running simple errands, then by all means.

“That won't be a problem,” I assure her.

“And I'd like to put some of my own furniture in the guest room I'll be using.”

“Very well.”

“And I insist on replacing your couch with mine,” she blurts. “No offense, but yours is hard as rocks. I refuse to spend my lazy weekends trying to snuggle on a boulder.”

I laugh outright. Wasn't I just complaining about how uncomfortable the designer couch is?

Without knowing it, Avery is already improving the quality of my life by moving in with me. I've never lived with a woman before. And while part of me is nervous to have someone else sharing my space, the majority of me is excited.

Really excited.

"Avery Lawson." I hold out a hand. "You've got yourself a deal."

CHAPTER 20

Adam

SUMMER IN LOS ANGELES is beautiful along the coast, but not so much the farther inland you move. The buildings, traffic, people, and heat create a stifling environment.

I'm thankful to be getting out of the city today. Avery and I will be spending the afternoon at Derek's house warming party. He purchased a property out in Malibu, and we're both excited to celebrate the accomplishment with him this afternoon.

But despite my excitement, I find myself missing my home country.

I miss standing outside along the coast of Spain, admiring the Mediterranean, soaking in the sea breeze as the sun warms you from above. Driving along the Pacific Coast Highway, admiring the coastal view, is almost the same.

The one advantage this moment has to my home country, however, is the beautiful brunette riding shotgun in my Bentley Continental convertible. The winding road and high speed forces me not to spend the drive admiring her, but I find myself sneaking glances every chance I get.

Her hair is tied in a top knot, but the wind has loosened several strands. They wave wildly in the breeze. Oversized sunglasses shield her eyes. A thin-strapped, pale-blue sundress covers her bikini-clad figure, revealing delicate shoulders, peppered with tiny freckles.

God. She's lovely.

Avery moved into the penthouse a week ago, and I've seen many versions of her. Exhausted Avery. Sleepy-eyed, early morning Avery. Sweaty Avery after a good, long workout in the building's gym.

No matter what version of her I see, there is no denying her natural beauty. Even with sopping wet hair and zero makeup on her face, she is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

I find myself waking up with a smile on my face, wondering what version of her I will be greeted with that morning—wondering why I ever chose to live on my own for so long.

It's nice to have someone in the apartment. Though, I wonder if I only feel that way because it's *her*.

Avery catches me staring, and she shouts over the wind, "What?"

"Nothing," I shout back. A bright smile accompanies the words. Today is going to be a good day.

My fingers clench against the red plastic cup in my hands as I glare at the two people chatting on the other side of the pool.

Derek's house is spectacular, and I *was* having a great time at the party.

Until Kyle fucking Waters stole Avery away.

The tall, dirty-blond man, co-founder of Source Solutions, lured my date away under the guise of showing her his first edition of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Apparently, that's Avery's favorite novel.

Why a grown man has an original copy of the historical novel in his car is beyond me. I graciously kept my mouth shut and waved Avery away to see the exciting artifact.

But that was thirty minutes ago, and Kyle is still commandeering Avery's time. She's standing over there in nothing but her bikini top with a sheer sarong tied around her narrow waist, laughing at something the tall man-child says.

She's not the only party guest sporting a bathing suit. All the other men and women at the party are taking advantage of the cool water and sunny day. Even me.

But Kyle Waters isn't looking at any other woman at this party, despite the fact I see quite a number of beautiful models circulating the pool area.

I recognize some from the launch party, but I'm surprised Derek invited them to his home. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who chases after models. Then again, who am I to judge?

Several of the gorgeous women run appreciative glances over my bare torso and thigh-hugging swim shorts, but I pay them no attention. My focus remains on my fake girlfriend and the man who wants to have his teeth punched in.

Plastic crunches under my fingers when Kyle's hand swipes down Avery's arm in a caress.

What the fuck is he playing at?

"Okay, Moreno, this is getting ridiculous." Heather Lawson sidles up next to me and plucks the deformed cup from my hands. She sets it down on the hot tub's wall next to us, then spins back to me.

I lift a brow and take in the stunning model. She's wearing a simple black one-piece. Her blonde hair hangs in effortless waves to the middle of her back.

Heather Lawson is undeniably gorgeous. She draws the gaze of every male she passes. Even now, I sense masculine stares assessing my involvement with her. Fortunately for them, she isn't the Lawson sister who holds my interest.

"What is ridiculous?"

She rolls her eyes. The gesture reminds me of her sister. "You've been mean-mugging Kyle and Avery for fifteen-minutes straight. I'm not sure you've even blinked."

It's my turn to roll my eyes at her exaggeration.

Heather feigns a gasp. "Did Adam Moreno just roll his eyes at me?"

"You deserved it."

She laughs.

I wish I could keep my mouth shut, but I've been stewing in irritation for too long. "What's Kyle's deal?"

"What do you mean?"

I gesture to our surroundings. “There are a dozen single, beautiful women at this party, but Kyle is choosing to spend his time with my girlfriend.”

Heather lifts a water bottle to her lips, but it doesn’t hide her tiny smirk. “Your girlfriend?”

I forgot Heather is the only other person who knows the truth about my relationship with her sister.

“Fine. Fake girlfriend,” I mutter. “You know what I mean.”

Heather’s eyes sparkle with amusement. “Don’t worry, Adam. Kyle doesn’t hold a candle to you.”

Does Avery think so?

I mean... she didn’t even react when I walked out into the kitchen in nothing but a towel on her second day in the apartment.

It wasn’t on purpose. I thought she’d left to go work out after breakfast. She’s lucky I wasn’t naked.

The fact Avery didn’t even blink when she saw me was a serious blow to my ego. I’m starting to wonder if I read the situation wrong.

What if Avery *isn’t* harboring secret desires for me, like I thought? What if she’s caught feelings for someone else?

God. Since when am I so insecure?

Since the day I ran into Avery Lawson at the launch party, and she didn’t succumb to my usually irresistible charms. Avery posed a challenge, then a solution to my PR problems.

Now, a new problem is developing. I know it won’t be long until I’m forced to confront it. Heather remains silent at my side, watching my expression as those thoughts run through my mind.

“Trust me, Adam. You have nothing to worry about. Avery doesn’t have feelings for Kyle.”

Some tension seeps out of my shoulders. I cannot deny how reassuring those words are.

“But Kyle has been in love with my sister since he hit puberty.”

Immediately, the tension returns. “Does she know?”

Heather shrugs. “Yeah. Weirdly enough, Kyle admitted his childhood crush to her a few months ago.”

“When?”

“I think it was her first official day working in her office.”

That little snake...

“But I’m not sure she realizes he still has feelings for her,” Heather continues. “Otherwise, I think she’d be more careful hanging out with him. She wouldn’t want to lead him on.”

I feel marginally better that I’m not the only one who can see Kyle’s blatant feelings towards Avery.

My nostrils flare when I see the pair laugh. “Well, someone should tell her.”

“It’s cute that you’re jealous.”

My glare swings to her. “Not funny.”

Heather laughs anyway. “How long has this been going on?” She gestures between me and her twin across the pool.

I pretend I don’t know what she’s talking about. “Excuse me?”

Again, she rolls her eyes. “How long have you had the hots for my sister, Mr. Moreno?”

I could lie. But I don’t.

“Months. Almost since we started *dating*.”

Heather smiles. “Good.”

I wait for her to say something else. To reassure me her sister likes me, too.

When she remains silent, I ask, “Has Avery said anything about me?”

God, I sound like a kid.

“The vow of sister confidentiality prevents me from answering your question,” Heather says seriously. “I encourage you to broach the subject with my sister.”

My gaze flickers between hers. “You won’t even give me a hint?”

“Nope.”

“None?”

“None.”

“Damn.” Are all siblings this loyal?

Heather chuckles. “Listen, Adam... Avery is notorious for hiding her emotions. Even from me. She’s always worried about everyone else and wants to put their needs before her own. She’s like our mom in that way.

“She’ll never be the person who just says what she wants. You’ll never know if she’s into you if you don’t ask.”

Typically, I’m not the kind of man who is afraid of rejection. I never regret putting myself out there.

But that was before Avery.

I’m not sure what I will do if she isn’t interested in making things between us real. I want to believe I’ll be a gentleman and respect her wishes. But, if I’m honest, I’m not certain I can walk away from Avery. Not without doing everything I can to convince her to be mine.

I’m not certain how long this decision has been forming in the back of my mind, but I know it’s what I want.

Avery Lawson is going to be my girlfriend. For real.

“Thank you for the insight,” I tell Heather. And I mean it.

The blonde smiles brightly. “You’re welcome. Go get her, tiger. I’m rooting for you.”

I excuse myself to go to Avery. It’s about time we have a serious talk about our relationship. For real, this time.

CHAPTER 21

Avery

“YOU’D LOVE IT, AVES,” Kyle states emphatically. His lips are spread in a wide smile.

“I’m sure I would.”

“Tahoe is gorgeous. Especially in the fall. You’ll have to come with me to check it out.”

I keep a polite smile painted on my face, but my cheeks are starting to hurt from the effort. “Maybe I will.”

My eyes trail over the pool while Kyle continues to boast about the luxury lodge he recently purchased.

Adam is still talking to Heather. The pair laugh about something. Adam looks like a Greek god with his tan skin and muscular torso. The perfect amount of dark hair is smattered against his chest.

The sight is a familiar one.

I’ve daydreamed about his impressive physique since that day I walked into the kitchen to see him rummaging around the fridge in nothing but a towel.

Seriously, it should be a crime for him to be so rich *and* ridiculously good looking.

How is any woman supposed to resist a specimen like that?

“What about November?”

Kyle’s question draws my attention.

“I’m sorry. What did you ask?”

His lips tighten slightly. He tries to hide it. “I asked if you want to go to Tahoe with me in November.”

It takes a second before I can formulate a response.

I thought it a little strange for Kyle to purchase a first edition Emma, but it was undeniably awesome to hold one of Jane Austen’s original masterpieces in my hand. Then, he

roped me into conversations about home, his parents, my parents. Now, he extends this out-of-the-blue invitation to vacation with him.

I'm not naïve. I realize Kyle must still have a crush on me. But his bold invitation is a surprise. It forces me to be direct.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Kyle." I try to soften the blow with a gentle tone.

It doesn't work.

"Why not?" His face twists.

"Because I have a boyfriend." It's the easiest card to play.

"November is five months from now."

Aluminum crackles when my grip tightens on my seltzer can. "And?"

"And you might not be dating Moreno at that time," Kyle replies.

I wait for him to realize what he's said is inappropriate, but Kyle just stares at me expectantly. Like his words will succeed in making me change my mind.

With a tight smile, I say, "Maybe, maybe not. For now, I'll have to reject your offer. Sorry, Kyle. Excuse me. I need to use the restroom." I turn and walk inside Derek's house. My flip flops slap against the tile as I enter the kitchen and throw away my odd-tasting seltzer.

I stop by the fridge and grab a different one. This one is peach flavored. Then, I retreat farther into the house. I follow the sound of Derek's voice coming from the TV room. I'm about to round the corner when a strong arm bands around my waist and tugs me into a dim room.

A quick scan reveals the shadowed outline of a washing machine and dryer. The door to the laundry room closes. I whirl around and barely manage to identify Adam before he's closing the distance between us, backing me into the wall.

"A-Adam?"

His chest leans against mine, but then he yelps and jumps back. “Jesus, that’s cold.”

“Sorry!” I extend my arm so the can is away from his bare chest. “Wait. No. I’m not sorry. What are you doing dragging me in here? Is everything all right?”

“It is now.” Adam steps close again.

Now, I see the heat in his gaze. A similar warmth builds in my core.

Uh oh.

“Adam?” I try again. “What are you doing?”

“What I’ve been wanting to do all damn day.” His hands slide into my hair. “No, make that all damn *week*.”

My stomach flips. I should stop this.

Desire flickers in Adam’s expression, but there’s something darker lurking under the surface. Something like possession. I hate that I like it.

I place my hand against his chest as his head begins to lower towards mine. “What’s wrong?”

He pauses.

“Nothing is wrong.” He tries to lower his head, but again, I hold him back.

“You seem upset.”

Adam drops his hands. “Can you blame me?” He takes a step back.

“What happened?”

“You ditched me for Kyle Waters. That’s what happened.”

Amusement immediately replaces my confusion. “Oh my god... Are you jealous of Kyle?”

“He stole you away for the better part of an hour.” Adam crosses his muscular arms, eyes narrowed. “And he wouldn’t take his shit brown eyes off you the entire time.”

I snort at the insult. It's petty, but funny coming from Adam Moreno's perfect lips.

Though his mood is amusing, I know I need to deescalate the situation. I don't need Adam and Kyle having it out. They work together. We need to keep things professional.

"Adam, relax. Kyle is harmless."

"Is he?" Adam challenges. "He thinks we're dating, but he's openly making a move on you."

I sigh. He has a point.

Kyle didn't do anything blatantly inappropriate, but his vacation invitation came close enough for me to feel the need to address it. I can't blame Adam for being bothered by his actions.

The world thinks we're dating, and we don't know every single person at Derek's party. Who knows if one of the guests saw me and Kyle and misread the situation. It'd be easy to sell the story to a tabloid.

"You're right."

Adam's mouth snaps closed. "What?"

"I said, you're right. Kyle's actions were inappropriate. I'm sorry I stayed away from you for so long."

Emerald eyes flicker between mine. My words have cleared away the frustration in his gaze. Now, only desire remains, and I feel my heart begin to race.

The air between us is charged. Lust sparks. I feel the shock of it through my entire body as Adam, once again, slides his strong fingers into my hair.

"Adam..." I sound breathless. "What are you doing?"

"I already told you." He leans down. "Something I've been wanting to do for months."

Months? Oh my god.

Is this really happening? Is Adam Moreno really about to kiss me? Reason tells me to put an end to this.

I'd promised myself not to fall into another relationship after the mess with Spencer. I wanted time to myself—to focus on my family and my career.

Who says this has to end in a relationship?

The little devil on my shoulder has a point. This is Adam Moreno I'm talking about. He's not exactly the commitment type.

Worries assuaged, I shift my hand over his pec, feeling the firm muscle and smooth skin. Consequences be damned, I want Adam Moreno to kiss me.

I tilt my chin back in silent invitation. Adam's eyes flash with victory just before his lips brush mine.

"Avery?" Kyle's irritating voice travels through the closed door.

I pull my head back on instinct, making Adam growl. The fierce sound makes my knees weak.

The door knob turns.

"Fuck this."

Adam grabs my face and crashes his lips against mine, stealing my breath and drowning me in a passionate kiss.

CHAPTER 22

Adam

AVERY TASTES like peaches and sunshine. My lips devour hers like a man starved. All the pent-up lust of these past weeks flows from my mouth and into hers, our tongues dancing around each other with delicious rhythm.

Avery returns the kiss with enthusiasm, filling me with a sense of satisfaction I haven't felt in a long, long time.

It's one thing when a beautiful woman succumbs to your advances, but when that woman makes you work for it... when you know her first instinct would be to deny the desire she feels for you, but she gives into it anyway... that's peak gratification. It speaks to the undeniable connection between us—the pull I've felt to her since the moment she bumped into me at the launch party.

Avery Lawson is everything I never knew I wanted.

And, Lord help me, do I want her...

My hands fall to her bare waist, slipping to her back and pressing her body against mine. Avery arches. I feel her hardened nipples through the thin, triangular bikini top brushing against my chest.

The sensation makes me kiss her harder.

“Avery?”

This little shit.

Hearing Kyle call her name from within the laundry room, Avery breaks our kiss. I'm only slightly mollified when she doesn't step back, out of my arms. Wide-eyed, Avery stares up at me. Silently, she pleads for my help navigating this situation.

My lips curl as an idea forms.

I keep Avery snug in my arms and cast an irritated glare over my shoulder. “We're busy, Waters. Avery will be out in a minute.”

More like ten to fifteen minutes if I have my way...

Kyle Waters looks like he's been punched in the gut. I'd feel bad for the poor bastard if he hadn't blatantly disrespected the relationship he believes I have with Avery. It doesn't matter that it's not technically real.

The fact is, Kyle believes it's real. And his pursuit of Avery is a serious violation of the bro code.

Not that we're bros...

Kyle gets ahold of himself, but his cheeks are burning red and he stares at the ground. "Never mind. It's not important. Door open or closed?"

My smirk grows. "Closed."

I'm surprised when Kyle listens and closes the door on his way out. The air is still thick with lust, but there's no denying Kyle's intrusion has put a damper on this moment.

"That was a little mean."

"But necessary."

I lean down and press a gentle kiss against her lips. God, she's so soft. Everything about Avery Lawson is smooth and silky. Except for her ball-busting personality. But I love how she's tough and doesn't take shit. It's a large part of what makes her great at her job... and what makes her able to withstand scrutiny from the press.

I'm staring down at her, counting every freckle on her nose, when she murmurs, "Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Looking at me like that."

A slow smile crawls over my lips. "How am I looking at you, Miss Lawson?"

"Like you want to devour me," she whispers.

God help me. Even her voice is sexy.

I dip my head and lower my voice. "That's because I do want to devour you. From your head to your toes, I want to

lick every inch of you, Avery. I want to see if you taste as delicious as you do in my dreams.”

Her breath hitches. “You dream about me?”

Is she really so unaware of how much she affects me?

“Every damn night.”

“Since when?”

“Since the day we met.” I vividly recall jerking off in the shower the night of the launch party, unable to get her red lips and fiery eyes out of my head.

We kiss again.

My fingers trail up and down her sides, relishing the feel of her warm skin.

Avery shivers. “We can’t do this here.”

“Why not?” I move my lips to her neck.

“Because this is my brother’s house.”

Hmm. Fair point.

“Then let’s get out of here.” I press my lips against hers. “Let’s go home.”

She chews her bottom lip. I wait with bated breath, praying she doesn’t overthink this situation.

“Okay.”

Yes!

I grab her by the hand and open the laundry room door. Voices come from the living room, but the hall is clear. I half-expected Kyle to be waiting with a pout and crossed arms.

I pull Avery behind me and head back to the pool area to get our belongings and cover-ups.

I spot Heather immediately. She’s surrounded by a trio of muscular men, each one vying for her attention. She wears a polite smile, but even at this distance, I can see the disinterest in her eyes.

When she sees us, her expression brightens. It illuminates even more when she notices her twin's hand curled around mine. Her lips tilt into a knowing smirk. She excuses herself from her admirers and meets me and Avery near the back gate.

“Leaving so soon?” Heather asks Avery teasingly.

“Yes,” I answer, squeezing Avery's hand. “Mind telling Derek bye for us?”

“Sure thing. I'll go find him now. I'm about to leave myself.”

Avery and Heather embrace. I'm pleased when Avery doesn't release my hand.

Heather shoots me another smirk when they separate. “See you later, tiger.”

I laugh. “Bye, Heather.”

It takes everything within me not to speed the whole way home. But the Pacific Coast Highway is not a straight, easy drive. The curves require focus, so conversation is limited on the trip home.

Avery leans back in the passenger seat, staring happily out at the beautiful view. I'm nervous to talk. I don't want to say something that will make her change her mind. So, I keep my mouth shut. I spend the drive imagining all the ways I want to please her.

The first time should be tame. In a bed, for sure. But the second time? I'm debating between the shower or kitchen. I can make us dinner while enjoying my dessert.

I'm rock hard by the time I steer the Bentley into the parking garage. I slip out of the car and hurry to Avery's side to open the door for her. She takes my hand with a bright smile. I help her out of the car, my dick twitching with excitement.

This is it.

I've been thinking about this moment for weeks. Months.

I turn to the elevators. Avery stumbles. "Oops."

I quickly help her regain her footing. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." She hiccups. "Sorry. I'm clumsy."

My eyes narrow. I take in her flushed cheeks and glassy eyes.

I swear, they weren't glassy a few moments ago...

"Let's go."

Avery leads me to the elevator. She presses the summons button, then curls into my side. Her easy affection surprises me, but I'm not going to complain.

My hand bunches the sundress fabric along her waist. I can't wait to rip it off her the moment we're inside the apartment.

The elevator arrives, and Avery stumbles again as she tries to step inside.

"Stupid flip flops," she mutters.

I hit the penthouse button.

When the doors open, Avery rushes out, clutching her stomach. "Gosh, that ride made me queasy."

It feels like ice cold water is poured over me, and my aching dick shouts in protest as realization hits me.

I hope I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure she's drunk.

And when she walks into the apartment and has to lean against the wall to slide off her sandals, I know I'm right.

Damn it. How did I not notice this before? I kept my eyes on her at the party. How did I not realize she had so much to drink?

I replay the afternoon in my head. I picture Avery with the same seltzer can in every memory, but maybe she just had multiples of the same drink?

And now that I think about it, I didn't see her eat a morsel of food. She'd been preoccupied with the tour of Derek's place, socializing with the guests she knew from work, and then being commandeered by Waters.

I shake my head. Sitting in the car, under the warm sun, must've allowed the drinks to finally hit her.

I follow Avery into the kitchen. I open the fridge and take out some bread, butter and cheese. American cuisine isn't my favorite, but they created some classics. Grilled cheese is one of them.

"What are you doing?" Avery asks from behind me.

I retrieve a pan from the bottom cabinet, keeping my attention forward. "Making us some food." I put the pan on the stove.

"Oh... that's nice. I'm starving."

"I bet."

"What are you making?"

"Grilled cheese." I turn on the gas burner and add butter to the pan.

"Oh... to be honest, I kind of wanted something else to eat."

I stop what I'm doing and turn around. I wish I didn't.

Because Avery Lawson stands just a few feet away. Her sundress is gathered in a heap on the floor, and her navy bikini top rests on top.

All the effort to subdue my dick is undone as I stare at her perfect breasts. They are full and heavy, the hard nipples aching to be touched. She stares at me hungrily. When she licks her lips and looks down at the bulge in my pants, I release an audible groan.

"Avery..."

"Come here."

Lord knows I want to.

I say nothing. I remain where I'm standing.

Avery's eyes flash. She saunters towards me with a sexy sway of her hips. I hold my breath when she reaches out. Instead of touching me, her hand snakes behind my back. I hear a click as she turns off the gas burner. Clearly, she's not so intoxicated that she doesn't realize the importance of turning off the stove.

Stop it, Adam.

I chastise myself for trying to convince myself it will be okay to act on my desire.

I almost lose my restraint when Avery's hands slide up my arms and rest on my shoulders. Her naked breasts brush against me. "Touch me."

I squeeze my eyes shut. This is painful. "Avery... you need food."

"No, I need you." Her lips press against my sternum. She pushes aside my half-opened button up and peppers feather-light kisses all along my chest and collarbone.

God knows I want this.

I want Avery's long legs wrapped around me as I plunge my dick into her center and take her against the living room wall. I want to hear her screaming my name when I press my tongue against her clit and give her the best orgasm of her damn life.

I want it all. And it's physically painful to deny myself what I want.

Because although Avery seems to want it, I cannot allow the first time we're together to begin with dubious consent.

I'm a grown ass man. I know better than to have my way with an intoxicated woman.

But God if it isn't the hardest decision I've ever made. And that includes turning down Rose Nadal when she offered to take my virginity when I was fourteen. My cousin Phillip liked her, and we were still close enough at the time that I

didn't want to betray him like that. Even though my teenage dick wished I had.

With every ounce of will power I possess, I take Avery's wrists and gently move her arms to her side. She stops her affectionate kisses and looks up at me with a question in her glossy eyes.

"Avery... we can't."

"Yes, we can." She rises on her toes and kisses the base of my throat. "I want you, Adam Moreno. Now, take me to your bedroom."

Who did I offend in a past life to deserve this kind of torture?

"Avery, love. You've had too much to drink. You need to eat before we can think about doing anything."

"I'm not drunk. I only had two seltzers."

My eyes narrow. "Is that true?"

"Mmhmm." Avery's lips suction against my throat. I wish they were around my dick.

"Avery, please..." My voice cracks. "Let me make you food. Then, we can talk about what comes next."

I hold my breath as I wait for her response. I'm not sure how much more I can take. I might need to run and hide in my room to keep myself from acting on her advances.

Relief, mixed with disappointment, courses through me when Avery takes a step back.

Then another. Then another.

She picks up the rumbled sundress and bikini and presses them to her chest. When she looks at me, her gaze seems a bit clearer. But she's definitely still under the influence.

Her eyes fall to the floor as she mutters, "I'm going to take a shower."

I'm a little concerned she might slip in the shower, but I certainly don't have the willpower to help her in there. A man

only has so much self-control...

“That sounds like a good idea. I’ll make you a sandwich and have it waiting for you when you’re done.”

She nods. “Thanks.

Regret hits me as she walks out of the kitchen. Not regret over the fact we didn’t take our evening any further, but regret at the flicker of embarrassment I saw in her expression right before she left.

The last thing I want to do was embarrass Avery.

I want nothing more than to take her to my bed and live out every fantasy I’ve ever had about us being together. But I need to know she’s all in. I don’t want an outside influence making the decision for her.

I can’t wait for tomorrow. I’m going to get sober Avery to consent to every last thing I want to do to her. And then we’re finally going to act on this connection between us.

Finally.

CHAPTER 23

Avery

RING. Ring. Ring.

I groan and burrow my head into the cozy mattress, pulling a pillow over my head.

But not even the fluffiest pillow dulls the irritating sound of my new cell phone ringing. I've been meaning to choose a less ear-piercing ringtone, but I keep forgetting.

With a huff, I toss the pillow away and reach onto the glass nightstand, fumbling for my phone. I squint at the screen.

Heather

I hit accept then put it on speaker. "Hello?"

"Avery?"

"Who else would it be?" I lie back onto the mattress.

"You sound groggy. Are you just waking up?"

"Yes."

"Are you feeling all right?" The concern in her voice puts me on alert.

"Yes, why wouldn't I be?"

"Because it's almost noon, and you never sleep in this late."

"It's noon?" I bolt upright. I look at the time on the phone and curse.

"Did you have an *exhausting* night last night?" I can imagine Heather's grin.

I wrack my brain for memories from last night. Adam and I kissed at Derek's. *That*, I certainly remember. I recall leaving the party, and Adam driving us home.

After that, the night is a blur.

Fear lances through me. I yank off the comforter and see I'm wearing shorts and underwear. I assess my lady bits. They

don't feel like they had any action last night.

I sigh. I'm simultaneously relieved and disappointed.

"Avery?" Heather prompts. Her teasing tone is gone, replaced by concern.

"I don't know," I tell my twin. "I don't think so."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

I run a tired hand down my face. "I mean, I don't know. I don't remember what happened last night."

Silence crackles through the phone.

"You didn't sleep with Adam?"

"No."

I'm ninety-eight percent sure that's true. My vagina doesn't have that just-fucked feeling. And based on the bulge I've seen under the thin fabric of Adam's gym shorts, I would definitely know if we did.

"Then what happened?"

Again, I say, "I don't know." My hair is damp, so I must've showered. I vaguely recall eating grilled cheese. "Everything is a blur."

"How much did you have to drink at Derek's?"

The question isn't accusatory, but I feel guilty nonetheless. The reason my sister avoids alcohol is exactly because of a situation just like this. I hate that this could be triggering for her.

Disappointed in myself, I admit, "I didn't think very much, but obviously I was wrong."

Another beat of silence travels through the phone.

Finally, Heather says, "Well, I'm glad Adam took you home before anything bad happened."

"Me too."

Now, I'm worried I made a fool of myself last night. Adam and I shared a hot moment in Derek's laundry room, and I

eagerly anticipated what was to come next when we got home. I thought, for sure, he and I would have sex. I'd been nervous, yet eager. I've been daydreaming about straddling his perfect body for so long.

Now, I'm worried I was a drunken mess. I need to speak with Adam to figure out what happened and apologize if need be.

"I was calling to see if you wanted to grab lunch, but I think you may have a roommate to clear the air with."

I swear, twin telepathy is real.

"Yeah... you're probably right."

"Don't worry. You might not remember this, but Adam showed his true colors yesterday."

"What do you mean?"

"That your fake boyfriend is super into you, sis. You should've heard him griping about Kyle hogging your attention. He's got it bad."

Flutters overtake my stomach. "You think so?"

"I know so. Now, don't ruin what could be a good thing by getting in your head. Get dressed. Leave your room. And talk to Adam."

I take a deep breath. "Okay."

"That's my girl." Heather chuckles. "I look forward to a full report over coffee on Monday."

I laugh. "We'll see."

"Psh. You're my sister. You tell me everything."

"We'll see," I repeat.

"Ugh. Party pooper. Fine. Keep your sex secrets. You'll crack eventually."

I shake my head and laugh. "Have a good day, Heather. I'll see you Monday for coffee."

"Bye, Aves. Love you."

“Love you, too.”

A click signals the end of the call.

I sit on the bed for a few more minutes, trying desperately to remember what happened last night. I want to know what conversation I am walking into when I leave this room. But as hard as I try, I can't remember more than bits and pieces of the evening.

I'm embarrassed by myself.

Best to get this over with.

I slide off the bed and walk to the dresser. I pull on a pair of loose blue jeans and tuck a white V-neck into the waistband. I slip on a pair of thin white socks then walk out of the room.

Adam sits on my pale-green sofa, scrolling through one of his many streaming services using his smart TV's remote.

When I demanded he replace his uncomfortable couch with mine, I honestly didn't think he'd really go through with it. But he is a man of his word.

The day after I agreed to officially move in, two burly bearded men knocked on the door at ten a.m., carrying my cozy couch into the penthouse, leaving with Adam's couch in their arms.

I stand awkwardly at the edge of the room, wondering how to greet him. He doesn't see me at first. When he does, his lips break into a wide smile.

“Good morning, Snoozy.”

I blink. His reaction is friendly. Is that a good thing?

“Snoozy?”

“You know,” he shrugs. “One of the seven dwarves.”

The corner of my mouth lifts. “You mean, Sleepy.”

“Ah. Yes. Same thing.”

I chuckle.

“Are you hungry?” He turns off the TV and stands, stretching his arms above his head. The move reveals toned

lower abs. I drink in the sight. He lowers his arms. “Avery?”

My eyes snap back up to his. “Y-yes.” I swallow. “Yes, I’m hungry.”

He’s wearing a knowing smirk, and I expect him to call me out on checking him out.

Instead, he asks, “Want to grab lunch?”

“Lunch?”

“Yeah. You know, the meal people eat in the middle of the day.”

Ugh. Since when does Adam tease me this much? Is he flirting, or is this how he puts me in the friend zone?

I won’t know the answer to that until I learn what, exactly, happened after we got to the apartment last night.

“Sure. Lunch sounds good. Let me go get my purse.”

I go back to my bedroom and pick up my thin, black crossbody. Its contents are limited. Both of my replacement credit cards arrived a couple days ago, and I was able to order a replacement driver’s license online. I have the printout of the order as evidence. Besides that, a stick of lip balm and a spare hair tie are all I carry out of my room.

Adam waits by the front door.

After I slip on a pair of white sneakers, I stand and say, “All right, I’m ready.”

Adam’s gaze travels over me. It’s then I realize I don’t even have makeup on, and I didn’t brush my hair.

I debate saying, ‘just kidding’ and going back to my room to remedy the situation when Adam says, “You look pretty like this.”

My heart flips in my chest. “Like what?”

He smiles. “Natural.”

Before I can react, he turns and opens the door, gesturing for me to precede him.

“After you, Avery.”

We don't go to the garage. Instead, Adam leads me into the main lobby. We pass Charles, the daytime doorman, on our way out.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Moreno. Miss Lawson.”

“Hello, Charles,” Adam returns warmly. He grabs my hand, lacing our fingers and leads me down the street.

“Hi,” I manage to squeak to Charles, picking up my pace to keep up with Adam's long strides.

I don't know why my heart is racing. Adam and I have held hands many times while we're out on the town.

But you don't lace fingers...

I glance down at our joined hands and realize my subconscious is right. Anytime Adam and I had to hold hands for the paparazzi, our hands were cupped. I didn't realize how much more intimate it is to wind your fingers through someone else's.

We don't walk far.

Adam and I enter the quaint sandwich shop two blocks over. It's fairly crowded, but he adjusts his grip so my hand is tucked behind his back, still in his, and maneuvers through the crowd to the back of the narrow restaurant.

A table with two chairs is tucked in the corner. A piece of paper with the handwritten word, “Reserved” sits on top.

Adam pulls out one of the chairs. I sit, looking around for someone to complain that we took the only open table. I didn't know a place like this would bother with reservations.

One second after he takes his seat, a bright-eyed, teenage boy appears at the edge of the table. “Hi, Adam.”

“Hello, Jeffrey. This is my girlfriend, Avery. Avery, this is Jeffrey. He lives in our building.”

Our building?

“Hi, Jeffrey.”

“Hello, Avery.” He beams with a mouth full of braces. He’s a cute kid, still in that gangly, awkward stage. He can’t be much older than sixteen.

“Did your manager give you any grief about saving this table?” Adam asks.

“Are you kidding? He was stoked. He hopes photographers will catch you leaving. Thinks it’ll drum up business.”

Adam smiles. “We’ll do our best to make that happen.”

The pair laugh. I attempt to join in, but it’s a tad awkward. I’m still swimming in my embarrassment from last night.

“What can I get you two to drink?”

I stick with iced tea and Adam orders lemonade. When Jeffrey leaves, I suddenly wish he hadn’t. He and I sit in a room crowded with people, chatting and laughing over delicious sandwiches, but I’ve never felt so nervous around him.

Not wanting the awkward silence to continue, I blurt the first thing that comes to mind, “How did you meet Jeffrey?”

“When I moved in, Jeffrey’s mother sent him upstairs with a plate full of cookies to welcome me to the building.”

Oh.

“Is Jeffrey’s mother single?”

“Hardly. Her husband travels a lot for business, but they are very much in love.”

“So, she’s just nice?”

“Very much so.”

I can’t remember the last time I had a friendly neighbor do something nice for me with no ulterior motive. People in New York tend to be wary of intruding. And my neighbors in college were a bunch of frat guys who were drunk almost every time I saw them.

I don't think I've been on the receiving end of neighborly behavior since I lived with my parents. Ann Arbor, Michigan isn't a tiny town, but our neighborhood was a tight-knit community. Everyone knew the names of the neighbors on their street.

Jeffrey returns with our drinks and takes our food order.

When he leaves, Adam leans forward. His elbows rest on the table. "Tell me, how are you feeling this morning? Or, should I say, this afternoon?"

I sigh. *Here we go.*

"I'm embarrassed."

"Why?"

"Because, apparently, I drank too much last night."

Adam picks up his water and takes a sip, watching me over the rim.

"I seriously didn't think I did," I continue. "I remember having two seltzers."

"You said the same thing last night."

"I did?" He nods. "That's so weird."

I shake my head. I'm by, no means, a consistent drinker. Regardless, two seltzers shouldn't have been enough alcohol to make me black out for most of the evening. I'm so lost in my own head; I don't immediately recognize the suspicious expression creeping over Adam's face.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He takes another sip of water and looks at the deli counter on the other side of the room, watching an employee slice roast beef in the fancy meat slicer.

"I'm considering the likely possibility that someone spiked your drink at the party."

I lean back, stunned. The chair wobbles. "What?"

"Think about it." His emerald eyes return to mine. "You had two drinks. Even on an empty stomach, that doesn't make

a person black out.”

“I said I *thought* I had two drinks,” I point out. “It may have been more.”

“You don’t believe that,” Adam states.

He, too, leans back. He crosses his arms and stares down at me. And, damn, does he look intense. This is not how I thought this conversation would go. But it’s obvious Adam isn’t prepared to let the subject drop.

“Seltzers come in a can, Adam,” I point out the obvious. “And I got them from the fridge myself.”

“But did you ever leave it unattended? Even for a moment?”

“I... I don’t know.” Most likely.

“Exactly.”

“Who would spike my drink at my *brother’s* house?” It’s not like we were out at a club.

Adam sips his drink. His silence, coupled with his pointed look, is telling. I remember what Heather said about him being upset over Kyle...

“You can’t seriously think *Kyle* would drug me,” I ask in a low, incredulous voice.

Again, he remains silent.

“What do you have against Kyle?”

“Many things.”

“Like?”

“Like how he publicly pursues another man’s girlfriend.”

“So this is about your pride?”

“This is about the fact Kyle’s actions prove his character is lacking.”

“Because you think he was flirting with me?”

“Among other things.”

I know what he's getting at. For weeks, Kyle's hardly been at the office. I didn't think anything of it until Derek confided in me that he and Kyle have been arguing lately. He didn't go into much detail, but he admitted he was afraid the company was driving a wedge between him and his best friend. He wanted advice on what to do. I told him to keep talking to Kyle, and to not give up until they cleared the air.

When I told Adam about the conversation, his advice was for Derek to cut the dead-weight and hire someone else to do Kyle's job. It's the mindset of a ruthless, although successful, businessman.

It's no secret Adam is not a fan of Kyle, and the events of last night definitely solidified his dislike of Source Solution's co-founder, but I'm not interested in listening to Adam vent about Kyle.

Shaking my head, I ask, "Is this really what you want to talk about today?"

Adam's nostrils flare. His lips press into a firm line. Then, he admits. "No. It's not."

In a blink, his demeanor changes. He leans back. His fingers drum an unfamiliar rhythm on the table. "Are you embarrassed by what happened yesterday?"

My cheeks heat. "Which part?"

"The part where we made out in the laundry room?"

I suck in a breath. My head turns on a swivel, searching for anyone listening. An amused smile tilts Adam's lips as he waits patiently for my response.

I must be beet red.

"No, I'm not embarrassed by that," I murmur.

In fact, that passionate moment was the highlight of these past few months. I'd been lusting after Adam, and it's nice to know his lips lived up to the hype. It's impossible not to wish I'd experienced more...

"Good."

“Good?”

He nods.

“That’s all you have to say.”

His smile grows. “What else would you like me to say, Avery?”

I... I really don’t know. I shrug.

Adam chuckles. He leans forward and whispers, “Would you like me to tell you that it took every ounce of decency I had not to take you to my bed last night, despite the fact you were obviously intoxicated?”

My pulse spikes.

“Do you want to hear how I sat outside your bathroom door while you showered to make sure you didn’t slip and fall, but the entire time, I was thinking about how I wanted to join you. How I imagined licking the water droplets from your skin before moving to more intimate places?”

Oh my...

Forget beet red. My cheeks are burning flames. Beads of sweat gather on the back of my neck despite the strong AC blowing above our heads.

He leans forward. I find myself doing the same. We’re both hovering over the table. Less than six inches separate us. My gaze flickers from his lips to his eyes, then trail over his face.

Adam is the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen, both up close or in magazines.

“What if you and I gave this a shot?” His voice is husky.

“What do you mean?”

He licks his lips. “I’m talking about you and me giving this thing between us a shot. A real shot.”

I stare at him like he’s grown two heads. I begin to lean away, but Adam’s hand shoots out and lands on top of mine, stopping me.

My eyes dart between his. “Where is this coming from?”

Sure, Adam and I kissed. And it was amazing. He admitted he wanted to sleep with me last night. I wanted the same thing.

But sleeping together and actually dating are two very different things.

“The world already believes we’re dating, Avery. And we both agreed not to date anyone else during this ruse.”

His fingers begin to trace tiny circles on the back of my hand. Goosebumps cover my arm.

“I like you.” The admission makes my heart soar. “I’m interested in pursuing a real relationship with you. That is, if you’ll have me.”

Never, in a million years, did I ever expect I’d be in this situation.

I’m at war with myself. My first impulse is to say yes and crash my mouth against his, grab our meal to go, and go back to the penthouse to have my way with him. But common sense reminds me this is a disaster waiting to happen.

Adam and I work together, and not just with this arrangement. It’s one thing to fake date a coworker, but to really date one?

When we break up, things will be messy.

I’ve spent these past months working to clean my life up. I’m not interested in taking a step back.

“Adam.” I sigh. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

He is undeterred. “Tell me you’re not attracted to me, Avery.”

“That doesn’t mean we should date.”

“What about how much we enjoy each other’s company?”

I think back to all the time we’ve spent together these past weeks, and how surprised I was to realize I didn’t despise any of it. In fact, if I’m being honest, I feel the complete opposite.

Adam is smart, funny, and kind. He's handsome. He's the perfect package.

But no one is perfect. Not really.

I need to stand my ground. I can't allow myself to be swayed. Giving in risks everything.

"I enjoy a lot of people's company," I reply.

Adam's eyes spark with challenge. "But how many others make your heart race? I can see your pulse flickering in your neck."

I slap a hand on my throat.

He chuckles, but then his voice deepens as he says, "Be my girlfriend, Avery. Let's explore this thing between us. Please."

CHAPTER 24

Adam

I STARE AT AVERY, trying to keep my cool, but blood is rushing through my veins and desire spikes my adrenaline.

I want this. I want *her*. But I can't force the issue. Avery has to want to come to me on her own. All I can do is offer tantalizing promises to lure her to say yes.

And beg.

I can't remember the last time I said 'please' when asking a woman to date me.

The brunette beauty gapes at me. I see the indecision swirling in her gaze, but it's mixed with enough desire to let me know it's not a lack of willingness that's holding her back.

"What if it's just sex?" she blurts.

"Perdón?"

She blushes prettily. I love when she blushes, especially when I'm the cause.

"We're adults, Adam. We don't have to really date to enjoy this attraction between us."

Is this how she wants to play it? Does Avery Lawson want a friends-with-benefits situation? It's a tough pill to swallow—to know a woman I want as my own doesn't feel the same way.

Pride tries to rear its ugly head. I silence the beast before it ruins everything. If this designation is what makes Avery willing to finally pursue this connection between us, then sign me the fuck up.

"Are you sure, Avery?" I smile slowly. "Once you have a taste, I'm not certain any other man will satisfy you."

Deep blue eyes sparkle with amusement. "You're quite confident."

"For good reason."

I run my fingers over her hand, and her breath hitches. I long to close the distance between us. The pull to this woman is like nothing I've ever felt.

But I need her to consent. I need to hear her say it.

She bites her bottom lip. I hold her gaze as she stares at me. I can see eager, yet slightly indecisive, thoughts swirl behind her gorgeous eyes.

“All right.”

My chest clenches. “All right, what?”

Her blush returns. “I'm sure about this. I'm tired of fighting this attraction. Let's do this.”

My dick stands at attention.

“Here we are.”

Avery and I jerk apart as Jeffrey arrives with our sandwiches. He sets a plate in front of her. Before he can set mine down, I say, “Actually, Jeffrey. Something's come up.” *Literally.*

I clear my throat and continue, “Can we get these sandwiches to go?”

“Oh. Of course. I'll be right back.”

Jeffrey grabs Avery's plate and hurries away.

She looks at me with a teasing smile. “What if I was really hungry?”

Shit. She's probably at a calorie deficit after yesterday. But I'm not willing to sit here in public, unable to touch her the way I want, while she eats.

I stand. “You can eat at the penthouse.”

She laughs as I hold out my hand. With a smile, she puts her fingers in mine. Gently, I pull her up. I lift her arm and kiss her fingertips.

“Let's get out of here, Miss Lawson.”

“After you, Mr. Moreno.”

With a takeout bag in one hand and Avery's in the other, I watch the numbers on the elevator rise as we ride it to the penthouse. Nervous anticipation flows through me.

It's an odd feeling. I can't remember the last time I was nervous about having sex with a woman.

That's because it's been a long time since you've liked someone this much.

My latest ex, Brigitte, was a beauty. She was lovely, and I'm not going to sugarcoat it, I enjoyed having her on my arm at events. But conversation was nonexistent, and the sex wasn't even that notable.

That might be fine for some men, but beautiful women are a dime a dozen. It wasn't hard to let her go to find one who also held my interest intellectually.

Trisha is a great example. But there wasn't that oomph-factor with the stunning model. Not like I feel with Avery.

We enter the penthouse. The sexual tension cranks up a notch.

Before I let myself succumb, I lead Avery to the kitchen bar. I set the bag on the counter and pull out a stool for her. "Fun later. First, we eat."

Avery hops onto the seat. "You don't have to tell me twice."

She reaches into the bag and unwraps the first sandwich. It's mine. She slides it to the place next to her. I sit and wait for her to take the first bite of her sandwich before devouring mine.

I'm not that hungry. Not for food, anyway. But I won't be able to indulge in my craving until she finishes her meal.

Avery wasn't joking when she said she was hungry. She takes her last bite minutes later. The moment she swallows, I make my move.

Grabbing her leg, I pull so her body turns towards mine. I step between her legs, cup her head, and lean down. I barely manage to press my lips against her before she leans away.

“Adam, wait! I have onion breath.”

“I love onions,” I mutter, moving forward and pressing my lips more firmly against hers.

She laughs against my lips and shoves my shoulders. “I’m serious. I need to brush my teeth.”

With a growl, I let her lean away. “You have two minutes, Avery. I mean it.”

With another laugh, she hops off the stool and races to her room. I count to seventy-five before I prowl after her.

She’s standing in front of the bathroom mirror. Her electric toothbrush is still in her hands. Seeing me, her eyes widen, and she mumbles with toothpaste foam in her mouth, “That wasn’t two minutes!”

I move behind her and gently push her hair to one side of her neck. I press a kiss to the skin below her ear. She shivers.

I do it again. This time, my tongue darts out to moisten the spot.

Avery leans against me. I feel her stiffen when my arousal presses against her lower back. I place another kiss on her neck, and her body loosens.

I continue my ministrations, moving my hands to her waist, digging my fingers against the groove between her torso and thighs under her leggings.

One hand slips over her warm center, over the fabric. I add the smallest amount of pressure to tease her—to give her a taste of what’s to come.

Avery jerks. She leans over the sink and spits out the toothpaste. Then, she spins around. Her minty fresh breath fills my senses in a heated, open-mouthed kiss.

Her nails scratch my scalp as her hands dig into my hair. I grab her waist and hoist her onto the bathroom counter,

matching the fervor of her kiss with my own.

Something unlocks for us. The desire building for weeks is unleashed. And neither of us are able to stop it.

Her hands slide down my body and grab the hem of my shirt. Our lips separate just long enough for her to yank my shirt over my head.

My tongue dives into her lips, and her fingers roam over my torso. Her touch is heavenly.

I want more.

I wrap an arm around Avery's back and pull her forward. We both moan as she grinds against my erection. I lift her. Gripping her ass with my free hand, I move us into the bedroom.

My thighs hit the bed, and we fall forward. I catch myself before I land on her. Avery's legs wrap around my waist, keeping that connection between her core and my dick.

Tongues and teeth clash. Hands grope and hips grind. My nostrils fill with Avery's flowery scent. I take it all in, yanking down my zipper and shucking off my jeans.

Avery moans with want. She pulls her mouth away and yanks her own shirt over her head. I lean back and watch her shimmy out of the leggings. My mouth waters as I take in her perfect breasts, covered by a sexy lace bra and the low rise, matching panties.

“You're so sexy, Avery. I want to taste every inch of you.”

For once, my compliment doesn't make her blush.

The modest Avery Lawson has taken a back seat. In her place lies a confident woman who looks at me with a suggestive smirk. She arches her back and whispers enticingly, “Show me.”

Desire flares.

I capture her lips in a rough kiss before moving my attention to her cheek, the hollow of her throat, her collarbones, before arriving at her chest. I tug her bra down,

exposing her beautiful breasts. They rise and fall with each rapid breath.

I pull a nipple between my lips and gently roll it between my teeth.

Her back arches, pressing her breast deeper into my mouth. “Yes.”

Encouraged, I give the other breast the same attention. My hand moves down, and I run my index finger over the thin fabric covering her center. Moisture soaks the cotton.

I growl in approval. “So wet for me.”

“Mmm.”

Unable to resist, I roll her underwear down her toned legs. I kiss my way back up the enticing limbs then press my mouth against her center.

“Ah!”

My fingers join in the fun. They separate Avery’s flesh, allowing my tongue deeper access. Avery wriggles and moans underneath me as I lick and suck. My finger pistons inside her. Then I add another. I move them in a wave motion, and my mouth continues its work.

“Oh god,” Avery cries out and bucks wildly as her orgasm rocks through her. I lap up her pleasure, my cock swelling even harder.

I press a kiss on her low stomach when she relaxes into a satiated heap.

“Wow.”

I chuckle against her stomach, then move my way back up to her mouth, kissing a path along the way. When I reach her lips, she smiles and holds my head as we kiss. The fact she’s unbothered by tasting herself on my tongue turns me on even more. It doesn’t take long for her passion to reignite, and her sweet kisses turn heated.

Still wearing my boxers, I grind my dick against her wet center. She sits up and frantically pushes my underwear down.

Male satisfaction escalates when she stares at my hard length and licks her lips. “Wow.”

She has no idea.

“Do you have a condom?”

I dive to pick up my jeans and dig in the pocket. Avery tosses her bra on the floor.

I take the condom out and return to stand between Avery’s legs. Staring into her eyes, I use my teeth to rip the foil. I keep my gaze on hers as I roll the condom over my dick.

Then, I lean forward. Avery scoots back so we can both lie on the bed. For the first time, she looks a little nervous.

I kiss her softly. “You sure?”

“Yes.”

I smile at her quick response. “Hold on, love.”

Avery’s muscles are tight as I press into her. Her pink lips part in the prettiest silent “oh,” filling me with the urge to see what they’d look like wrapped around my dick.

Later. For now, I focus on the mind-blowing sensation of being inside Avery Lawson. A hiss passes my lips when she rolls her hips up, and I am fully seated inside her.

A bead of sweat gathers on my brow as I fight the urge to give into my desire to drive into her with all my force. “You okay?”

“Better than okay,” Avery leans up and traps me in a smoldering kiss. Then, she whispers, “Fuck me, Adam.”

Yes, love. My hips begin to move, controlled by a brain not located in my skull. Her hips roll in rhythm with mine. Almost immediately, I feel a familiar tingle gathering at the base of my spine.

Not yet.

I refuse to let my first time with Avery Lawson be short. I’m going to savor this. I’m going to savor her.

You only get one shot at a first impression, and I'm determined to make sure Avery never forgets the first time she had my dick inside her. I'm going to make her want more.

I pull out. Avery cries in protest, but she quiets when I flip on my back and move her on top of me. With a sassy grin, she lowers herself onto me. My head flies back, and my eyes shut.

Fuck.

She begins to ride me. "How is this, Mr. Moreno?"

"Adequate."

"Adequate?" I hear the smile in her voice, and I know I'm in trouble.

Avery changes the motion. Her rhythm slows. She leans back, letting me slide against her front wall with delicious pressure. I look up and see her fondling her own breasts.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Seeing my attention, she picks up the pace. "Do you like this, Mr. Moreno?"

"Yes." I hiss. I grab her hips, but I don't take over her pace. Not yet.

"Mmm. Good." She slides her hand to where we're joined. Her fingers brush the base of my cock.

"Avery."

"Yes?"

I roll my hips once. I think I see stars.

She continues her motion and the pleasurable assault on where we're connected. "Are you ready to fuck me?"

"What do you think I'm doing?"

"Being fucked... by me."

She moves to rise off me. But I'm having none of that. I tighten my hold on her hips and slam her back down.

She throws her head back in ecstasy. "*Adam.*"

The breathless sound of my name on her lips flips the switch. My control is gone. I overpower Avery's rhythm with me own.

The sound of slick skin slapping fills the room, accompanied by pleased moans and cries. Avery's breasts bounce. Her hands grip my wrists tight, reveling in the feeling of me pounding her down onto me with all my might.

I feel my balls tighten just as she cries out from her orgasm, and I see literal fucking stars when I come right with her.

CHAPTER 25

Avery

I'M AN IDIOT.

An orgasm loving, sex-deprived idiot.

Lying on the bed next to a sleeping Adam, I stare up at the cream-colored ceiling in his bedroom. I'm unable to go back to sleep after waking up to the feel of him snuggling against my back.

The lust-filled haze of the previous day is fading, but the subtle throb between my legs reminds me of the sex marathon with clarity.

I. Had. Sex. With. Adam. Moreno.

The words run through my head on repeat. I simultaneously want to cheer and cringe.

After our first round, we took a break for water. It wasn't long before I couldn't take watching a shirtless Adam wander around his kitchen, looking domestic, taking the time to make sure I had anything I could need. I pounced on him like a rabbit in heat. That's how we ended up in *his* room.

Boy, oh boy, did Adam Moreno rise to the occasion. The man was insatiable. I've never had so many orgasms in one day. Thank goodness he had the awareness to keep water on the nightstand after our first go around.

Because he's done this before.

I scrunch my face and try to dismiss the intrusive thought. But that's the rub.

I know Adam Moreno is no innocent virgin, and I'm no one special. We hooked up. It was intense. And amazing. But I can't let myself read too much into it.

It doesn't matter that Adam said he wants to give dating a legitimate shot. He and I both know a relationship between us will never work.

Sex, sure. We're both adults. But anything more than that is unrealistic. And it's best if neither of us delude ourselves into thinking it can be otherwise.

With that thought in mind, I gently lift the muscular arm from my waist and set it behind me. Adam's breath hitches, and I freeze. When his breathing steadies, I slide my body off the bed, landing in a crouch.

I'm quiet as a mouse as I creep out of the bedroom, drawing the door closed behind me with the smallest *click*. I breathe a sigh of relief. My bare feet pad against the cool floor as I make my way back to my room.

A glance at the clock reveals it's a little past six in the morning.

Perfect.

By the time I shower and change, I can make my way into work and arrive at an ordinary time, if not a little early.

And maybe I'll have time to figure out how the hell I'm going to handle this situation before I see Adam.

The office is illuminated and bright. The window shades are pulled up to allow the morning sun to shine into the space. I greet the receptionists as I pass with a falsely bright smile.

Despite the distance between me and my sexy fake boyfriend, my stomach is a tangle of knots just thinking about our inevitable conversation today.

No doubt, he's awake by now. I glance at my phone. The picture of me and my siblings from Halloween stares back at me.

No notifications.

Maybe Adam was relieved when he realized I wasn't in bed this morning? Maybe he's glad to avoid that awkward encounter?

My office is neat and recently cleaned. I place my purse in its designated drawer and power up the computer. I enter my log in information and immediately open my calendar with my list of items to complete today.

Press release draft deadlines.

Booking Derek an interview with two prominent East Coast magazines to discussing his background and how he came up with the idea for Source Solutions.

Coordinating our company's involvement with a STEAM conference for young men and women.

Overall, not a super busy day, but it's more than enough to keep me distracted from a certain sexy billionaire. At least for a little while.

I get to work. An hour passes, and I'm in the zone. My stomach drops when I hear the knock on the door.

I swallow the lump in my throat and run my hand over my satin blouse. "Come in."

A familiar head of wavy brown hair pops inside. "Hey," Derek greets. "You busy?"

"Not at all." I smile, relieved. "What's up?"

My brother closes the door behind him. "I wanted to talk to you about Saturday."

"What about it?"

He sits in the chair across from me and sighs. "Kyle."

My eyes narrow. "What about Kyle?"

"Look, this is awkward. But... Kyle insisted I speak to you about it." He stares down at his hands, fidgeting.

"Just spit it out, Derek." I know my brother's tells. He's worked up about something.

Another sigh. "Do you know what you're doing with Adam Moreno?"

I frown. "What do you mean?"

Derek looks up. His taunt expression gives the impression he'd rather be doing anything else than having this conversation.

“Adam is a good guy, but do you know what you're doing by dating him?”

I watch my brother, confused. “Where is this coming from? What did Kyle say?”

Derek's cheeks turn pink. “He told me about the laundry room.”

He what?!?

Before I can react, Derek continues, “And I wasn't going to say anything, but one of the girls at my party is friends with Trisha Willems, and she said she and Adam saw each other not too long ago.”

Irritation accompanies my confusion. “And?”

Derek looks back at his hands. “And after what Kyle told me... I don't know. I'm worried about you. I thought Adam was going to be a rebound from Spencer. I didn't really think you'd like him enough to make out with him in a closet like a teenager. Otherwise, I never would've been okay with you moving in with him.”

“All right.” I hold up a hand. “Stop, right there. You are not Dad, Derek Lawson, or Mom. But not even they get a say in whether or not I move in with someone. I'm an adult. I make my own decisions.”

Derek throws his hands in the air. “Well, what do you want me to do, Aves? I feel responsible for this mess. I'm the reason you two met.”

“What mess are you talking about?”

“The fact Adam hung out with a gorgeous model, and you didn't know.”

“But I did know.”

Derek's eyes widen. “You did?”

“Yes. Why would you assume I didn't?”

“Oh. Um. Well, I guess I just assumed that if he hung out with her...”

“He would’ve cheated on me?”

Derek winces. “I guess.”

I feel bad for Adam. How often do people make these types of assumptions about him? How many relationships had crumbled because of this very thing?

Not that we have a relationship...

“Can Adam not have female friends, Derek?”

“He has a reputation.”

“And yet, you never criticized our relationship before now.” I lean back in my chair and assess my brother through narrowed eyes. “Why now?”

“I told you; I thought Adam was a rebound.”

“You think I planned to use a handsome billionaire as a rebound?”

“He’s good looking, but I know your type, Aves. You don’t do flashy. And you could care less about money. You guys shouldn’t be serious. You don’t fit Adam’s type either.”

Derek realizes his mistake the moment the words pass his lips.

“Shit, sorry. That came out wrong.”

I hold up another staying hand. “Whatever, Derek. It doesn’t matter. Let’s wrap up this conversation so we can move on with our day.”

“I’m just worried about you, Avery. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I appreciate that. But I’m a big girl, Derek. I know what I’m doing with Adam.”

Well, I did...

Until I fell victim to his god-like body and effortless charm.

“Just do me a favor,” I say. “Don’t talk about my love life with anyone else. Especially not your best friend.”

Derek nods. “Yeah, okay. You’re right. I’m sorry. Kyle just cares, but I know he’s not impartial when it comes to you.” He rises from the chair. “Have Mom and Dad told you about their anniversary party yet?”

I latch onto the new topic, eager to let his previous remark about Kyle slide. “Yeah, but last we spoke they hadn’t chosen a place.”

“I think they’re just going to do it in the backyard under a tent.”

My jaw drops. “For their thirtieth wedding anniversary? Absolutely not.” My childhood home’s yard isn’t a sprawling lawn with luscious trees and a beautiful garden. It’s small. And bordered on three sides by faded privacy fences.

Derek chuckles. “That’s what I thought you’d say. Would you be willing to call around town and see if there’s something better available?”

“Of course.” I grab my mouse and click open my calendar and type a note to research different locations during my one-hour break after lunch.

“I know you and Heather will say you want to split it—”

“We will split it.” I glare at my younger brother.

Derek sighs. “Fine.”

“Fine.”

“Let me know what you find.”

“Will do. See you later.”

Derek exits, leaving the door cracked behind him. I open an internet browser and type in a search for venues around Ann Arbor.

I have twenty minutes before my first meeting with the team I created to head the company’s social media accounts. The team of four are young, but they’re talented and extremely knowledgeable about the latest trends to drum up visibility on

various social media sites. They need very little supervision, but I like to check in with them every Monday to see if they need anything from me before we start the work week.

I'm scrolling through pictures of the university's botanical garden when, suddenly, the air in the office shifts. A heavy feeling presses on my shoulder.

I look up and jump. "Jesus! Adam. You scared me."

The olive-skinned billionaire stands in the doorway, dressed to the nines in a rich tan suit and brown leather Oxfords. His hair is gelled down, and his beard is freshly trimmed.

I can't believe I had sex with someone like *him*.

"Why did you leave this morning?"

My eyes snap up from admiring Adam's thick thighs. "What?"

That's when I notice the anger simmering in his deep green eyes. He takes a step inside and closes the door behind him.

Uh oh...

"Why did you sneak out this morning?" His jaw is tense. A muscle in his cheek flickers.

"I... I didn't want to wake you."

"Bullshit." He prowls across the room. "You were running."

I stand on shaky legs. "Why would I run?"

"Because you're a coward."

"I am not a coward." I backpedal as he rounds the desk. I keep moving until the window's cool glass presses against my back.

His hands flatten on the glass, caging me in. Eyes roam over my features. His breath comes in rapid bursts. He's really worked up.

"Then why did you leave?" His eyes flicker with a new emotion. Is that hurt?

I frown. Suddenly feeling guilty, I whisper, “I didn’t think you’d care.”

“Why not?” His minty breath fills my nostrils. It reminds me of last night and how I insisted on brushing my teeth before falling into his arms.

I shrug. My shoulder brushes the underside of his arm. “I don’t know.”

Adam’s gaze flickers between my eyes for several seconds. Slowly, his irritation fades. It’s replaced by something much more enjoyable. He licks his lips, and my stomach flutters.

He brushes a finger along my throat. A smug grin pulls at his lips when I gasp.

“I wasn’t done with you, Avery Lawson. Looks like we’ll have to finish right here. Right now.”

I don’t have time to ask what he means before his mouth is on mine. His tongue presses my lips, unrelenting until they part and let him in. His hands remain pressed against the glass.

Only our mouths touch. I tilt my head, and he tilts the opposite direction. We devour one another.

It’s not long before I can’t resist touching him. My palms press against his pecs. The pressure of his lips increases as my fingers crawl up and press into his shoulders, pulling him forward so our chests touch. His arm wraps around my waist. The other hand dives into my hair.

Adam Moreno kisses me like his life depends on it. Like he will die if he lets our lips separate.

I love it.

Mouths still locked, Adam lifts me and spins away from the window, towards the desk. He shoves my keyboard and mouse away and sits me on the surface.

He tries to step between my legs, but my pencil skirt is too tight.

“Damn skirt.” He mumbles against my lips, and I giggle.

But my amusement is replaced with shock when he reaches around and begins to fumble with the skirt's buttons along my backside.

“Adam!” I break our kiss. “What are you doing?”

“I told you. I wasn't done with you.”

He recaptures our lips. For a moment, I'm lost in the feel of his perfect lips moving against mine. Then I remember we're in my office.

Again, I break away. “Adam, we're at work. Someone might see.”

“Then you shouldn't have snuck out this morning.” He succeeds in unbuttoning my skirt. He lifts me into his torso and loosens the fabric. I don't try to stop him from gently tugging the skirt down my legs.

Once freed from the tight material, one leg lifts to hitch around Adam's hip.

His hand runs up and down my thigh. “I love your legs.”

Adjusting his hold, he reaches down and brings my other leg up. My arms snake around his neck as my legs wrap around him.

I bite my bottom lip. “Adam... this is a bad idea.”

“You're wrong, Avery.” He kisses my shoulder through silky fabric, then shirks off his jacket and loosens his tie, throwing both to the floor. “This is a very good idea.”

He sits me back on the desk and unbuttons my blouse. He groans approvingly when he sees my red lace bra. I may or may not have put it on with him in mind.

“You're gorgeous, Lawson.”

“Back at you, Mr. Moreno.”

My words are the key to unlock the last of Adam's control. With a growl, his tongue and teeth make their marks over my neck and down my torso. I throw my head back in pleasure when his fingers move aside my thong and plunge inside me.

In the back of my mind, I know this is crazy. I don't even know if the door is locked. Someone can walk in at any moment.

But it seems like I wasn't done with Adam either...

My body aches for this. She'd waited years for the way he made her feel last night.

And who am I to deny her?

I bite the palm of my hand to keep from crying out when my orgasm rocks through me.

Before it ends, Adam's pants are unbuckled and he rolls a condom over his long, thick length. Then, he's pressing into me, our mouths locked in another mind-blowing kiss.

Some soreness lingers from yesterday, but it's overshadowed by today's lust.

I run my hands under Adam's untucked shirt, trailing over the dips and ridges of his ripped abdomen.

He pistons into me once. Then again. Then, without warning, he stops. I feel him at my entrance, but he doesn't enter.

"What's wrong?" I murmur against his lips. I grab his hips and try to urge him forward.

He resists.

"Are you my girlfriend?"

My head snaps back.

Looking up into Adam's gaze, I see he's serious.

"What?"

Slowly, Adam pushes inside me. My body relaxes. Then, he pulls out again.

I barely refrain from screaming with frustration. "Adam!"

"Are you my girlfriend, Avery? I only sleep with my girlfriends."

"That's a lie."

He smirks. “Not anymore. I’m turning over a new leaf.” He drags his length through my lips, taunting me. “Tell me you’re willing to give us a shot. Tell me you’re mine. Then I’ll fuck you right on this table with the entire office sitting on the other side of the door.”

God, why is that hot?

“Adam, that’s not fair.” I whine. “You’re using sex against me.”

“A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do.” Adam cups my face and kisses me softly.

His dick pushes in halfway, but he stops.

I groan.

“What’s it going to be, Avery?” He circles his hips. “Will you be my girlfriend and allow me to ravish you like only I can... Or are you going to deny yourself *this?*”

He seats himself inside me, and I gasp. My muscles clench. I try to rock against him—to create friction and chase this high—but Adam, once again, pulls out.

“You bastard.” I pant.

Adam chuckles. “Just say the word, love. And you get all of me. But only if I get all of you.”

This is blackmail. I should be furious.

But what the hell? Like I told Derek... I’m a big girl. I can handle myself with Adam Moreno.

And I can let him handle me at the same time.

“Fine, Adam. You win.” I move to kiss him.

He dodges my kiss.

His thumb brushes my bottom lip. “Say it.”

“I’m yours, Adam.” I grind against him. “Now, fuck me.”

Adam pistons in and out of me. The cup of pens rattles on the desk. I meet him thrust for thrust, throwing my head back as I revel in this ecstasy.

I feel Adam's dick pulse. Then, he's coming. I'm right there with him.

His thrusts slow, only coming to a stop once he knows I'm completely done. Then, he pulls out and removes the condom, tying it off and throwing it in the waste bin.

"That can't stay in there."

He tilts my chin up and kisses me deeply. Then, he murmurs, "Just cover it with other trash."

We kiss for a bit. Then, Adam steps back and we both get dressed.

"Are you planning our wedding in Ann Arbor?" Adam asks, amused.

"What?" I turn and follow his gaze and see the browser search up on my computer screen. "Oh. No. That's for my parent's anniversary."

"How long have they been married?"

"It'll be thirty years next spring." I finish tucking in my blouse then step around him, walking to the door.

"Wait... aren't you twenty-nine?"

I shoot him a smirk. "Yes. Our dear mother was twelve weeks pregnant with me and Heather when she and my dad got married. Apparently, it caused quite the scandal when my paternal grandfather found out."

"The senator?"

I stop and turn to him, surprised. "How did you know that?"

I'm not close with Senator Lawson from Michigan. Neither are my parents. I rarely, if ever, speak about him.

Victor Lawson didn't approve of my parents' relationship. He even went so far as to try and sabotage it.

It's been over thirty years since their falling out. My grandmother separated from Victor not long after, but he still

hasn't tried to mend the broken bridges between his son and his family.

"Derek told me about him," Adam says, surprising me further.

"Oh." I continue walking towards the exit.

I open the door and look meaningfully at Adam. He stops in his tracks. Crossing his arms, he grins.

"Are you kicking me out, Miss Lawson?"

"I'm very busy, Mr. Moreno," I tell him with a sly smile. "I have a meeting to get to."

He takes a step closer. "So, that's it? You ravish me and then send me on my way?"

"I believe you ravished me," I reply quietly, all too aware of the open door. "And I'd say you got what you wanted out of the exchange."

I mean his orgasm, but the way Adam's eyes soften makes me think he's thinking of something else.

"Yes, I did."

He closes the remaining distance between us. I don't resist when he leans down and kisses me, despite the fact anyone can walk by.

Everyone believes we're dating, but we've never kissed in the office. It could stir up some gossip, but it won't be anything damaging.

"Let me take you out on a date tonight."

A picture of my calendar flashes in my mind. "Don't we have an art gallery opening to attend?"

Moreno Masterpieces supports the arts in many ways. One is funding the creation of public art gallery's where up and coming artists can display their work. He and I are scheduled to attend so he can report back its progress to his grandfather.

"I forgot." Adam runs his hands over my arms. "Afterwards. Let's get dinner."

“I don’t know... it might be pretty late.”

“Then let’s eat before.” Adam holds my hands. “I want to solidify our relationship with a real date. And I want to do it before you change your mind.”

His eagerness is endearing.

“Okay. We can leave the office early to get ready at home, then we can eat at five?” That will give us two and a half hours before the opening.

“Early bird hours. I love it.” Adam leans down and gives me another kiss. “I’ll see you tonight, Miss Lawson.”

Grinning like a fool, I say, “Bye, Mr. Moreno.”

CHAPTER 26

Avery

LOW LIGHTS CAST a romantic vibe over the five-star restaurant. The shades are drawn, diluting the brightness from the day's sun, almost making me forget it's so early.

"So," Adam begins, staring at me over the rim of his glass of whisky, "Tell me, why are you the fiery, protective older sister?"

I swallow my last bite of Caesar salad and set my fork down on the small plate. "Who says I'm fiery?"

"Anyone who knows you."

I laugh.

The waiter arrives and swiftly carries off our salad plates.

When he's gone, I answer. "Well, I *am* the oldest. I don't think it's unusual for older siblings to be protective."

"Aren't you only seventeen minutes older than Heather?"

I lift a brow. "How did you know that?"

"Heather." He takes a sip.

"Hm. Good memory."

"I remember everything when it comes to you."

I twirl the stem of my wine glass, trying not to show just how sweet I find that statement. Spencer forgot my birthday. Twice. It's hard to believe I put up with him for so long.

I elaborate on my answer, "My parents are great, but they both worked a lot while we were growing up. They weren't always around when one of us needed them."

"So, you filled in?"

I shrug. "Wanting to fix things is in my personality."

"Like Spencer?"

My lips flatten. "Don't."

“Don’t, what?”

“Lecture me. I have it under control.”

“Hmm.” Adam swirls the brown liquid in his glass.

I want to change the subject, but it irks me that Adam might think badly about me. “Look, I made a mistake. I never should have co-signed the loan, but I did. Now, I’m handling it.”

“You don’t strike me as someone who would make a poor financial decision.”

“People are stupid when they’re in love.” I drain the wine and set the glass on the table.

“So, you loved him?”

“I thought I did.”

Our break up was painful, but it wasn’t long before I realized everything that was wrong with my relationship with Spencer. We cared about our careers more than each other. I was gone all the time.

That’s not an excuse for him to cheat on me. But it is a manifestation of what was lacking between us.

I never put Spencer, or our relationship, first. And neither did he.

It’s a blessing I found out about his infidelity before it was too late, and I had more than a car loan linking me to him.

“Let’s talk about something more cheerful,” Adam suggests, finishing off his whisky.

“Please.”

The waiter returns with our food. Adam orders us another round, then we dig in.

There are several perks to fake dating, or I guess really dating, Adam Moreno. At the top of the list are the delicious meals.

Not even the presence of paparazzi clicking their cameras every time the front door opens can ruin the experience.

Thankfully, Adam and I are tucked in the far back corner, mostly out of their view. The restaurant is decently crowded despite the early hour. It's that popular.

I've caught the lingering stares and hushed whispers of a few of the diners around us, but for the most part, no one is paying Adam and I much mind.

"So, about that cheerful topic."

I twirl a fettuccini noodle around my fork. "Yes?"

"My grandfather wants to meet you."

The fork halts halfway to my mouth. I lower my hand.

"Oh."

Adam cuts his NY strip, looking completely at ease. "He actually insists on meeting you."

I'm sure the founder of Moreno Masterpieces is rarely told no.

"Is he coming to town?"

"No." Adam chews and swallows a piece of steak.

When he doesn't elaborate, I ask, "Then how am I supposed to meet him?"

"I've been instructed to invite you to our family's villa in Marbella."

"Spain?" I splutter.

"Yes."

I sit back in my chair, too stunned to eat. "When?"

"Next week."

Next week?!

"Adam." I'm shaking my head. "I can't go to Spain next week."

"Why not?"

"Because I have a job."

"So do I."

“Well, my job isn’t as flexible as yours.”

Adam laughs.

I crack a smile. “Seriously, Adam. I can’t go to Spain. It’s too short notice.”

“I apologize for that, but I ask that you reconsider. This won’t be a random trip, it’s my family’s annual reunion. My entire extended family will be there.”

I gape at him. “Is that supposed to motivate me to go?”

It sounds like a nightmare.

“The press knows about the gathering. It’ll go a long way of proving we’re serious if they get pictures of you there.”

A new knot forms in the pit of my stomach. Adam and I literally just became a real couple—it honestly hasn’t set in yet. But, to the press and Adam’s family, we’ve been a couple for a while.

Now, us acting like a couple in love has an extra layer of complication. How am I supposed to know when Adam’s behavior is for an audience and when he’s being genuine?

Just thinking about it makes my head hurt.

“Adam...”

“Avery.” He leans forward and takes my hand, lacing our fingers together. “I really want you to come to Spain with me. I plan to bring my laptop and work when necessary. You can do the same. It’s just one week.”

One week surrounded by the rich and glamorous, navigating how to behave around my boyfriend of less than twenty-four hours when the world thinks it’s been months.

But when I see the silent plea in Adam’s emerald eyes, my resolve falters.

“You think I’d actually be able to get work done?”

“I will give you the key to lock the rest of us out of the office while you do.”

I laugh. Adam smiles, his eyes sparkling with warmth.

I sigh. *Oh, what the hell? Why not?*

“Okay,” I murmur.

His smile brightens. “Thank you, love.”

He stands and leans over the table to kiss the back of my hand. My cheeks flush as I hear the hushed murmurs around us pick up, and Adam retakes his seat.

The feel of someone staring draws my attention over his shoulder. A dark haired, burly man sits there. He’s alone, and the only thing on his table is a pint of beer. He’s staring at me, and he doesn’t look away when he notices my attention.

In fact, he lifts his glass in greeting, shooting me a wink. I have a strange feeling that I know him, but I cannot figure out how.

“And don’t worry about speaking with Derek. He’s already approved your vacation.”

My eyes snap back to Adam. “When did you speak to Derek?”

“This afternoon.”

Just hours after my brother confronted me about being in over my head with Adam...

“And Derek was fine with it?”

“No, actually. He sort of read me the riot act.”

“What? Really?”

Adam chuckles. “Yes.”

Warily, I ask, “What did he say?”

“That you’re not as tough as you act, and that he doesn’t care how rich I am, he’ll kick my ass if I hurt you.”

I bark a laugh. “He did not say that.”

My little brother is a pacifist. He’s always been reserved and soft spoken. He wouldn’t threaten anyone. Not to their face, at least.

But Adam's words contradict that. "He did. It made me respect him even more than I already do."

I scoff. "Because he threatened to beat you up over my honor?"

Men.

"No, because he's looking out for his family. He's a good man."

"He is." I agree.

Adam smiles. Again, he stands to press a quick kiss on my hand.

This time, I feel more than one pair of eyes on me. I look up and see a long lens camera peeking out from behind a fake plant near the hostess stand. A commotion ensues as the hostess sees him and calls for security.

Adam sits back down. Hearing the ruckus, he looks over his shoulder to watch the scene unfold. When the photographer hurries out the door, Adam turns his attention back to me.

"Don't you ever get tired of it?"

He doesn't ask for me to clarify.

"The paparazzi are an unwelcome nuisance in my life, but they aren't always so... *forceful*. I have no one to blame but myself for their feverish desire to catch me in another scandal."

Oh, yeah... the porn star in Vegas.

Ugly thoughts try to take root, and I'm not proud to admit how hard they are to dig up and throw away. Once again, I doubt if I should continue to go along with this dating ruse.

Not the *ruse*, ruse.

But the *I'm really Adam Moreno's girlfriend* ruse.

Adam is a wealthy, gorgeous man with a sordid, very *public* history. I don't doubt he's attracted to me. Our night together confirmed as much.

We'd established monogamy even before we slept together in order to keep the façade of our fake relationship intact. That won't change now that we're giving into our desire for one another, but what happens when lust runs out?

What if that occurs before his image has been repaired, and his position in his grandfather's company is secure? I can't see how we would be able to maintain a loving image in public when we break up.

For the first time since I officially agreed to date Adam, I am forced to admit this could very well be a horrible, horrible idea.

"Stop it." Adam's voice is low and firm.

I blink. "Stop, what?"

"Thinking." His fingers press against mine. "I can see the negative thoughts swirling in your head. Stop it."

I lift a brow. "You want me to stop thinking?"

"I care about you, Avery," Adam declares in his sexy, accented voice. "Sincerely. I want us to give this relationship a real, honest-to-God shot. But that won't happen if you keep trying to convince yourself not to do it."

"I..." I open my mouth to deny the accusation, but I can't get the words out.

Adam is right. I am trying to convince myself not to do this—not to put myself out there.

"Things could get messy," I murmur one of my most prominent worries.

His thumb brushes the back of my hand.

"They could," he agrees. Emerald eyes feel like they're staring into my soul. "But you know what people say, the messiest things in life often turn out to be the most beautiful."

"You just made that up."

"Perhaps."

I laugh.

Adam's eyes soften. "What do you say, Avery Lawson? Will you turn off that beautiful brain of yours long enough to take a leap for something you want?"

I smile coyly. "Who says I want you?"

"The way you screamed my name last night."

My toes curl in my wedge heels.

"This could be a bad idea."

"Or a great one," Adam counters without missing a beat. His fingers trail over the sensitive skin on my inner wrist. I feel the tickling sensation all the way to my toes.

Oh, this man...

"Okay. I'll stop overthinking."

Adam looks at me through dark, thick lashes. "You promise?"

His breath against my skin sends shivers through my body.

"I promise."

CHAPTER 27

Avery

SPAIN IS BEAUTIFUL, much more beautiful than any photograph or video could ever convey.

Rich, lush hills covered in the brightest green roll out into the distance on either side of the road. A bright blue sky peppered with stark white clouds creates a stunning view above.

I cannot wait until we reach the coast, and I get my first look at the Mediterranean. I know it's going to be to die for.

“Would you like me to roll down the window, or do you enjoy pressing your face against the glass like an eager puppy?”

I tear my eyes off a beautiful villa surrounded by open pasture and smile brightly at Adam, not at all bothered by his teasing. “Everything is so lovely.”

“Just wait until you see the coast.”

I'm practically bouncing in my seat. “I can't wait!”

This past week, my feelings about this trip oscillated from begrudgingly resigned to excitedly nervous.

My last real vacation was spring break during my senior year of college. Me, Heather, and our dormmates enjoyed the beach and nightlife in Cabo San Lucas.

Since then, my vacations have been regulated to family holidays. My work at the PR firm in New York had been very demanding. I could never get away for longer than three days without my phone blowing up with a crisis I needed to handle.

I did travel with my clients sometimes, but that was work. It didn't count.

Seven years is a long time to wait for a real vacation, and I'm happy to finally be getting away. Even if meeting Adam's infamous family is part of it.

Needless to say, that's the part I'm worried about. I've done my research.

The Morenos are members of the elite in Spain. An extravagant party? An important political event? Diplomatic gathering for foreign dignitaries? The Morenos are always involved in one way or another.

It's truly amazing that Adam's grandfather managed to build so much in one lifetime. And while other family members play a role in maintaining the company's prestige and wealth, Adam is the one responsible for its continued growth. Adam Moreno is so much more than a gorgeous face.

And, by some odd twist of fate, he wants to date *me*. There are moments where that's still hard to believe, but our rigorous sex life certainly helps distract from them.

Heat warms my face as I think of last night. I'd been trying to cook dinner when Adam decided he couldn't wait. He stripped us both of clothes and kissed me senseless before bending me over the counter and ramming into me from behind.

But one climax wasn't enough, and he carried me to my comfortable couch

to finish the job.

The lasagna was well burned by the time we finished.

Adam's finger brushes against my warm cheeks. "I would love to know what you're thinking about."

"Nothing." I press my lips together and go back to admiring the scenery.

He doesn't let me off that easy. A *click* reaches my ears. I turn and see Adam slide the seat belt off his shoulder, then he's crossing the middle seat in the town car.

"What are you doing?" I press against the door, shooting a meaningful glance to the driver's head in the front seat.

Adam doesn't stop his advance. He gently holds my chin between his thumb and index finger. I melt under his soft lips.

We kiss for several seconds. It's sweet and affectionate—not heated and lusty like usual.

I almost forget about the driver. But the stranger's presence keeps me from reaching down and grabbing ahold of the growing bulge in Adam's pants.

Adam pulls back, but our noses are close enough to touch. "What were you thinking about?"

His voice is gravelly, laced with desire.

I bite my bottom lip, smiling softly. "How I can't wait to get you to a bed."

Adam growls approvingly.

"But I doubt we'll be able to enjoy much of each other this trip." I sigh, exaggerating the sound with a pout.

"What?" Adam frowns, leaning back. "Why not?"

"We're sleeping in different rooms."

I was surprised when Adam shared the information with me. I know his family, particularly his grandfather, has old-fashioned views and values. While the patriarch knows his grandson is far from a virgin, that didn't sway his views on couples sharing a room prior to marriage.

So, Adam and I will have our own rooms at the Moreno family's villa. And it's going to impede our sex life.

His lips curl in a slow, sexy smile. "Avery, love, do you think that can keep me away from you?"

He lowers his head and nibbles on my bottom lip then licks away the tiny sting. Inside, I sigh. This man is something else.

I cannot remember the last time I was so attracted to someone, and I've never had this strong of a sexual connection with anyone.

On our third day of officially dating, I almost let the insecurity win.

Adam and I had just had spontaneous sex in the back of his car, right in the parking garage, and I didn't recognize myself.

I'm not the kind of girl who has sex in public.

At least, I wasn't.

But the pull I feel to Adam Moreno is unreal. It has me acting like a crazy person.

I called Heather immediately, searching for advice on how to handle this situation. My twin just laughed in my ear and told me to get out of my head and enjoy sex with a hot billionaire.

And so... I have.

And it's been amazing.

Adam's hand slides between my breasts, reaching the bottom of my cropped t-shirt. My waist high leggings only allow a sliver of midsection to be in view. Adam trails his fingers over my exposed flesh, and I tremble with want.

His lips find my neck. He nips and sucks. Moisture gathers between my legs.

"Adam," I whisper with a slight moan. My eyes flutter closed. "Not here."

"I want you everywhere. All the time. You drive me crazy, Miss Lawson."

I smile. "Back at you, Mr. Moreno."

He smiles against my neck. Then, he presses a sweet kiss under my ear and leans back. His heated gaze locks on mine. He licks his lips.

"I can't wait to get you alone tonight," he whispers.

"Me either."

Adam continues to watch me. I see the battle raging in his eyes as he fights his desire to take me in this back seat.

But as crazy as he makes me feel, I draw the line at having sex in front of someone else.

Adam knows this. With a begrudged groan, he presses one last kiss to my lips, then throws himself back into his seat. He adjusts the front of his pants, then buckles his seatbelt.

I'm back to staring out the window, grinning like a fool.

We pull up to a stunning, off-white, two story villa. The car ascends the driveway, taking us to the top of the moderate cliff, overlooking the beautiful, sea-green waters of the Mediterranean.

Through a copse of citrus trees, I see a shimmering blue swimming pool as we drive past the back of the property. The white stucco gleams pristine. The terracotta roof tops off the opulent view of the Moreno family villa.

I'm eager to see the rest of the beautiful home. But my excitement falters when I see the finely dressed man and woman standing on the top step, outside the front door.

"Adam... I thought you said I'd have time to freshen up before meeting anyone."

He follows my gaze. "Hm. Looks like my grandparents arrived early."

Adam doesn't sound happy about that.

The car pulls to a stop at the center of the curved driveway. Adam opens the door and walks around to open my door. Firm fingers wrap around mine as he helps me out of the car.

The driver walks to the trunk to remove our suitcases, but Adam insists he can carry them himself. I take my laptop bag. Adam slides his satchel with his computer across his body then picks up our carry-ons. One is in each hand.

We climb over two dozen steps to reach the older-looking couple at the top.

Mr. Moreno wears a white linen suit—the very image of a Spaniard ready to enjoy a holiday. His salt and pepper hair is thick and wavy, and his face is clean shaven. The woman at his side has rich, chocolate-brown hair. It's cut in a stylish bob, framing her delicate features. Both wear the evidence of their advanced years with visible lines and wrinkles, but both have

trim figures under their expensive attire. They take care of themselves, and they aren't afraid of showing the world their true age.

"Buenas tardes, Abuela," Adam greets warmly when we reach the top of the stairs. He sets down our suitcases and walks into the woman's open arms.

"Mi amor." His grandmother hugs him tight. "It is so good to see you."

Her English carries a heavier accent than Adam's. I assume she chooses the language for my benefit.

Adam steps back. He wraps an arm around my shoulder. "Let me introduce you to mi novia, Avery Lawson."

I force myself not to dwell on how sexy Adam sounds when speaking Spanish.

"Buenas tardes, Señora Moreno." I put my level two Spanish course from high school to good use.

She smiles kindly. "Good afternoon, Avery. It is a pleasure to finally meet you. Call me Camila."

She opens her arms. I step away from Adam for her embrace. She kisses both of my cheeks and releases me.

"Abuelo, this is Avery."

I turn to face his grandfather with Adam's introduction.

Alejandro Moreno is a handsome older man. His jawline isn't as sharp as it once was, but I see he's given Adam his impeccable bone structure. He also gifted his grandson his stunning, emerald irises.

"A pleasure, Avery." He steps forward and kisses either side of my face like his wife.

"We didn't expect you to arrive until this evening," Adam says to his grandfather once they separate from their own embrace.

"I could not wait to meet Avery," his grandmother replies. To me, she asks, "Are you hungry? I had the chef prepare a light lunch."

“Lunch would be lovely.”

I follow Camila into the villa. A spacious living area sprawls out in front of me. To the left is a state-of-the-art kitchen with modern appliances. To the right, an elegantly furnished dining area features an immense dark wood table with ten ivory armchairs tucked underneath.

Adam disappears upstairs to deposit our luggage in our rooms while I follow his grandparents into the kitchen.

An array of fresh fruit, cheeses, and sliced meats covers the granite center island. Camila offers me a heavy bone china plate. “Since we arrived early, we do not have our typical server available for the midday meal. I hope you don’t mind serving yourself.”

“Not at all.” I actually prefer it.

I select a number of items for my plate and follow Camila’s instruction to sit in the dining room. I’m settling in an ivory chair near the end of the massive table when Adam comes back downstairs. He sees me sitting alone and comes to stand behind me.

He bends down to rest his head by my shoulder and eyes up my plate. “Is that going to be enough food?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?” He kisses my earlobe. “I have plans for us later. You’re going to need your energy.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Only for you, love.” He kisses my ear again, then straightens.

My cheeks flush when I see Camila smiling at us as she enters the room. I’m not usually one for PDA. I hope she’s not offended.

Adam excuses himself to get a plate. When he returns, his grandfather is at his side. They’re speaking in Spanish. Based on their tone, it’s a cordial conversation. Adam sits next to me, and Alejandro sits next to his wife, and the conversation switches to English.

“How long until the circus arrives?” Adam asks around a bite of cheese.

“Do not speak with your mouth full,” Camila chastises.

“They’ll be here before dinner,” his grandfather answers.

“Who is arriving today?” I ask Adam.

“My cousins and their families, as well as my Aunt Maura and Aunt Esme.”

Is his mother not coming?

“How many cousins do you have?”

“Six.”

“Six?” That seems like a lot.

Adam smirks. “What can I say, Spanish Catholics like to procreate.”

I have to cover my smile when Camila chastises him for the lewd remark.

“Perdóname, Abuela. Lo siento.”

It’s nice seeing Adam around his grandparents, acting like a normal guy. There’s no business associate to maintain a façade in front of. No influential investor to impress. Here, in Spain, Adam is just an ordinary man being chastised by his grandmother for poor manners.

I like it.

I like it a lot.

“Do you have any cousins?” Camila asks me politely.

“Unfortunately, no. My parents were both only children. I do have two siblings.”

“Brothers?”

I smile. “A younger brother and a twin sister.”

“Ah, a twin. That must have been fun growing up.”

“Yes, Heather was a built-in best friend. We’re very close.”

Camila smiles. “That’s lovely.”

“What has Adam told you about his family?” she asks.

“That he loves you all, and he misses you.” It’s true.

This past week, Adam told me a lot about his family, trying to prepare me for a week in their company. It was very obvious that he adores his family, and he misses living close to them.

Camila’s eyes lock on her grandson. “Then perhaps Adam should move back home, sooner rather than later.”

“Abuela.” Adam sighs. “I will come back home. I’m just busy with work.”

“Are you certain? Now that you have Avery, I fear you will never move back home. Avery,” she turns her attention to me, “how do you feel about moving out of America?”

My mouth falls open.

I quickly snap it shut. “Oh. Um... I-I am not sure.”

“Abuela,” Adam groans. “Please do not harass Avery.”

“Who is harassing?” Camila holds up her hands in innocence. “I am merely asking if la novia de mi nieto will ever move with him to his home country.”

Blood rushes from my face as my mediocre Spanish allows me to translate her words.

“Enough, Abuela. You’re going to scare her off.”

“Psh,” she guffaws. “Avery does not present herself as a woman easily swayed off something she wants. Are you dear?”

Her probing eyes burrow into mine.

“No, I suppose not.”

“See?” Camila grins at her grandson.

Her probing eyes return to me. “Would you ever consider moving from your home country?”

“I suppose that would depend on the circumstances.”

“Such as?”

My face is scorching hot. “Whether or not I see a future in the new location.”

“A wise answer,” Adam’s grandfather, thankfully, interjects. He changes the subject, “Avery, Source Solutions is your brother’s company. Is it not?”

Grateful for the interruption, I answer, “Yes. His and his best friend’s, I mean. They founded it together.”

“Really?” He raises a gray brow. “I’ve been keeping up with news about the company. I only ever see your brother’s name mentioned.”

I frown.

Now that he mentions it, I suppose most of the press has covered Derek more than Kyle. I attribute that to the fact that Derek is more business-minded than Kyle. He’s also equally knowledgeable about the company’s technology.

Kyle, on the other hand, isn’t so good at public speaking. Derek was the one who secured Adam’s investment, and I know he successfully wowed others at their launch party.

Still, as the PR agent for the company, I need to make sure the founding of the company is depicted accurately. Kyle deserves to be recognized for his contribution. Derek always says he could never have created the company without his best friend’s help.

Realizing Alejandro waits for a response, I say, “Kyle is the more reserved of the two.”

And has a lower work ethic as of late. I keep that part to myself.

“I see.” Alejandro sips coffee from the small cup sitting on a matching saucer.

Conversation returns to the impending arrival of relatives and the evening plans.

I eat my light lunch, content to listen to the three of them chat and joke with one another. Again, it’s nice to see this side of Adam. It humanizes him. It makes him more like a man I could see myself dating.

You are dating him...

It's still hard to believe.

"I think I'll show Avery to her room so she can relax before everyone arrives."

Adam pushes back his chair. He looks at me meaningfully.

"Oh. Yes, that would be great." I stand.

"That's a wonderful idea." Camila's eyes glint with knowing. "I hope you enjoy your accommodations. Let me know if you need anything."

It takes everything within me not to duck my head in embarrassment. I've done nothing wrong, but it's obvious the matriarch of the Moreno family knows her grandson's cues. And the smoldering look in his gaze makes it clear he wants to finish what we started in the car.

And I'm not complaining.

Not one bit.

CHAPTER 28

Adam

MY SENSES ARE FILLED with everything that is Avery Lawson. Her scent, the sound of her voice, the feel of her skin, and the sight of her bucking against my face as I plunge my tongue between her luscious pink lips.

I revel in the taste of her as she grabs my hair and grinds against me. “Oh my god, Adam!”

Her cries are fuel to my efforts.

We’re in her guest room at the villa. My grandparents are somewhere in the same house, but we’re alone in my mind. Right now, my sole focus is Avery. Everything about her, every interaction, calls to me.

How she can look so composed and put together in a crop top, black leggings, and a pair of sneakers. How she navigates awkward conversations with ease. How she looks into my eyes and makes me see only her.

She’s weaving me in her web of temptation. But she has no idea she’s doing it.

I still feel her resistance from time to time. She doesn’t want to believe this thing between us is real. That we go together so perfectly.

I’ve been with plenty of women. Most were nothing more than a physical connection.

I know when there’s more at play. And only a fool would let someone like Avery slip through their fingers.

And I’m no fool.

Avery cries out as her climax rocks through her. She grabs the pillow by her head to mask the sound.

Male satisfaction flares. I lap her up like a man dying of dehydration until the last ripple rolls through her. She lies limp on the bed. I crawl over her, toss the pillow to the floor, and capture her lips with mine.

We kiss long and hard.

Avery reaches down to my pants, but I gently grab her wrist and press it to the mattress, above her head. She wraps her bare legs around me. I slid off her leggings almost the moment we entered this room.

I feel her warm center against me. She rolls her hips, putting pressure on the bulge in my pants. “But what about you?”

I almost lose my resolve. I close my eyes and take a moment to enjoy the feel of Avery grinding against me.

“I am afraid we’ve pressed our luck long enough.” I open my eyes and take in Avery’s flushed cheeks and bright blue eyes. “If one of us doesn’t make an appearance downstairs soon, one of my grandparents will come looking for us.”

Realization dawns in her blue eyes. Followed by mortification. I laugh as Avery shoves me off her and slips off the bed. She slides on her panties before hurrying to the bathroom.

I trail after her, grinning. I lean against the doorjamb as Avery digs through her toiletry bag and goes to work fixing the damage caused by my mouth and fingers.

She’s standing in only her delicate panties. A week ago, Avery would’ve hurried to dress after getting out of bed. The progression of our relationship is, undoubtedly, accelerated. Living together certainly plays a role.

I’ve never lived with a woman before. None of my previous girlfriends even stayed beyond two nights in a row. Part of me had been worried Avery moving in would be the end of us before we really had the chance to begin, but the opposite has happened.

I look forward to waking up and seeing Avery standing in the kitchen in her silky pajama shorts and curve-hugging tank top. I enjoy going to work together. And I enjoy holding her throughout the night.

Living and working in the same space as Avery means she is the woman I have spent the most time with. And I haven’t

grown tired of her. Not even close.

If anything, I want more.

Calm down, there.

There's not much more that can come from my relationship with Avery. Certainly not marriage.

I frown. I never intend to marry.

I saw the way marriage destroyed my father, and I have plenty of mates from university who decided to take the dive and marry their long-term girlfriends, only for them to be divorced a couple of years later.

No, marriage is certainly not in the cards for me. It's never been a problem for previous girlfriends, though there were a few who naively believed they could be the one to make me change my mind.

But I've never discussed the subject with Avery.

I watch the brunette beauty reapplying mascara to elongate her natural lashes, and I am concerned this conversation could be the metaphorical shoe she's been waiting to drop. She's waiting for a reason to call off our relationship—to go back to pretending.

I know it.

She admitted as much after indulging in half a bottle of wine one night. I assured her she'd find no fault with me. And I meant it.

Now, I'm not so sure.

Avery catches my gaze in the mirror. "Adam?" She turns to face me. "Are you all right?"

I shake off my worry and dazzle her with a bright smile. "I'm more than all right. I'm perfect."

I step in front of her. My hands land on her hips, and I tug her forward.

"Nuh, uh. No way." She places a firm hand flat on my chest. "I just fixed my makeup. You can't ruin it."

“Hm.” My fingers trail over her soft skin, traveling up and down her back as I gaze into her stunning eyes. “Very well. But just know, I’ll be thinking about my turn all night.”

I lean down and press a chaste kiss to her lips, then step back and drop my arms. If I keep touching her, I won’t be able to resist throwing her back on the bed, uncaring if my abuelo decides to barge in.

“You’re a tease.”

Avery gently shoves me back. She glides past me and finds her suitcase. She slips on a flowery sundress. Thin straps show her freckled shoulders. The fabric hugs her trim waist before flaring out around her calves.

I take out the suitcase I stashed in her closet and take out a fresh button-down. I roll up the sleeves. Then, I shrug in my slacks, hiding my lingering erection in the waistband.

Avery slips on a pair of strappy, two-inch wedges then straightens and twirls in a circle. “How do I look?”

Like you’re mine.

“Beautiful.” I take her hand and tuck it in my elbow. “Now, let’s go introduce you to the Moreno clan.”

Aunt Esme and her daughters, Valerie and Phoebe, fawn over Avery almost the moment they arrive in the villa. My two youngest cousins love to read gossip rags, so they’re read all about my and Avery’s romance as depicted by the press.

“Is it true Adam purchased one of Princess Diana’s Cartier Tank Louis watches for you?”

“No! This was my grandmother’s.” She holds up her wrist, wearing the watch behind the rumor. “It was a college graduation present.”

“Oh.” Valerie and Phoebe sigh at the same time, disappointed.

Even my level-headed Aunt Esme seems disappointed that the grand gesture wasn't real.

I'm watching the women from across the living room. My cousins sit on either side of Avery on the couch. My youngest aunt is settled in a high-back chair, closest to the open window, enjoying the fresh air.

My grandparents are on the back veranda, chatting with their other daughter and the rest of my family members.

"I was wondering where you snuck off to." My cousin, Phillip, appears beside me, speaking in Spanish.

"Here I am," I reply. My eyes remain on Avery, admiring the way the setting sun illuminates her chestnut hair.

There was a time when Philip and I were close. We are the oldest cousins, and we're closest in age. We used to do everything together. Vacations. Sports. You name it.

But as we got older, and the question of who would be the successor to our grandfather came into play, our comradery turned into competition. It's been over a decade since Phillip and I were able to spend time together without things turning contentious. I don't have any hope this meeting will be any different.

"It seems your ruse is working."

I take a sip of my grandmother's favorite dessert wine. She insists everyone take a glass after dinner, despite our personal preferences.

"I do not know what you mean."

Avery throws her head back to laugh at something Cousin Phoebe says. Her smile lights up the already bright room.

"Not that you ever have trouble finding beautiful women, but this one is especially charming. Intelligent and driven too, based on what I've heard."

Irrked, I finally slide my gaze to him.

Phillip and I look similar. We're both tall with the same tan skin tone. But while my hair is brown, his is black. My eyes

are green while his are hazel.

Neither of us have had issue enticing women to our side. But I've found an unsettling pattern where Phillip enjoys pursuing women I've previously had relations with. At least half my exes have been photographed hanging on Phillip's arm following our breakup.

Aside from finding the choice odd, his antics have never bothered me. I recognize them for what they are: a means to try and get a rise out of me.

Thinking of him trying to pursue Avery, however, makes me see red.

"Avery is unlike anyone I've ever dated," I allow, taking another sip of the too-sweet wine.

I could really go for a glass of whisky from my grandfather's impressive collection, but even Alejandro Moreno won't go against his wife's port mandate.

"Please, Adam." Phillip says. "There's no need to keep up this farce with me."

A brow raises. "Again, I do not know what you mean."

"Your reputation was in shreds. Abuelo threatened your job. Now, suddenly, you have a respectable girlfriend?" He scoffs. "Quite a coincidence, don't you think?"

Say what you will about my cousin, he is not stupid.

"A stroke of good luck, is what it is."

Not wanting any of my other family members to overhear this conversation, I leave the living room. Phillip follows me to the study on the same floor. My laptop is already on the desk. This is where I'll work while in Spain.

A massive, wall-length bookcase covers the wall behind the desk. The wall facing the back of the villa is made of glass. Through the tempered material, I see the children, my cousin's children, splashing around in the pool. Their nannies keep a close watch on them while their parents mingle with the adults.

I don't begrudge their parents for wanting adult time. Most of them are loving, excellent parents. But the sight causes a pang in my chest as it makes me remember my own childhood. My parents, most notably my mother, were the epitome of absent, even when we stood in the same room.

I move towards the glass window and take a seat in one of the four green leather armchairs placed around a heavy wood center table. I place my barely-consumed glass of port on the table. Phillip trails after me and does the same.

"I forgot about this room." Phillip leans back in the luxurious chair and scans the study. He sees my laptop. "Of course you brought work on vacation."

"The business does not stop simply because I am out of the office."

"What does your girlfriend think of that?"

"She brought her own work, too."

"To Spain? What a waste."

That.

That attitude is why I can't believe my grandfather actually considered forcing my resignation and putting Phillip in my place.

As I said before, Phillip is not stupid. He knows the business nearly as well as I. What he lacks is drive and work ethic.

It's not an uncommon tale. Growing up wealthy can make a person complacent. Why work hard when the world is already handed to you on a silver platter?

I'm convinced Phillip only wants my job because of the status the title of CEO would give him, both in our family and with the world.

He would argue against it. But the facts are, Phillip is a handsome, wealthy man who enjoys living a luxurious life. Work is second. He is exactly what the press paints me as being—the very thing my grandfather disapproves of.

Phillip only gets away with it because he's *not* CEO.

“Andrew and I have a bet on how long this liaison of yours will last.” Phillip mentions our next closest cousin in age. Andrew is Aunt Esme's eldest child. Phillip is Aunt Maura's. “Andrew says one month. I'm more optimistic. I believe it will take at least three more months for our grandfather to buy your reformed-playboy image. Then, you can distance yourself from the clever beauty out there, and someone else can take a stab at her.”

“Stab anything near Avery, Phillip, and I will remove your dick from your body.”

“So aggressive.” He feigns astonishment. “What would Avery say to that?”

“Are you talking about me?” Avery's musical voice precedes her entrance.

She's wearing the same sundress from earlier, but one of my grandmother's cashmere shawls is wrapped around her shoulders to ward off the night's oncoming chill. Her hair is piled high in a loose bun. Tendrils of hair curl around her face.

Breathtaking.

Phillip and I stand.

In English, Phillip says, “I was just telling Adam how lucky he is to have such a respectable girlfriend.”

Avery's smile is forced. “That is kind of you to say.”

My cousin dons a magnanimous smile. “I will leave you two lovers to chat. No doubt, you are seeking a break from our boisterous family.”

Avery's expression softens a bit. “They're all very kind.”

“Morenos pride ourselves in our hospitality.”

Phillip walks to the exit. As he passes Avery, his hazel eyes trail over her blatantly. My fingers dig into my palms as I clench my fists. I'm prepared to punch Phillip in the jaw if he doesn't stop leering at Avery this second.

As if sensing my anger, Phillip's gaze lifts. He finds me glaring. His smile broadens.

"I will see you both later," he says, then he's out the door.

Avery closes the door behind him. She turns around and puts her hands on her hips. "No offense, but I don't like your cousin."

My mood instantly lightens. "No? I cannot imagine why."

She scoffs. "He's arrogant. And flashy."

I grin. "I believe those are the characteristics you would've used to describe me at one point."

"You're still all those things, but you've grown on me." She laughs at my indignant snort. Her eyes travel over the ornate space. "Wow. This room is beautiful."

"I'm surprised you were able to sneak away from Valerie and Phoebe." I gesture to the seat in front of me, the one Phillip just left.

Avery crosses the room and sits. "They're sweet, but it is a little strange how much they already know about me. Especially since I know it didn't come from you."

We chat a little about the rumors they've heard. Most make me chuckle.

All except one.

"There are a concerning number of rumors about our inevitable engagement apparently."

A pit forms in my stomach. "Oh?"

"Yes. Don't worry. I told them an engagement was at least three months away."

Blood drains from my face. Avery sees and laughs.

"I'm joking, Adam. Goodness. Tell me you're a commitaphobe without telling me you're a commitaphobe."

"I am a loyal partner."

Despite what the sordid tabloids say, I've never cheated on a woman when we were exclusive. The only problems I had

was when the women I dated decided they were no longer happy with that arrangement and insisted on wanting more.

Which, if I'm being honest, happened fairly often.

"But the thought of marriage makes you squirm."

I resist the urge to do just that. My body is tense. I'm wondering how to tell Avery I am not interested in marriage, worried it will be the ammunition she needs to blow up our budding romance, when she interrupts me.

"Relax, Adam. I'm not delusional. I know you and I are not endgame. I'm not expecting anything like that from you."

Instead of relief, I feel indignant. "Why not?"

She shrugs. "We're just having fun. I'm embracing it."

"But fun doesn't equate to lifelong commitment?"

Her forehead furrows. "Not in our case, no."

I should be thrilled. This is exactly what I want. Avery Lawson as mine, but with no expectations of the future.

So why does my chest tighten painfully at the thought of there being an expiration date on our relationship?

"I wasn't trying to upset you." Avery wears a pensive expression.

It's too early for me to be so attached to this woman. I know it. But that doesn't make it stop.

I manage to shove the disturbing emotions down. I offer Avery a grin. "I'm not upset. Forgive me. It's been a long day."

She watches me for several seconds. Then, she nods slowly.

I move the subject far away from my conflicting thoughts and desires. "Shall we rejoin the rest of the party?"

Her eyes glint. "I have a better idea."

Before I speak, she stands. I watch her return to the door. She flips the lock.

My stomach clenches.

With a sassy grin, she returns to my side of the room. Instead of sitting down, she goes to the edge of the glass wall. Her fingers find the button for the blinds. She hits the button and lowers the cream-colored covering from the ceiling.

My heart begins to race.

Avery saunters over to me.

“What is this?”

She drops to her knees. “Returning your favor.”

My breath hitches when her hands rest on my knees. “That wasn’t a favor. It was a gift.”

“Then I’m repaying your gift in kind.”

Manicured hands creep up my pant legs. Button loose, my zipper lowers. My erection protrudes through the opening, parting the fabric in the front of my briefs. I lift my hips and Avery pulls my pants and briefs to my knees.

I hiss with approval as Avery’s mouth descends and begins to work over me.

Her hands caress and squeeze my thighs. I thrust upward when those smooth fingers cup my balls. Her mouth is soft, but her tongue guides my length along the ridges on the roof of her mouth.

My head is flung back, eyes closed. I grip the armchair to keep from grabbing Avery’s head, holding her still, and fucking her mouth like an animal.

God, what is it about this woman?

Avery moans as she licks and sucks. The sound is my undoing. My dick swells and explodes. Hot cum shoots down Avery’s throat, and she swallows it down eagerly. She leans back on her heels and removes her mouth.

She licks her lips, and I lose control.

Avery gives a tiny yelp of surprise when I grab her shoulders and haul her up onto my lap.

Her dress's skirt bunches up at her hips as she straddles me. I kiss her hungrily. She meets my tongue thrust for thrust.

It isn't long until my erection pops back up, hard and fast, ready for another round. I want to slam into her to my hilt. But this is a surprise. I don't have a condom on me.

Against my lips, Avery murmurs, "Do it. I'm on the pill."

I need no other encouragement. I lift Avery's hips and adjust her over me, and I slam her down.

"Ah!"

Avery rides me with wild abandon. I pull down the front of her dress and capture a nipple in my mouth.

"Adam!"

I grunt and clench my muscles as I drive upwards. My hands bring her down on me. This time, we come together.

Avery rests her head on my shoulder, her breathing labored. I feel her rapid heartbeat against my chest. I brush a sweaty tendril of hair away and kiss her temple.

"And you say I'm the troublesome one."

She giggles against my shoulder. I tilt her chin up and kiss her lips. She mesmerizes me with her tongue's smooth ministrations, spiking my desire for her to new heights.

I am in so much trouble.

CHAPTER 29

Avery

THE PRISTINE, Spanish blue sky is hidden behind a blanket of light gray clouds. The breeze coming off the sea is strong. It feels like a storm is coming.

But that doesn't deter the Moreno men from their soccer game. Or, should I say, fútbol. Adam's youngest male cousin, Mateo, was adamant I use the proper term for the popular international sport.

The teams are made of five. Adam and Phillip are opposing team captains. Mateo and Andrew are split up. Phoebe's and Valerie's husbands and the oldest male children make up the rest of the team.

The women and girls sit on blankets spread over the lush grass, cheering for both sides, but favoring the one with the most direct relations. Two young girls, both Phoebe's children, abstain from joining their male cousins in the game. They were invited, but the eleven and thirteen year old seem to prefer keeping their beautiful sundresses and hair pristine like their mother. The three of them could star in a fashion catalog for mother-daughter clothing.

Valerie's husband, Tomás, strikes the ball into the portable net positioned on the north end of their makeshift field. Valerie leaps up and cheers like he scored the winning goal in the World Cup. I laugh and clap along with the others.

Adam's on the other team. He barks a foul at Phillip for his aggressive defending. The other players chime in, each one shouting the call which favors their own team.

“Competitive lot, aren't they?”

Adam's grandfather stands on the edge of the blanket I share with Valerie and Camila. I look up and see he's speaking directly to me.

“They are,” I agree. “But it looks like they're having fun.”

I look back at the men playing. Adam tackles Phillip, and the ball shoots out of bounds. Phillip throws it in to Tomás and play resumes quickly.

“Indeed. Care to take a walk around the field with me, Avery?”

I haven’t spoken to the Moreno patriarch alone in the five days I’ve been here, spending quality time with Adam’s family. I expected him to interrogate me long before now.

“Of course.”

I stand and straighten my loose blouse and tug on the hem of my linen shorts. I have my bikini on underneath. I’d feel underdressed, except the other women also wear their bathing suits. They just have a fancier version of casual.

I slip my arm through Alejandro’s and let him lead me around the field where the men are playing. Their energy is infectious. I can’t stop smiling as I watch.

“Adam has a driven spirit. He’s always strived to be the best at whatever he’s put his mind to.”

I turn my attention to Alejandro. “He’s very accomplished.”

“In many areas, yes.” He sighs. “But I’m afraid his personal relationships could use some work.”

“Oh?”

Green eyes, so much like his grandson’s, meet mine. “Am I correct to assume you know about Adam’s mother?”

“A bit.” I tell myself to tread carefully.

I don’t want to reveal anything Adam may have told me in confidence. Best to let Alejandro do most of the talking.

Another sigh. “My eldest daughter, Isabella, loves Adam, but she is not the mothering kind. I know her rejection was hard for him to accept.”

Of course it was.

“I did my best raising him. Camila and I tried not to make the same mistakes we made with his mother. We fostered a good work ethic. We instilled the importance of education. Adam is a fine man. But I believe there is one area of development where we failed him.”

“What is that?”

“Adam has more of his father in him than I knew how to deal with. Enrique was a romantic. His emotional intelligence was high, but he often let his emotions dictate his actions. As evidence by his choice to pursue my daughter and his loss of will after she abandoned him.”

Alejandro runs a hand through his peppered hair. “Instead of encouraging Adam to feel his emotions, but logically think of how to handle them, I encouraged him to stifle his feelings. I dismissed their importance. I taught him that they weren’t useful.”

I never would have thought that.

“As I’ve gotten older, and I’ve seen Adam’s relationships, I realize my error. Instead of helping him, I’ve emotionally stunted him. He’s spent the last decade pursuing meaningless flings. He’s avoided entangling himself in a respectable match. And I believe I am partly to blame.”

I don’t know what to say. I’m not certain I understand the motive behind this conversation.

“Adam seems happy. I do not believe anything you did, or didn’t do, is holding him back in life.”

“Perhaps that is true.” Green eyes remain locked on mine as we walk towards the cliff, overlooking the sea. “I have seen a change in him this trip.”

My throat tightens. “What do you mean?”

“You make my grandson very happy.”

Oh, no.

“Adam and I are still very new,” I say. “I wouldn’t say we are all that serious.”

“Yet, you live together.”

My cheeks heat. “That was partly out of necessity.”

“Ah, yes. Adam told me about your robbery. Honestly, that was the moment I began to suspect something was different about you.”

I hate that I can’t resist asking, “What do you mean?”

“You are not like Adam’s other women. You lived in a disreputable are of town, despite the fact you have an immensely wealthy partner.”

I frown. “Adam is not my husband. He is not responsible for my living situation.”

“That is precisely my point, my dear.” Alejandro smiles. “I’m not certain Adam has ever dated anyone who didn’t want something from him in return. I’m sure it’s refreshing for him.”

Hm. I never really thought about that. I mean, our initial arrangement stemmed from us both needing something from the other.

But now?

Adam still needs a mended reputation. And I still need his investment in Derek’s company. But those things are natural consequences of our, now, real relationship.

And although he insisted I move in with him, I don’t *need* to live in his penthouse. Is Adam’s infatuation with me heightened by my independence? Does it even have anything to do with me as a person? Why does that thought make me feel bad?

“I can see my words are troubling.” Alejandro observes.

I swallow. “Not troubling, necessarily. It just gives me a lot to think about.”

He nods. “I see. Well, I just wanted to tell you that I find you to be an impressive young woman, and I believe your influence on my grandson’s life has allowed him to open up

and be the man I always knew he could be. It is clear he adores you.”

My blush grows, fueled by a mix of embarrassment and unease. “Thank you. I feel the same.”

We arrive at the cliff. I gaze out at the beautiful Mediterranean. Sailboats float on the smooth surface. And fishing boats are scattered, catching the day’s meal.

My mind races. Doubt creeps in.

I’m enjoying my time with Adam, but is this becoming too much? Meeting Adam’s family is one thing. But having his grandfather give me his blessing, when I know very well how much Adam does not want a serious commitment?

It’s a hard situation to navigate. I need to speak with Adam and figure out how to handle this. Maybe we do nothing. We’ll be back in LA in two days, and things can go back to normal.

A shout of victory interrupts my thoughts.

I turn and see Adam rip his shirt off, leaping into the arms of his teammates as they win the family game. Even from this distance, his impressive physique makes my stomach clench. And his happy smile makes my heart squeeze.

I may be in too deep already.

CHAPTER 30

Avery

IT'S my last day in Spain.

And although it wasn't the most relaxing vacation with the exuberant Morenos popping up around every corner, I've genuinely enjoyed myself.

The Morenos are a welcoming and kind family. They may have immense wealth, and there were times where the difference in our lifestyles was obvious in conversation, but overall, they were just like any normal family. They bickered. They teased. Adam loosened up here, more than I'd ever seen.

It's obvious he loves his family.

And it's obvious he thrives in his home country.

I'm not certain how long his work will keep him in LA, but I know it won't be forever. The realization makes me sad.

Even though I know this relationship isn't one to last, I can't deny that I've enjoyed my time with Adam these past weeks. Even before our relationship was sexual, his wit and humor made him enjoyable to be around.

I've never admitted it to anyone, but I genuinely enjoy coming home from work and having someone there for company. I'd been getting lonely at my place, so much so that I contemplated adopting a cat. The only thing that held me back was the utmost respect for the creatures. I work a lot, and though cats are independent animals, they still deserve love and affection. I could barely commit to a handsome, billionaire boyfriend. Committing to an animal would be tough.

I'm sunning myself on one of the white loungers next to the pool. My mind travels to work. I haven't gotten as much done as I'd hoped, but I'm surprisingly not worried about it. I took care of the most important tasks before leaving for Spain. I can use the plane's WiFi and get little tasks done tomorrow before I return to work on Monday.

If Adam doesn't try to distract me, that is.

Warmth builds in my core as I think of Adam and his Adonis-like body. Despite sleeping in separate bedrooms, he and I have enjoyed a scandalous amount of sex in the villa. I never thought I'd be a girl who enjoyed the thrill of potentially being caught in the act, but with Adam, there's no denying I love every moment.

The sound of footsteps slapping on the flagstone surrounding the pool makes me open my eyes. Phillip, Adam's handsome but overly-arrogant cousin, approaches from the villa. Adam is on a conference call with suppliers in Italy, but he said he'd join me when he's done.

I pray it's soon.

Phillip seems harmless enough, but there's no missing his leering gaze. I've done my research on him. He's a playboy—the exact sort of man I believed Adam to be.

Unlike Adam, however, his cheating scandals are legitimate. And they are high in number.

“Good afternoon, Avery.”

“Hello, Phillip.”

He sits on the lounge chair next to me. “Where's my cousin?”

“Working.”

“Leaving his gorgeous girlfriend unattended.” Phillip tsks. “Foolish.”

I ignore his compliment. “Are your grandparents back yet?”

Camila dragged her husband to the monthly farmer's market in the closest town inland. She'd invited me to come along, but I opted to stay behind and enjoy my last day relaxing by the pool. It's second only to going to the pristine beach. I plan to drag Adam there later this evening. Maybe we'll get sand in some uncomfortable places. Again.

“No, they have not returned. It's just you and me.”

I don't like his suggestive tone.

I face the sun and close my eyes, hoping Phillip will take a hint and leave me alone. But when I feel his eyes trailing over my bikini-clad body, I know my relaxing is over. At least for now.

I sit up and grab my towel, wrapping it around my body, immediately feeling more comfortable.

“I’m going to rinse off and grab something light to eat. Want anything?” I add the last part to be polite. I really don’t want to get him anything.

Phillip smirks. “No. I have everything I need here.”

I nod. “Okay. Enjoy. I’ll see you later.”

Rather than returning to the villa, I walk the opposite direction, towards the pool house tucked between several citrus trees. It’s a modest building, but it has a shower and drawers filled with clean robes and disposable sandals of all sizes. Camila insists everyone rinse off after using the pool before entering her home. She takes cleanliness to another level.

I step inside the pool house. It’s decorated just as finely as the villa. I take care not to so much as breathe on the expensive figurines placed around the space. I couldn’t afford to replace a single one.

I turn on the shower in the adjacent room. Waiting for the water to warm, I return to the larger space to retrieve a towel, robe, and sandals. I stop short when I see Phillip standing just inside the doorway.

“Phillip? What are you doing in here?”

“I’m here to talk.”

He closes the door behind him. He doesn’t flip the lock. That’s the only reason I don’t immediately lose it.

“I need to shower. Let’s talk once I’m done.”

He shakes his head slowly. “I’m afraid I can’t let this opportunity slip through my fingers. I don’t know if my cousin will ever allow me another opportunity to speak to you alone.”

He's not allowing it now.

“Tell me.” Phillip takes a step. “How much is he paying you?”

My eyes widen. “What?”

He smiles. “I know you’re in public relations. You’ve done a marvelous job mending his reputation. I’m wondering how much my cousin is paying for the honor of your *services*.”

His innuendo is obvious.

And insulting.

“I’m not sleeping with Adam for money.”

“Of course not. I’m sure it’s just a happy bonus. For both of you. One my cousin orchestrated, no doubt.”

“What do you want, Phillip? Other than to insult me?”

He takes another step. “You.”

“Excuse me?”

“I want you.” His eyes roam over my towel-clad body with blatant lust. “You are, without a doubt, a gorgeous woman, Avery Lawson. You intrigue me. And excite me. And I want you.”

I cannot believe this is happening.

“I’m not interested. Now, please leave.”

“Come on, Avery.” He takes another step. I slap his hand away when he tries to caress my cheek. He is undeterred. “I know my cousin. He will not pursue anything lasting with you. You know it as well.”

“Oh, and you would?” I shake my head. “You are not any better than Adam, Phillip. You cannot offer me anything he can’t.”

“That is where you’re wrong.”

Phillip closes the distance between us. I’m forced to step back or let his chest touch mine. I clutch the towel tight in my fists, but I’m ready to punch him in the nose if he dares try to touch me again.

He doesn't.

Phillip is content to hover over me, crowding me against the wall, but he doesn't lay a finger on me.

“My cousin is wealthy and good-looking, but I promise you, he doesn't know how to pleasure a woman like I can. One night with me, Avery, and I'll make you forget my cousin's name. You'll want me, and no one else. Just like I want you.” He licks his lips and stares at my mouth. “Give me the chance to prove it to you, Avery. I promise you won't regret it.”

I say nothing. Mostly because I am a loss for words.

Does his line work on other women? It must. I don't know what else would give this man the audacity to proposition me.

Finally, I manage to repeat, “Not interested.”

My refusal has the opposite of my desired effect.

Phillip's eyes heat. His nostrils flare. “Avery...” He moans my name and dips his head down and takes a deep breath. I don't immediately notice one of his hands has crept up behind my neck. He tugs on one bikini string. “Just give me a cha—”

He doesn't finish his sentence. Phillip is ripped back and thrown to the other side of the pool house.

He hits a table with two elegant sculptures. I jump when they both shatter against the floor. My eyes fly back up, and I watch as Adam grabs his cousin by the neck and shoves him against the wall. Phillip's head bangs against the surface with a cringe-worthy *thump*.

CHAPTER 31

Adam

I LEAVE the study with light, eager footsteps. The thought of enjoying the sight of Avery in her bikini—of holding her in my arms as we wade around the pool now that most of my cousins have left—made work nearly impossible.

But I managed to complete all necessary tasks. Now, I eagerly make my way to spend the afternoon with my girlfriend.

I know something is wrong the moment I see she isn't by the pool. I scan the area. I catch sight of Phillip's familiar dark hair just before he ducks into the pool house.

Foreboding grows. Anger accompanies it.

I stride across the deck and step inside. I cannot begin to describe the rage that rips through me when I see Avery pinned against the wall.

It's like I am a beast—a territorial beast whose mate is being threatened by a lesser male. The animalistic urge to put him in his place consumes me. It controls me.

I don't think. I let instincts reign as I grab Phillip and toss him away from my girlfriend. Then, I yank him up and pin him against the wall with only one hand. I hold him there, threatening to cut off his air supply. My pulse is racing.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I shout in our native tongue.

Phillip doesn't answer. He can't. My grip prevents it.

"Adam," Avery's hand lands on my shoulder. A shiver courses through me at her touch. "Let him go."

I ignore her.

To Phillip, I growl, "Avery is *mine*." My fingers dig into his throat. "Touch her again, and it will be the last thing you do."

Phillip claws at his throat, but fails to dislodge my grip.

“Do you understand?” I snarl.

Phillip’s head jerks in a nod.

I should release him.

But the memory of him cornering Avery is burned in the back of my mind, clouding me with rage.

Avery stands behind me. I can feel her anxiety. She squeezes my shoulder. “Adam... please let him go.”

Phillip is lucky. If it weren’t for Avery, I would squeeze his neck until he lost consciousness. Only then would I release him. I shove him to the side and down, finally letting go of his neck.

My cousin lands on his hands and knees. He gasps for breath.

Avery takes a step as if to check on him. I hold an arm out to stop her. “Do not even think about it.”

She purses her lips in concern, but she stays where she is.

“Get out,” I state.

Phillip looks up. His face mottled red.

“Get. Out.” I shout.

My cousin scrambles to his feet and rushes out the door without a backwards glance. My shoulders rise and fall with heavy breaths. I try to calm down, but I am still livid.

I can feel Avery’s unease. She’s staring at me like she doesn’t recognize me. Honestly, I don’t recognize myself. I can’t remember the last time I lost my temper, let alone physically threatened someone.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Her eyes dart between mine. “What was that?”

“He touched you.”

“I had it under control.”

“Did you?” I challenge. “Because it certainly didn’t look like it to me.”

She closes her eyes and takes a steadying breath. “I need you to calm down. I can’t talk to you while you’re like this.”

“Like what?”

Her eyes fly open, pinning me with her deep blue irises. “Unreasonable and threatening people.”

“My reactions were perfectly reasonable.”

“You have to control your temper, Adam, or all our hard work to repair your reputation will be for nothing.”

She has a point. The press would have had a field day if they caught wind of my altercation with my cousin. A story of a jealous beau sold just as well as a philandering playboy.

I take Avery’s hand and kiss her palm before resting it on my chest.

It’s several seconds later before I am calm enough to say, “You’re right. But even if my behavior leaked to the press, our hard work would not have been for nothing. We never would have come to be together otherwise.”

Her eyes soften. So does her voice as she says, “I mean it, Adam. You can’t go around choking people.”

“I know.” We stare at each other.

“I’m yours, Adam.” She rises on her toes and kisses my lips lightly. “Now, can we try to forget about this and enjoy our last day here?”

“Whatever you want, love.”

And I mean it.

Whatever Avery Lawson wants, I will do everything in my power to give it to her.

And I do mean everything.

CHAPTER 32

Avery

RETURNING to life after a week in Spain proves harder than I anticipated. Aside from the mess with Adam's cousin, Phillip, I had a heavenly time at the Moreno's villa. Being able to spend time with Adam, away from the paparazzi and our jobs, allowed us the freedom to just be *us*.

I saw sides of Adam I'd glimpsed in California, but they thrived around his family.

And the sex was amazing.

Must be something in their water. I've never craved a man the way I crave Adam.

I'm staring at my computer screen, not really reading the email that just dropped in my inbox, when my desk phone rings.

"Hello?"

"Miss Lawson, your one-o'clock is here to see you," Gina from reception tells me.

"Yes. Thank you. Send her in."

I hang up and quickly straighten my desk. I've been playing a bit of catch up since returning from vacation, and I forgot I have an interview for my assistant's position today.

A knock sounds against my door. I settle back in my chair.

"Come in."

A stunning redhead walks in the room. She's tall and lean, and she looks like Heather and all of her model friends.

"Miss Lawson?" the beauty says.

"Good afternoon." I stand and walk around the desk. "You must be Brigitte Evans."

She smiles, revealing straight, white teeth. "I am. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me."

“Of course. You have an impressive resume. Please, have a seat.” She sits in one of the blush chairs in front of the desk.

Instead of sitting behind my desk, I grab the folder with her resume and a list of interview questions, and I sit in the chair next to her.

“So, tell me a little about yourself.”

“Well, I have sales experience, but my degree was in Mass Communications from King’s College in London with a number of courses in public relations.”

I eye her impressive GPA on her official transcript with a nod of approval.

Brigette continues, “I know I am at a disadvantage since I didn’t start working in this field right away, but I am willing to work my way up the ladder and prove I know what I’m doing.”

She sounds sincere.

“Tell me about the student-run blog you oversaw at University.”

The interview progresses like any interview does. I learn more about Brigette’s thought process and problem-solving abilities as she answers strategic questions. She’s not only beautiful, but she is knowledgeable. She’s the best candidate I’ve interviewed to date.

A knock sounds. Adam enters without waiting.

When his eyes land on the beauty in the chair across from me, he stops in his tracks. His warm expression shutters. He becomes the cold, aloof version of himself that I am not fond of.

“*You.*”

Brigette maintains her composure, but I see the slight widening of her eyes when she sees Adam. “Hello, Mr. Moreno.”

“What are you doing here?” he clips.

I don’t like his tone. Not one bit.

“Mr. Moreno, as you can see, Miss Evans and I are in the middle of an interview. If you could please excuse us, I will come find you after we are done to discuss whatever it is you need.”

My tone is icy and brooks no argument. I will not have him stand there and embarrass me.

“Avery, you do not understand. Brigitte is my—”

“I am very aware of your previous relationship with Miss Evans, Adam.” I cut him off.

From the corner of my eye, I see Brigitte stiffen. She’s surprised I know about her, too.

Which is really quite silly.

Not only does she list Moreno Masterpieces as a previous employer, but I did my research on Adam after agreeing to help him mend his reputation.

I know all about his relationship with the stunning redhead next to me, I also know she threatened to sue Moreno Masterpieces for wrongful termination, not long after she filed an HR complaint against Adam. But both the HR complaint and the law suit were abandoned. That’d been three months ago, just weeks after Adam and I started our dating ruse.

Since then, Brigitte has been working as a temp for a small law firm in LA. According to her boss, she’s a hard worker. And her educational background makes her uniquely qualified for the type of assistant I’m looking for.

I don’t need someone to get me coffee. I need someone to take some of the PR work load off me. And after seeing she seems to have moved on from Adam, I decided her resume was too perfect to not have an interview.

Based on Adam’s incredulous expression, I realize I should’ve mentioned it to him.

I stare at him. I don’t think he’s going to leave my office, but he surprises me by turning on his heel and stomping out of the room.

I sigh. My attention returns to Brigitte just in time to see her shoulders slump.

Wearing a cautious expression, she asks, “You knew about me and Adam?”

I close the folder in my hands. “I knew about your previous relationship with Mr. Moreno, yes.”

“But you interviewed me anyway.”

It’s not a question.

Still, I answer, “Yes. Your resume is impressive, Brigitte. I would’ve been a fool not to interview you.”

I mean it. Brigitte’s background implies she would be very good at managing the day-to-day press releases and monitoring the public perception of Source Solutions.

She stares at me. She doesn’t know what to say.

I decide to lay my cards on the table.

“Brigitte, let me be honest with you. I need an assistant. And everything about your professional resume says you could be a great fit. But I need to know, are you interviewing for this job for reasons other than to advance your career? Are you hoping that by being near Mr. Moreno you will rekindle your relationship?”

She bites her bottom lip. “The thought crossed my mind.”

I sigh, disappointed. I’m never going to find an assistant.

“But then I looked into your career,” she surprises me by saying.

“Oh?”

She nods. “You worked at one of the biggest firms in New York. You had high profile clients, all of whom had spotless images by the time you were done with them. I realize that you are the exact kind of person I can learn from—that I can grow from. I really do want this job.”

I believe her. But we need to clear the air.

“You are aware Mr. Moreno and I are in a relationship?”

She swallows the lump in her throat. “Yes.”

I let silence settle between us, allowing us both to think of what we know and what it would mean if we work together.

Brigette lowers her head. “Adam and I did not end well. I was hurt.” She lifts her gaze. “But I understand he is not the guy for me. I really do want this job—this opportunity. But I understand if my history makes it too messy.”

I crack a smile. “It makes things complicated, but I am willing to look past it given your work is as good as I think it will be. And that you don’t engage in an inappropriate workplace behavior.”

Brigette sucks in a breath. “Are you... are you offering me the job?”

“On a probationary basis, yes.” I stand.

Brigette rises a second later.

“When can you start?”

“Tomorrow.”

I chuckle at her eagerness. “Alright. I’ll see you tomorrow at nine. I’ll be sure to have a desk ready for you.”

Brigette smiles brightly. “Thank you so much, Miss Lawson. I promise, you will not regret this.”

I shake her hand with a smile of my own. “I’m sure I won’t. And, please, call me Avery.”

CHAPTER 33

Adam

BRIGETTE HAS JUST FINISHED FILLING out HR paperwork. I watch on the security camera as Avery escorts her to the elevator and says goodbye with a friendly wave.

My heart is pounding in my chest as I make my way back to Avery's office. I see her long hair disappear through the door, and I hurry forward, stopping her from shutting the door with my foot.

"Adam."

She sounds surprised. She takes a step back and lets me into the office. I close the door, and she watches me carefully. I must look like a lunatic.

I *feel* like a lunatic.

Dread and unease threaten to drown me, dragging me into the depths of a sea of negative thoughts and fears.

"You cannot hire Brigitte."

Her brows rise. "Why not?"

"You are aware she is my ex."

"I am."

"And are you aware she threatened to sue me?" The HR complaint was one thing, but taking things to court was an entirely different matter.

"Yes, but that case was dropped not long after it was filed."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No." Avery frowns. "I learned that when I was researching your history. You know, when you asked me to help repair your reputation?"

My anxiety doesn't lessen. "Brigitte cannot be trusted."

"Because she's your ex?"

“Among other things.”

“What other things?”

I think back to our petty fights. To how she was insanely jealous.

Brigette was a girlfriend who wanted to be exclusive. And I was lonely for companionship, so I entertained her. But when it became obvious she wanted so much more, I ended things.

She didn't take it well.

“Avery.” I shake my head. “What are the odds of her applying to become your assistant? It's her plan. She has something up her sleeve.”

“She also has an impressive resume, Adam.” Her frown deepens. “And I'm not going to punish her just because she used to date you.”

This is a nightmare. I care about Avery. Having Brigette around is going to ruin things.

The thought of Avery and I ending because of this... I cannot let it happen.

“Avery... you cannot hire Brigette.”

“Too late, Adam. I already have. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't try to tell me what to do.”

My anxiety spikes. “Avery, you cannot.”

“Why not, Adam?” She finally loses her temper. Her hands fist on her hips and she demands, “Explain it to me. Why can't I give Brigette a chance? Why can't I hire a talented young woman to help take some of my workload off my shoulders?”

“Because she will try to ruin us!” I shout.

“How?” Avery shouts back. “Are you planning on seducing her? Are you going to take her in your office and fuck her on your couch?”

“Of course not!”

“Then I don't understand how her presence will ruin us. Do you truly believe I am so insecure? What have I ever done

to make you believe I am someone who would be jealous of an ex to the point that we break up?”

“I—”

She continues, interrupting me, “Because I have news for you, Adam, if I was the pathetic, insecure woman you think I am, we would never have been together in the first place.”

Confusion clouds my thoughts. “What does that mean?”

“Come on, Adam.” Avery rolls her eyes. “You have a history of dating gorgeous models, actresses, and heiresses. I have no reason to believe you don’t still communicate with them. But I choose to believe you’re loyal—that you won’t cheat on me. If I didn’t believe that—if I felt insecure about your exes, I would never have agreed to give this relationship a shot. No one is worth damaging my self-confidence. Never again.”

Ouch.

I stare as Avery spins on her heel and goes to sit behind her desk. I don’t understand why her words bother me so much.

If she truly cared about me, how could she stomach being around a woman I slept with? If our roles were reversed, I know I would never subject myself to the presence of one of her exes.

It would be torture to think of another man kissing Avery—of holding her against him at night and inhaling her intoxicating floral scent.

The thoughts bring a new one to mind.

“Is this payback?”

Avery’s seated behind her computer. She was scrolling with the mouse, but my question brings her attention back to me.

“Payback? For what?”

“Spencer.”

I know she has no idea what I’m talking about right when I say the bastard’s name.

Shit.

Her eyes dart between mine. “What are you talking about? What’s happened with Spencer?”

I shouldn’t have said anything. But other than lying to her face, there is no way to avoid admitting what I’ve done.

And I’ll never lie to Avery.

I run a hand down my face, wondering how I can tell her what I’ve done without the conversation devolving into a fight.

Too late.

“Adam... tell me.”

I exhale. “Spencer and I came to an arrangement.”

She rises from the chair. Slowly. Cautiously. “What arrangement?”

I widen my stance and cross my arms, bracing for the worst. “He signed over his car’s loan to me.”

She stares at me with a blank expression. “What?”

“You no longer need to pay his vehicle loan. It’s taken care of.”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“This week.” Before the next payment was due.

Avery stands there, frozen, but calm... too calm.

“Let me see if I understand you.” She stares at me with cool, assessing eyes. “You believe I knew about your arrangement with Spencer. You didn’t tell me about it. But you thought I’d be so mad that I would... what? Go behind your back and invite your gorgeous ex-girlfriend to work here. To spite you? Does any of that make sense?”

Well, when she puts it like that...

“I don’t know what to think, Avery. It feels like you’re sabotaging us.”

“Why would I do that?”

“You tell me.”

Her eyes narrow at my sharp tone. “Don’t be childish, Adam. Say what you mean. Stop beating around the bush.”

Nostrils flare. I grind my teeth together, then say, “Fine. I cannot fathom a reason why you, as my girlfriend, would willingly hire one of my ex-girlfriends to work for you. I don’t understand how this doesn’t bother you.”

“Are you saying I have something to be worried about?”

“Of course not.”

Avery throws her hands in the air. “Then I don’t see the problem, Adam. Brigitte is hired on a probationary basis. If she steps out of line, she’s gone. But I don’t think I should deny a qualified woman an opportunity just because she warmed your bed once upon a time. If I concerned myself with every woman you ever slept with, I wouldn’t be able to stomach seeing half the beautiful women in this damn city!”

Her words feel like a slap to the face. Deep down, I know I deserve them. I’m overreacting about Brigitte, but it’s done out of fear of losing Avery.

But the way she describes me is nothing short of unflattering. And it pains me to think she really thinks of me like that.

“I see.”

Avery’s head falls in her hands, hiding her face. Her shoulders rise and fall as she tries to steady her breathing.

Seconds pass.

I contemplate how to proceed with the conversation, but I’m unable to think about anything except how I wish I never walked in this office.

Finally, Avery raises her head. Apology swirls in her gaze. “That was out of line.”

“No,” I interrupt. “It’s fine.”

She presses her lips together. A worried crease forms between her brows. “I’m not trying to upset you, Adam. I hope

you know that.”

“I do.”

That’s the truth.

Avery is unlike any woman I’ve ever dated. There are no games. No manipulations. I believe she is hiring Brigitte because of her qualifications.

There’s no ulterior motive.

But after years of being handled by beautiful women, my defenses are high, and my own insecurity rises to the surface. I’m afraid of my past and present colliding. I’m afraid of Brigitte and Avery breathing the same air. I’m afraid of Avery learning unsavory things about me.

I’m afraid of losing her.

The realization ripples through me, sending shockwaves through every single nerve.

When did this happen? When did Avery Lawson become someone I don’t want to lose?

I take a step back, towards the door. “I have a meeting to get to.”

The lie rolls off easily. The irony of the situation doesn’t escape me. I just said I wouldn’t lie to Avery, yet here I am, being the coward I’ve always despised.

“Adam.” The way she murmurs my name makes my heart race. “We should talk about this.”

“We can talk tonight.” I backtrack to the door, but I continue to face her.

I take in her baby blue blouse tucked into the gray pencil skirt. She’s stunning.

And smart.

And mature.

And exactly what I need.

I shake the thought away. Fear spikes. This wasn’t supposed to happen. I need to get ahold of myself.

Avery watches me, head tilted to the side. Her hair is loose. It creates a curtain along the left side.

When my hand presses against the door, she finally sighs. “Okay. We’ll talk later.”

“Yes.” I nod. “Have a good day.”

I leave like the room is on fire. I walk away from Avery Lawson, trying to ignore the pang in my chest when I finally acknowledge what needs to happen. This may very well be the hardest thing I’ll ever do, but I cannot allow these feelings to fester.

I cannot rely on anyone else.

I need to break up with Avery.

Before she destroys me.

CHAPTER 34

Avery

ADAM and I never do discuss me hiring Brigitte.

It's been four days since our argument, and we are ships passing in the night. He leaves the penthouse for work before I wake up, and he's nowhere to be found when I return.

At work, he's always busy. Either on the phone or leaving the office for meetings.

How did we go from Spain to this? He's pulling away, and his absence hurts.

More than I care to admit.

"Earth to Avery?" Heather waves a freshly manicured hand in front of my face. She's sitting beside me at the nail salon during my lunch break. "Did you hear me?"

"No. I'm sorry."

I try to shove all thoughts of Adam from my mind, but all I can think about is what happened. I'm worried I made a mistake hiring Brigitte, but then I wonder why that's the case.

"I asked if you've heard from your ass-hole ex."

"No."

"Have you checked the loan status?" Heather was the first person I called after Adam admitted he paid off Spencer's loan.

"I have." I stare at my pale pink nails, illuminated by the UV light to dry the paint.

"And?" Heather presses.

I sigh. "And it's paid off. All forty-thousand, two-hundred and thirteen dollars."

My twin whistles. "Damn."

"Exactly. It's too much. I can't believe Adam paid off his car... and without telling me."

“I can.”

“What?”

Heather gives me a pointed look. “You’re stubborn, Avery. Would you have accepted Adam’s help if he tried to talk to you about it first?”

“Of course not.”

“There you go.” She shakes her head. “I’m not saying Adam was right not to talk to you about it, but I am saying I understand why he didn’t.”

“The loan was my mistake to fix.” I’m the one who was stupid enough to sign it.

“Why do you feel the need to own every struggle alone? Honestly, I’m glad Adam did what he did. If he didn’t, Derek or I would’ve, and then you’d be pissed at us.”

“Heather... Adam and I *just* started dating. For real, I mean. How am I ever going to repay him anytime soon?”

“Did he ask you to?”

“No.” I press my lips together.

“Then why can’t you just accept the kindness?”

“Because it’s a really, really expensive kindness.”

And having that money spent on me... it makes me nervous. I don’t know what it means. I don’t know how I can ever thank Adam for helping me in that way.

“Did it ever occur to you that Adam would want to take care of you for the simple fact that he *likes* you?”

The thought had crossed my mind. It’s what lessened most of my frustration during that conversation in my office.

“Adam and I haven’t spoken in nearly a week, Heather. Not one word.”

“Well, that could have more to do with you hiring his ex.”

I stiffen. “You think I should’ve punished Brigitte and not given her the job, just because she used to sleep with my boyfriend?”

“Okay, one... that’s a biased way to ask the question. Two, of course not. You say Brigitte is qualified, and she’s kicking ass at the job. But I’d like to point out that you’re upset with Adam for not discussing something with you, but you treated him the same way.”

My defensiveness deflates like a punctured balloon.

Damn it.

“I’ve made a mistake.”

“A little one,” Heather confirms.

If my nails weren’t still drying, I’d shove her arm.

“Helpful as always,” I return sarcastically.

“Hey, if you want my help, I say you talk to him.”

“He’s avoiding me.”

“So, don’t let him avoid you.”

“You want me to force him to speak to me?”

“Yes.”

“What if he’s not ready to talk?”

There’s a reason Adam and I haven’t spoken. I want to respect his needs. But I don’t really know what his needs are.

“Then give him the opportunity to tell you he’s not ready to talk. Don’t just assume that’s the case.”

What Heather suggests goes against my instincts. I’ve always been the person to give someone else space when in an argument. But then I remember how my high school prom date assumed my lack of communication meant I didn’t want to go with him anymore... and he asked another girl to go with him instead.

“You’re right.”

“I know I am.” Heather grins.

I roll my eyes.

“When are you going to talk to him?”

The sooner, the better. Otherwise, I might chicken out.

“After lunch. I’m pretty sure he’s in his office.”

“Perfect. I’ll hang out in the café downstairs.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s not a problem. I have a virtual consultation with the event coordinator we hired for mom and dad’s anniversary party.”

Guilt hits me. I’ve barely thought about their party, and I haven’t provided much help other than offering to split the extra costs with my siblings.

“How is that all going?” I ask.

The last I heard, the coordinator was having trouble finding a venue to fit our needs. Spring was a popular time of year for weddings and anniversary celebrations.

“We’re still negotiating a venue, but I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry.”

For once, I won’t. I have too much going on, both personally and professionally. It’s hard for me to do, but I’m undeniably relieved to know my sister is overseeing the finer details of our parents’ party.

“Thanks, Heather.”

“Of course.” She puts a comforting hand on my arm. “Don’t worry about us. Focus on you, and talk to Adam. I’m sure things will be better once you clear the air.”

I smile back. “I’m sure you’re right.”

Less than an hour later, I knew she was, in fact, *not* right.

CHAPTER 35

Avery

I LIFT my arm and tap my knuckles against Adam's office door. Natasha is still at lunch, so I walked back here unannounced.

For a moment, I worry Adam might be at lunch too, but then I hear his sexy, accented voice call, "Yes?"

I open the door and step inside. My hand still holds the handle.

Adam looks up from his laptop. The sun shines through the window at his back, casting him in a warm glow.

He's so attractive it makes my heart race just looking at him.

"Hi," I say weakly. I hike a thumb over my shoulder. "Natasha wasn't at her desk..."

"I see."

Is his tone cold, or am I being paranoid? I remind myself I'm Avery Lawson. I deal with difficult people and messy situations on a regular basis. I know how to handle myself in uncomfortable situations.

Lifting my chin, I meet Adam's gaze. "I was hoping we could talk."

Adam looks uncertain. I think he's going to deny my request.

He surprises me by saying, "Sure. I have a few minutes."

He motions to the table in the corner of the room as he stands from his desk. I take a seat. My unease grows when he chooses to take the seat across from me, not the one right at my side.

We stare at one another.

Neither of us speak.

Adam's face is unreadable. It's so unlike the one I've come to know these past few weeks. I don't know what to think.

"We haven't spoken in a few days," I begin. "How have you been?"

"Fine. Busy." He straightens his silk tie, staring at the skyline visible through the window behind me.

I wait for him to say something else, but he falls silent.

I've had enough. "Adam... what's going on? Are you mad at me over hiring Brigitte?"

"No. I realize you were right. She shouldn't be denied an opportunity just because she and I dated." He clears his throat. Almost as a second thought, he adds, "Especially since I won't always be working here at Source Solutions."

My chest tightens at the reminder that his stay in LA is temporary. And, most likely, so are we.

But that's a problem for a future date.

I focus on the now. "Then why are you avoiding me?"

To his credit, Adam doesn't try to deny it. "Because I needed time to think."

Historical words for a doomed relationship.

"Think about what?"

I already know what he's going to say when he says, "Us."

My heart is pounding. Emotion threatens to clog my throat. It takes every ounce of self-control not to give either of those things away. I force my features into a calm expression.

"What about us?"

"I spoke with my grandfather two nights ago," he says, catching me off guard. "We discussed many things. One of which being how much he and my grandmother enjoyed meeting you last week."

Not knowing what else to say, I offer, "I enjoyed meeting them, too."

Adam nods. “He went on to say that all conversation regarding my potential resignation have quieted in the company. Everyone seems hopeful that I’ve turned a new leaf, and there’s no more talk of replacing me.”

“That’s fantastic, Adam.”

“It is.”

“Why don’t you sound happy?”

“I don’t? I apologize. It must be the fatigue.” Adam clears his throat. “Given this latest turn of events, I figured it was time you and I speak about an exit strategy.”

“Exit strategy?” I repeat the words slowly. My heartbeat had steadied during talk of his family. Now, it’s back to racing. “What do you mean?”

Emerald eyes turn to meet mine, but they flutter away after a couple of loaded seconds. “Now that my reputation is repaired, I’d like to discuss how we can tactfully dissolve our public relationship.”

I hear what he says, but it doesn’t make sense.

“Our public relationship?”

“Yes,” Adam says. “I do not want all our hard work these past months to come undone by rushing a breakup. I wondered if you had any plans of how to end our relationship in a discreet, respectful manner that would leave my reputation intact.”

I’ve never had an out of body experience.

But right now, hearing Adam discuss a break up as if we never had anything real... it’s like I’m hovering near the ceiling, watching myself sit there, struggling to understand what I’m hearing.

Did I imagine our weeks of happiness? Or mind-blowing sex and companionship?

Adam’s cool and aloof demeanor would say so. But I know otherwise.

“You want to break up.” I’m proud of my steady tone, but I have to dig my hands into my lap to hide the way they tremble.

“My reputation is mended.”

I stare at him. “Why won’t you just say it?”

The first flicker of emotion breaks through his steady gaze. “Avery, I—”

“You know what, never mind.” I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t need you to say anything. Your behavior speaks volumes.”

I can’t believe I walked into this situation, not knowing exactly how it was going to go.

Adam avoided me like the plague for four days. He didn’t even respond to my texts. Did I really think I could come in here and clear the air? That things would be fine?

I know better than that. I know *people* better than that. I need to exit this situation before it devolves any further.

I stand.

Adam is quick to do the same. “I am not trying to rush the process, Avery. I don’t wish us to act hastily and spark illicit rumors as to the cause of our breakup. We should still be seen together in public. You should remain living at my place.”

Is he for real?

Anger cracks through my calm facade. My eyes narrow into sharp slits. “I am not your fuck buddy, Adam.”

“That is not what I—”

“And I am not a vindictive bitch who would ruin all of *my* hard work by broadcasting to the world how big of an asshole you are.”

Oh man... I’m losing it.

I need to get out of here.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I can’t even look at him. When I do, all I can think about is Spain. And how

perfect things were.

I knew it was too good to be true. I knew we weren't endgame—I told Adam as much. But I guess... part of me had started to wonder...

I'm an idiot.

Calmly, I say, "Don't worry, Adam. I will be professional. Your reputation will not take a hit from our breakup. But I will decide what I need to do to move past this. And that likely includes moving out."

I open my eyes. Immediately I wish I hadn't. Adam's mask has fallen. He wears a pained expression.

But I feel no sympathy.

He, and he alone, is responsible for how he feels.

"Very well," he says quietly.

I nod. "Goodbye, Adam."

I move to the exit. My fingers wrap around the silver handle.

Behind me, I hear him say. "Avery, I'm sorry."

For a moment, I freeze.

For a moment, I want to spin around and demand to know why he's putting an end to our real relationship, while acting like it never even happened.

But pride stops me.

"Yeah." I hate that my voice cracks. I clear my throat and bite out, "So am I."

Then I walk out of his office with my head held high, but my heart remains behind, crumpled into dust on his office floor.

I knew I never should have gotten involved with Adam Moreno.

CHAPTER 36

Avery

“GUESTS WON’T BE able to see around the centerpieces. Is there any way we can make them shorter?” I ask the florist and her assistant as they place the first elaborate bouquet on the center table.

The Source Solutions first annual holiday party is tonight, and the guest list doubled over the last month when the article, written by Cynthia Nelson, finally came out. All of the company’s unanswered invites were suddenly RSVP’d with “enthused to attend”. Turns out, my lackluster conversation with the writer hadn’t hindered her journalistic integrity. For that, I am so thankful.

With the amped interest in Source Solutions, I had to double the floral order for centerpieces. In my haste, I hadn’t contemplated how the lovely arrangements would block the view of the table’s occupants.

Thankfully, Joanne from Heavenly Arrangements takes my request in stride. “Of course. We’ll snap the stems down a bit. No big deal.”

“Oh my gosh, thank you. Would you like me to help?”

“No need, Avery.” Joanne smiles kindly. “We have it covered.”

I leave them to their task and move on to check if the caterer needs any help. This has been my modus operandi over these past four months.

Summer heat faded into comfortable fall, followed now by a crisp winter. Through all three seasons, my heart continued to ache over my break up with Adam. I opted to distract myself from sadness by keeping busy. But no number of tireless days or late-working nights could save me from dreaming of Adam while asleep.

Each morning, I woke up happy and lighthearted, only for the illusion to shatter the moment I remembered that

conversation in Adam's office. And everything that's happened between us since.

Which is a whole lot of nothing...

To Adam, it seems like I barely exist.

Which hurts more than it should.

Our breakup left a painful mark—even worse than the one created by Spencer. Amazing, considering how short our relationship was compared to my post-college boyfriend.

Shaking my head, I force away the depressing thoughts. I walk over to the man in charge of the catering company hired for the event.

Before I reach him, I hear from behind, "Shouldn't you be getting ready, young lady?"

My lips widen into a huge smile when I recognize the voice.

I spin around. "Dad!"

Eric Lawson is in his fifties, but he barely looks forty. He wears a fitted t-shirt and blue jeans and sneakers. His go-to casual attire for flights. Beside him, my mom wears flattering leggings and a warm smile. She holds her arms wide.

I walk into her embrace and squeeze her tight. "What are you two doing here? Heather said you planned to meet us at the apartment."

Since Adam and I broke up, I unofficially moved in with my twin. She's subletting a friend's Beverly Hills guest house. Which is amazing. But it also means I cannot bring over anything more than my wardrobe.

I really need to get a storage unit. Or my own place.

Heather appears behind our parents, shaking her head good-naturedly. "You know Mom and Dad. They insisted on dropping by Source Solutions to see Derek and check everything out. When Brigitte said you were here, they insisted on coming here too."

"What did you think of the office?" I ask as I hug my dad.

My mother gushes about the location, beaming with pride at all her son has accomplished. She mentions how everyone she met seems nice.

Then, my father grumbles, “We ran into that Spanish fellow.” His arms cross. “I’m not impressed.”

Heather and I exchange grins. Dad hasn’t liked a single one of our boyfriends. I shouldn’t be surprised a billionaire doesn’t sway him.

Since our relationship was highly publicized, Eric and Julia Lawson knew of my romance with Adam. But when things ended, I finally admitted to them that most of it had been a ruse concocted to mend Adam’s public reputation.

I wish I could have lied and told them it was all fake, but my mother is a human lie detector. I had no hope of hiding the truth.

So, they know Adam and I were real, but we ended things shortly after returning from Spain.

And based on my father’s gruff mention of Adam, he knows me well enough to know I wasn’t as unaffected by the breakup as I tried to seem during our weekly video chats.

“Eric,” Mom chastises. “Don’t start.”

“What?” Dad asks innocently. “I’m just saying. He seems like a dandy.”

“Eric!” Mom gasps. As Heather and I laugh, she goes on, “I swear, for growing up in high-brow social circles, you are so abrasive.”

“That’s what you love about me.” Dad throws his arm around Mom and kisses her temple. “Now, how about I take my favorite girls to a late lunch before the evening’s fun? I hear the Chinese food in LA is top-notch.”

I refuse to acknowledge the pained reminder of how Adam ordered my favorite food after my robbery to feel better.

At least, I try.

“Food sounds great,” I say with a forced smile. “But let’s do something else. I’m not really feeling Chinese.”

I pretend not to see my parents exchange a loaded look. I grab my phone and text Brigitte, asking her to arrive a bit early to the party to check on things. She agrees.

After a quick word with the caterer, I follow my family out of The Pierre, and we all squeeze into Heather’s Jetta and go to her apartment.

For the first time in months, I don’t think of Adam Moreno. Or the fact I’m far from over him.

Instead, I enjoy my family’s company. And refuse to acknowledge that tonight is the last night Adam and I will be in each other’s presence.

Because tomorrow, Adam returns to Spain.

And I can finally get to moving on with my life.

I hope.

CHAPTER 37

Adam

THE HOLIDAY PARTY is in full swing. The decorations are stunning. The food was delicious. The guests are all having a great time, mingling and enjoying the perks of the open bar.

None of this is surprising.

Not when I know Avery Lawson is the one who put this event together.

I stand in the corner, watching her laugh at something Frederic Bastian, son of the business tycoon, Charles Bastian, says. My hand drifts to my pocket, and my fingers grip the delicate silver charm I bought Avery all those months ago in Spain.

We'd been by the beach, admiring the pristine water and watching the squawking seagulls flying around, scavenging for food wherever they can find it. When I passed a jewelry cart on my run the next morning and saw the seagull charm, I knew I had to get it for her. I'd planned on it being a Christmas gift. Goes to show how naïve I'd been about the fate of our relationship.

Heather stands beside Avery, commandeering the attention of the other two men standing in the group, but Frederic doesn't take his eyes off Avery. He hasn't taken his eyes off her all night.

It's torture to watch.

When I look at Avery, charming anyone who interacts with her, I remember how things used to be. I remember her humor. Her intelligence and kindness. And I remember how it felt to call her mine.

Like I could ever forget any of those things...

True to Avery's word, our breakup hit the press but no salacious rumors stemmed from the amicable parting of ways. If anything, the magazines applauded us on a mature display,

and they promptly began to speculate on the identity of my next lover.

But despite the most convincing rumors, I've had no one in my bed since Avery.

The only person touching my dick is me. Usually in the shower, in the middle of the night, when I can't sleep because I catch the faint smell of Avery's floral scent.

Or I find one of her stray hairs in my linens. It doesn't matter that my housekeeper has done dozens of loads of laundry since we broke up. Avery's presence in the penthouse remains.

I can't escape it.

Which is one of the main reasons I've decided to return to Spain. Source Solutions is on solid ground. They have investors knocking on the door, and new companies inquiring about their services every day.

My investment still supports them, but that's by choice. If I withdrew my funding, I have no doubt they'd be able to weather the rocky waters until another investment, or two, stabilized them.

"You know, I never thought I'd say this, but you are a complete idiot," a musical voice says in Spanish.

I turn and take in Brigitte. My ex wears a classy cocktail dress. The navy-blue color is more subdued than anything I've ever seen her wear.

I've avoided the stunning woman these past months at work, just like I've avoided her boss. But when I did see Brigitte, she was nothing but professional and polite.

There was no evidence of the jaded young woman who threw a fit when I didn't take her dancing at a club for her twenty-fifth birthday. Or the one who sucked at sales, so she lodged an HR complaint to avoid being fired. Or the one who threatened to sue me when she, eventually, *was* fired.

I eye the redhead, not with interest, but with contemplation.

“Perdón?”

“You’re an idiot,” she repeats. She sips her glass of champagne and stares across the room. Right where I know Avery stands, speaking with Frederic. “But perhaps it’s for the best.”

“What is?”

“You sabotaging your relationship with Avery.”

“I didn’t—”

“Please, don’t insult my intelligence.” She holds up a hand. “Or have you forgotten the fact we dated on and off for years?”

“I did not forget.”

“I know you, Adam. I know what you’re doing.” Her eyes move back to Avery. “But, for the life of me, I cannot understand how you could do it to her.”

“What are you accusing me of doing?”

“You never let yourself get too close to anyone. Aside from Trisha, you kept all of your girlfriends at an arm’s length. And it doesn’t take a genius to know why.”

My temper flares, but so does my curiosity. “Pray, enlighten me.”

“You’re afraid you’ll become a shell of a person. Just like your father.”

She may as well have slapped me across the face.

“My relationship with Avery has nothing to do with my father.”

“Doesn’t it?” Brigitte lifts a knowing brow. “I worked at Moreno Masterpieces, Adam. I heard everything everyone said about your parents and their twisted ending.”

I grip the stem of the wine glass in my hand firmly, reminding myself not to squeeze too hard before it shatters in my hands. Brigitte continues, either not knowing how close to the edge of my temper she treads, or not caring.

“Your father, by all accounts, was an intelligent, strong man. Then, he met your mother. And he was so in love with her, that it destroyed him when she decided to leave him. Some say it’s what killed him.”

“Enough,” I snap.

A couple nearby hears. They look over, concerned. I’m too worked up to placate them, but Brigitte offers a reassuring smile before narrowing her gaze back on me.

“You’re upset because I’m right. You don’t loathe commitment. You’re afraid of it. You don’t want your happiness to depend on someone else. So, you make sure not to get attached. But you couldn’t stop yourself from falling for Avery... could you?”

The sound of her name has me turning back to look at the brunette beauty. Frederic’s eyes run over while she turns to say something to her sister. I want to gouge his eyes out.

“Jesus, Adam. I don’t understand you,” Brigitte says, annoyed. “I didn’t take you for a coward.”

“I am not a coward.”

“No? Then why did you end things with Avery?”

“Why do you care?”

That gives Brigitte pause. She purses her lips and her forehead furrows as she tries to think of an answer. I expect her to say she doesn’t care. I expect her to give up and walk away.

She surprises me by admitting, “Because Avery Lawson gave me a chance when she had every reason to believe I could be a snake in the garden, intent on ruining her relationship. She’s a good person. And she genuinely cared for you. But you ruined it.”

My heart squeezes. “You barely know her. How do you know she cared for me?”

“A woman knows.” Brigitte sips her drink, then sighs. “Look, I really don’t know why I felt compelled to come over here. But I guess part of me still cares about you, Adam. We

didn't work out, but now I realize that was for the best. I still want you to be happy. And based on what I saw in the press, before you imploded your relationship, Avery made you genuinely happy."

She did.

Too happy.

"Thank you for your concern, but it is unnecessary." I sip my wine. "I'm fine."

"I hope that's true six months from now when Avery is madly in love with someone else." She shakes her head once and moves away. "Have a nice night, Adam."

Brigette's words ring in my ears long after her absence, jarring my thoughts and clouding my judgment. I never gave her enough credit when we were together. I never knew she could be so insightful about another person. She came off as superficial and materialistic.

While those were certainly aspects of her personality, I didn't realize they could have prevented me from seeing the other, more admirable, qualities.

But things started differently with Avery. When I met her, I found her attractive, but immediately wrote off any chance of romance when I learned she was Derek's sister. The time we spent together in those early days, even when we were pretending to date, we got to know one another without pretense. Without the complication of falling into each other's beds lingering over us.

At first, anyway.

It wasn't long before my attraction to Avery won out, leading me to propose an amendment to our relationship. I've never denied my time with Avery was the best I'd ever had with a girlfriend. And sex with her had been phenomenal. We fit together perfectly, in more ways than one.

"Your father, by all accounts, was an intelligent, strong man..."

Yes, once upon a time, Enrique was a man going places. But my mother ruined him.

And I can't lie—I always feared ending up just like him.

My indefinite singlehood has never bothered me. I never met someone who challenged the notion of never legally tying my life with another.

Until I lost Avery.

I release a heavy sigh, then finish off my wine and stare at my ex-girlfriend as another man flirts with her, and a jealous beast tries to tear its way out of my chest and make good on my desire to claw Frederic's eyes out.

Nostrils flare each time his fingers brush against her smooth flesh as he holds her glass, steps aside so someone can join the group, or steadies her when she wobbles in her designer heels.

By the time Avery excuses herself from the group, I am striding across the room after her. I don't know what I'm going to say. I just know I need to speak to her.

I've feared it for weeks, but Brigitte's earlier words have all but confirmed it: I fucked up. I never should have ended things with Avery. It wasn't our time.

I need to win her back.

I just hope it's not too late.

CHAPTER 38

Avery

I SEE Adam speaking with Brigitte.

I don't want to be jealous, but the green-eyed monster rears its ugly head, anyway. Brigitte is not interested in Adam. She's dating a guy from legal, and based on the way she's always mooning over her texts during lunch, I'd say she's got it bad for the guy.

Still, it's hard to reason away my jealousy. Especially when I'm so clearly not over Adam Moreno.

Not by a long shot.

“—take you out, sometime. I have a cousin who is the head chef at a Michelin star restaurant. I can get us a table next Friday.”

My gaze returns to Frederic. The handsome blond has been charming me for the past hour. At any other time or place, if I were single, he'd be just the kind of man I'd go for.

He's smart. Attentive. And I can tell he has a great body underneath that expensive suit.

But his accent noticeably lacks a Spanish flare. And his skin tone is tan, but not the warm olive I've come to crave. And his eyes, though a beautiful shade of blue, aren't the stunning emerald I long to gaze into.

I cannot remember the last time I was so wrapped up in a guy—unable to get him out of my head after breaking up.

Maybe my first boyfriend? But I'm pretty sure I was over Scott Higgins after two weeks of binge-watching *Gilmore Girls* with Heather and Mom, devouring a gallon of Dad's favorite ice cream on our living room couch.

I smile at Frederic, hoping to come off friendly, but not too friendly. “I'm flattered, Frederic. Truly. But I'm not really in the dating market at the moment.”

His face falls. He doesn't try to hide his disappointment. "That is too bad, Avery. May I be so bold as to request you reach out to me whenever you decide to give smitten men like me a chance?"

It's impossible not to smile at that. Or not to agree. "You have my word."

Frederic graciously changes the subject. Our private conversation shifts, and we resume speaking to the group as a whole.

Heather is discussing her upcoming trip to Europe, where she will be meeting with different fashion houses to see if she can snag the ambassador role for one of the well-known brands.

The men lap up my sister's words like she's giving a Ted Talk that will change their life. Normally, they couldn't care less about discussing fashion brands, but they are positively enamored by my sister.

"I'm going to find the restroom and freshen up," I say during a pause in the conversation. I look at Heather. "Want to keep me company?"

Appreciation flickers across her face. "Actually, yes. That would be lovely. Gentlemen, we'll be back in a moment."

Heather and I walk to the back corridor where the restrooms are located. We are nearly there when we hear Mom calling our names.

She's standing by the bar, waving us over. Dad and Derek are chatting with Kyle's family. Heather turns to me with a raised brow.

"You go ahead," I tell her. "I'll use the restroom and be right there."

Heather nods. "Okay."

We part ways.

The bathroom is empty. Not surprising, considering it's tucked so far back. There's another bathroom near the front of the ballroom. No doubt, it is overflowing with gorgeous

women freshening up their makeup after an evening of eating, drinking, and dancing.

Careful not to step on the hem of my floor-length gown, I walk into the first stall.

I wash my hands after using the restroom, then admire my hair. Brigitte gave me the name of one of her friends who is a stylist. He came to the office at noon today to do my hair, and the large curls have held their shape with hardly any frizz. Whatever product he uses is miraculous.

I try to make a point not to think about Adam, or the fact he was speaking with Brigitte.

Or how handsome he looks.

Or how much I miss him.

Get ahold of yourself, Avery.

It's been months. Our romance was too short to warrant this lovesickness.

I step out of the bathroom, prepared to keep a happy face for another hour, then make my escape back to Heather's apartment. My parents are staying at a hotel nearby, so I won't have to worry about sharing a ride with them.

The moment I step out of the bathroom, though, I collide with a muscular chest that should not be so familiar to me. But it is.

"Easy there, love." Adam's lips lift in a small smile. "Where's the fire?"

His hands land on my lace-covered arms, but I feel the burn of his touch through my entire body. I move left and step out of his hold.

"Excuse me, Adam. I didn't see you." I try to walk around him.

He steps in my way.

"Mind if we speak for a moment?"

“Actually, I do mind. Please excuse me.” I try to move around him again.

And, again, he shifts to block my path.

“Adam,” I say, exasperated. “What are you doing?”

“I’d like to speak with you.”

“About what?”

“About...” He pauses. “Stuff.”

“Stuff?” I tilt my head to the side.

He nods. “Yes, stuff. Can I please have five minutes of your time to discuss stuff?”

I look at Adam. I mean, I *really* look at him.

He looks the same as ever, except for the subtle dark circles under his eyes. I know he’s not sleeping well. Natasha let it slip over coffee one morning.

I believe she did so, hoping I would take the initiative and go speak to Adam—to see what was wrong. She must not know how Adam decided to end things.

I had too much self-respect to chase after something that never really existed—to chase someone who didn’t feel about me the way I felt about him.

But beyond Adam’s tired eyes, I see a familiar determination. He’s not going to let me walk away without speaking. Not easily, anyway.

“Fine. Five minutes.”

Adam’s expression brightens. “That’s all I need.”

CHAPTER 39

Avery

I FOLLOW Adam out of the back corridor. We decide it'll be best to have this conversation in private. So, we walk through the hotel's ballroom doors and enter the lobby. There's a bar and restaurant attached. We settle in a table in the back. It's nearly empty.

“So, here I am. What do you need to talk about in the middle of our company party?”

I'm letting my irritation show. I'm annoyed Adam decided now was the time to speak when he's had weeks to do this.

“I made a mistake.”

I stare at him. *Is he serious?*

“Okay?”

Adam runs a hand over his styled hair, making the strands stand on end. “I never should have ended things.”

I didn't expect him to be so forthright. It catches me off guard. “It is what it is, Adam.”

“But I don't want it to be what it is. I want to fix it.”

“Fix it?”

His hand finds mine under the table. His touch makes my pulse spike.

“I never should have broken things off between us, Avery. I especially shouldn't have been so cold about what was going on with me. I'd like the chance to explain and make it right. I'd like for you to forgive me for being an ass.”

I've dreamed of hearing him say these words more times than I can count.

From the outside, I know I seem put together. I go to work. I go to events. I manage to keep my composure in public. But my evenings are spent rethinking everything about my time

with Adam, wondering where it went wrong. Searching for the signs that he wasn't really into me like I had believed.

The what-ifs were driving me crazy. They still do. But I've been getting better.

Until this conversation...

I know this is going to set me back.

When I remain silent, Adam asks, "Will you let me try to explain?"

It's what I've been waiting for.

"I'm listening."

Hope fills his expression. He licks his lips, nervous. "The reason I broke up with you, Avery, is because I realized I cared too much."

I blink. "Excuse me?"

"After our conversation about Brigette, I realized I wasn't angry. I was afraid. I didn't want Brigette to influence your opinion of me. And you were so level-headed about it all... I started to worry I was following my father's footsteps."

My forehead furrows. "I don't understand."

"My mother wrecked my dad until he was a shell of the man he used to be. She sliced his heart, chewed it up, and spit it out, leaving me to deal with her mess as she ran away to live her own version of happily ever after. She was unaffected by the end of their love. Whereas he was never the same."

I let the implications of what Adam says settle in my mind.

Then, I ask, "Are you comparing me to your mother in this situation?"

Does he think I'm so heartless as to hurt him the way his mother hurt his father?

"Yes. No. Well, not really. I'm actually comparing myself to my father."

I take a deep breath and exhale. "I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. I knew you had an aversion to

commitment.”

The grip on my hand tightens. “I made a mistake, Avery. You are the type of woman who makes men dive to get down on one knee. I vowed long ago that I’d never be that type of guy.”

I knew that already.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing we broke up.”

“No, it’s not. Because being apart from you has not cured me of these feelings. I want to be with you, Avery. I want you to forgive me.”

My heart simultaneously soars and plummets. Adam wants to be with me... but it’s against his better judgment...

I can’t do this.

I can’t sit here and hear him continue to tell me how much he cares for me, or else I’m afraid I’ll fall back into his arms. Only to end up here, again, one day.

I pull my hand away and rise from the table. “I do forgive you, Adam. Thank you for explaining things to me. I really appreciate it.”

His chair screeches against the floor as he stands. “Where are you going?”

“Back to the party.”

Adam catches my arm before I can leave. “Wait... that’s it? Don’t you have anything else to say?”

“What would you like me to say, Adam?”

He swallows. His eyes dart between mine. “Say you’ll give me another chance.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because you made me promise not to overthink our relationship, Adam. And I told you I would. I forced my doubts to the back of my head and allowed myself to fall for

you. Then, without any warning, you ripped the rug out from underneath me.”

“Avery, I’m sorry.”

“I believe you. But that doesn’t change anything.”

“Avery.” He presses a hand to his chest, as if in pain. “You know me. What we had was real.”

“Until you decided it wasn’t.” My voice cracks. I clear my throat. “Look, Adam. It doesn’t matter. You’re leaving tomorrow.”

“That doesn’t have to be the end.”

“We’ve already had our end, Adam, but at least now we can both have some closure. Thank you for that.”

He stares at me in disbelief and hurt. It takes everything I have not to crumble and give in.

Lord knows I want to.

“Goodbye, Adam. Enjoy the rest of the party.”

CHAPTER 40

Adam

SHE WALKS AWAY. I fall back into the chair, the image of Avery Lawson staring me down with flawless makeup and perfect curls as she tells me we're over for good will forever be seared in my mind.

I can't believe I lost her. It's a blessing and a curse that I'm leaving for Spain tomorrow.

The blessing? It will prevent me from doing something foolish like showing up on Avery's doorstep each night, begging for her to change her mind.

The curse? My departure puts a finality on our breakup that I'm not truly ready for.

I wait ten minutes before mustering the strength to return to the party. I won't stay long. I can't. There's no telling what I might do if I see another man flirting with my girl.

She's not yours, you idiot. And you only have yourself to blame.

The moment I step back into the ballroom, I'm greeted by Heather Lawson's beautiful, scowling face. "What did you do?"

I tilt my head in question. "What do you mean?"

"I saw you and my sister leave to talk. When she came back, she immediately started circling the room to say her goodbyes. Obviously, something is wrong."

I scan the room and see Avery near the back of the ballroom, speaking to her brother. Their bodies are tense. Derek's scowl can be seen all the way over here.

"So, I repeat, what did you do?" Heather finishes.

I tear my gaze off the woman of my dreams and meet her sister's eye. "I told Avery I made a mistake."

Heather's glare doesn't abate. "And?"

“And I told her I want her back.”

“You idiot.”

“What?”

“You waited until *now* to have this change of heart? Right before you’re leaving. What changed?”

“I—” I frown. “I’ve always felt this way. It wasn’t until I was hit with the sight of her, along with the knowledge that I’m supposed to leave tomorrow, that I realized I made a huge mistake.”

“Again, you’re an idiot.” Heather shakes her head. “You know Avery. You know she’s stubborn. She’s spent these past months struggling to get over you.”

My stomach clenches. “She struggled?”

Heather levels me with a pointed look. “You know she has.”

Actually, I don’t.

Anytime I crossed paths with Avery at Source Solutions, she seemed completely fine. There were no emotional outbursts. No lingering looks. My most meaningful relationship ended with the most mature breakup. Trisha doesn’t count. She and I were nothing more than a fling.

But Avery? We had it all.

A true, deep connection.

She was the brightest spot in my day and the warmest part of my night. She became a confidant and friend before she was ever my lover. And when we finally gave into the pull urging us together, she was the spark that ignited desire in me. The desire to be the best version of myself. For her.

For *us*.

I let my insecurities about becoming a useless shell of a man, like my father, prevent me from being happy with her.

Heather watches me. Whatever emotion is displayed on my face makes her features soften.

“Look, Adam. I’m sorry you’re hurting. For what it’s worth, I really enjoyed seeing my sister with you. She was so happy. Thank you for those months. And for helping her separate herself from Spencer forever. I know she never got the chance to properly thank you, but she really appreciates what you did for her.”

A burn spreads in the back of my eyes. “This can’t be the end, Heather. I won’t let it.”

“You don’t have a choice.” Her words are delivered softly, but they’re a punch to the gut regardless.

I had the world in my hands, and I let her slip away out of fear of what could’ve been—the fear that I was already so far in love with her that I was acting like a crazy person, ready to break my cousin’s nose and keep a young woman from being her assistant.

I dip my head in acceptance. I keep my eyes trained on the shining floor underneath our feet.

“Heather!”

Both Heather and I look up at the sound of her shouted name. Brigitte runs towards us, her eyes wide, her body language frantic.

“What’s wrong?” Heather hurries forward to meet Brigitte halfway.

“It’s Avery. Something’s wrong.”

“Why do you say that?” I insert myself into the conversation.

Brigitte is too worked up to be offended by the intrusion.

Wide eyed, she says, “Avery and I were talking on the phone. She was asking me to stay until the end of the party to ensure everything goes smoothly. Then, out of nowhere, I heard her shout. Then the phone went dead.”

My heart drops. “What do you mean, you heard her shout? Was it in surprise?”

“No. It—” Brigitte chokes up. “It sounded like pain. Like she was hit or something. I can’t find her anywhere.”

My phone is out, and I’m dialing before she finishes the last syllable. My actions could be construed as hasty, but there’s a pit in my stomach that grew with every word out of Brigitte’s mouth.

Natasha answers on the first ring. She stayed home tonight to finish packing, eager to return to her home in Spain. “Good evening, Adam. How can I—”

“I need the owner of The Pierre on the phone immediately.”

“Of course.” Her breathing changes as she hurries to her laptop. “May I ask what for?”

“Avery is missing.” I’m striding to the lobby, ready to assert myself with the hotel manager on duty, but things will go much smoother if the owner, herself, gives me the access I need. “I need all exits to the hotel locked or manned. And I need access to their surveillance.”

“Got it. I’ll connect you now.”

Heather hurries to keep pace with me. “What’s going on?”

“I’m locking down the hotel. Brigitte, call the police.” The redhead fumbles with her phone as she rushes to do what I say.

“Don’t you think this is a little too much? Shouldn’t we look for Avery first?”

“No.” I can’t explain it, but my gut tells me something bad has happened to Avery. If we don’t act, it could be too late.

At the main desk, I bark for the evening manager.

A frazzled middle-aged man greets me. He hears my request right at the moment Natasha connects me with the owner of the hotel.

After a brief exchange, confirming my identity and telling her what happened, Ivana Pierre grants me full access to the security cameras in the hotel.

I'm browsing through them when a police car arrives. Heather and Brigitte have gone off to physically search for Avery while I do this.

The two cops join me, but I have yet to find any sign of Avery or her alleged attack.

"Good evening, Sir. I'm Officer Wentz. This is my partner, Officer Patrick. We understand there was an assault here this evening."

"Yes."

My eyes remain glued to the screen. I've examined the footage from every corner of the ballroom. Now, I've moved to the kitchen where the catering staff is moving about.

"Where is the victim?"

"We cannot find her."

The officers share a look. "Then how do you know there was an assault?"

"Her assistant heard it over the phone as they were speaking." My eyes catch sight of a curly-haired brunette weaving her way through the crowd of servers.

"There she is!"

I note the time stamp. Fifteen minutes ago. Has it really only been fifteen minutes? It feels like a lifetime has passed since this gnawing feeling has been plaguing my stomach.

In the video, Avery holds a phone to her ear. She's moving towards a set of double doors. They must lead to the back of the hotel.

I ignore the officers as they look at me with exasperated expressions. It's clear they don't want to be here.

I toggle the screens to show the footage from different security cameras outside the hotel. The third one shows a dimly lit alley. I rewind the video. I resume it when I see Avery's perfect figure step out into the alley. My heart is pounding in my chest, fueled by fear.

What was she thinking, going out there alone?

The officers have been watching the screen over my shoulder. Seeing the situation, they tense. As if they, too, can already see where this is going.

The three of us watch as Avery walks down the concrete steps. She turns up the alley, still talking on the phone, and walks towards the busy street.

She never makes it. A bulky figure steps out from the shadows. There's a bulky object in his hand.

A gun.

The figure makes his move without hesitation. He comes up behind Avery and strikes her with the butt of his weapon. There's no sound in the video, but I can imagine Avery's shout just as crumbles to the ground.

Then, the attacker throws her over her shoulder and carries her the opposite way out of the alley.

Away from the busy street, and away from any witnesses.

CHAPTER 41

Avery

Fifteen minutes earlier.

I'VE GOT to get out of here.

The thought runs through my head on repeat as I stride across the ballroom, mixing in with Adam's heartfelt words.

"Say you'll give me another chance..."

"What we had was real..."

"I'm sorry, Avery..."

Emotion clogs my throat. I hurry to make my escape before I fall apart.

I've already said goodbye to my family. Now, just need to get out of here without being photographed by the paparazzi casing the event for photographs of prominent guests.

I contemplate going to the main lobby to ask the hotel staff about another exit, but I don't want to risk running into Adam. It was hard enough to turn him down once.

I'm not sure my broken heart will be able deny his pleas again.

"There you are, I've been looking all over for you."

I turn and see Kyle walking towards me. He looks handsome in a fitted black tux with a festive green tie.

The last thing I want to do is stop and make conversation, but things have been off with Kyle since Derek's party. And not just with me. He's gone from rarely working in the office to *never* working in the office.

He and Derek aren't on good terms, and I worried Kyle wouldn't come to tonight's party. I'm so glad he did.

So, I stop my hasty escape and spare a moment to speak with my brother's best friend. "Hi, Kyle. How are you?"

“Better now that I’ve seen you.” His gaze sweeps over me. “You look gorgeous.”

Kyle leans in, and I shiver as his lips brush against my cheek. I step back and ignore my body’s uneasy reaction to his touch *and* his compliment. I blame my lingering feelings for Adam more than an aversion to Kyle.

“Once again, you’ve outdone yourself, Avery. This party is fantastic.”

I smile past my discomfort. “Thank you.”

“You do know you’re not technically Source Solution’s party planner, right?” He cracks a smile.

“I don’t mind. I like to help.”

“I know. You’re always helping others.” Kyle stares at me fondly. “Did I overhear you saying goodbye to your parents?”

I nod. “I’m feeling a little worn out. I’ve decided to call it an early night.”

“Want me to walk you to your car?”

“No, that’s okay. I’m ordering a car. I’m just trying to figure out how to get out of here without being photographed.”

“Why not go out through the kitchen?” Kyle suggests.

“There’s an exit back there?”

He nods. “To an alley. I saw the caterers delivering through there when I arrived.”

“That sounds great. Thank you, Kyle.”

“Of course.” He smiles. Then, he takes out his phone and shoots off a quick text. “Would you care to share a drink with me before leaving?”

I give an apologetic smile. “Rain check? I really am exhausted.”

Emotionally.

“Not a problem. I’ll see you later, Avery.”

With a wave, I turn and make my way to the kitchen. I grab my phone and dial Brigitte's number as I walk through the swinging door.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Brigitte. Can you do me a favor?"

"Of course."

I dodge a server with a massive silver tray filled with dirty dishes. He dumps them in the sink with a clatter. "Do you think you can stay until the end of the party? Just to make sure everything runs smoothly."

"Yes. But what about you? Are you leaving?"

"Yes."

A pause. "Does this have something to do with Adam?"

The sound of his name renews my sadness.

"Yes." I step through the large metal doors on the far side of the kitchen. A dark alley greets me. I look left and see the street.

"Got it." Brigitte doesn't pry. "Don't worry about a thing, Avery. I'll take care of everything."

I believe her.

Brigitte has turned out to be a fantastic assistant. She's saved my ass several times when I forgot about deadlines or showed up late to meetings. All because I've been too wrapped up in wallowing about Adam.

It's like I've reverted back to a teenager who doesn't have the emotional intelligence given to her by an additional decade of life experience.

I hope that changes soon. Being heartbroken is exhausting.

I walk down the concrete steps and make my way towards the street. "Thank you so much, Brigitte. I owe—"

My voice dies as a noise reaches my ears. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end. I move to turn around, but

before I can, I am struck in the back of my head. Pain sears from the impact, and I fall on hands and knees.

I think I scream. I can't be sure.

I try to get up, but I have no control over my limbs. The alley starts to spin around me, my vision going dark at the edges. My arms give out, but before my face hits the ground, strong, ungentle hands circle around me.

That's when everything goes dark.

CHAPTER 42

Avery

MY HEAD THROBS and my body aches. I try to open my eyes, but the simple movement threatens to make my head explode.

I lie still, breathing deep, feeling disoriented.

“I didn’t tell you to fucking hit her,” an angry voice snarls nearby. I wince as the sound makes the pain in my head intensify.

Eyes squeezed shut, I take slow, deep breaths. My cheek is pressed against a firm surface. It feels like Adam’s couch. But that can’t be right. We replaced his couch with mine.

I try to lift my hands to rub my eyes. Pressure tugs on my wrists. My eyes crack open and panic flares when I look down and see my hands are tied with thick, scratchy rope.

I’m lying on my side on an unfamiliar couch. I’m still wearing my dress from the holiday party. A sharp throb pounds behind my eyes as I struggle to take in my surroundings. My pulse races.

I’m in an apartment with fine furnishings. It looks like it belongs in a catalogue. There are no personal effects. Just furniture with cool colors and sharp lines.

I don’t immediately remember what’s happened. Then, the dim alley comes to mind. The strange sound. And then the intense pain when something struck the back of my head.

That must be the source of my agony. I assess the rest of my body, and aside from my itchy wrists, nothing else feels unusual. Or hurt. Just achy.

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch,” a second voice reaches my ears. I strain to listen and hear which direction the words are coming from. “The princess will be fine.”

They’re nearby, but not in the same room. As I continue to listen, I struggle to make sense of what’s happened to me.

Clearly, I've been kidnapped. But instead of being locked up in someone's basement, I'm in a swanky apartment.

I don't know if this was a coordinated abduction, or if I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I look down at my bound wrists. A pull confirms the knots are sturdy, but there's some wiggle room. I begin to pull and twist my wrists, ignoring the burn, as I try to free myself.

I stop when a voice speaks, sounding closer, "You're sure no one saw you bring her here?"

"Positive. She fit perfectly in the laundry cart. No one suspected a thing."

The thought that I was stuffed in a laundry cart without knowing fills me with unease. I have no idea how long I was unconscious or what was done to me in that time.

I hold my breath and focus my attention on my lady bits, prepared for the worse. But nothing feels sore or stretched. I shift my hips and confirm the familiar sensation of my lace underwear.

Relief courses through me. I exhale.

"Did you hear that?"

Shit. Do I pretend to be unconscious, or do I let my abductors know I'm awake?

Footsteps approach. I don't have long to decide.

Realizing I'd rather face this situation than delay the inevitable, I keep my eyes open. A man with dark hair and stubble peppering his jaw steps into view.

"Good morning, princess."

I'm taken back to the night I was robbed, and I hear a deep, sinister voice demand I give him my purse.

"*You.*"

"Me." The man who robbed me outside my apartment grins down at me. "Long time, no see, princess. You are not an easy woman to get ahold of."

I shove my hands against the firm couch and sit up. My head spins. Even so, there's no mistaking the man's voice now that he's right in front of me.

My fear heightens as my mind tortures me by reliving that terrifying night.

Then, another memory hits me. I see this man sitting at a restaurant. I'm eating with Adam. And this man is staring at me.

"You've been following me," I croak.

"I'm surprised you noticed." He grins. "You seemed so focused on that billionaire of yours, I wasn't sure you would ever look at me."

Bile rises in my throat. I choke it down.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Me?" He holds a hand to his chest. "Nothing. Well, nothing from you. I'm just here to get paid."

My forehead furrows. "Paid?"

"Stop talking to her!"

The original voice interjects. I freeze.

No. It can't be...

Time slows.

A second pair of footsteps draws near.

The breath is knocked from my lungs when I see Kyle Waters walk into sight. He still wears his tuxedo, and not a hair is out of place as he looks me over with concern. "Hello, Avery."

CHAPTER 43

Adam

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND. How can there be no other footage of the man who abducted my daughter?” Eric Lawson, Avery’s father, asks the police chief.

We’re in my penthouse. The police commissioner is a friend of the family. It wasn’t difficult to arrange for his officers to use my space as a command center in the search for Avery.

That makes it sound like there are a dozen officers on the case. In fact, there are only four. The LAPD is spread thin.

At least the chief made the effort to be here.

He’s staying with me and Avery’s family while his officers are out searching for leads. So far, they’ve come up with nothing.

“There are no security cameras on the other end of the alley, so we didn’t get a shot of his face. And there are none angled towards the exit anywhere else on the street. Right now, we’re running the plates of any car we were able to catch in streetlight cameras. Our hope is one comes back linked to a known criminal.”

“Your hope is a criminal abducted my daughter?” Mr. Lawson’s fists clench.

His wife places a calming hand on his arm. “Thank you, Chief Montez. We appreciate everything you are doing to help us.”

Julia Lawson drags her husband away. They walk toward where I sit in the living room. Heather is on her sister’s couch. Avery never tried to get it, and I never mentioned it. If I’m being honest, I liked having the reminder of her in my home.

Heather stares down blankly at the cushion, running her fingers over the green fabric as if in a daze. Across the room, Derek’s face is pale. His eyes are bloodshot.

I'm not certain I look any better. It's been four hours since we discovered Avery's attack and abduction, but there is no clue as to who is responsible. Each of us still wear our clothes from the party, and no one looks like they'll be leaving anytime soon to change.

The only person who has left is Brigitte. Her boyfriend lives down the street. She went to his place to change. On the way back, she plans to grab food for the rest of us. Not that I think any of us will be eating.

"This is bullshit," Derek snaps.

"Derek," his mother chastises. "Language."

He pulls the end of his hair. "How can someone walk out of an alley carrying an unconscious woman, and no one saw a thing? There have to be witnesses."

"Chief Montez canvassed the area," I mutter. "Apparently, that was a dead end."

"But that shouldn't be possible. This is freaking LA, one of the most populated cities in the world." Derek shakes his head. Then, he stiffens. "Unless..."

"Unless what?" I press.

"Unless someone was waiting with a car at the end of that alley," Derek says.

Chief Montez overhears and says, "It is very possible we are dealing with more than one suspect."

Mrs. Lawson whimpers. Her husband wraps a comforting arm around her.

"If that's true, then let's hope a stoplight camera caught their license plate," I say, trying to be optimistic when all we can see before us is the dark unknown.

"That only works if the guy is a criminal," Heather murmurs.

"There's a high chance a guy who hits women over the head with a gun isn't an upstanding citizen," Derek tells his sister.

“I don’t know.” Heather sighs. “Something feels... *off*. Like I’m missing something.”

I know what she means. Something pricks the back of my mind, but try as I might, I cannot figure out what it is. I’ve replayed the evening multiple times in my head. I’ve gone over what I saw in the surveillance video of Avery’s actions.

A knock sounds on my front door, followed immediately by the slide of a key card. Natasha enters, carrying a tray of four coffees and her laptop bag. Behind her, Brigitte follows with another tray of coffee and a box full of donuts.

“The donut shop was the closest place open,” the redhead shares apologetically.

“It’s fine. Thank you, Brigitte,” Derek tells her.

She and Natasha deposit their items on the kitchen island. Everyone goes to get a cup of coffee. Except for me and Heather. All of Avery’s family is a wreck, but Heather is taking her sister’s abduction especially hard.

“I spoke to her not five minutes before she walked out of the hotel,” Heather mutters. I’m the only one around so I assume she’s speaking to me. “I knew she was upset. She told me she was going to leave. What if I stopped her and forced her to stay at the party? None of this would’ve happened.”

“What if I never spoke to her?” I counter with a sigh. “What if she and I never dated? None of this would’ve happened either.”

Heather frowns.

“We can play the ‘what if’ game all night, Heather, but there’s no point. It won’t solve anything.”

She takes a deep breath. “You’re right... but I’m still mad at you.”

I give her a weak smile. “I’m mad at me, too.”

I never should have let Avery walk away from me. I should have gone after her. I should have done a better job at explaining myself so she would’ve been inclined to give me a second chance.

I'm determined to have another shot to make things right. But, for now, I'm focusing my energy on getting my girl back. No matter the cost.

Being wealthy puts me in many social circles, and there's a seedier underbelly to the world that I've chosen to stay clear of. But when I saw the footage of Avery's attack, I didn't hesitate to call in a favor.

I wouldn't say the Italian mob has a strong presence in LA, but they have many allies. And right now, those allies are searching for any information on Avery's abduction. And I know they're efforts are strong.

Just like I know repayment won't be cheap.

And I'm not talking about money.

Companionable silence settles between me and Heather. We watch the others in the room drink their coffee, looking around anxiously, as if they'll see the sign we're all waiting for appear out of thin air.

A phone rings.

Both Heather and I jump.

The intrusive sound cuts off when Chief Montez accepts the incoming call. The whole room listens.

"Montez, here."

A brief pause.

"Yes, that is correct."

I press my lips together, straining to hear what's said on the other line. Nothing is audible.

Chief Montez's eyes widen. "Yes. That's great. Send it through."

He hurries to his laptop and types in his password, still listening to the person on the line as he clicks through screens. Instinct has me on my feet and walking over to where the chief huddles over his screen. He glances up.

Seeing it's me, he waves a hand for me to come look, as he says into the phone, "Stay on the line. Let me check something."

I round the table. The chief opens a file in a recent email. Text fills the screen. He scrolls down to a photograph and asks me, "Do you recognize this man?"

I stare at the dark-haired man with a thick beard. His lips are flat, but his eyes are crinkled in amusement despite the fact he's posing for a mug shot. His demeanor screams arrogance.

"No," I answer. "Who is he?"

"Richard Garbo." The chief scrolls up. "His car was seen parked close to the hotel, and it left around the time of Avery's abduction."

"What name did you say?" Derek strides across the room.

"Richard Garbo," I repeat. "Mean anything to you?"

"Maybe." Derek's eyes narrow. "I'm not sure."

He looks at the computer, but the chief closes the window.

"Sorry, son. Police files contain confidential information."

Derek's eyes shift to me for help.

"It's all right, Montez. Derek is discreet."

The chief's lips pinch together, but he relents and opens the screen, scrolling down to the picture.

The moment the man's face is in view, Derek releases a low curse. "Fuck, I know that guy."

"How?" Chief Montez asks.

"He goes by Rick. He's Kyle's martial arts instructor."

My blood runs cold. "Are you sure?"

Derek nods. "Yeah."

"Do you have any idea why he would want to abduct your sister?" the chief asks.

"No. I don't imagine they would've ever met. It doesn't make sense."

Maybe not to Derek... but suddenly... the pieces are starting to fall into place. I'm contemplating how to address my theory, when I'm beaten to the punch.

"Where's Kyle?" The question comes from Heather. She's standing from the couch, her hands clenched in fists at her side.

"What?" Derek asks.

"Where. Is. Kyle?" She bites out. "He's behind this. Where is that little shit?"

"Heather!" Mrs. Lawson says. "What are you talking about?"

"Kyle is obsessed with Avery. I know he's behind this." She looks around the room, conviction in her gaze.

"Who is Kyle?" Chief Montez asks.

"Kyle Waters. My childhood friend," Derek says. I don't know how it's possible, but his face looks even paler than before. "And my business partner. We founded our company together."

"And what motive would he have to abduct your sister?" the chief asks.

"Because he's crazy, and he's obsessed with her!" Heather yells. "You didn't see him at your party, Derek, but he was overt about his interest in Avery, even knowing she was dating Adam."

Mention of my name brings the room's attention to me.

I straighten my shoulders and say, "It's true. Kyle's behavior towards Avery has been inappropriate as of late."

That's all the reassurance Chief Montez needs.

Into the phone, he says, "Put a BOLO for Richard Garbo and his car, and add one for Kyle Waters. Research his vehicle registration, then add that vehicle to the list."

He listens to a reply then gets off the phone before immediately dialing another number.

As Chief Montez continues with his business, Eric Lawson looks between his daughter and son before landing on the former. “We’ve all known Kyle’s had a crush on Avery, but why would he abduct her? What does he hope to gain?”

“He has to know this will ruin his life,” Julia Lawson adds, shaking her head, eyes mournful. “He’s a smart boy. It’s not like him to be so reckless.”

“Because this is the only way for him to get what he wants,” Derek mutters.

All eyes turn to him. “What do you mean?” his father asks.

Chief Montez is still on the phone, but he’s paying attention to our conversation at the same time.

Derek runs a hand through his hair. “Kyle’s been upset lately. He doesn’t like the way the company is going.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “Source Solutions is a huge success. You’re bringing in more clients than you ever expected. Your growth is phenomenal.”

“That’s the point. Kyle wants success, but the pace which we are growing is overwhelming him. Not to mention, he doesn’t like that I’ve become the default face of the company.” Derek frowns and stares at the ground in front of him, shifting his feet. “Kyle asked me to buy him out of the company.”

“What?” Several in the room exclaim.

I stay silent and wait for him to continue.

“Kyle wants to leave the company. He wants me to buy him out.”

“What was your response?” Chief Montez asks, abandoning the phone call completely.

“I told him I couldn’t afford it.” Derek exhales. “My money is tied up in the company or other non-liquid assets.”

“How did he react?” Montez prompts.

“Badly.” Derek runs a hand through his hair. “He insisted I could buy him out—that I was just being selfish. But I don’t know how it’s selfish to want my best friend to hold on to his

share of our company so he can be rich in the future. I tried to reason with him, but he wouldn't change his mind."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Heather asks.

"Because it was business related. I didn't think it would matter. Not really. I thought he'd change his mind."

"But he didn't," I say. "Instead, he found another way to try and get what he wants."

It takes a moment for them to realize what I'm talking about.

"You think Kyle wants to ransom Avery?" Eric asks.

I nod. "It's the only thing that makes sense."

"But why?" Julia repeats her earlier concern. "He has to know this will ruin him. He has to know we'd go to the authorities."

"I'm sure Kyle has a plan." It's not my intention, but my words sound ominous.

Chief Montez clears his throat. "Right. Well, this is a solid lead and a pretty good motive. I'm sure I can persuade a judge to grant warrants on any of Waters' properties."

He repeats the information into the phone, instructing the officer to get on the task.

My pulse is racing, and my fists ache to punch something. Namely, a certain lanky dark-haired guy's face. I hate feeling helpless. And I'm worried.

If Kyle Waters is indeed behind this abduction, which my gut says he is, then he has to have a contingency plan to get out of it unscathed. He has to have help.

And I fear what will happen to Avery when all is said and done.

CHAPTER 44

Avery

“KYLE?” I choke. “What are you doing here?”

My brother’s best friend ignores me. His eyes are narrowed on the man leering at me with a malicious grin. “Why don’t you go get us something to eat?”

“Thought you wanted me to stay out of sight.”

“Wear a hood,” Kyle counters.

With a smirk, the man stands. “Aye, aye, boss.” He grabs keys from the table by the door and leaves, but not before shooting me a taunting wink.

The silence in the apartment is oppressive.

Kyle stares at me. I stare back. I’m struggling to come up with a logical explanation for my situation—one that doesn’t paint the young man before me as a villain.

I can’t come up with anything.

Finally, Kyle speaks, “How do you feel?”

“Like my head was bashed in.”

“I’m sorry about that, but we couldn’t have you scream and draw attention to yourself.”

My stomach churns. “What are you doing, Kyle? Why are you working with that criminal?”

“He’s helping me.”

“With what?”

“Getting what I want.”

“And what’s that?” I snap.

I hate how calm he sounds. I hate how he’s speaking to me like he didn’t arrange for a guy to knock me out and tie me up in his apartment.

“I want Derek to buy me out of the company.”

I blink. “You what?”

“I’m tired of standing on the sidelines while Derek drains all our resources and profits into this rapid expansion. I refuse to be here when it all comes crashing down. I want my cut now.”

“Kyle...” I shake my head. “Source Solutions is blowing up. Its success is remarkable. You helped create it. Why would you ever want to leave that?”

“Because I’m done being second to Derek.” He begins to pace the room. “We created this idea together. We worked on the software and developed the tech together. But things have changed. Derek’s become the face of Source Solutions. You were at his party. You saw all those models there, throwing themselves at us because of our money. Everything he does now is over-the-top. I don’t recognize him. And I don’t value these people who’ve leeches onto our company. So, I’m done. I’m getting out.”

I take in everything he says, and realize Kyle has some deeper issues influencing his decisions. I need to tread carefully.

Clearly, he’s unstable if he’s gone so far as to kidnap me.

“So, you want out of the company, but Derek won’t let you?”

“He says he can’t afford it.” Kyle scoffs. “Can you believe that? After he bought his massive house in Malibu, he has the audacity to try to tell me he doesn’t have the money to buy me out.”

I don’t know the details of my brother’s finances, but even if he had millions at his disposal, I’m not sure how easy it would be to buy Kyle out of the company, given he was one of the founders.

“So... what?” I prompt. “Derek said no, and your next option was to ransom me for him to agree?”

“Exactly.” Kyle plops down on the chair across the room. He leans back, lounging, acting as if we’re having a perfectly normal conversation and I’m not tied up.

I need to reason with him.

I need to talk him into letting me go.

“You realize this is illegal?”

“I’m aware.”

“And that Derek will go to the authorities,” I continue. “They won’t let you ride off into the sunset with your money.”

“He won’t have a choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“Derek will give me what I want because I have the ability to destroy all of Source Solutions’ technology if he doesn’t. Either he gives up half of the company’s value to me and keeps it, or he loses everything.”

That’s a pretty decent threat.

“Then why not just hold that threat over his head? Why kidnap me?”

“Because there’s only one thing Derek values more than the company. And that’s family.” Kyle avoids my gaze. He moves to an old-fashioned bar cart in the corner and pours himself a glass of dark liquor. “Would you like a drink?”

“No.”

Kyle shrugs then returns to the chair, sipping his drink like he doesn’t have a care in the world. But his bouncing leg gives him away.

“There’s something else going on,” I murmur. “This can’t all be about Derek taking the spotlight.”

Kyle’s jaw ticks. He doesn’t respond. Instead, he continues to sip his drink.

I take a leap. “Does this have to do with the other guy who was here? The one who robbed me?”

“That was supposed to be when we kidnapped you,” Kyle says, shocking me. “But Garbo fucked that up.”

The robbery was months ago. How did I not know how miserable Kyle was this whole time? How did *Derek* not

know?

I shove those questions aside. Something else is going on here.

I press my earlier hunch. “Kyle... you can tell me. What does that guy have on you?”

“Nothing.” His eye twitches.

I switch tactics.

Lowering my voice, I softly say, “Kyle, I’ve known you since we were kids. I care about you. Kidnapping me... ransoming me to Derek... it’s not you. I want to help. Tell me what’s going on, and I’ll help you.”

“Avery Lawson.” His eyes soften. “Always trying to help everyone else. Aside from your beauty, it’s one of my favorite things about you.”

I force myself not to scowl at the affectionate remark.

“Then let me help you.”

He takes another sip. He smacks his lips when done. “You are already helping me by being here.”

Like I have a choice.

“This is crazy, Kyle. Don’t do this. I know you don’t want to do this. You don’t want to hurt me.”

“Of course not, Avery.”

“Then why are you?”

He presses his lips together.

I play the only card I can think of. “I thought you cared about me. I thought you liked me.”

His eyes flash. “I more than like you, Avery.”

Yikes.

I swallow the lump in my throat and keep the innocent expression on my face. “Then tell me... why are you really doing this?”

His fingers drum against the wood armrest. I hold my breath, counting every second until he finally says, “I made some bad bets. My payout from Source Solutions would help pay off my debts, as well as free me from being beholden to the toxic trajectory the company is taking.”

And there it is.

Part of me feels for Kyle. He must be in some deep shit to be willing to do this. The Kyle I know is a good guy. He avoided trouble as a kid like the plague. We were kindred spirits in that regard.

But I cannot let myself forgive him for the situation he’s dragged me in.

“You’re on a tight timeline,” I guess.

“Yes,” he confirms. “Taking you will make Derek liquidate funds more quickly than a threat to crash the company would. I’m using all the resources I can think of.”

“Okay.” I nod. “I understand.”

“You do?”

“Yes. You’re desperate. You’re just doing what you think will solve your problems. But Kyle...” I pause and let my concern filter into my expression. “You know this won’t end well for you. Even if you get the money and escape, where will you go? What will you do?”

“You mean what will we do?”

I rear back like he slapped me. “I’m sorry?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to *see* me, Avery. I’ve been waiting for you to recognize I’m grown. I thought I had my chance after you ended things with that asshole in New York. I thought your move to LA would be our beginning. But then that son of a bitch Moreno showed up and ruined everything.”

All progress I thought I was making with Kyle disappears in a snap.

Dread swirls in my gut.

“Kyle, I think you’re great. But I’ve always viewed you as a broth—”

“Don’t say that.” Kyle slams his palm on the armrest.

I jump and slam my lips closed.

Regret fills his expression. He runs a hand through his hair.

“I apologize, Avery. I’m a little wound up. Perhaps it is best if we continue this conversation tomorrow.”

I don’t want to stay here another minute.

“Kyle, just let me go. Before it’s too late.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

He rises and walks over. I sink back into the firm couch, as he holds out his hand. I don’t want him to touch me, and he notices.

With a sigh, Kyle grabs my wrist and yanks me up. I stumble into his chest. A different emotion crosses his gaze, making my stomach roll.

I pull out of his grip and take several steps back. “Kyle... there will never be anything between us.”

“Never say never, Avery.” He turns on his heel. “Unless you want to be here when Rick returns, follow me. I’ll show you to your room.”

CHAPTER 45

Adam

“YOU HAVE TO EAT SOMETHING, Mr. Moreno.” Julia Lawson holds a donut in front of my face.

I take it to be polite, but I have no plans on eating it. I have no appetite.

“Thank you, Mrs. Lawson. Please, call me Adam.”

“Only if you’ll call me Julia. Mind if I join you, Adam?”

“Not at all.”

Avery’s mother sits on the patio chair next to me. We stare out at the faint glow of the rising sun on the horizon. It’s been over seven hours since Avery went missing, and other than identifying Kyle’s martial arts instructor’s car, there’s been little news.

The police went to Kyle’s apartment, but it was empty. And not just of people. The entire place had been cleaned out as if Kyle intended to move. The information did nothing to lessen any of my fears.

There’s no doubt in my mind Kyle is responsible for Avery’s abduction. Not after everything Derek shared. But since we haven’t heard anything from him, my brain is a tangled, anxious mess of many unknowns.

What is his end goal?

How do we get Avery back?

“I notice you haven’t slept.” Julia continues staring at the horizon.

“No. I have not.”

Even Avery’s parents managed to get an hour or so of sleep. I know I need to be rested in order to help Avery to the best of my abilities, but short of drugging myself, I won’t be able to shut off my mind long enough to sleep.

Drugs...

Avery after the pool party...

“That fucker,” I growl under my breath.

I’m now certain I know who tampered with Avery’s drink at Derek’s party. But what did Kyle have to gain? Was he hoping to get her alone and kidnap her?

Or was he just trying to sleep with my girlfriend?

“Did you say something?” Julia asks.

“Nothing.”

I don’t want to burden her with this information unnecessarily. She and her husband already believe Kyle is behind this, though they struggle to accept it. They can’t reason the man’s actions with the young boy they knew.

“I wanted to thank you.” Her words catch me by surprise.

“Thank me?”

Brown eyes turn toward me. Avery looks like her mother, but she got her eyes from her father. “For doing so much to help find Avery. For offering up your home so we can all stay together until we find her.”

The Lawson parents took over Avery’s old room while Derek and Heather took turns trying to sleep in my other guest room.

“There is no need to thank me for that,” I reply sullenly. “I’d do anything for Avery.”

Knowing eyes scan me from head to toe. “You still care for my daughter.”

It’s not a question, but I answer anyway. “Yes, I do.”

“Not to put pressure on an old wound, but I thought you were the one to end things.”

“I made a mistake.”

“I know what that’s like,” she says softly.

There’s no judgment in her tone.

Silence falls. Julia is content to let the subject drop—to not press the issue.

Suddenly, I have the urge to bare my soul. My heart is split in half, and my attempt to sew it back together backfired. I want to talk to someone about it.

“I asked Avery to take me back at the holiday party,” I admit. “She rejected me.”

“My daughter has always been a stubborn one.”

I give a half-hearted laugh, remembering all the times Avery and I butted heads. Especially in the beginning. Before our relationship was real.

“I know.”

“My husband and I were very glad when Avery broke up with Spencer.”

Not surprising. The guy’s an ass. I’m sure he couldn’t hide his true colors for long.

“You, on the other hand, we were cautiously optimistic about,” she adds.

I’m sure any parent would be excited to learn their daughter was dating someone as wealthy as me. No doubt, the Lawsons contemplated the potential of a future between us, and liked knowing their daughter would be taken care of.

Not that I blame them for feeling that way. I get it. I’d want the same for my daughter... if I ever had one.

The image of a little girl with wavy brown hair and piercing blue eyes assails me. Emotion burns my chest.

Julia continues, unaware of my turmoil, “Though, to be completely honest, we were less than thrilled at first. Your reputation left something to be desired.”

My earlier confidence flickers. “Some of the stories were true, but most were exaggerated by the press.”

“I can only imagine,” Julia says kindly. “But since we never met you, my husband and I had to trust our daughter. And what she said about you.”

I feel weak asking, but I can't resist. "What did Avery say about me?"

"Surprisingly little." Julia laughs. "Then again, Avery's always been reserved about sharing her personal life. Heather is the over-sharer of the two."

I could see that.

"It was Avery's demeanor that told us the most about you. She seemed happy—happier than we'd ever seen her in a relationship. And more self-assured. She wasn't doubting her decisions. About you. Her job. She was the confident young woman we knew as an adolescent. It was nice to see."

"I can't imagine Avery as anything but confident," I admit.

"This world can be cruel," Julia says. "Avery is resilient, but she's not immune to its effects."

Those words make me want to wrap Avery up in my arms and whisk her away to a private island somewhere. Away from the rest of the world.

But I know she wouldn't let me.

At the very least, I can be the one she comes home to. The one to refill her confidence when the world threatens to chip it away.

It she'd only let me back in...

"I should never have let her go," I murmur quietly.

Avery's mother hears.

"You'll have plenty of time to try to fix things. I know my daughter. She isn't over you yet."

My back straightens. "You think so?"

"I know so." She looks pointedly at the donut still whole in my hands. "Now, eat. You're going to need all your energy to convince my daughter to give you another chance. Trust me."

The smallest hope sparks in my chest. I take a bite of donut. Thoughts of Avery and the future I'm determined to have with her keeping me going.

Avery Lawson is mine.

And I'm hers.

I don't let myself doubt it for another second.

CHAPTER 46

Avery

I WAKE up in the guest room Kyle led me to, still wearing my dress from last night. The curtains are drawn, but light shines through the edges of the fabric.

The rope rubs raw skin, making me wince as I use my hands to push myself upright. Pressure in the back of my skull travels over my head. I press my fingers against my eyes to try and dull the ache.

I'd hoped Kyle would leave my hands untied after he removed them to allow me to use the restroom. But when I walked out of the bathroom, he immediately re-tied my wrists. They were slightly tighter than before. I believe he was taking out his frustration over the fact I refused to wear the skimpy pajamas he'd laid out for me.

I'm breathing deep, trying to will the pain away long enough for me to think, when I hear elevated voices coming from outside the room.

“—the pilot is aware of the plan.”

“How do you know he won't betray us?” I recognize Kyle's voice. He sounds skittish.

“Because we're paying him not to,” the first voice, I'm guessing Rick, says. “Now, let's get this show on the road. We've given them the night to freak out. It's time to make the call.”

My heart thumps. I scooch off the bed and creep out of the room. Things are quiet.

Then, I hear Kyle say, “Hello, Derek. I believe you know why I am calling.”

I stop at the edge of the hall and peek around the corner. Both men are standing around the coffee table in the middle of the living room.

“Avery is safe... for now. But that can quickly change if you don't give me what I want.” Kyle puts the call on speaker

and places it on the table.

“I’ve already told you,” my brother’s voice comes through. My hands press against my mouth to muffle my sob. “I don’t have that kind of cash lying around, Kyle. I can’t buy you out. Not yet.”

“That’s bullshit, Derek.”

“It’s not.” Derek’s voice is strained. “I thought you were my best friend, Kyle. I thought you cared about me and Avery. How can you do this?”

I watch Kyle shift uncomfortably. He stops the moment Rick turns his glare on him.

“I thought we were friends, too.” Kyle says. “Yet, you’ve been treating me like a second-class citizen in my own company. You’ve been meeting with investors, doing interviews, and making decisions without me.”

Derek stutters. “You said you didn’t want to be bothered with the business aspect of the company. You *asked* me to take the lead on all that stuff.”

“And take the lead you did. So much so, that I’m not even needed as a follower.”

I’ve heard enough. I can already tell this conversation is going nowhere.

I turn and jolt when I see the front door in view. Adrenaline pours into me. My heart races.

I glance back at the men. They’re still focused on the call. Now is my chance.

My bare feet barely make any noise as I creep towards freedom. I’m itching to make a run for it, but running is bound to draw their attention. If the door is locked, they’ll be on me before I can even open it.

So, I move slowly, walking sideways to keep them in my peripheral vision.

Derek and Kyle continue to go back and forth, but the blood pounding in my ears drowns out all sound except my

tiny breaths. My fingertips touch the door.

“AVERY!” Kyle’s shout spurs me into action.

Everything happens in a matter of seconds.

I try to turn the handle. It’s locked.

NO!

I flip the lock and turn the handle, but the deadbolt keeps the door shut. My hands shake as I turn the bolt, and a sense of victory fills me when the door moves inward.

Then a firm body slams against the door. Rick whirls on me with violent intent, then shoves me back. I scream, more in frustration than anything. Though, I do land awkwardly on my shoulder. My tied hands prevent me from catching myself properly.

“Don’t hurt her!” Kyle shouts.

It’s followed by Derek’s frantic cry. “Avery!”

Anger fuels my words. “Don’t give him anything, Derek,” I scream at my brother. “Don’t you dare. AH!”

Rick grabs me by the hair and yanks. I scramble to get my knees under me to relieve the pressure.

“I said, don’t hurt her,” Kyle shouts again.

“Who else is there, Kyle?” Derek asks. “Is it Rick? Are you going to let him hurt Avery?”

“Shut up!” Kyle shouts towards the phone.

Rick drags me to the living room. I yelp when he shoves me towards the coffee table. I barely manage to twist my body so my head doesn’t collide with the sharp corner.

“Avery.” Derek’s voice is strained. “We’ll get you out of this. I swear. What?”

The sound of a shuffle precedes an accented voice saying, “I’ll buy you out, Kyle.”

Adam.

So many emotions flow through me.

Relief.

Hope.

Worry.

Confusion.

I'm glad he's with Derek and, hopefully, my parents and Heather.

Adam has connections. Even though we aren't together, I know he will do everything in his power to help me. I know he cares.

It just wasn't enough to stay with me.

"Adam Moreno," Kyle spits. "You're the one who started this problem. Before you, Source Solutions was doing fine. Then you came in, flaunting your money, and lured my friend into your vile world of greed and excess. Now, look what's happened."

"You want money, Kyle," Adam replies evenly. "Well, I have the money. I'll give it to you in exchange for Avery's safe return."

"I don't want your money," he spits back.

That earns another glare from Rick.

Kyle ignores it. "You robbed me of my best friend, and then you tried to take Avery from me."

"Avery was never yours," Adam says coolly.

I wince.

Kyle's face turns red. "She is with *me*. I have her. And I'm not letting her go."

My blood runs cold. "What?"

"What?" Rick barks at the same time.

"You won't get what you want if you don't return Avery," Adam sounds a little less composed.

"I don't care. I'll die before I give a man like you *anything* he wants."

“Is that your final call?” Rick asks his partner.

Kyle’s eyes flick to him. He frowns, worried, but he doesn’t back down. “Yes.”

He looks back at the phone, glaring. As if Adam can feel the extent of his hatred through the device. He doesn’t see Rick move.

I watch, frozen, as the man pulls out a gun—the same one he hit me over the head with.

Time slows.

He points it at Kyle.

I scream a warning, but it’s too late.

Rick pulls the trigger.

Shouts come from the phone and from me.

Kyle’s eyes grow wide as a red stain blossoms on his dress shirt. He falls to the floor. His body twitches briefly. Then, he stills.

Rick’s arm lowers to his side. “You’re dealing with me now, Moreno,” he says into the phone. “And the price for the girl just went up.”

CHAPTER 47

Avery

I'M SITTING in the back of a black sedan with dark tinted windows. I don't remember how I got here. Everything is a blur. I've been moving on autopilot since I watched Kyle's murder.

Vaguely, I recognize I'm in shock. But the realization isn't enough to shake me out of it.

The binding around my wrist is gone, replaced by cold metal cuffs. Their sharper edges pressing into my sore wrists makes me long for the scratchy rope.

Rick is driving and talking through a Bluetooth headset. I force myself to try to focus and listen.

"I don't care about your agreement with Waters. You're working for me now. There's been a change of plans. We need to leave within an hour. I'm on my way to the airfield now."

A pause.

"Then call them and get them to fuel the damn jet. Tell them they'll get a ten percent bonus if they get it taken care of."

Rick scratches his ear. His eyes lift and look in the rearview mirror. Our gazes meet. His narrows suspiciously before looking back at the road.

"I've got to go. Just get it done. You'll be compensated for your extra efforts." He taps the ear piece. "Don't even think about trying to escape again. I promise you won't like the consequences."

I'm so numb, the threat barely registers. "Where are we going?"

"Mexico. Then straight to the Caymans to withdraw the funds sent by your pretty boyfriend. Waters should have ransomed you to him in the first place. The kid was too short-sighted."

Gradually, my thoughts clear. I don't let myself think about Kyle. If I do, I risk falling back into shock. I need to have my wits about me if I want to avoid getting on a plane.

“If you take me with you, they're going to come after you. They'll monitor your every move. You won't be able to escape.”

“Don't worry about me, princess. I know what I'm doing.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. I hope that's just an expression, and he hasn't actually done this before.

Adam's involvement increases the odds I'll get out of this situation. I know he won't fall through on a ransom payment. But he has resources that extend beyond money.

I can only pray he is using those resources to help me beyond pulling together the ransom payment. I hope he's coming up with a way to find me.

Thirty minutes later, we pull up to a regional airport. A small jet sits outside the single hangar. There isn't a soul in sight.

Rick curses.

“Those fuckers were supposed to fuel the plane.” He slams on the breaks. My seatbelt locks, saving me from colliding with the front seat. “They can kiss their bonus goodbye.”

He gets out of the car and slams the door behind him. He doesn't spare me a single glance as he stomps towards the hangar. Two anxious looking men run out to meet him. They speak frantically, their arms waving in the air.

Whatever they say infuriates Rick. He takes out his gun and points it at one guy.

I gasp.

But he doesn't pull the trigger.

The two men hustle back to the hangar, returning seconds later with a fuel hose. Rick lowers his gun as they hook the hose up the plane. Then, he takes out his phone and makes a call.

Knowing these men aren't about to die, I take the time to look at the rest of my surroundings.

Barren trees and unkempt shrubs surround the airfield and runway. The road behind me is empty. There are no other buildings, and we drove past the last house five minutes ago. Even if I escape, I won't find shelter anytime soon. The weather is unseasonably cold for California, and I'm still wearing my gown from the holiday party.

Rick's voice permeates the vehicle as he yells at the person on the phone. He waves his gun around in anger.

Screw it.

I'll take my chances. Trying to escape is better than letting Rick take me out of the country without a fight.

I try the door to my right. Then left. Both are locked.

A glance confirms Rick is still shouting on the phone. I scramble through the two front seats. No easy feat when my hands are cuffed and my legs are contained by a form-fitting gown.

Somehow, I manage to slide into the driver's seat. After taking a steadying breath, I open the door.

The moment my feet hit the cold ground, I hike up the gown's fabric to my thighs and run. My rhythm is awkward with my cuffed hands holding the gown. I swing them from side to side as much as I can and try to pick up speed.

"HEY! No! Stop!" Rick's shouts spike my adrenaline. "Don't make me shoot you!"

I'd rather be shot running than ransomed like a passive princess.

The closest brush is about twenty yards away. I head straight for it. It's unlikely I can outrun Rick in the open, but through winding overgrowth, I just might have a shot.

I'm ten yards away when shots fire. I stumble and nearly land on my face, but I'm not hit. My feet, miraculously, stay underneath me, and I continue to the brush. The gown threatens to tangle my legs.

Rick's threatening shouts continue. I ignore them. He needs me alive to get paid.

But nothing says you have to be unharmed.

I duck into the brush as another shot fires. The sound rings in my ears as fabric and hair snags on branches and shrubs. I push past them, ignoring the sting as scratches litter my body.

I continue to run. Rick is still shouting, but he sounds farther away.

I don't look back.

More gunshots go off, but they sound different. They fire too quickly, in rapid succession.

Oh, god.

Are multiple people shooting at me?

I need to find somewhere to hide. I can't outrun bullets.

I'm scouring for a hiding place as I run when a strong arm comes out from behind the wide, leafless tree I pass. The arm wraps around my torso and tosses me to the ground. I land on my stomach, and someone else's weight lands on top of me.

"AH—" My scream is cut off by a meaty hand shoved over my mouth.

Next to my ear, a smooth voice I don't recognize says, "Be still, Avery Lawson. We are here to help."

He has an accent. It's not Spanish, but close. I jerk my head in a nod. Cautiously, the man removes his hand.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"Friends of Adam Moreno."

Relief is instant. I knew Adam would try to help me.

I choke back a sob.

"Our men should clear the airfield in a moment. Until they do, it's best to stay down to avoid a stray bullet."

I comply. The entire time we wait, my heart is beating a bruising rhythm against my sternum.

The man's chest is no longer pressed against my back. He holds his weight off me, but his breath billows in the frigid air near the side of my face.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"Just outside Sequoia National Forest, on a private airfield."

I'm not super familiar with the layout of the state, but I'm glad to confirm we're still in California.

A gruff voice from somewhere behind me says, "Nero just signaled the all clear."

I turn my neck and see a second man crouched behind shrubs. He lowers a pair of binoculars. The man hovering over me gets to his feet. He offers a hand and helps me up.

My legs are shaky from all the adrenaline. The man keeps hold of my arm as he and his partner lead me back towards the airfield.

My eyes strain to see through the gnarled trees, and I try to hear anything as we approach. Other than what sounds like a door slam, I don't hear a thing. And I can't see anything other than the outline of the hangar.

As we draw near, the man releases me and moves in front, swinging his rifle from his back to his hands. The other man moves behind me. A glance confirms he wields his own weapon.

We break into the airfield's clearing. Two black SUVs with dark windows are parked haphazardly in front of the hangar. All four doors are flung wide open. The occupants exited the vehicle in a hurry.

"Nero," the man leading us barks.

A tall, lean man steps out from behind one of the cars. The automatic weapon in his hands reminds me of mafia movies. Its disconcerting to see one in real life.

"All clear," the man, Nero, says.

The men lower their weapons.

Nero turns his attention to me. “Are you all right, Avery?”

Wow.

This guy is gorgeous. Like... belongs on a magazine cover next to Heather gorgeous. I’m so taken aback by his otherworldly good looks, I forget he asked me a question.

The man behind me chortles. “You’ve done it again, Nero. You’ve rendered a woman speechless.”

Embarrassment floods my cheeks. Nero smirks.

“I’m fine,” I say, shaking my head, getting ahold of myself.

Nero goes to speak, but he’s interrupted.

“Avery!” My knees grow weak as I recognize the Spanish accent that’s been starring in my dreams for months.

Adam Moreno rounds the corner of the hanger. He wears a bullet proof vest, and he looks like he hasn’t slept. But when his emerald green eyes lock onto mine, he looks strong and steady, and like exactly what I need right now.

He runs toward me but pulls up short when he’s just a few feet away. I use my last bit of strength to move forward and throw myself into his chest. His arms wrap around me, holding my weight.

Then, I break down.

CHAPTER 48

Adam

“THANK YOU AGAIN, Salvatore. I am in your debt,” I say to the leader of the Italian mob in North America.

He resides in New York and is a prominent real estate developer and businessman. He’s the cousin of Giorgio Lansing, my grandfather’s close friend. That’s who I got his number from.

I’ve always known Giorgio and his family rose to power through unconventional means, but I’ve never once contemplated calling on him for help with anything.

I know what it means to owe the Furnaris a favor.

But when Avery was abducted, there was nothing I wouldn’t do to help get her back. Including linking myself with a man as dangerous as Salvatore Furnari.

“I am pleased with the outcome, as I’m sure you are,” Salvatore replies. “As for the debt, there is no debt among friends. However, if I shall ever be in need of help, I hope I can count on you.”

That’s the same thing.

I exhale. “Of course. You have my word.”

“It’s been a pleasure, Moreno,” he says just before ending the call.

I sit on Avery’s sofa, staring out the window of my spotless penthouse. Natasha ordered a cleaning service to tidy the place after the police and the Lawsons left. That was a week ago, shortly after Avery was rescued.

Terror still grips me when I think about how close we came to losing Avery. Every single one of us knew that there was a chance Rick would not hold up his end of the bargain. If he got Avery out of the country, Lord only knows what he would’ve done once he got his money.

My phone rings.

I look at the screen. I sit up straight when I see who's calling.

"Avery?" My heart is in my throat.

It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, but I've kept my distance from Avery this past week. After holding her in my arms while she cried, I wanted nothing more than to stay by her side in case she needed me.

But I know Avery.

What she needed was to lean on her family—to rely on their support as she processed everything that happened since she was taken.

Confirming Kyle Waters was dead had been a shock. I can only imagine what it did to Avery to witness such a violent act.

But the fact that she's calling me stokes the hope that I'd kept dormant these past few days.

"Hello, Adam." Her voice is nearly my undoing.

"How are you doing?" I wince the moment the words pass my lips. It's an insensitive question.

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"Better now."

Do I imagine it, or does she inhale a sharp breath?

Is that a good thing?

"Derek told me you haven't left for Spain."

Hope rages like white water rapids. "No, I haven't."

Silence is her response.

I swallow back my nerves and go for what I want. "Are you free for dinner tonight? I'd love to see you."

I hold my breath. I can't explain why, but it feels like our entire future rests on the precipice. Her response will dictate where we go from here.

"I'm not in town," she replies, dulling, but not erasing, my hope.

“Where are you?”

“Michigan. With my parents.”

“When will you be back?” *When can I take you on a date and beg you to be mine again?*

I bite the inside of my cheek as I wait for her response.

“I...” She sighs. “I don’t think I’m coming back.”

“What?”

“I think I’m going to stay in Michigan for the foreseeable future. Going back to LA... to those memories... I’m just not up for it yet.”

“But what about your job?”

Source Solutions hit a bump with Kyle’s scandal and subsequent death. Some investors pulled out, but the company is holding strong. A lot of that is thanks to Derek. Sure, my capital secured the company, but his leadership in the wake of such trauma really held everyone together. It’s impressive how he’s hardly missed a beat.

“I’ll work remotely. I’ve already cleared it with Derek.”

No. This can’t be happening.

Avery is right in my reach, but I feel her slipping away. But I won’t let go that easy.

“Can I come visit you?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to do that,” I say. “I can be there tonight.”

“Adam.” She sighs. “This isn’t why I called.”

“Then why did you call?”

“To say thank you. I never had the chance at the airfield.” Her voice is shaky as she relives the memory.

“You don’t need to thank me.” *I’d do anything for you.*

“Yes, I do. So... thank you, Adam. Truly. You saved my life.”

The reminder her life was ever in danger feels like a knife to the heart.

“You’re welcome, Avery.”

Silence, once again, settles. I’m content to sit here and listen to her breathing. I’d do this all day. Just the reminder that she’s alive and well, and on the phone with me, is a balm to my fractured heart.

“Let me come to Michigan,” I plea softly. “Let me take you to dinner.”

I know I don’t imagine her breath hitching this time. “Adam... we can’t.”

“We can.”

“We broke up.”

“A mistake I’ve already owned up to.”

“You had your reasons.”

“Which were all bullshit, and just a means to take the coward’s way out when I felt myself falling for you.”

“Adam...” She sighs again.

My heart is pounding in my chest. I feel like I’m going to throw up. She’s saying goodbye, and there’s nothing I can do to stop her.

“I want you back, Avery. Tell me what I need to do for you to give me a second chance.”

“I’m sorry, Adam. But there’s nothing. My mind is made up. This is what’s best.”

My hope splinters into sharp shards.

“How is being apart what’s best for us?” I’m straight up begging. But my pride doesn’t care. It’s willing to be pulverized into dust if it means Avery agrees to be mine again. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone, Avery. I realized my mistake before you were kidnapped, but then when I was faced with the thought of losing you forever... I couldn’t stand it.

You're the only one I want. You're perfect for me, Avery Lawson. I want us to be together."

"Our relationship was great, Adam, until it wasn't. We both knew it wasn't going anywhere. We're too different."

My temper flares. "How are we different?"

"You know how, Adam." Avery's tone softens. She's trying to let me down easy.

I rebel against her kindness.

"Because I'm rich?" I challenge.

"Because we don't live in the same worlds, Adam, let alone the same country. You were always going to go back to Spain."

I don't have to.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but I can't say them. Though my pride is shattered, that's not the problem.

The problem is... I want Avery to want me because *she* wants me. I want her to *want* to make this work. No matter what.

She's the type of person who has to make this choice on her own. Or else she'll always question it.

So, though it pains me to say it, I mutter, "I understand."

"You do?"

No!

I clear my throat. "Yes."

Her voice trembles when she says, "I am sorry, Adam."

Me too.

"Take care, Avery."

"Goodbye, Adam. And thank you again. For everything."

Before I lose my resolve and resort to begging once again, I hang up.

I'm back to staring out the penthouse window, feeling numb. The woman of my dreams was in my arms, and I fucked it all up.

I guess some things never change.

CHAPTER 49

Avery

Two and a half months later.

“HOW DO I LOOK?”

Mom turns away from the floor length mirror to face me and Heather. She wears a curve-hugging white dress with the end of the skirt flaring at her knees. Her heels are made of nude-colored lace, and her shawl is made of faux white fur.

“You look stunning,” Heather says, approaching our mom for a hug.

My sister and I wear matching pale blue gowns. The satin material slides over my skin as I stand and join their embrace.

“My girls.” Mom squeezes us tight. “Thank you both so much for helping to arrange this party. Your dad and I are so touched.”

“Of course, Mom,” I say with my own squeeze before stepping back. “Thirty years is a big deal.”

I wish we could’ve done something big for their twenty-fifth anniversary, but my siblings and I were far from financially stable to pull off something like that. Not that our parents cared. They were just as touched by us pulling together money to book them a visit to a bed and breakfast on the coast of Lake Huron.

“Everything is just so nice. I mean, look at this place.”

Mom gestures to the fancy bridal dressing room in the fanciest hotel in Ann Arbor. Ornate crown molding edges the walls and gilded light fixtures are posted throughout the room. The ballroom where the anniversary party will be held showcases the same expensive finery.

“Anything for you and Dad.” Heather presses a light kiss on her cheek. “Speaking of Dad, we should go check on him

and Derek. But you have to stay in here. No first looks until the photographer is here to catch the moment.”

Mom laughs. “You’re so silly. This isn’t a wedding.”

“Just play along, Mom,” Heather says. “It’ll be fun.”

“All right,” she concedes with a grin. “I’ll stay here.”

Heather and I leave the bridal suite and make our way to where our father, brother, and Uncle Derek are getting dressed.

“I forgot to ask, how was your client meeting yesterday afternoon?” Heather asks.

“Great. I think they’re going to sign with me.”

“That’s fantastic.”

“It is.”

When I returned to Michigan, it only took about two weeks until I started feeling stir-crazy. I missed going into Source Solutions each day and working my tail off for Derek’s company.

I’m still managing a lot of their PR related business, but Brigitte has naturally stepped in to fulfill the in-person roles. I realized I needed something else to fill my time. So, when Heather came to me and told me about a friend of hers looking for a new PR agent to help her rebrand so she could transition from a catalogue model to fashion model, I took the leap and started my own PR firm.

Now, I have three clients. But if this latest meeting went as well as I believe, it’ll be four soon. I’ve been able to manage all the new clients on my own, thanks to Brigitte covering Source Solutions, but it’s probably time to hire additional help.

“Why don’t you sound happy?” Heather asks.

“I am happy.”

She frowns skeptically. “I think you’re forgetting I’m your twin, Avery. I know your moods almost as well as my own.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. I’m happy.”

She sighs. “What is it going to take for you to admit you regret the way things ended with you and Adam?”

We reach the main lobby and begin to weave through the crowd of people. Some are guests for our parents’ party. Heather and I say quick hellos but keep moving.

When we’re out of ear shot, Heather prompts, “Well?”

“Well, what, Heather?”

“When are you going to admit you miss Adam?”

“There’s no point.”

“Of course, there’s a point,” Heather argues. “You know, you’re allowed to change your mind about stuff. You don’t have to stubbornly stand your ground when it’s obvious that’s not what you want.”

Her prying brings emotions to the surface that I’ve successfully suppressed since leaving Los Angeles.

My parents insisted on me speaking to a counselor about the trauma of my abduction and seeing a childhood friend murdered right in front of me. And I’m still working through that.

But Mom and Dad did not insist I address my breakup with Adam. Their restraint was impressive really. As psychologists, with my mother’s specialty being relationship dynamics, I was surprised by their lack of pressure on that subject.

“You’re forgetting that Adam broke up with me, Heather.”

The words still hurt to say.

“You know he changed his mind!”

“For now, but what happens months from now? Or a year? Or two?” I shake my head. “If Adam and I got back together, we would inevitably wind back up at the same place. Ending things now was for the best. Even if it hurt.”

“Why are you so sure you and Adam won’t work out?”

We reach the hallway leading to the men’s changing room, but Heather stops and blocks the way. Her arms are crossed. I

know she isn't going to let this subject drop.

I mimic her posture and cross my arms. "Because I know, Heather."

"How?"

I throw my hands up in the air. "I just do."

"Like you knew you and Spencer would break up? Oh, wait. That's not true. You actually debated marrying that asshole. You're obviously a great judge of character."

Ouch.

"That's not fair."

"What's not fair is that you're letting a setback rob you of your happiness. Adam admitted he wants you back. He knows he made a mistake. Why can't you believe him when I know you want him back, too?"

Because it would hurt too much if he changes his mind.

I inhale through my nostrils. This isn't what I want to talk about today. Today is supposed to be about celebrating Mom and Dad.

But my sister is stubborn... just like me.

"Look, it's been months, and I haven't heard from Adam. I have too much going on to wonder if he's still interested in a relationship. We don't even live in the same country anymore."

Derek let it slip a few weeks ago that Adam had returned to Spain. I'm not ashamed to admit I cried myself to sleep that night.

"You don't think Adam is still interested?"

As much as it hurts to say, I do, "No, I don't."

Heather bites her lip. Her forehead furrows as she debates something in her head. I don't expect her next words.

"Who do you think arranged for the party in this hotel, Avery?"

I stare at my sister. "We did."

“No... we didn’t.”

Unease curls in my chest. “What are you talking about, Heather?”

With a lift of her chin, Heather says, “Adam is the one who worked with the hotel to get the ballroom for Mom and Dad’s party.”

My heart lodges in my throat.

“No,” I try to argue. “There was a last-minute cancelation.”

That’s what the hotel event coordinator said when they called me to book the room.

“You and I both know this ballroom was booked for years when we looked at it as an option, not to mention it was well out of our price range.”

“You, Derek and I paid the discounted rate for the late cancellation.”

“Come on, Aves.” Heather rolls her eyes. “You’re not dumb. You know Derek’s funds are locked up in the company while the police finish their investigation into Kyle’s death and his connection with that Rick guy. And I declined that cover shoot next month, so my money is tight.”

I did *not* know that last part.

“Wait, you declined the Petre Coronado shoot?” Why would my sister decline working with one of the most renowned fashion designers in the world?

“We can talk about that later.” Heather waves a dismissive hand. “The point is, Adam arranged all this just to make you happy. Just to make our parents happy. He is not done with this relationship.”

I can’t let my budding hope surface. It’ll hurt too much when it’s crushed.

“Adam is rich, Heather. Money means nothing to him.”

“But the fact he thought of using his money for *this* doesn’t count? You’re devaluing his gift just because he’s

rich?”

I purse my lips.

It might seem ungrateful, but I have to be honest, “I would prefer a different gesture.”

“You’re saying you would prefer if Adam showed up and gave a speech as his grand declaration of love?”

Am I? I guess so. It certainly beats him trying to win my affection with money.

Adam never tried to use that tactic during our relationship. Despite his wealth, every date with him had been as low key as he could manage, not counting the events and outings we arranged for the press to help mend his reputation.

It made me like him that much more.

“Avery?” Heather prompts.

“Yes, okay? Fine. I’d prefer a gesture versus him paying for our parents’ party.”

Heather’s expression morphs into a mischievous smile. “Well, then, I suppose it’s a good thing I didn’t talk him out of coming.”

My eyes widen. “You what?”

She looks over my shoulder.

I already know who stands there before I hear a sexy, Spanish accent say, “Hello, Avery.”

CHAPTER 50

Adam

MY HANDS ARE SHAKING. I hide them behind my back and straighten my spine. I don't want Avery to see how nervous I am—how the sight of her after all these months threatens to ruin me.

She looks gorgeous. Her hair and makeup are professionally done, highlighting all of her beautiful features and showcasing her graceful neck.

I long to touch her.

To hold her.

I keep those desires at bay. It's a miracle she agreed to speak with me. I know she's on a timeline for the anniversary party.

Heather excused herself to check on her father and brother, leaving me and Avery alone. We moved to the lobby. I suggested we sit in the arm chairs near the stone fireplace, but Avery prefers to stand.

I'll do anything she wants. Just as long as she talks to me.

Except, we aren't talking right now. Avery is staring at the landscape painting showcased on the wall next to us, chewing on her bottom lip.

After a moment, she asks, "Why are you here, Adam?"

Her attention remains on the painting. She sounds uneasy. Nervous.

That's good. It's better than angry.

"These months without you have been agony, Avery. I don't wish to endure it any longer. Tell me what I can do to convince you to be with me."

My blunt response draws her wide-eyed gaze to me. "Adam, I—"

“No. I mean, please, just wait. Let me say something before you respond.”

Avery pauses, then nods. “Okay.”

I take a breath and run a shaky hand through my hair. Suddenly, I don’t know what to say. Her presence and the fear of messing up renders me mute.

I stare at her with open, pleading eyes as I frantically try to figure out what to say to convince her to be mine again.

“I’ve never seen you so nervous,” she says softly.

I give a weak laugh. “That’s because I’ve never been this terrified.”

Her eyes drop to the floor. She surprises me when she speaks. “I’ve been going to counseling lately.”

I know.

Derek takes pity on me and gives me snippets of information about Avery’s life. His reluctant kindness is all that’s kept me from losing my mind these past two months.

“That’s good,” I say.

Avery went through hell. I’m glad she’s talking to someone about what happened. It’s better than bottling up her problems.

Like I do.

I’m working on that.

“It is.” Avery agrees. Then, she adds. “I realized something about myself recently. Something I probably should’ve known.”

“What is that?”

“That I’m risk averse.”

I don’t speak. I just watch her, praying her words will be in favor of us.

“I’ve spent my whole life fixing other people’s problems. Starting with my siblings, and then I made a career out of it. I... I never really thought about how to solve my own. With

Spencer, I thought I handled it when I left him, but then the car loan bit me in the ass.”

She takes a deep breath. “When you solved it for me... I was both appreciative and wary. You were so generous to help, but I’ve never relied on anyone. It scared me.”

“Me helping you scared you?”

“Me *letting* you help me scared me. I almost ended our relationship then.”

My heart is pounding. “But you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t.” Her eyes soften. “But you did.”

“I already told you, that was a mistake.”

“I know you did, but how can I trust you won’t think the same thing in the future? I know your parents had a toxic end. I don’t blame you for being wary of meeting the same fate.”

Hope, that torturous, blessed feeling, creeps into my chest.

“Because you aren’t the only one who realized something about yourself. Or who got scared.” I take a steadying breath. “I’ve never let myself fall for a woman, Avery. But I didn’t just fall for you. I collided, head first and heart open. It reminded me of the love my father claimed he felt for my mother, and it scared me.

“So I ended it before I could get hurt. But it didn’t take long for me to realize the agony of the what-ifs would mar me the rest of my life. I realized I would never forgive myself for giving up on something so great. So rare.”

I lick my dry lips. Emotion strains my voice as I say, “I love you, Avery, and I will spend the rest of my life trying to prove it to you. Even if it takes years. If that’s what it takes to get you to give me another chance, I’ll have no regrets.”

Her lips part. Her eyes dart between mine, searching for the answer to her next question, “You love me?”

“More than I’ve ever loved anyone.” I take a step closer. My heart squeezes when she doesn’t back away. “If you break

my heart, then so be it. I'm not afraid of any future, except for the one where you aren't in it."

And there it is.

I've laid my heart at her feet. The only thing I can do is hope she's willing to take this leap with me.

Avery's chest rises and falls. In a whisper, she asks again, "You love me?"

I take another step. Feeling bold, I lift a trembling hand to cup her face. My thumb caresses her smooth cheek. "Yes, I love you, Avery."

She takes a stuttering breath. "I love you, too."

We move at the same time.

Avery rises on her toes, and I lower my head. Our mouths collide and months of pent-up love and anguish are poured into the kiss. I wrap my arm around her back and press her into my chest. Her hands grab the lapels of my tux and hold tight. Passion has our heads pushing and shoving in a familiar dance.

A throat clears behind us.

Avery breaks away, staring up at me in a daze. Before her, I would've thought it a lusty expression. Now, I recognize the love in her eyes.

Another throat clearing drags her eyes over my shoulder.

"Aunt Chloe."

She releases my tux and takes a quick step back. Reluctantly, I drop my arm to let her. I wipe my mouth discreetly, hoping to clean off any lipstick, before I turn to greet one of Avery's family members.

I'm greeted by not one woman, but two. Their ages and similar features lead me to believe they are mother and daughter.

"Hello, Avery." The older woman grins. Avery awkwardly hurries forward to embrace her, then does the same to the younger woman.

“Hi, Olivia. It’s so nice to see you.”

“Hey, Aves,” Olivia wears a smirk of her own. “Are you going to introduce us to your friend?”

“Oh, dear. I believe he is more than a friend, don’t you?” Her mother’s eyes glint.

The pair share a laugh. I join in.

“I’m Adam Moreno,” I extend my arm. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

I shake their hands while Avery watches on. Her face is an adorable share of red.

My next words make the color deepen. “I’m Avery’s boyfriend.”

Avery chokes on spit, earning another chuckle from the rest of us. I step next to her and gently pat her back.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Adam. I’m Chloe, a college friend of Julia’s. I’ve known Avery since she was just a twinkle in her father’s eye.”

“Gross,” Avery chokes.

“And this is my daughter, Olivia. She’s Derek’s age. All the kids grew up together, so they’re basically cousins.”

“Nice to meet you,” Olivia says.

I return the sentiment.

“I was looking for my husband,” Chloe tells Avery. “Do you know where he is?”

“I think he’s with Dad in the changing room,” Avery wheezes.

“Okay. I’ll speak with him later. We’ll go see your mother in the bridal room. I cannot wait to see her dress.” Chloe’s eyes sparkle, then she turns her attention back to me.

“You may resume making out with my goddaughter when we leave.”

“Aunt Chloe!”

We all laugh, even Avery, despite the fact she's as red as a cherry. Avery and I watch Chloe and Olivia leave. My arm slides around my shoulder.

“Boyfriend, huh?” She looks up at me with a tiny smile.

“It was either that or lover.”

She laughs.

The knot that's been tied around my heart finally loosens. I almost don't know how to feel without the painful pressure reminding me of my loss. But staring down at Avery, I acknowledge I would do it again. As long as it led me right here—to this moment.

I lower my head and press my mouth to hers, silently vowing to kiss her every chance I get. I need to make up for lost time.

“Will you be my date to the party?” she murmurs against my lips.

I smile and kiss her again. “I thought you'd never ask.”

EPILOGUE

Avery

One year later.

“THIS IS SO BEAUTIFUL, Adam. I can’t believe you managed to keep this trip a surprise!” I say, leaning against his chest, staring out at the natural beauty in front of us.

Adam and I are sitting on a beach in Spain, not too far from his family’s villa. White sand spreads out around us. Adam’s legs are bent and wide, allowing me to sit in-between them and relax as we enjoy the gorgeous sunset over the Mediterranean.

“It wasn’t easy.” Adam kisses my temple. “You’re annoyingly observant.”

I chuckle. “Well, thank you for the effort. This is perfect.”

Muscular arms tighten around me. “You deserve a break. You’ve had a busy year.”

So busy.

My PR firm has taken off. Lawson PR Services now represents over thirty clients, with over half being affluent celebrities and the rest being corporations like Source Solutions. I’ve left Brigitte in charge of overseeing the corporate accounts with a whole team of her own while I manage the models, actors, and actresses with my own team.

Honestly, my life feels like a dream.

Not only is my career thriving, but I have the love and support of a man as gorgeous and intelligent as Adam Moreno.

I mean, he relocated to freaking Michigan to help our relationship thrive. While Ann Arbor is lovely, it’s not exactly a hot bed for billionaire CEOs of foreign corporations.

Initially, I was hesitant to let him make such a sacrifice for me. In fact, I tried to insist against it.

The idea that Adam would give up a fabulous life in California or his family in Spain to be with me felt like a lot. We loved each other, but I feared he would come to resent me for the decision.

That's when my mother broke her self-imposed vow to stay out of my business.

Julia Lawson sat me down and told me to stop disrespecting Adam's choices with my own doubt. She reminded me Adam is not a weak man easily swayed by emotion. If he made the decision to pursue our relationship with everything he has, including a voluntary relocation, I, as his partner, needed to respect and appreciate his selfless choice.

It wasn't hard to admit she was right. Not that she didn't already know that.

Adam's breath tickles my ear as he whispers, "What are you thinking about?"

His fingers trail down my arm and play with my charm bracelet, twirling the seagull charm he gifted me for my birthday.

"How lucky I am to have you in my life."

His lips brush my temple. I feel his smile. "Aren't you glad you ran into me at the Source Solutions launch party? Who knows if we'd be here if you weren't so determined to catch my attention."

"For the one-hundredth time, it was an accident."

He chuckles.

"But I am glad it happened," I say softly. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Adam Moreno."

He sucks in a breath. "And you are the best thing that's ever happened to me, Avery Lawson." His arms tighten. "I cannot imagine going through life without you."

"Me either."

"So... how about we don't." Adam shifts back.

I sit up and turn with a quizzical look. “Huh?”

“Let’s not go through life without one another.” Adam reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a small velvet box.

My breath catches.

My stomach flutters as Adam maneuvers to kneel down on one knee.

“Avery Lawson, you are, without a doubt, the most amazing woman I have ever met. You’re kind, strong, and intelligent. Your only fault is putting other people’s needs before yours. Well, that, and your notable stubbornness.” He smiles.

I choke out a laugh. Tears burn the backs of my eyes.

Adam continues, “After we got back together, I vowed to never be so stupid as to let you go again. But even though I was madly in love with you then, my feelings could not compare to the way I feel about you now. You are my best friend, and I don’t want to spend another day on this earth without knowing you are mine forever.”

Adam opens the black velvet box and displays a gorgeous solitaire diamond. It’s round and sparkles in the setting sun’s light.

Happy tears roll down my cheeks.

“Will you marry me, Avery?”

I get to my feet and lean towards him. I cup his face with my hands and stare into those stunning emerald irises and say, “Yes, Adam. I will.”

His smile blinds me. Then, he stands and wraps his arms around me, lifting and spinning me with a joyful laugh.

Then, under the Spanish sky on the pristine beach, Adam Moreno seals the deal with a kiss.

He once told me to call our relationship whatever I wanted. A casual affair. A budding romance.

Now, I get to call it what I really want... my happily ever after.

Keep reading for a sneak peek at Heather's love story in:
Worth a Thousand Words, book two in the *Lawson Lovers Series*.

THANK YOU!

If you enjoyed *Call It What You Want*, please consider leaving a review! Any review, however short, helps spread the word about my books to new readers.

Thank you again for reading my debut romance novel! Be sure to connect with me on Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook at [@AuthorBrittMcKenna](#) to discuss all things romance and book updates!

<3 Britt

WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Chapter 1

Heather

The Caribbean sun casts its warm midday glow over the world renowned, five star resort. I sit at the pool-side bar and watch a trio of bikini clad women with flawless makeup strut along the flagstone like they're on the runway. A group of men in the pool watch their progress with blatant interest. There's good-natured jeering as one man pulls himself out of the water and hurries after the women.

“Would you like another smoothie?”

I turn around on my barstool and return the smile of the handsome bartender. “No, thank you. One is enough.”

The tan, toned guy nods. “Let me know if I can get you anything.” A wink accompanies his words.

I maintain a friendly smile, but I make sure it's not encouraging. If I were actually here for vacation, I might take him up on his offer. But this weekend isn't about me. All my attention needs to be on my twin and her upcoming nuptials.

Which reminds me, I really should text Avery and tell her I've arrive. But after my hellish week, I need a little time to decompress. Otherwise, I'm not sure I'll be able to play the role of happy, doting maid-of-honor like Avery deserves.

So, I continue to people watch and sip my non-alcoholic pineapple and strawberry smoothie. I observe an affectionate older-couple hanging out along the edge of the pool. They hold hands and giggle together like teenagers. They remind me of my parents and the type of relationship I hope to have one day.

“Excuse me,” a deep voice says.

I turn.

A good looking guy wearing a white t-shirt and short swim trunks stands there, holding a beer can. His eyes widen with recognition.

My stomach drops as he says, “No way. Heather Leigh? I thought it was you.”

I force a practiced smile onto my lips. “Hello.” I hold out my hand. “And you are?”

The guy takes my hand and splutters. If I weren’t embarrassed by the attention, I might find it endearing. But the truth is I hate this part of my job. I became a model because I love fashion and my Aunt Claire convinced me I had the perfect look to be successful. I was too naïve to realize that success would mean being recognized everywhere I went, unable to enjoy private moments in public like I used to.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful for my career and everything it’s provided me. But I miss anonymity more than I would’ve thought. As well as the sense that I have any control over my life.

When the guy doesn’t speak, I clear my throat. It jolts him out of his surprise.

He squeezes my hand and gives it a firm shake before releasing me. “I’m Trevor. Wow. Sorry.” He shakes his head. “I just can’t believe it’s really you.”

“Well, it’s me.” I release an awkward chuckle. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Yeah. You too.” His eyes run over me. His endearing nervousness is replaced by lust. Not unusual, but disappointing.

Not wanting to engage any longer, I turn back to the bar without another word. The bartender stands on the far end of the bar, drying glasses with his towel. He looks at me with a raised brow. I shoot him a reassuring smile. He nods and turns back to his work.

I bring my smoothie to my lips right as Trevor says, “Would you like to come have a drink with me and my friends at the pool?”

I lower the sleek glass to the bar top and glance at Trevor. “No, thank you.” I face forward. He doesn’t take the hint.

“Ah, come on. A beautiful girl like you shouldn’t be drinking alone. Let us keep you company.”

“Thanks, but I’m meeting someone.” The lie rolls off easily. It’s the kind of excuse that usually does the trick in dissuading persistent men. But Trevor isn’t swayed.

“Come hang out while you wait.” His hand lands on my back.

I stiffen.

He leans his elbow on the bar. His can of beer bumps my smoothie. “I promise you’ll have a good time.”

My cheeks heat. Not from embarrassment, but from anger. I hate when people feel entitled to my time. Some people feel like they know me because they’ve seen me in fashion shows or on magazine covers. They feel like I owe them something.

A little over a year ago, when my career first started to take off, I indulged people like Trevor. But it wasn’t long before the effort started to wear on me. Now, I don’t give in. I can’t. Not if I want to maintain any semblance of mental health.

I straighten in determination. With a deep breath, I school my features and turn to convey to Trevor, in no uncertain terms, that I am not interested, when I’m interrupted.

“Hey, babe,” a smoky voice says behind me. The enticing voice sends shivers down my spine. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“I’ve been looking for you.”

Goosebumps cover my arms. I can’t explain how a voice can elicit such effects within me, but I cannot deny I am extremely attracted to the deep, sultry timbre.

Eager to see the owner, I turn. My stomach flutters as I take in the most mouth-watering man I've ever laid eyes on.

The stranger is tall. At least six-three based on where the tall bar sits at his waist. He wears a pair of khaki shorts and a short-sleeved, blue v-neck. His arm muscles and muscular chest are showcased nicely in the tight shirt.

Stunning hazel eyes framed by dark brown lashes gaze down at me. A rugged jawline and angular features gaze down at me with familiarity and affection. Both are misplaced. I don't know this man. If I did, I know I'd never forget him.

"Babe?" His plump lips quirk in a toe-curling smirk. His eyes dart over my shoulder, reminding me of our audience.

I press my lips together, then force them into a warm smile. "Hey, babe. There you are. I've been waiting."

"I'm sorry, gorgeous. It won't happen the rest of our trip." He grabs my hand and I almost break into a sweat when he brings my knuckles to his mouth. He presses his luscious lips against my knuckles then lowers my hand and shoots me a sexy wink.

Sweet baby Jesus.

I've worked alongside countless male models, all of whom are the pinnacle of masculinity and male attractiveness. But I've never seen a man who looks like *this*. Rugged handsomeness with classic, Greek-godlike features.

While I'm admiring his stunning looks, he looks over my shoulder. His expression shutters into something dark and threatening. "Can I help you?"

"I-I," Trevor is back to stuttering. "Nah, man. Sorry to intrude. It was nice to meet you, Heather." He backtracks, slipping in his flip flops. He rights himself then turns and rushes away.

I release a relieved sigh and turn back to the stranger. "Thank you for that."

His expression loses its hard edge. He dips his head. "You're welcome." He turns to the bartender and orders a

margarita on the rocks.

I face forward and pick up my smoothie. My lips purse, mildly put out by his quick dismissal before I remind myself I don't have time to flirt—not even if this Adonis was interested. I need to go find Avery and our mom to help prepare for the rehearsal dinner this evening.

“Forgive me for asking, but what is a beautiful woman like you doing alone at a luxury beach resort?”

My eyes lift. They're captured by piercing hazel eyes. Maybe he is going to flirt with me...

I can spare a few minutes.

“Who said I'm alone?”

He scoffs. “I know you are.”

“How so?”

“Because no man who brought you here would be foolish enough to let you out of his sight. Nor would he want to.”

The words are flattering. But that doesn't mean they aren't shallow. “And you're basing that on what? My bubbly personality?” I lift a brow in challenge.

“No, just your looks.”

“Exactly. For all you know, I could be a raging bitch. Maybe my boyfriend wanted a break from my endless nagging and vapid conversation.”

“Hm. You're right. Not even someone as beautiful as you can make nagging tolerable. At least, not for the long term.”

“I know. So disappointing, right?”

We laugh. He holds out his hand. “I'm Nero.”

I shake his hand, mildly disappointed again when he is quick to let go. “I'm Heather.”

“Nice to meet you.” He grabs his margarita. “What brings you to St. Kitts?”

“My sister's wedding. It's tomorrow.”

“Ah. That explains all the extra foot traffic this morning.” He motions over my shoulder. I turn and see resort employees carrying parts of a white tent across the pool area, heading down to the beach. The rehearsal dinner will be taking place there, followed by tomorrow’s reception. A wood floor is already laid out over the sand.

“It’s going to be a small wedding,” I say, “but the groom’s side of the family likes extravagance.”

“I can see that.”

I chuckle and sip my smoothie. Nero is handsome, and complimentary, but I don’t get the sense he’s trying to take me to bed. He’s friendly. And I like it. “What brings you here?” I ask.

“A much needed vacation.”

“Are you alone?” I look him up and down.

“Fortunately, yes.”

“Fortunately?” I start to grin.

“I enjoy being alone.”

My grin falters. “Oh. I see. Well, that’s nice. This is a beautiful place to relax.”

“Yes, it is.” Without warning, he rises from his seat, throwing a tip onto the bar. “It was nice talking to you, Heather, but I’ve got to run.”

“Oh.” I frown. “Okay. Thanks again for your help earlier.”

“No problem. Have fun at your sister’s wedding.”

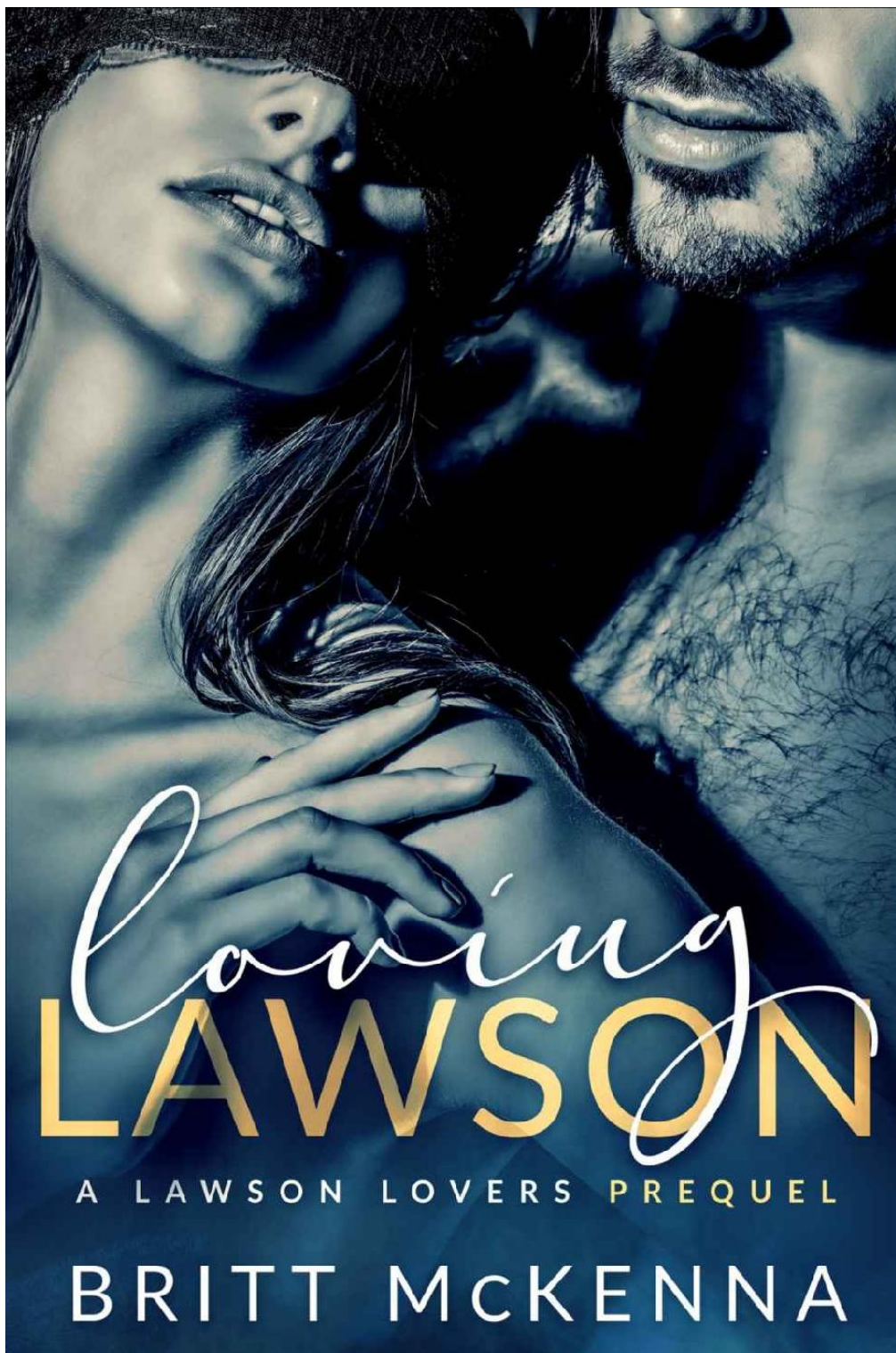
“Thanks.” Nero’s already several feet away. His long legs cover ground quickly.

I force my eyes off his toned butt and go back to staring at the bar. I sip my smoothie, feeling slightly hurt that Nero cut off our conversation so abruptly. Then again, it’s probably for the best. This weekend isn’t about me and my non-existent love life.

No, this weekend is about Avery and Adam. I'm determined to shove all my personal troubles aside and help make sure my twin has the best wedding she can imagine. It's the least I can do after everything she's ever done for me.

Pre-order Heather's Story, **Worth a Thousand Words**, today!
Releasing June 6, 2023.

While you wait, read about Avery's parents' love story in **Loving Lawson - A Prequel**: An Enemies to Lovers, Forced Proximity Romance.



Loving
LAWSON

A LAWSON LOVERS PREQUEL

BRITT MCKENNA

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Britt McKenna is an emerging author of contemporary romances with strong-willed heroines and their morally grey love interests.

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