

A close-up, profile view of a man with dark, wavy hair and a well-groomed beard. He is wearing a white dress shirt with a blue tie, which is unbuttoned at the collar, revealing his chest. He is looking out of a window, with his right hand resting against his face in a contemplative pose. The background shows the interior of a vehicle or a modern building with large windows.

A BILLIONAIRE BOSS ROMANCE

**LOOKING
FOR
TROUBLE**

ALEXIS WINTER

Looking For Trouble

Chicago Billionaires

Alexis Winter

Edited by
Kimberly Stripling



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Thank You!

A wonderful thank you to my amazing readers for continuing to support my dream of bringing sexy, naughty, delicious little morsels of fun in the form of romance novels.

A special thank you to my amazing editors Kimberly Stripling and Michele Davine without whom I would be COMPLETELY lost!

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And lastly, to my ARC team and beta readers, you are wonderful and I couldn't do this without you.

XoXo,

Alexis

“Most of the time, when I tell someone to do something, they obey me, Presley. Maybe you need a gentle reminder?”

You know what they say about trouble...if you go looking for it, you'll probably find it.

But I wasn't looking—at least that's what I told myself when I met him.

Wrapped in a bespoke suit and twenty years older than me—Cyrus Gates, the heartless billionaire of Chicago and my new professor.

I should have known from that first meeting, when his lips curled into a devious grin, his dark eyes raking their way slowly over my body as my stomach flipped.

I'm merely the innocent little prey to his insatiable predator.

When I moved to Chicago for college, I promised myself I'd let loose, but here I am in my last semester of grad school and I'm still the same good girl.

Inside, there's still a woman who wants to explore the world on her own terms, dying to break free, dying to know what's behind those dark eyes.

With a reputation like his: cold, calculated and every bit the domineering powerhouse the world makes him out to be, Cyrus is the kind of man I should run from.

The kind of man that gets off on conquering anything and anyone.

But he comes to me with an offer I can't refuse—a publicist job at the most prestigious public relations firm in Chicago tasked with cleaning up his image.

The catch...he's the client.

No matter how much I try to stand up to him, no matter how much I try to fight my desire, he can see straight through me.

Something inside me ignites, knowing a man this powerful wants me and has no shame expressing it.

But this isn't just an innocent game of cat and mouse—it's a lesson you learn the hard way.

He's risking losing a multibillionaire dollar deal of a lifetime and I'm risking my entire future.

Just when I think there's a happily ever after in our sights, he pulls the rug out from under me and I'm left with a target on my back from his enemies.

He warned me—he isn't the kind of man you just walk away from unscathed, but I didn't listen.

Instead, I dove in head first with a heart of glass, falling for a man who doesn't have a heart at all.

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Chapter 1

Cyrus

“They’re backing out of the deal.”

I drop the paper in my hand and look up at my CFO, Nelson, a panicked expression across his weathered face as he barges into my office.

“What the fuck do you mean they’re backing out?”

“Exactly what it sounds like.” He shuts my door and steps further into my office. “I told you, Cyrus. I told you your reputation would get the best of you someday and it has, goddammit!” His cheeks grow red with frustration as he narrows his gaze at me over his glasses, sweat beading at his temples.

“That can’t happen, so either tell them it’s back on or get my lawyer Terry on the phone to find a legal loophole.”

“There is no loophole this time, Cyrus. They made sure of it in their morality clause in the contract.” He wags his finger at me.

I stare at him, his chest heaving. I reach for the intercom button on my phone.

“Abigail, get Terry Wetzler on the phone for me, please, and let him know I want to see him standing in my office within the next twenty minutes or he can find a new big whale for his firm.”

Nelson rolls his eyes at me, something that irks me in the moment, but I ignore it.

“I don’t pay him two grand an hour to allow deals like this to slip through the cracks. We’ve been in talks with Meridian Telecom for over two years to secure this deal and I’ll be damned if they suddenly grew a set of balls and think I’m too immoral.”

“It’s the shareholders and the board, Cyrus; you know that. Meridian doesn’t just own the largest newspaper and two of the largest television networks in the world; they own several family-friendly networks along with a massive children’s movie company. They don’t want it to get out that the man who just bought them has a reputation for blackmailing and strong-arming his way into deals, let alone the fact that the last woman you went on several very public dates with was married to your business rival, Peter Frisk!”

I snap my eyes up and watch as Nelson flinches. He swallows whatever else he’s about to say when he sees the look on my face. I let out a huff of a laugh and lean forward, folding my hands on my desk as I narrow my gaze at him.

“Are these the issues *you* have with me or did they tell you all this?”

“Sir.” My intercom comes alive with Abigail’s voice. “I have Terry here to see you.”

I stand up and reach for my suit coat. “Last time I checked, Nelson, I was signing your paychecks so I suggest you lower your fucking voice when you speak to me. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting to resolve this mess that you can’t seem to handle.”

Nelson doesn’t respond. He spins on his heel and waddles his portly body through my office door, leaving it wide open as he grumbles his way toward the elevator. This isn’t the first time I’ve had to put Nelson in his place, and it won’t be the last.

He’s not wrong. I have a reputation, not only in Chicago but throughout my industry. Do I give a shit? No. I don’t blackmail or strong-arm good, ethical people into deals; those kinds of people don’t have dirt I can use against them. But the dirty lowlifes that think they can manipulate me and then want

to back out when they realize they can't get what they want? Well, those are the kinds of rats I enjoy playing target practice with.

I tell them all the same thing. *"You want to be a big man and try to fuck me over, be my guest. Because my dick is twice as big and I will show you zero mercy when I strip you of every ounce of self-respect you have for yourself."*

"Terry, thanks for coming over so quickly." I smile and hold out my hand to my lawyer.

"Didn't really have a choice now, did I, Cyrus?" He laughs but the sarcasm is practically dripping from his lips. "You know you can call me without summoning or threatening me, right? I'm well aware you're our biggest client, as are the other partners."

"Good to hear it." We take a seat and I launch right into the issue, not wanting to waste anyone's time. "Look, I've got a little issue surrounding my deal with Meridian. Nelson let me know they're threatening to back out based on a morality clause in the contract."

"Yes, I'm well aware of the morality clause, as are you. I'm also aware of their threats. We discussed it, or rather, I tried to discuss it with you a few times, but you brushed it off. You told me it was some"—he holds up his hands in air quotes—"pious power play" by them."

"Because it is," I double down.

"Doesn't mean it's not legit. All of us at Wetzler, Bergen and Pierce have gone over the contract in detail and there are no loopholes. There is no getting around this clause. Another thing I made abundantly clear to you before you even put pen to paper on this deal, but you didn't seem to be concerned about it."

I stare at Terry and I can tell by the expression on his face that he isn't bullshitting me. I don't exactly enjoy not getting my way, not because I'm a spoiled child but because most of the time, it's just because someone hasn't done the work to figure out a new way to get me what I want.

How the fuck else do you think I became the most powerful billionaire in Chicago before the age of forty?

“So what’s the plan then? I just lose one of the biggest deals in media history because they don’t like who I fuck or how I manage my enemies?”

Terry reaches into the left pocket of his lapel, producing a small white business card. He leans forward, placing it on my desk and sliding it toward me with one finger.

“Call Lisa Wade, like I told you to do a year ago.”

I stare down at the name printed in black block letters. She’s a pit bull through and through, owner of the most prestigious PR firm in the city—hell, probably in the US. She’s the person anyone who’s anyone calls the moment they find themselves in hot water.

“This deal hasn’t walked yet, Cyrus.” Terry stands up and tugs gently on his cuffs beneath his suit jacket sleeves. “If it had, I’d have heard from their lawyers. It’s a threat and if there’s one thing I know about you, it’s how you level up and come back swinging twice as hard. Lisa is expecting your call. She’ll get your reputation in check, and then we’ll knock it out of the park with this deal.”

After we say our goodbyes, I sink back down in my chair, flipping the business card in my fingers over and over. I hate admitting defeat and I really fucking hate having to pander to people’s ideas of who they think I *should* be.

I’ve never pretended to be a saint or a nice guy. I’ve been called the “bad boy billionaire of Chicago” for a reason and I wear it like a badge of honor. I refuse to kowtow to people and kiss their ass just so they shake my hand and smile to my face while stabbing me in the back with their other hand.

I toss the card on my desk and stand up, walking over to the window to look down at the people filling the streets far below. They look like ants from up here.

I think about what my dad would have done in a situation like this. Actually, I know what my dad would have done. He’d have groveled, bent over backward, and sold his soul if it

meant that he'd be seen in a better light. That's the biggest lesson he taught me before he died of pancreatic cancer at fifty-four years old. My dad worked day and night, sacrificed his wife, his health, and his sanity, all so people would think he was a good guy, so he could appease everyone else, and still, he was destroyed by those who pretended to be his friends. He died penniless—in debt actually—and not a single one of those soul-sucking leeches even showed up to his funeral.

I can feel my pulse in my temples; my blood pressure is through the roof. I reach up and tug at my tie, hoping that by loosening it, I'll find relief, but it does little to help. I glance over my shoulder at the business card on my desk, taunting me. I hate asking for help... I hate *admitting* that I need help.

“Fuck it.” I walk back over and pick it up, pulling my phone out of my pocket with my other hand and dialing the number—not the one that's printed, but the one that's been scribbled on the back next to the words *personal cell*.

“Lisa Wade.” Her tone is clipped, her voice deeper than I remember.

“Lisa, this is Cyrus. Cyrus Gates.”

“Cyrus! Last time I saw you was at that holiday party where my husband was trying to convince you to buy his boat.” She lets out a throat chuckle. “How are you?”

“Been better I suppose if I'm calling you.”

“Well, tell me what the issue is.”

This time, I laugh. “We both know the answer to that already, Lisa.”

“HOW BAD IS IT?” I SQUIRM IN MY CHAIR AS LISA POURS OVER her tablet, her tortoiseshell glasses barely hanging on to the end of her professionally sculpted nose. Her white blouse is wrinkle-free, tucked crisply into a pair of slim black pants. Shiny, classic black Louboutin heels adorn her feet that are

tucked delicately beneath the chair she's perched on, one ankle crossed over the other.

She glances up at me, slapping the cover closed before staring me dead in the eyes.

“Could be way worse. Honestly, the fact you don't have any paternity suits and you haven't been caught with illegal substances or prostitutes is a big plus in my world.” I smile, but she continues. “That being said, you should have listened to me at that holiday party a year ago when I told you to take that adjunct professor position being offered to you at the University of Chicago.”

I crook an eyebrow. “Seriously? Me teaching? Come on now, Lisa. I might have graduated from their hallowed halls, but I'm sure as shit not their golden boy. They do love to cash my alumni checks though.”

“Just doing a simple search of your name and seeing the top images and articles that pop up about you in the last few months, I'd tell you off the top of my head to stop sleeping with married women, being photographed with women young enough to be your daughter, and athletes who like to break the law.”

“In my defense, Nikki told me they were separated and pursuing a divorce,” I say, referring to Nikki Frisk, the now ex-wife of Peter Frisk, the tech giant of Chicago. “How the fuck was I supposed to know she was lying and just doing it to get back at Peter for screwing their fourth nanny?”

She waves away my excuse. “The public doesn't know those details. What they saw was a spoiled forty-six-year-old billionaire with a married twenty-nine-year-old woman who is *now* divorced.”

“That wasn't on me!” I say defensively. “They made that bed together. I was merely a pawn that was used. And those photos of me with models are old; I haven't been to one of those yacht parties in ages. Every few months the press circulates some old photo of me with some bullshit headline. It's clickbait, Lisa.”

“Bottom line, Cyrus, is that the public passed a judgment on you a long time ago that you can’t change. I’m not here to wipe away your past. As my political clients like to say: I’m merely here to help you establish a clean slate, make people forget the past they’re so blinded by your future.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“I’m not sure you will once I tell you how we’re going to do it.”

“What?” The smile fades from my lips as I sit up straighter.

“I called the university. They’re still willing to extend you the offer to teach a grad level class for a semester. The fact is, it makes them look good to perspective students when one of the powerful men in America not only graduated from their institution, but came back to teach a class there... free of charge.” She reaches into her briefcase and pulls out a file, tossing it onto my desk. “That’s the coursework; it starts in four weeks.”

“I’m doing this for free? Of course there’s a fucking string attached.” I reach for the folder and pick it up to read it. “Ethics in Business?” I laugh and close it. “You’ve gotta be shitting me. Of all people to teach that?”

She shrugs. “Trust me, it seemed like a joke to me too, but they insisted they were willing to have you teach it.”

“I’m not a teacher, Lisa.”

“And I’m not a miracle worker, Cyrus. This is gold, handed to us on a silver platter. The bad boy billionaire stops behaving like a twenty-five-year-old trust fund baby and starts teaching ethics at a prestigious institution? Meridian won’t think twice if they know that a school that often outranks the Ivies in academics trusts you enough to teach such subject matter.”

I reach for the folder again and begin flipping through the course information as Lisa stands and gathers her things.

“In the meantime, lay low. I mean it. No parties, no celebrity events, and no young women.” She raises both her

brows at me, a deep wrinkle filling in across her forehead like she makes this expression often.

“As you wish.”

I spend the rest of the afternoon and early evening sipping whiskey and hiding away in my office—sulking. By the time I leave and make my way downstairs to my driver, Wes, I’m tipsy.

Professional? Not in the slightest, but all I can focus on is sinking my teeth into a porterhouse and washing it down with a damn fine glass of scotch.

“Evening, Wes.” I toss my coat across the back seat, not bothering to put it on. “Drop me over at The Waterhouse. Craving one of their steaks.”

“Will do, sir.”

I love The Waterhouse because it’s dark and quiet and off the beaten path. I can sit here for hours and not be recognized. I haven’t been by in almost six months actually, so I practically devour my steak at the bar.

“Ready for that scotch?”

“Ready.” I nod to Frank as he takes my plate away and pours me a few fingers of liquor.

“How’s business?” he asks, handing me the tumbler. Frank knows who I am; he’s been the bartender here for the last few years and someone I’ve grown to trust.

“Of all days you should ask.” I shake my head. “Just another day of some morally bankrupt corporation attempting to trample me on their high horse so they can back out of our deal.”

“The Meridian Telecom deal? They want to back out of selling to you?” I’ve vented a few times over the years to Frank about this deal. Typically, I play my cards very close to the vest, but there’s something about Frank that has me talking... Could be the scotch.

“Yup. Something about me being too immoral.”

“Come on”—he leans his hands on the bar—“you’re Cyrus Gates. Surely, you won’t let them get the upper hand.”

That makes me laugh. “Of course not. I’m just biding my time. Trying to find the perfect opportunity to fucking destroy them and then lowball them with an offer they can’t refuse,” I say in jest. The reality is, I could do that, but it’s not my plan. My plan is to get them to realize that putting some bullshit morality clause into a contract is asinine and it won’t change my behavior or stop me from purchasing them.

I bring the glass to my lips, but pause when I hear a huff of annoyance to my left. I turn and look at the woman I previously hadn’t noticed sitting beside me. Her gaze is forward, buried in a book actually. Her auburn hair is pulled over her shoulder opposite of me. Her exposed neck is long and lean. I let my gaze wander down her body for a second, her oversized sweater giving nothing away, but the knee-high boots and short skirt she’s wearing have me curious about what’s underneath. I’m a sucker for long, shapely legs. I absentmindedly clench my jaw at the thought.

Damn, how the hell did I not notice her?

“Something on your mind?”

“Just ironic, I guess.” She continues staring at her book as she responds dismissively.

“Do tell.”

She closes her book, then slowly turns to face me, the dim light of the bar making her look almost angelic. She’s young, young enough that I almost ask if she’s old enough to even be in a bar. Now I feel like a creep for looking at her the way I did only seconds ago.

“Well, it’s ironic that you’re an infamous billionaire, notorious for—”

“Infamous?” I laugh, cutting her off as I look over at Frank. “This is starting off well. Sorry, continue.” I take another healthy swallow of scotch, my head starting to swim, signaling I need to head home, but I’m far too invested in what

this young woman has to say to leave right this second. Not to mention she's stunning.

"Notorious for being reckless, unmanageable, and oftentimes downright unethical. And yet, you're criticizing a company for the same behaviors. A company which you openly admit that you plan to destroy, thus proving their own point to them."

I can't hide the shit-eating grin that takes over my face. How fucking adorable. Clearly this young lady doesn't know the first thing about real life and how terrible most humans are, especially the ones with an ounce of money or power. I don't bother explaining that my comment about a hostile takeover of their company was a joke. She obviously has an already ill-informed opinion of me.

"What are you reading?"

She glances at the book in her hand, then slowly lifts it off the bar to show me.

"*The Modern Billionaire*," I read the title aloud. "Ah, let me guess... there's a chapter in there about me?"

"Just finished reading it actually. Turns out, you're not a very nice guy." She gives me a look as if to say, *and what do you have to say about it?*

I smile, finishing my drink and pulling several bills from my wallet.

"To be clear, I'm not criticizing the company for being unethical or immoral. What I don't like is when they pretend that they don't do the same practices as everyone else because they own a few kid-friendly, family-focused businesses. And then they turn around and try to fuck me up the ass because they want to appear that they're not like me, while gladly cashing my billion-dollar offer. Everybody has a price, Miss, and money isn't an issue for me."

She opens her mouth like she's about to respond, then shuts it again, turning her gaze back to the book in her hands.

"Let me guess, they don't talk about that in there, do they?"

“Well, not really, no.”

“Didn’t think so.” I nod to Frank and slide on my coat.

“That’s the difference between me and all the other billionaires they shit on in books like that. I don’t pretend that donating to a nonprofit or political initiative absolves me of my sins.”

“That aside,” she says matter-of-factly, “the book’s goal isn’t about *shit-talking* billionaires. It’s to show that there isn’t an ethical means to get there. Somewhere along the way, you stepped on somebody to get where you are.”

“Why is it, that it’s always people who haven’t lived my life, will never be a billionaire, and don’t know me at all who have the most to say about how I’m living? I mind my business. I show respect to those who show respect to me. I don’t step on anyone to get ahead because I don’t have to. Like I said, money talks. I don’t always handle my enemies like I should, and I don’t spare the feelings of people who try to fuck me over, but most importantly...” I lean toward her, placing my hand on the back of her stool till our faces are close together. Her eyes drop from mine to my lips, then back up before I hear her swallow nervously. “I sure as shit don’t pretend to be a nice guy, sweetheart.”

FOUR WEEKS LATER...

I drum my fingers on the desk in the office the university assigned to me. I told them several times I really didn’t need an office, considering I own one of the largest high-rise office buildings in the city, but they insisted.

“Oh, trust me,” Miss... Miss somebody I can’t even remember now said to me as she gave me a tour of the grounds at a turtle’s pace. “You’ll need it for grading and student meetings.”

God, student meetings.

The thought of being in an enclosed space with students has my jaw clenching tightly. I glance around the room, once again questioning what the actual fuck I'm doing here when my phone buzzes with a text from Lisa.

Lisa: *You'll be fine. Hope you're already in your class and not hiding out somewhere running late.*

"Goddammit," I mutter, realizing class started four minutes ago. "How the hell—" I shake my head and grab my tablet to head into class.

The room is large, the rows tiered. Students are mingling, spread out in random clumps around the space.

I shut the door, a little harder than needed to get their attention, and immediately the chatter stops, only to be replaced with a few whispers and murmurs.

"Oh my God. That's Cyrus Gates. He's our guest lecturer this semester?" I hear one woman exclaim as she leans toward her friend, both women blushing as they look at me.

"Good morning," I say flatly. "I have no interest in shouting all semester so everyone sit in the front three rows." They glance nervously at one another, a few obeying immediately while the others question if I'm serious. "Now!" I shout loudly and they scramble to their feet.

"As most of you probably already know, I'm Cyrus Gates. I will be your professor this semester for Ethics in Business. Since this is a grad level course, I expect you all to behave like adults and be responsible for managing your own time. I have no interest in babysitting any of you. I also don't care to take roll; this isn't grade school. If you want to pass, show up. Otherwise—" I point toward the door.

I look down the row of students, most of them bright-eyed and eager, a few still shell-shocked, I assume by my lack of warmth. Several are still bundled up from the January cold of Chicago. A few have messy hair where they've removed their beanies. For the most part they look young—mid to late twenties, a few forty-plus-year-olds, along with one white-haired man I'd guess to be in his early sixties.

Then... there's *her*. She looks so familiar to me, but I can't place her.

Pale, freckled skin, long auburn hair that almost reaches her waist, and bright-blue eyes. She's wearing a mint sweater that hangs loosely off one delicate shoulder, leaving it exposed. Her lips look like the shape of Cupid's bow, plump and pouty with a hint of pink. I do a double take, then shift my eyes back to someone else so I'm not obvious. I feel a clenching in my gut, Lisa's words from weeks ago ringing in my ears.

"And stop being photographed with young women."

I'm not a creep. The reality is she's right about how it makes me look. I only hooked up with younger women in my past a few times because it was an easy one-night stand. They had some daddy issues to work out, wanted to attend a fancy yacht party or two, and I needed to get laid. I wasn't looking for forever and neither were they. The responsible, age-appropriate women weren't throwing themselves at me and I was wallowing in self-esteem issues. Not to mention the thought of settling down and *forever* was about as appealing as a daily colonoscopy. Nikki Frisk *happened* to be younger at twenty-nine, but I didn't actively seek her out.

"Anyone care to tell me what the word *ethics* means to you?" I say, turning my attention back to my class. I glance around the room, but nobody responds.

She raises her hand timidly.

"Yes, Miss?"

"Presley, Presley James." She says her name almost as if I should know it, but it doesn't ring any bells.

I lean back, sitting on the edge of the desk, crossing my arms neatly over my chest. "And what does ethics mean to *you*, Miss James?"

"It's a set of... a moral code of conduct. Guidelines for how we should behave." Her voice is angelic, like I imagined it would be. Breathy and a touch high-pitched.

I nod. “Is that what Webster says or is that what it means to *you*?”

She chews her bottom lip momentarily. “Both, I suppose. I believe that is what ethics is and should be. Morality because otherwise it’s chaos, anarchy.”

“And who decides what is moral? Who decides what is chaos?”

She opens her mouth, then snaps it shut again.

“Miss James,” I say and then gesture to the rest of the room, “and all of you for that matter, I encourage you to think for yourself. We all know how the dictionary defines the word ethics or ethical, but in the real world, there won’t be the morality police helping you, guiding you through every decision. That is something that you’ll have to determine for yourself. Your morality will be based on your own life experiences, your own values, etcetera. So again, I challenge you to look inward and figure out what you are willing to live with when it comes to what is moral. Life is one big gray area most of the time.”

“Is that what *you* do, Mr. Gates?” She stares at me unblinking, her spine stiff. “Do you make decisions in a vacuum based on your own version of morality or do you take into account that there’s a general idea of what is right and wrong when making your business deals?”

She’s feisty... or perhaps defiant. I can’t decide which turns me on more. Fuck, so not the point and the exact opposite of what I’m supposed to be focusing on here.

I can’t hide the grin that settles over my face. I think for a moment, running my finger slowly over my bottom lip as I contemplate my answer. I want to make it abundantly clear to her and the rest of the class that while there are rules that one should follow or abide by, a man like me is far above them.

“No,” I say flatly, staring at her. “Because when you’re as powerful as I am, when you own most of this city and your name is on the company, you get to make the rules, Miss James.” I watch as her throat constricts with a nervous

swallow. I lean forward a touch, lowering my voice for emphasis as she clasps her hands tightly in her lap, her knuckles turning white.

“But you nor anyone else in this room has that kind of power so I would highly suggest that someone like you follow the rules because otherwise you might be facing consequences that you’re not prepared to handle.”

Chapter 2

Presley

My body tenses beneath Cyrus Gates' intimidating stare as my cheeks flush with embarrassment.

This man doesn't remember me at all. Then again, it was almost a month ago, he was drinking, and if rumors are true, he goes through women like some go through... What is the rest of the phrase again? Tissues? Underwear? Coffee filters? It's not like I'd stand out from his string of female encounters.

“What the hell, Pres?” My friend Serenity elbows me gently in the rib, but I keep my gaze forward as Professor Gates continues with the lecture.

Regret churns in my stomach, not that I answered his question in such an opinionated manner, but that once again, I can't shake my uptight attitude that has plagued me my entire life. I don't want to see the world as black and white. I know there are a lot of gray areas, especially in business, and honestly, I'd give anything to not be so averse to risk for once in my life. I grew up in an area where right was right and wrong was wrong; there was no margin for interpretation... no differing opinions.

When I graduated high school and moved from small-town, central Illinois to Chicago for college, I wanted to experience life on my own terms. Figure out what life meant to me and what I believed. I promised myself I would be spontaneous and fun. That I would finally throw caution to the wind and do all those wild and exciting things you're supposed to do when you're young. But here I am, in my last semester of grad school and I'm still walking that line like a

tightrope... wanting so bad to let loose yet too scared of the possible consequences.

I pop open my tablet, diving into my notes as the lecture carries on. I try to remain focused on what Cyrus is saying, but the way he casually reaches his hand up to run it through his hair, brushing it away from his forehead, has me mesmerized. He pushes off the edge of the desk where he's been perched, sliding his suit coat down his arms and placing it gently on the back of the chair behind the desk.

“I plan to discuss with you some of my own experiences in business, the flat-out unethical bullshit I've been privy to as well some of my own actions that people have deemed immoral or questionable. I also plan to share with you why I've made the decisions I have and why I stand behind them.”

He casually unbuttons the cuffs of his shirt, slowly rolling up each sleeve to reveal his tan, muscular forearms.

I've always struggled with attraction. I was jealous when my friends would fawn over some guy they thought was the hottest man alive, even celebrities and pop stars. I just never met a guy who made me have that kind of reaction. The weak in the knees, make your heart skip a beat and your mouth go dry type of drop-dead desire... till right now.

Well, technically, it happened that first night I saw him at The Waterhouse. The moment I heard the bartender mention the name Cyrus Gates, my ears perked up. He really is notorious and that book I was reading, among other articles I've seen over the years, has made it clear the man doesn't care what anyone thinks. Something about that I-don't-give-an-F attitude and the way he carries himself is extremely attractive to me. A man that rich, that powerful that nobody can buy off or sway his opinion has me thinking all sorts of inappropriate thoughts. I feel my eyes glaze over and my head tilt as I wonder if he has that kind of dominance and power in bed.

No! This is wrong; this is so wrong on so many levels. This is Cyrus Gates, the man has a reputation as one of the worst

men in Chicago who just so happens to be my professor and oh, I don't know, is old enough to be my dad!

I feel my throat constrict and I reach down for my water bottle as a coughing fit threatens to erupt. Just as I bring it to my lips and take in a full mouthful of water, I cough, spraying the water half on the floor and half on my tablet and lap.

“I hope that you’ll feel com—are you okay, Miss James?” His brows furrow as he turns his attention to me, the rest of the class following suit as I attempt to wave away his concern.

“Ye—yes,” I manage to croak out after swallowing down the remaining water, nodding my head vigorously to reiterate my response. I wipe the water droplets from my tablet with the sleeve of my sweater while trying to nonchalantly dry my mouth and neck where the water ran down.

This is one of those moments people talk about wishing the floor would open up and swallow them whole. If I thought my cheeks were red earlier, they’re almost on fire at this point.

His eyes linger on me for a moment as he carries on with what he was saying.

“As I was saying, I want this class to feel open to discuss your thoughts on what I share with you. Like Miss James did earlier.” He gestures toward me, only deepening the burning sensation on my cheeks. “This class is for you, not for you to spare my feelings. This class is for you to learn, ask questions, even the most uncomfortable ones.”

I sink a little lower into my chair, hoping that if I stay focused on the screen in front of me, I won’t notice the way his eyes burn through me, like he can read every thought in my brain.

The second the bell sounds to signal our class is dismissed, I gather my things and make a break for the door, Serenity following closely behind me.

“What was *that* all about?” She catches up to me, grabbing my shoulder to spin me around so I face her.

“Nothing. I just answered Professor Gates’ question.”

She gives me a coy smile. “Yeah, we all saw that. I mean, what was with the tension between you two? Do you know him or something?”

“Uh, everyone knows him; he’s Cyrus Gates.” She gives me another look. “No, I don’t know him, Serenity. I just let it frustrate me that he’s our adjunct professor. Come on, that man teaching Ethics in Business? That’s like having a six-year-old with an Easy-Bake Oven teach a culinary class at Le Cordon Bleu.”

Serenity giggles, rolling her eyes at me. “I don’t think that’s quite the right analogy, but I get what you’re saying. Let me guess. That billionaire book you were reading made you hate him?”

I shrug. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Pres, maybe it’s a good thing to learn from someone like him, someone who doesn’t pretend to follow all the rules while we know they’re full of shit. He did tell us that he isn’t saying act like him; he even encouraged us to question his decisions. Besides”—she reaches out and touches my elbow—“we are getting our master’s in public relations, odds are, we’ll end up representing someone like him someday. You’re going to have to remove your personal feelings from it or your ass will get fired immediately.”

“You’re right.” I shake my head, my shoulders falling with the realization that I’m still way too uptight. I need to learn to relax, let go of the things that I have no control over. It’s never served me to be so stressed out and tense all the time. “Guess I’m still working on that part of it. Ugh, now I feel bad that I overreacted. Why do I always shoot my mouth off like that?”

She rubs my back. “Because you’re still that somewhat innocent young girl who moved to the city to experience life and let loose... You just haven’t figured out how to do that yet.”

I think back to when I met Serenity my first week on campus at the University of Chicago. We were both studying business with the desire to continue on with a master’s in public relations. She was instantly my best friend, even though

she's the complete opposite of me. She was born and raised in Chicago, already had a huge network of friends, and knew all the best hot spots and party scenes. I, on the other hand, grew up three hours south of the city in a farm town that had one stoplight and kids that drove tractors to school.

While she has brought me out of my shell a lot, I still can't seem to shake my good girl persona. I had confessed to her early on in our friendship that I wanted to shed that image, that I wanted to experience life and enjoy my twenties, take a few risks and explore my wild side. Unfortunately, I became so engrossed in school and my internship that a few frat parties, two mediocre short-lived romances, and one weekend in Vegas where I spent almost the entire time writing a paper in the hotel room was as wild as it got for me.

"Besides," she says, pulling me out of my thoughts, "we both know you're smarter than him. He's just a man with a shit ton of money so people admire him." She winks at me. "It's our final semester of school forever; take some notes and learn a few lessons from one of the most powerful men in America. It could come in handy someday. Plus, having a connection like Cyrus Gates in the world can't be a bad thing, right?"

I chew my bottom lip for a second, listening to her.

"You're right." I glance over her shoulder just as Mr. Gates exits the building and starts walking away. "Hey, I'll catch up with you later," I say as I step around her. "Thanks again for the pep talk, as usual!" I wave to her as I attempt to walk quickly down the sidewalk, dodging the icy patches.

"Professor!" I half shout as I round the building toward the parking lot. "Professor Gates!"

He stops and turns around, a look of confusion on his face as he squints against the sunshine that bounces off the snow.

"Hi, Professor." I attempt to hide that I'm half out of breath.

He lets out a laugh and shakes his head. "Please don't call me that."

"Um, pardon?"

“Professor,” he says with that sexy grin on his lips, “makes me feel... old. Call me Cyrus, or Mr. Gates if you have to.”

“Oh, okay, sorry... Mr. Gates.” I smile nervously.

“What can I do for you, Miss James?” He seems half-annoyed as he pulls back the sleeve of his coat to check the time on his watch. It’s only now I’m realizing how imposing his figure is. Fitting that a man this powerful also looks like he could rip off his suit and be a Marvel superhero at any second. His shoulders are broad, his chest thick and pronounced, even beneath a suit and winter coat.

“I—uh, I wanted to apologize actually, for earlier.” He crooks an eyebrow at me, as if he doesn’t understand what I’m talking about. “I could have been more respectful. I didn’t mean to be argumentative or come across as holier than thou when you called on me in class. I guess what I’m saying is, I’m sorry for not thinking critically and getting defensive instead when you challenged me.”

“I didn’t perceive any disrespect, Miss James. Have a good afternoon.” He turns back toward his car.

“You don’t remember me, do you?”

Shit. I hadn’t planned on reminding him about our little interaction, but once again, before I can think, the words come out of my mouth.

His shoulders square and he turns back to look at me, his eyes studying me momentarily.

“The Waterhouse. I was the woman at the bar... reading the book. The one who said you weren’t a very nice man.” I pause, waiting for a reaction, but he continues to stare at me which makes me even more nervous. “I guess I should apologize for those comments as well, huh?” I smile, hoping he laughs it off.

Recognition smooths his previously perplexed face and a grin tugs at the corner of his mouth. “That’s right... the woman at the bar.” The way he says it has my stomach doing a little flip. His eyes change, growing darker as he runs them down, then slowly back up my body. He drags his hand slowly

over his jaw like he's contemplating what to say next. Then he takes a step closer to me.

“Don't ever apologize for being honest, Miss James, and don't”—he narrows his gaze and it makes my stomach clench—“ever compromise your beliefs because you think you overstepped a boundary or owe someone an apology for them.” He steps back and turns to walk back toward his car but stops after taking just two steps.

“One more thing, Miss James.” He only half turns back to face me. “As a young, beautiful woman, never be afraid to stand up to a man like me no matter how unprofessional or disrespectful it might be perceived because this world is full of wolves that will fuck you over and toss you aside and they'll be praised for it. That's the one lesson you need to learn from this class this semester. I might not be one of the nice guys, but I won't lie to you.”

I watch as he slides into his sleek black sports car without another word and drives away. His advice hanging heavy in the air, I try to understand, but the only word he said that seems to echo in my ears is *beautiful*.

Chapter 3

Cyrus

I drill my fingertips on my desk, the image of Presley in her oversized hoodie in class today, her hair piled high on her head as a few loose tendrils clung to her neck.

The last two weeks have been harder than I expected... Fuck it, they've been excruciating. Seeing her tapping away on her tablet, her glasses making her already large doe eyes seem even bigger as I try to stay focused on the lecture I'm giving, is driving me mad. When she apologized to me the other day, I wanted to bend her over the hood of my car and spank her bare ass pink. Teach her a lesson about apologizing for being bold and standing up for herself. Also teach her a lesson about talking back to me.

"Cyrus. Cyrus, are you even listening to me?"

"Hmm?" I lift my chin from where it's resting on my other hand and look up at an annoyed Nelson and my lawyer Terry sitting beside him.

"I said, Are you li—"

"I heard you," I cut him off. "I'm listening."

He lets out an exasperated sigh. "As I was saying, we have a meeting with Meridian in less than two weeks. They want to discuss moving forward with the contract and what that would look like."

"What that would look like?" That phrase catches my attention.

"Yes," Terry responds, leaning forward in his chair a little.

“Meaning what, Terry? What exactly does that mean? If I’m buying a company for billions of dollars, what the fuck do they have to say about how things *look* moving forward? I guess I missed that part of business school where a company gets to pocket billions, then still tell me what the fuck I get to do with my company.”

I reach up to loosen my tie. I’ve been a lot quicker to snap lately and it’s starting to piss me off. It’s this deal, the fact I have them not only breathing down my neck but watching over my shoulder like I’m a damn teenager again, waiting for me to fuck up so they can pull it and walk away. Maybe I should be the one to walk. I don’t need the money and I don’t need the added stress.

Ah, who the fuck am I kidding? I know it’s not just that... Hell, it’s not even the biggest part of it. It’s her... Presley. Every time my brain isn’t focused on work and half the time it’s supposed to be focused on something else, it’s focused on her. On her thin neck, the way her delicate fingers wrap around the base of it when she’s thinking. The tip of her pink tongue that darts out and drags slowly across her plump bottom lip as she types.

“Meaning that Meridian wants to keep their current board of directors in place once the acquisition goes through. They want to keep the integrity of the family-friendly empire they’ve built intact, even after Gates Enterprises takes over.”

“Meaning they’re scared I’m going to what? Turn it into a den of iniquity?” I chuckle at their attempt to control me. “Terry, if they want to keep their board of directors, I don’t give a fuck. Despite what their CEO thinks, I have no interest in buying them just to ruin their reputation and run it into the ground. That’s not at all what this purchase is about. It’s about diversifying my assets, plain and simple, but they want to turn it into something it’s not.”

“Then it seems like the meeting won’t be an issue. They’re very impressed with your position at the University of Chicago and Lisa’s other efforts most likely won’t go unnoticed by them as well. I’ll be in touch with you next week.” Terry stands and extends his hand toward me.

“What do you mean Lisa’s other efforts?” I shake his hand slowly as my assistant Abigail’s voice breaks through the intercom.

“Sir, Lisa Wade is here for your meeting.”

“I’m sure she’ll explain.” He smiles and exits, Nelson right behind him as Lisa enters my office.

“You look so happy to see me,” she says in her usual dry delivery. “You didn’t forget about our meeting, did you?”

I shake my head. “No, I didn’t forget but I expected to see your publicist, or should I say handler, since she’s the one who is usually checking in with me these last few weeks.”

Lisa ignores my remark, her thin lips painted their trademark red to match her nails. “I expected Becky to take this meeting as well but unfortunately she quit. Her husband got offered his dream job in San Francisco, so I am scrambling to do her work and run my firm.”

“Shit,” I mutter, “I’m sorry. Seems we’re both under some serious stress.”

“Well, I’m afraid I’m probably going to be adding to it.” She gives me a hollow smile. “There’s an upcoming charity event that has requested that you be the keynote speaker.”

“Can’t I just write a check?”

“You can and will, but you also need to attend, mingle, and actually act like you care,” she says flatly.

That stings.

“I do care, Lisa.” I sit up. “Is that the image that’s out there of me? That I don’t care about people in need?”

“I’d be lying if I said that isn’t a common thread that runs through different groups. Look—” She closes her tablet and leans her elbows on her knee that’s crossed over the other. “I know you care; don’t forget I knew you back before all this. I know that you put on this facade because it’s easier to just pretend to be the person everyone already assumes you are, the person that they’ve already judged based usually on misinformation. But the reality is, Cyrus, you can easily show

them you care, show them that there's more to you than scandals and underhanded bullshit. You might have been that young man in the past, but you're not him anymore, so why not just let the world see who you really are?"

I think about her words, images of my father coming back to me. Of him trying to make everyone happy while losing himself in the process. No matter what he did, no matter how much he cared or who he helped, some group somewhere hated him for it.

"I know you're right. It is easier to just let everyone form their own opinion based on rumors or a picture they saw because trying to convince them you're not the same twenty-five-year-old who lived to party and didn't care about anything but himself is damn hard. The reality is I care about people in need, in causes, but I don't give a damn about people's opinions of me. I refuse to be just another schmuck who does performative shit in the name of looking good."

"Tell you what, think about it. Actually, send me over a list of the organizations or charities that you currently donate to or are on the board of and let's see what we can do to get you more involved with them... instead of just writing a check. And before you tell me that people will just think you're doing it for show, let me worry about that. Figure out what would make you happy, Cyrus, because apart from this deal with Meridian, it couldn't hurt for you to clean up your image and just be genuine. Maybe think about actually finding a nice woman and settling down? Stop hiding behind that old silly bad boy billionaire moniker; it's tired."

"Haven't you heard though? I've got a new one; I'm a living heart donor apparently."

She rolls her eyes and gathers up her things. "If you want the world to think you're heartless, there's not much I can do to help you, Cyrus, so I'd suggest you stop reading up on other people's opinions of you, you know... since you don't *care*. There's a good man in there; you just need to let him out."

"Thanks, Lisa." I squeeze her shoulder as I walk her to the door. "I know I'm not making things easy for you, but you

know why I struggle with all this; you know my past.”

“Just keep behaving. Meanwhile, I’m going to attempt to not lose my mind as I try to find another publicist before I have a meltdown.”

“Good luck.” I shut the door behind her, Presley’s name popping into my head as a potential candidate she could hire. It would be a long shot and probably a conflict of interest but she’s bright and opinionated, just the kind of young woman who would thrive at Lisa’s firm.

I check my watch, noting I have fifteen minutes before my next meeting. I take the time to sit on a couch in the far corner of my office, leaning back and closing my eyes to think about Lisa’s comments.

The reality is, I’m not the same man I once was. I do have regret for briefly dating Nikki Frisk. The fact was, she was engaging and smart and I didn’t pursue her. She reached out to me for advice about her assets in the divorce and we hit it off. She had led to me believe that she and Peter had been separated and were in the middle of a divorce. The fact that those same rumors plagued the tabloids only solidified her claims. Had I known that wasn’t the case, I never would have looked twice at her. I may be a lot of things, but I’m not a fucking home-wrecker. But it wouldn’t have mattered if I tried to defend myself and tell people that she lied to me; they already believed that I did it to twist the knife a little deeper into Peter Frisk after I had recently and very publicly walked away from a very lucrative opportunity to partner with him.

Like I said, there’s a lot of shit out there about me that isn’t too great, some I’m not proud of, but I won’t get into bed financially with a corrupt asshole who’s been known to profit off wartime weapon agreements. The world likes to paint me as the Machiavellian villain and yeah, I might play into it, but the reality is, I do have morals.

Part of me thinks that Peter Frisk was in on the whole thing with Nikki in some elaborate scheme to smear my name even further and tank this deal with Meridian.

My eyes pop open, my attempt to think through my own emotions only making me more stressed out and now very clearly paranoid. I stand, straightening my tie, and walk over to my desk to prepare for my next meeting.

I open my drawer and see Lisa's business card still sitting in it. I reach for it, then hesitate, only to reach for it again. This time I pick it up and slide it into my wallet.

“SHIT, ARE YOU SERIOUS? WHEN?”

I stop suddenly when I round the corner of the long hallway where my classroom is located. Presley's friend—her name slipping my mind—has her hand on her shoulder as they slowly walk in front of me.

“Today. My boss called me into his office this morning and said that they are forced to downsize my position along with five others.”

I slow my pace to stay behind. I know I shouldn't listen in on their private conversation, but the moment Presley mentions being downsized, Lisa's current predicament of being short-staffed flashes through my mind.

“And of course it's right after the New Year; that's really shitty of them. Not that there's really ever a good time to lose your job.” The friend stretches her arms around Presley's narrow shoulders and gives her a squeeze.

“Yeah, I was barely getting by working there part-time as it was, but now I don't know how I'm going to pay my bills. I'm going to have to get a roommate again, Serenity.”

Serenity, that's her name.

“Not a chance, not after that weirdo that you caught rummaging through your underwear drawer. We'll figure something out. You can always crash on my and Jarrod's couch.”

My stomach clenches at the reference to the roommate.
What the fuck kind of situation was she living in?

The women stop and I pull my phone out of my pocket, pretending to be focused on the screen as I walk past them and enter the classroom.

For the next ninety minutes, I try to remain focused on what I'm teaching, but my eyes keep drifting over to Presley's face, her expression clearly troubled. Her eyes shift down toward the floor, her chin resting heavy on her hand that's propped up by her elbow on the desk. She's in another world, clearly distracted by the bomb dropped on her earlier by her employer.

I reach into my lapel, pulling the business card from my wallet and slipping it into my pants pocket while one of the students attempts to answer a question I presented.

When the bell finally alerts to the end of class, the students don't waste time rushing out into the hallway.

"Hey, I have to rush to meet Jarrod. I'll call you later tonight, okay? You sure you're okay?" Serenity gives her a look of concern as Presley nods her head, assuring her that she'll be fine before shooing her to go meet up with her boyfriend.

"Miss James." Her head snaps up, her blue eyes meeting mine as she slides her tablet into her bag. "Could I have moment with you, please?"

She nods, her eyes now darting to the last two people who exit the room, leaving us completely alone.

I run my finger nervously over the business card in my pocket as I step toward her. Her hair falls over one shoulder and down her back in long, silky waves—waves I'd like to run my fingers through as my tongue explores her body.

Stop thinking with your dick, asshole; that's why you're in this mess.

I clear my throat. "Miss James, I couldn't help but overhear your situation earlier on your way into class." She

looks at me, unblinking. “That you lost your job this morning?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, I did.” That look of sadness is back instantly, her tense shoulders falling a few inches as she lets her arm that’s holding her bag sag a little lower.

“I may have an opportunity for you.”

“Oh?”

“Lisa Wade owns the best PR firm in Chicago, arguably one of the top in the country. She actually represents me and Gates Enterprises.” I pull the card out of my pocket.

“Yes.” She somewhat laughs. “Everyone in the public relations field knows about Lisa Wade. She’s our Lebron, if you will.”

“Well, it just so happens one of her publicists quit unexpectedly and it’s left her in a serious situation. She’s in dire need of help and I’m sure that she’d be willing to work around your school schedule.”

“Oh.” She stares at me in disbelief before her hand comes up to rest against the base of her throat. “Wait, are you offering me a job?”

I chuckle, extending the business card toward her. “I’m not, but I’m telling you that I know of an opportunity you’d be a perfect fit for and I can put in a good word for you.”

Her mouth falls open slightly in what I assume is shock as she slowly reaches for the card. Her long, slender fingers grasp the card, touching mine for the briefest second, but it’s all I need to feel the electricity radiate up my arm and through my body. I look down to where our hands touch, then back up to her to see if she felt it too, but her expression gives nothing away.

“Why me? I—I’m still in grad school. Working for Lisa Wade is a dream job for like every person who studies public relations. I don’t think I’m qualified.”

I shrug. “Might be but not everyone is like you. You’re the kind of person Lisa hires. You’re driven and clearly very

smart, something that hasn't gone unnoticed in class these last few weeks, and you're not afraid to voice your opinion... even if it's one of disgust." I can't keep the smirk from my lips.

"Well, technically I apologized for that though so I'm not sure I have the kind of backbone you think I do." Her cheeks flush.

"And I thought we agreed that you're not going to apologize."

"Did I?" I can't tell if I'm imagining it or it's wishful thinking, but I swear her expression goes from coy and innocent to flirty as she cocks her head to one side.

I nod my head slowly, sliding my hands into my pockets. I'm biting my tongue to resist telling her that maybe she needs a little paddling to remind her that she should listen to me.

"You're right, I guess you didn't." I hear the octave of my voice lower as I say, "But this little exchange right here proves my point because most of the time, when I tell someone to do something, they obey me, Presley. Maybe you need a gentle reminder?"

Her breath gets a little heavier, her chest rising and falling visibly, more than before as the blush creeps from her cheeks down to her neck. My eyes fall down to her exposed collarbone and I have the most sudden urge to reach out and run my fingertip gently across it but I don't.

"Re-reminder?" She stumbles with the word.

Don't do it. Don't say what you want to say. I remind myself that I'm a changed man.

"So I can tell Lisa to expect your call then?" I ask firmly, bringing us both out of whatever lust-filled haze had settled between us.

She nods her head and slides the card into her pocket as she grabs her bag and hoists it over her shoulder.

"Thank you, Pro—Mr. Gates." She shakes her head at her own correction. "Seriously, thank you." She offers a slight nod

of her head with a tight-lipped smile and scurries around me to exit the room.

I grab my coat and slide it on as I walk down the long hallway toward the exit. I pull up Lisa's name on my phone and hit dial.

"Cyrus, always concerning when you call me unannounced. What happened?"

I laugh. "Pleasure to hear your voice, Lisa. Nothing happened, but I do have some good news for you. I have a student, my best student actually, who just lost their job. I gave them your card and suggested they give you a call about the open publicist position you have. I know Becky had years of experience under her belt, but I think you should at least interview this candidate."

"A student? Cyrus, I need someone who can be up to speed like yesterday and already has experience in the industry."

"I understand. They have experience, just lost their job this morning at another firm, a mediocre one but still, it's experience. Trust me, Lisa, if I didn't think she couldn't handle it, I wouldn't have suggested it."

"*She?*" I hear the concern in her voice at my slipup. I had hoped not to divulge that information because I knew it would illicit this kind of response from her.

"Trust me, she's worth it. She's extremely bright; she's got a backbone and a moral compass that would keep even the worst of us on the straight and narrow."

The other end of the phone is silent for several seconds.

"Fine, I'll interview her, but Cyrus, so help me, if this is some ploy to get this woman into your life, I'll make it my life's mission to make sure you regret the day you were born. You understand me? No ulterior motives."

"No ulterior motives," I repeat back to her through a half chuckle.

As much as I want to think there's some small chance in hell that Presley James and I could ever be anything more than student and professor, I know damn well that if I value my career and my balls, it can never be anything more than a fantasy.

Chapter 4

Presley

I lie in bed, the blue glow of the television illuminating my bedroom as I absentmindedly flip the business card in my hand over and over.

I noticed the handwritten note on it indicating Lisa's personal cell and it made me wonder if Mr. Gates had written that for my benefit or if Lisa had written it for him. Maybe they're an item or maybe it's exactly what he said, that her firm represents him.

I drop the card down to my side and stare at the television, rewatching an episode of *Friends* I've seen probably more times than I can count. I smile at a snarky comment made by Chandler, but my mind quickly begins to drift back to my interaction with Cyrus this afternoon.

"Most of the time, when I tell someone to do something, they obey me, Presley. Maybe you need a gentle reminder?"

Did I read into that exchange or was there innuendo in his comment? What kind of reminder was he referring to? I feel my thighs squeeze together almost involuntarily as I recall the way his voice dropped an octave when he said it. The look in his eyes made my stomach quiver in the moment, just like the first night we met when he leaned in to tell me, *I sure as shit don't pretend to be a nice guy.*

I close my eyes as my fingers find their way across my pelvis, settling at the juncture between my thighs as I lightly tease myself. Goosebumps break out across my skin just like they did when our fingertips touched. I felt like my body was

on pins and needles, seconds away from melting into a puddle of goo, but he seemed unfazed, so I quickly pulled my hand away and shook the feelings from my head.

My phone rings beside me, startling me. I sit up, glancing around in embarrassment like someone witnessed what I was about to do to myself with thoughts of Cyrus Gates.

I slide my finger across the screen when I see Serenity's name appear.

“Hey, what's up?”

“Hey, Pres, how are you holding up?” I know she cares and only means well but the dreaded *tone* has already settled into her voice.

“I'm good. Just watching *Friends*.”

“Are you sure? You want me to come over? Jarrod is playing Call of Duty online so he's distracted anyway.”

“No, it's late and I mean it, I'm okay. Things—” I hesitate but decide to tell her anyway. “Well, things might be turning around for me already.”

“Really? Did they offer you your job back?”

“No, but, uh, I've been presented an opportunity to interview with Lisa Wade.”

“*Thee* Lisa Wade?” Serenity squeals.

“One and the same.”

“Holy fucking shit, Presley! How did you manage that? I mean, not that you don't deserve it—sorry—I just mean, it's Lisa Wade!”

“I know,” I say, fully aware at the insanity of the situation. “Actually, Professor Gates told me about the position and gave me her card.” The phone is silent for a few seconds.

“Cyrus? How'd he know that you needed a job?”

I shrug as if she can see me. “I guess he overheard us talking and said that she is in dire need of a publicist because

one of hers just quit unexpectedly and she's in a bind. He said she'd be willing to work around my schedule."

"He didn't—"

"Didn't what?" I ask when she doesn't finish her statement.

"I don't mean to sound jealous or like an asshole, but he didn't try to like demand a tit-for-tat situation for the opportunity, did he?"

"He did make me blow him. If that's what you mean."

"Oh my God, Presley," she says as we both burst into laughter.

"No, Serenity, and I would hope you would know me well enough to know that I wouldn't take the damn offer if those kind of strings were attached."

"I know you wouldn't but we both know that man has a reputation as a womanizer. Then again, he is fine so I wouldn't blame you if you did take an offer like that." She laughs again.

"It's not a guaranteed anything. It's just an interview, but I'd be crazy not to hope for it, right? I mean, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

"You're doing that thing again."

"What thing?" I scrunch my brow.

"That thing where you doubt yourself. You're always so modest, Presley. I don't say it just to say it; you are by far the smartest person I know and you have the most insane potential. I guaran-damn-tee you that someday, you'll be Lisa Wade. You're going to be that PR powerhouse that twenty-four-year-old you was interviewing with. I mean it."

I feel my throat grow thick with emotion. She's right in that I do tend to doubt myself. I give everything I do absolutely one hundred percent of my effort but growing up in a house where all my parents wanted me to do was get married and have kids, those seeds of doubt still threaten to break through and take root.

I love my parents but they never understood when I said I wanted to leave my small town behind and move to the “big city.” They told me it was dangerous and frivolous. They felt like I thought I was too good for the life they’d chosen for themselves, but that’s not it at all. I just want my own experiences, my own path.

“Thanks, I mean it. I want this so bad, Serenity, but I’m so scared to get my hopes up because I know I’m not technically qualified... but I want it.”

“And you’ll get it. Just watch.”

We hang up and I roll on my side, attempting to focus back on the TV but it’s no use. I switch it off, plug my phone in, and make sure my alarm is set before I close my eyes and drift off to sleep.

I PACE THE FLOOR IN MY STUDIO APARTMENT, TAKING A SEAT on my couch as the phone rings. The second I hear a click, I jump back up and begin to pace again.

“This is Lisa.”

“Hi.” My voice is so high I sound like a dog toy. “Hi, this is Presley James. I’m calling because Cy—Mr. Gates gave me your card. I apologize—”

“Ah, so you’re his best student,” she says, her voice growing warmer.

His best student? Is that what he told her?

“Thank you for reaching out. Cyrus mentioned that you’d be calling, and I really am in dire need of someone ASAP so would you be able to come by this morning for an interview?”

“Oh, yes, absolutely. I’m free all day actually. I don’t have class on Tuesdays at all.”

“Perfect. Come by at eleven. The front desk receptionist will have a badge for you and tell you which floor my office is on. You know where we’re located?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you, thank you so much.” I try not to gush but it just comes out.

“See you at eleven, Presley.”

The phone goes dead and I can’t stifle the squeal of pure joy that erupts from my throat as I throw my hands over my head and dance with excitement. I glance over at the time on the microwave. It’s already half past nine and I haven’t even showered.

“Shit!”

I toss my phone onto the couch and rush to the bathroom to start the shower. It’s only a few stops away on the train, but still, I need time to pick out the perfect, professional interview outfit, brainstorm questions I might have, and brush up on my general interviewing skills.

I rush through my shower routine, wrapping a towel around my long hair and a fluffy robe around my body as I make myself a cup of coffee. I grab my tablet and pull up my resume to update it with my most recent work experience. I don’t own a printer—does anyone anymore?—so I’m hopeful a digital copy of my resume will do. I can simply email it to their HR team or Lisa herself when I arrive.

I read over my resume and I’m happy with it. For only working part-time at Lighthouse Public Relations, I actually had a lot of responsibility. Mostly to do with the fact that they were so small they had most of us doing more than one job, but also because I enjoyed it and often asked for more responsibility so that I could gain hands-on experience.

I’m about to close my tablet and start drying my hair when a thought pops into my head. I open my school email and pull up the syllabus for Ethics in Business. There at the top of the page is Cyrus Gates’ school-assigned email address. If I had to guess, he’s probably never checked it. We use the online portal for any questions or assignment submissions, but I decide to send him a quick note anyway.

Got an interview with Lisa today at 11! Thanks again for the opportunity. I promise to have a backbone.

And then, for some unknown and completely asinine reason, I sign it...

Your best student ;)

I have a habit of attempting to be bold in the moment which usually backfires on me because it's not bold; it's stupid and impulsive and ends up with me cringing in bed at night as I once again pray the earth would open up and swallow me whole.

Thankfully, I'm too nervous and excited to allow this slip up to completely overtake my brain and ruin my day. I close the tablet and rush to the bathroom to finish getting ready, completely focused on my upcoming interview.

There will be plenty of time later for me to remember this moment of insanity and wallow in embarrassment or perhaps, craft yet another apology to Mr. Gates.

I arrive at my interview fifteen minutes early... Okay, more like thirty, but I paced outside in the cold January wind for fifteen minutes until my face went numb before going inside. Fifteen minutes is an acceptable amount of time to be early; thirty sends the message that I just can't manage my time.

I sit rigidly in a chair outside of Lisa's office, looking down for the fifth time to make sure my visitor's badge is straight. It's straight. I tap my fingers, then my foot, then cross and uncross my legs again.

I can hear voices on the other side of her office door nearing closer so I stand up. The handle turns and the door begins to open when I recognize the voice and Cyrus Gates emerges from her office.

"You don't give me enough credit, Lisa." He laughs, looking back at her as they both walk out of the office. "I'm not always the bad guy."

"Mr. Gates." I smile nervously as he finally turns, his eyes meeting mine.

"Miss James," he says calmly, clearly already aware that I was meeting with Lisa today.

“Hello, Presley, I assume?” Lisa says as she extends her hand toward me. “Pleasure to meet you. I know you already know Cyrus. I’ll be right with you. I’m going to grab a cup of coffee before our interview. Would you like one?”

Is she asking to get me coffee?

I shake my head, my words caught in my throat.

“Great, go ahead and step into my office and I’ll be right back. Cyrus, I’ll be on the lookout for your email; don’t make me call you for it,” she says, her back already toward us as she walks down the hall.

I stand nervously, unsure if I should step into her office or say something when Cyrus steps closer to me, his spicy cologne hitting my nostrils, causing me to groan internally.

The last thing I need to fuel my forbidden professor fantasies is to know how damn sexy he smells.

“You’re more than capable to handle this position, Presley. I hope you know that.”

I nod my head, not in agreement but because I’m unsure what to say. I glance down at my feet and see his hand jut out, one finger touching my chin so slightly I think for a second that I imagine it. I jerk my head upward and look at him.

“Don’t overthink it in there. You’ll be fine, kid. Don’t forget to show that backbone.” He gives me a wink, then turns around and nonchalantly walks toward the elevators.

Kid? An image of Han Solo saying it snarkily to Luke Skywalker causes my nose to wrinkle.

My stomach does that flip thing but not in excitement, more like humiliation. Suddenly that little fantasy in my head that he was flirting with me fizzles out. This man sees me as an innocent little fawn, all wobbly-legged as she tries to navigate her new life.

“Focus on the interview,” I say to myself as I march into her office. The last thing I need to be worried about is if my professor has the hots for me or not. Not only is that highly

unethical, but I'm pretty sure he could get fired and Lisa could blacklist my name all over Chicago.

"Sorry for the wait," Lisa says, interrupting my thoughts. "Okay, let's jump into it."

She spends the next twenty minutes discussing the position, explaining the responsibilities that it would entail.

"That all sounds extremely doable and honestly, very similar to what I was doing at Lighthouse, only on a much smaller scale and with lesser-known clients. I'm extremely detail-oriented and I can juggle a lot, even though I'm still in school. My class load is light this last semester and I managed much more working almost thirty hours a week previously. I did bring a copy of my resume if you'd like to see it."

I open my tablet and hand it over to her. She places her glasses on the tip of her nose and reads over it before handing it back to me. She slowly removes her glasses, folding them in her hands as lowers them to rest on the desk. My nerves are on edge; I can't tell what she's about to say, but it's not at all what I expected.

"Look, it's completely unorthodox and not part of my practice *at all* to do this, but if I offered you the job right now, would you take it?"

My mouth feels like it's full of sand. I feel my eyes almost jump out of their sockets.

"Yes!" I say enthusiastically.

"Great, then it's yours." She stands and holds out her hand again. I shake it firmly, a smile stretching so widely across my face I feel it reach the corners of my eyes.

"If you can, head down to floor seven where HR is located. You can start paperwork and email over a copy of your school schedule so we can work around it. They'll also have the pay outlined down there; if it's not to your liking, we can renegotiate."

"I—uh, I'm sorry I'm speechless. I was just grateful for the chance to interview with you. I don't think I actually expected this."

She smiles genuinely. “Thank Cyrus. He spoke very highly of you. Oh, speaking of, that’s the account you’ll be managing. I, of course, will be on it as well, signing off on everything, but you’ll basically be his case manager, day-to-day babysitter if you will.”

“Oh.” I can feel my face grow pale.

“Is that okay?” she asks, her eyebrow hooking upward.

“Yes, of course. Of course. Thanks again, so much. I’ll email over my schedule as soon as I’m done with HR.”

I smile and practically run to the elevator. My legs shake as I step in and the doors close behind me.

I can’t tell if it’s pure excitement for the job or nervous that I just signed up to work side by side with Cyrus Gates. Then the mortification sets in as I remember the childish email I sent him earlier like a giddy schoolgirl.

Maybe I’ll get lucky and this elevator will plummet to the basement, saving me the embarrassment of having to see him face-to-face in class tomorrow. I pinch my eyes closed tightly, shaking my head as if it will loosen the thought and tumble from my brain. I want to focus on the pure elation that is radiating through my body right now.

I spend the next hour with Marquis, the head of HR, as he gives me a brief tour of the building, shows me where my desk will be, and assists me in working with IT to set up my new work profile and get started on the paperwork.

“We offer full benefits to anyone who works over twenty hours a week so you’ll be receiving an email from me with the links to set that up if you want to sign up as well as a monthly membership to any gym, yoga, or Pilates studio of your choosing.”

“Seriously?” I’m taken aback at the generosity of the company.

“Absolutely. Lisa always says that we should take care of our minds and bodies first. You’re going to love it here; I can promise you that. Everyone is very approachable and willing to help out. Even Lisa, she’s a god among us but she doesn’t

act like it.” He smiles. “On that note, I’m heading back to my office. Feel free to take off once you’re done filling out the paperwork and emailed me your schedule. I’ll work with Lisa to get your hours sorted and be in contact soon.”

“Thank you so much.” He gently pats the doorway to my office and spins on his heel to walk back to his.

Over the next hour, I fill out insurance documents, my W-2, sign the NDA, and go over the new hire handbook as well as send out my schedule. I email myself the company culture handout as well as a few other new hire documents to read up on at home, then gather my things to head out.

I can’t keep the smile off my face as I walk to the elevator and then through the lobby. I feel like I’m bouncing with every step as I whisk through the revolving door and burst out into the January sun. I forgot my sunglasses so I drop my eyes down to my feet as I take the few steps to the sidewalk.

“With a smile like that, I’m guessing you got the job?”

I stop so suddenly I almost take a spill. I look up to see Cyrus, casually leaning against his shiny black sports car. His long camel coat, most likely cashmere, is buttoned around his tall, imposing figure. His dark hair has tumbled over his forehead and his hands are encased in black leather gloves.

“Come on”—he nods with his head as he holds his arm to gesture—“I’ll give you a ride.”

Chapter 5

Cyrus

“Did you wait here this entire time?” she asks, confused.

“I had some other business in the building that occupied most of the time, but I did wait the last fifteen minutes or so.”

“Why?”

“To see if you got the job. So, did you?”

“I did.” The smile returns to her face and I can’t help but reciprocate.

“Congrats! Let me buy you lunch.” I motion toward the car again, but she stays frozen where she stopped.

“Did you—have something to do with it? Why I got the job?”

“Presley.” I can’t hide the frustration in my voice at this point. “Get in the damn car.”

She jumps a little. “I think I’ll ju—” She motions with her thumb over her shoulder, but I don’t let her finish whatever she’s about to say.

“As *my* new publicist, I think it’s only right we have lunch and discuss our strategy going forward for my image.”

She purses her lips, wanting to say something snarky back—I can see it all over her face—but she gives in and takes the few steps toward my car.

“Hey.” I hook my hand around her elbow, pulling her toward me as we step around the back of the car. “You didn’t

even look at oncoming traffic,” I scold her.

“There’s nobody coming; they have a red light”—she motions toward the line of cars waiting behind the white line —“and it’s a one-way street so no cross traffic.”

She’s right, but I still hold her arm as I walk us to the passenger side and open the door for her. She slides inside.

“I’ve never been in a Mercedes before,” she says as she glances around the car, running her fingertip gently over the soft leather of the armrest on the door.

“Never?”

She shakes her head, then turns toward me. “You didn’t answer my question about the job. Is that why you were here this morning? To make Lisa hire me?”

I can’t hold back the laugh that erupts from my chest. “Trust me, nobody can make Lisa Wade do anything she doesn’t want to do, not even me.”

“So that’s not why you were there then?”

I contemplate lying to her, or at least bending the truth a little by mentioning the other business I had in the building, but I don’t.

“I was there to see you.”

I navigate the car through Chicago traffic, pulling up to one of my favorite bistros and opening the car door before she can ask me why.

“Afternoon, Mr. Gates,” Austin, one of the regular valet attendants, opens Presley’s door and ushers her out of the vehicle before walking around to take my place behind the wheel.

“Austin,” I say, tipping my head toward him.

“What is this place?” Presley tilts her head to look up at the name on the sign as I gently press my hand to the base of her spine.

“The best damn French bistro in the city.” I’ve been a regular at Bistronomic since they first opened over a decade

ago. I nod to the host who also recognizes me, leading me back to my regular table, tucked away from prying eyes. The last thing I need right now is someone's tongue wagging about the new twenty-something on my arm.

“Allow me,” I say, helping remove Presley's coat. It's unintentional but the front of my fingers drag down her arms as I slowly slide it off her body. She turns just as I finish removing it, sending her hair over my hand. It's just as silky as I imagined and it smells like warm vanilla. I curl my fingers into my palm to resist reaching out and grabbing a handful of it, tugging it to bring her body back against mine so I can lean over her, devouring her mouth with mine.

Fuck me.

I pull her chair out, allowing her to take a seat before removing my own coat and sitting down myself.

“How did you know I'd be at Lisa's this morning?”

The waiter has barely left our table after placing down a pitcher of water before she asks. She's really not letting this go.

“Have you checked your email today?” Her brows knit together. “Check it,” I say as she continues to stare at me. “Check. It,” I say again, slowly this time as I lean forward and grab my glass of water.

She reaches into her coat pocket and produces her phone, her face still twisted with confusion as she taps around. I see her eyes scanning, then a small smile slowly creeps across her face along with a slight pink that darkens her cheeks.

“Did you forget you sent me an email?”

She nods her head, her delicate gold earrings bouncing with the movement.

“I must say, it was a pleasant surprise to see in my inbox this morning.” I smile. “Why don't you read my response out loud.”

Her lips part in that cute little nervous manner I've seen before. Her eyes drop from me to the phone, then back up to

me.

“Go on.”

“Miss James,” she says softly before clearing her throat. “Good luck at your interview. I’m sure you will get the job.”

She stops.

“Signed?” I ask.

Her tongue darts out, wetting her lips. She swallows.

“Your favorite professor.”

I like watching her fight the urge to sink beneath the table and hide.

She straightens her shoulders, sliding the phone back into her coat pocket before reaching for her water.

“I never said that you were my favorite professor.”

I shrug. “I think we both know it’s true.”

“Some might call that arrogance.”

“Not arrogance if it’s true.” She stares at me. “Is it true?”

“Will I get fired if I say no?” She gives me that cocky little grin.

“Of course not. I think you don’t want to say it’s true because you hate that you like me. It goes against every moral fiber of your being since I’m the big bad immoral wolf of Chicago teaching *your* ethics class.”

My answer clearly shocks her, but we’re interrupted by the waiter reappearing to take our order.

“Oh, I, uh, didn’t look at the menu yet.”

“Do you want me to order for us?”

She looks at me, then to the waiter who smiles broadly at her.

“Mr. Gates has excellent taste and has been coming here since we opened.”

“Okay,” she says, then I give our order to the waiter before turning my attention back to her.

“So why do you need a publicist, Mr. Gates?”

“Seriously?” I laugh. “You know why.”

She shrugs. She’s playing that innocent game again. I lean back in my chair, crossing my ankle over my knee as I narrow my gaze at her. I contemplate keeping it surface level, telling her that some not-so-upstanding decisions in my past are impeding a very important business deal I’m trying to close, but I go for the truth instead. If she’s going to be my publicist, she needs to know who I really am. Plus, there’s an underlying hope that I’ll scare her enough that she won’t want to push the limits of these flirty little exchanges between us because I know my resolve is hanging by a thread already.

“While a lot of the rumors about me are untrue, I have certainly done my fair share of what people would consider shady business practices. Not toward the innocent,” I say emphatically, “but I don’t play fair when it comes to selfish, spineless assholes who would fuck their own mother over to get ahead in life.”

“Why even deal with those kinds of people in the first place?”

I want to laugh at her naiveté, but the reality is, a lot of people think that way.

“If I didn’t do business with people like that, there’d hardly be anyone to do business with—if any at all. That’s the unfortunate truth. So while I might be unethical, the reason I get branded as the worst of these lowlifes is because I don’t pretend to be someone I’m not. I don’t pretend like I’m altruistic and innocent like they do.”

She nods. “So you’re like Dexter.”

“Pardon?”

“He was a serial killer on a TV show but he only killed bad guys.”

I smirk. “I guess you could think of it like that, but I can promise, there are no bodies in my basement.”

“So, you don’t want to pretend to be innocent; what do you want your publicist to do for you then?”

This is why I knew she’d be perfect for this job. She listens and she’s quick.

“To help showcase the good that I actually do but not in some way that is saying *hey, look over here so that you don’t see the bad shit I’m doing over there*. Also, to show that I’m not my past. People can grow and evolve and change.”

“Meaning?”

I chuckle, thinking how to choose my words wisely for the next part. “Meaning I had a penchant for women, fast cars, and a good time.”

“And now?” Her face is stoic, her back stiff.

“And now I don’t, simple as that.”

“I’ve done some research. I am aware of the most recent Nikki Frisk scandal.”

“Yeah.” I drag my hand over my jaw slowly. “I was a fool. I won’t lie. I should have seen that one coming, but I truly didn’t.”

“Blinded by love?”

I almost spit my water out of my mouth. “God, no!” I shake my head. “Lust, darling, pure lust.” I toss her a wink. “A man’s gotta eat.”

I see her flinch and I’m not sure if it’s at the word lust or darling or the fact I basically just said I needed to get laid. I didn’t mean to say the latter; it just slipped out, surprising even me.

Seconds later our waiter appears with the food, saving me from having to continue with that conversation... or so I thought.

“So what’s the game plan then? No more women, parties, and cars?”

“Well, I’m not getting rid of any of my cars, but I promise to obey the rules of the road. I have no interest in parties anymore; I’m far too old to be bothered with that nonsense.”

“And women?” She takes a bite of her shrimp salad, her eyes shifting down to her plate.

“Women,” I say before taking a bite of my food. I chew slowly, choosing my words wisely before answering. “I’m not going to be celibate if that’s the ask, but I promise to make wiser choices. More age-appropriate choices that are most definitely in no way married or engaged.”

“That sounds like a wise decision. Have you only dated younger women?”

I shake my head. “No, not at all. In fact, I’ve only seriously dated women closer to my age, but the tabloids don’t like those stories because they don’t sell. I’ve certainly been photographed with more young women than I’ve dated. Some were literally just standing next to me; others were merely on my arm to get into a club or a party and I never talked to them again.”

“How old are you?” she asks.

“Old enough to be your father.” I’m not sure why I answered like that.

“My father is forty-eight.”

“Not too far off then. Forty-six.”

She chews her bottom lip like she’s unsure if she should ask her next question. But then she gives me that smile, that mischievous one that hides something behind it. “And what is age appropriate for a forty-six-year-old man?”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-four, soon to be twenty-five.”

There’s a palpable tension between us right now. She knows she’s goading me; she knows I want to say she’s *old enough*.

Is this a game for her? Something she's done with other older men? This isn't what I expected from her the first time I saw her. She bounces between timid and innocent, staunch in her beliefs that the world is black and white, and then there's this.

I can't decide if this is some sort of fantasy in her head, the older man, professor trope or if she's trying to test me, but the thoughts I've had about her... the thoughts I'm having right now of reaching across this table to drag her into my lap so I can teach her a hard lesson about teasing me aren't just a cute game for me. She's plagued my thoughts since the moment I met her and I can't ruin her life for a quick fuck, no matter how many times I beat off in the shower imagining it.

I know where this is leading and I decide that as much as I've enjoyed these little intimate moments of innuendo, I have to shut it down before she gets it into her head that I would ever go for her. That I ever *could* go for her.

"I need to get back to the office." I stand up and toss my napkin onto the table as I reach for my coat. "Apologies for the quick exit." I toss several bills on the table. "The tab is paid and here's extra for a cab home."

She stares up at me, her fork frozen halfway to her lips. I know I'm not behaving like a gentleman, but it's time she realizes I'm not one... not in the slightest.

"I'll see you in class, Miss James."

Chapter 6

Presley

I watch as Cyrus walks briskly out of the restaurant, shrimp salad still halfway to my mouth that's hanging open in confusion.

I shake my head as if that will help me understand what just happened and shovel the forkful of food into my mouth with a shrug. There's no sense in a good lunch going to waste. I finish my meal, thanking the staff before heading out.

Instead of calling a cab, I decide to walk the three blocks to my train station. I pull my phone out of my pocket and call Serenity, hoping she's still at lunch.

"Hey, girl. I was just heading back to the office from lunch. Been dying to hear how the interview went."

I had sent her a text about it, right before sending that ridiculous email to Cyrus.

"I was hoping I'd catch you at lunch. I just had two of the strangest interactions."

"Oh?"

"Well, the first one was good strange; it was the interview itself. Lisa is exactly what you'd imagine, but nice, like... genuinely nice."

"Seriously?" she asks in disbelief. "I thought for sure she'd be a Miranda Priestly type woman... although, I'm not sure why. I've never heard a bad thing about her."

"Probably because that's what society makes us think high-powered women are like—ball-busting bitches." We both

giggle. “But yes, she was so kind and the strangest thing about it is, she offered me the job.”

“What!” I immediately jerk my phone away from my ear at the high-pitched scream that echoes from Serenity’s mouth. “I knew you’d get it! I knew it! But why was it strange?”

“I dunno. I guess I assumed it would be one of many interviews if it was going to go anywhere. She basically just talked to me about my experience for a bit, then bam, said the job was mine if I wanted it.”

“Girl, we have to go out and celebrate. This is huge! *Huge!*” she reiterates and I know she’s gesturing wildly on the other end of the phone.

“Thanks.” I laugh. “Seriously, you always believe in me.”

“And I always will because you’re amazing and deserve this, Pres. So, what was the other weird interaction?”

“Oh.” I feel myself tense up. “So, Mr. Gates was there.”

“For the interview? That’s weird.”

“Uh, no, before the interview. He said he had a meeting with Lisa before, but he waited for me after the interview and then insisted I go to lunch with him.”

“And did you go?”

“I did and it seemed to be going okay, and then right after our food arrived, before he even ate anything, he got up suddenly and said he had to leave and just bailed on me.”

“What? That’s really rude.”

“I know. There’s more to this strange dynamic, a lot more actually, but I’ll explain it tonight over drinks. You want to meet at Matchbox at seven?”

“Yes, but now I’m dying to know what else you’re not telling me. Shit! I’m late for my meeting. See you tonight!”

She hangs up quickly, just as my train arrives to take me home.

“*HE*’S THE CLIENT YOU’LL BE MANAGING?”

Serenity’s eyes bug out of her head when I reveal to her that I found out at the interview that the publicist who quit was working for Cyrus.

“Yeah. That’s why he insisted I go to lunch with him. We talked about why he needs a publicist and he started talking about how he needs to clean up his image. I could be wrong,” I say as I take a sip of my dirty martini, “but it felt like he was flirting with me.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Serenity says nonchalantly with a shrug. “It’s in his nature. A man like him can’t help it; he probably doesn’t even realize he’s doing it.”

“Then again, he called me kid.” I look down at my glass, swirling the olive around with the toothpick, that same feeling of disappointment from earlier washing over me.

“Presley,” she says slowly, “what’s with that look? Please tell me you weren’t hoping it was something more.”

I shake my head, attempting to be convincing. “No, I’m sure you’re right. It was just innocent flirting, or at least it seemed like it was, but most likely, he wasn’t even trying to flirt.”

“As long as that’s all it is because trust me, you don’t want to act out that good girl gone bad fantasy on a man like that.”

“What about that little speech you gave me after our first class with him, saying maybe it would be good to learn from a man like him?”

“Learn as in education, not a hard lesson. Look, I get it. He’s sexy and older and that whole forbidden professor thing is so hot, but at the least, you could lose your job and at the worst, a man like him can not only break your heart, but ruin your life.”

I nod my head and focus on enjoying the rest of my martini. Serenity fills me in on the current gossip that's going on at the magazine she works for where she manages their social media and I push every last thought of Cyrus Gates out of my head that's now swimming in vodka and olive juice.

I RAISE MY HAND HIGHER, BUT CYRUS DOES EVERYTHING IN HIS power to avoid acknowledging me.

I tried pushing the whole interaction out of my head after my talk with Serenity last night, but I'm starting to wonder if I said or did something that upset him.

"To add on to what Jeremiah said," I interject before he can cut me off or change the subject, "I do think that we should consider society's rules that are put upon us and decide if the risk is worth the reward to break them. If we always just go along with what was done previously because there's this unwritten expectation or rule that is deemed the right way, then we risk never having progress."

Mr. Gates stares at me for a moment. He opens his mouth like he's going to respond, then turns and walks back toward the lectern.

"Miss James, while I do agree with you, I think your point comes from a place of inexperience and ignorance."

His words are curt and I feel my face flush with embarrassment as a few students turn to look at me.

"So only experienced people like yourself, people with power and wealth can be game changers? Can disrupt and be the voice of progress?" My tone is a lot sharper than I intended but it gets my point across. I see his jaw clench as his fingers wrap tightly around the edge of the podium he's standing behind.

"And until we become those people, if we ever do, we should just what? Bend over and take it?"

Serenity's elbow hits my ribs gently as she turns to smile at me, speaking through her teeth. "What the fuck is going on?"

I don't look at her. I keep my eyes trained on Cyrus as he does that thing again. Smirking while he drags his hand over his jaw like he's biding his time before he rips my head off. But before he can answer, the bell dismisses us.

He doesn't say another word. He grabs his coat and tosses it over his arm as he marches hurriedly out of our classroom. I gather my things quickly, holding my book in my hands instead of putting it in my bag so that I can catch up with him.

"Mr. Gates." I say his name as I walk briskly after him. "Cyrus." I opt for his first name, saying it louder, but he's clearly ignoring me. "Professor!" I finally shout and it causes him to stop.

"What can I do for you, Miss James?" He says my name like it leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

"You can explain to me what the hell is going on?"

"What do you mean?"

My frustration has reached a boiling point. "Care to explain why you refused to call on me in class today? After your very rude behavior at lunch yesterday when *you*"—I point my finger at him and I can see he doesn't like that at all—"forced me to go to lunch with you."

He looks down at where my finger is still extended, then slowly drags his eyes back up to mine. It's seductive and intimidating at the same time. I drop my hand and let it rest on my hip.

"I came to tell you I start the job tomorrow and we need to discuss setting up a meeting so we can go over your expectations of me."

"And you thought harassing me in the hallway would be the best time to do that? Call my secretary." He turns to walk away again, but I don't let him. I walk in front of him and stop.

“Seriously, what the hell is going on? You tell me to have a backbone, and then when I do, you punish me by ignoring me or playing some game or whatever this is. If I did something to offend you, then just be a man and tell me, but if it’s that you can’t stand working with a strong, confident woman, then this is going to be a problem.”

A smile slowly spreads across his face before he lets out a laugh, a real laugh. “Trust me, that’s not the issue.”

He grabs my arm, looking around before pulling me down a narrow hallway. He reaches forward and opens a door, gently pushing me inside and closing the door behind me.

“Where are we?” I look around the small dark room as I sit down in a chair.

“My office,” he says, tossing his coat on the desk, then turning back around to face me. “I like when you have a backbone.” He slides his hands in his pockets as he looks down at me. “Probably too much.”

“What does that mean?” I tilt my head up to look at him, but he doesn’t answer the question.

“What questions do you have about the job?” He steps backward, crossing his arms over his chest as he perches on the edge of the large wooden desk in the center of the room.

“I guess, what you need from me? What Becky did?”

“I think Lisa will be best suited to answer those questions. In fact, I’ll set up a meeting with the three of us in my real office so we can talk through it. How does that sound?”

I nod my head. “Good. Thank you.”

“As far as I know, I’m your only client, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I think it will work best between us if”—his eyes grow heavy, and his lips curl at the edge like there’s something going on in that head of his that is far more sinister than what he’s actually saying—“you’re completely at my disposal.”

I feel my breath hitch in my chest at the way he said that, and I know that's the reaction he was going for. I clench my hands tighter together in my lap as I stare at him.

“So now we're back to this?” He tilts his head at my question. “This game of playing nice, then pretending I don't exist later.”

“Oh, I think you have it the other way around, young lady. I'm not the one playing games.”

“You think I'm playing games?”

“How is it that you go from the confident woman in my classroom who's ready to bite my head off, demanding my attention in the hallway by shouting at me, to this timid, meek little thing with her hands folded in her lap like I could get away with anything?”

My lips fall open as he pushes himself off the desk, coming to stand directly in front of me. He towers over me, another intimidation tactic, I'm sure.

“Speechless, just like you were at the interview yesterday morning. Then you go asking naughty little questions at our lunch yesterday, teasing me. Look at me.”

My eyes dart upward at his command.

“Naughty questions?” The words barely squeak out of my throat.

Is that what this is about?

“Mm-hmm. You know exactly what you're doing to me, don't you?”

I slowly shake my head no.

“Do I intimidate you?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He smiles a wry grin. “Now, run along, please.”

I both hate and like his dismissive attitude toward me. It makes me want to be defiant. To tell him to make me. Instead, I stand on wobbly legs and turn toward the door, reaching for

the handle, but before I can, I feel him so close behind me, the warmth from his chest radiating against my back.

“Allow me,” he says, his mouth near my ear as he extends one arm to grab the handle, the other coming to rest so gently against my hip bone. The contact startles me and I drop the book that was in my lap earlier.

Without thinking, I bend down to retrieve it, jutting my ass directly into his crotch that was barely two inches from me.

I hear his sharp intake of breath as his fingers dig into my hip bone and a slight groan falls from his lips.

“Fuck.”

His head lulls forward as his hand moves from the handle to rest flatly against the door. I stand still, turning my head slightly as I feel him harden against me.

“Sorry.” The word is barely a whisper.

“Don’t be.” His words are strained. “But if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stand up right now and walk through that door.”

After his playing games talk, I should know better, but instead of obeying him, I goad him.

“Or what?” I ask sweetly. “You’ll give me a gentle reminder?” I use his words from when he gave me a lecture about having a backbone.

His hand moves swiftly from the door to my back. He slides it up my spine, grabbing a handful of my hair as he tugs it gently, pulling me back against him even harder.

“Or you’ll find out what kind of man I actually am.”

Hearing his threat sends fire running through my veins. I feel myself grow slick with desire in an instant as he grabs the door handle. This time, he doesn’t hesitate and pulls the door open, shoves me into the hallway, then slams it loudly behind me.

Chapter 7

Cyrus

“F uck!”

I pound my fist against the door after I slam it behind her. The last thing I fucking need is her thinking she has the upper hand.

I could see the fear in her eyes as I stood over her, but the second I felt her perky little ass pressed against my cock, I knew I couldn't keep my composure. It's one thing to fantasize what it would feel like to hold her body against me; it's a whole other situation now knowing what her taut body feels like in my hands.

My cock throbs in my slacks, straining against my zipper... begging for release. I glance around the dark office, contemplating for a brief second if I could rub one out before heading back to the office but decide against it.

I grab my coat as I call my secretary and head out to my car.

“Abigail, give Lisa Wade's office a call and get a meeting set up at my office tomorrow with her and Miss James, please.”

I throw the car in gear, gunning it out of the parking lot. Clearly, me playing indifferent to Presley didn't scare her enough and now she's well aware of the effect she has on me. I need to regain the power dynamic in this relationship. Time to up the ante and show her exactly the kind of man I am.

“APART FROM THE REQUEST TO KEEP THE CURRENT BOARD, ARE there any other new requirements I can expect moving forward?”

I don't attempt to hide my frustration with Ken Pike, the CEO of Meridian.

“None that we foresee.” He glances between his lawyer on his right side and his CFO on the left.

“Great. So, per our agreement, your current board will stay on and it will be written into the contract. Are there any other concerns you gentlemen want to address with me at this time?” I smile—it's not genuine in the slightest. What I want is to tell them to go fuck themselves, but Terry and Nelson are staring daggers at me right now.

“Cyrus,” Ken says in that self-righteous, condescending tone of his. “You have to understand, as men, we understand your way of life. There's no judgment from any of us. It's nothing personal; it's our consumer.”

Does this motherfucker think I give a rat's ass if he or his cronies judge me? Does he not realize what I know about him and his proclivities for stepping out on his wife with professionals?

“Of course not, Ken. I understand. Meridian has an image to uphold and that's just as important as any part of this deal, if not more important. The last thing I want to do is damage *your* image in this deal. As long as we are in honest communication about expectations and there's no hidden agenda, this will all be a piece of cake.”

I can't tell if Ken is picking up on my not-so-subtle threats. It's my nice way of saying, *if you even think about fucking me over on this deal again, I'll air all your dirty laundry and still walk away with your company.*

“Excellent. Gentlemen,” he says, standing up and shaking my hand, “as always, thank you for your time and I really am

excited to get things moving forward again on this deal.”

The moment they leave the boardroom, Nelson turns to me.

“Would it kill you to not subtly threaten them every time we have a meeting?”

“Yes, Nelson, it would,” I say, making my way back toward my office with him hot on my heels.

“I’m just saying that maybe you could play ni—”

I stop and turn around to face him, instant anger pulsing through my veins. “Play nice? Is that what you’re going to say?”

“Well, yes,” he chokes out.

“No. No, I can’t *play nice*, Nelson, because they’re not. If they want to play hardball, I’ll come out with both barrels blazing because when you’re soft, like I was thanks to you on this deal and you concede anything, they always come back asking for more. I guarantee you that because we said yes to keeping their board of directors, they’re already scheming what else they can keep in this deal.”

“So, what? You’re willing to lose it? After everything we’ve done? After all the goddamn hard work I’ve done on this deal?”

“Relax, Nelson. We aren’t going to lose the deal,” I say, reaching out and placing my hand on his shoulder. “But yes, I’d be willing to walk away before I’d let them strong-arm me into something I don’t want to do. I know you’re working hard on this deal and trust me, you’ll be rewarded when it goes through, but in the meantime, let me play hardball with them.”

I give him a gentle slap on the back just as the elevator doors open, revealing Lisa and Presley.

“Cyrus.” Lisa smiles at me, then Nelson. “Nelson, how are you?” She gives him an air-kiss.

“Stressed,” he says, shaking his head.

“Per usual.” I gesture toward Presley who stands timidly off to the side, her arms stiffly at her sides. Her dark-plum coat is unbuttoned, revealing a pale-pink blouse that’s tucked into a fitted black skirt that hits just above her knee. “Nelson, this is Miss James, my new publicist. She’s going to do her absolute best to keep me in line and make sure this deal with Meridian goes through without any *immoral* impropriety.”

Her eyes don’t leave mine and I can’t hide the smile that tugs at my lips.

“Pleasure,” Nelson says, reaching out to shake her hand.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” she says sweetly.

“May I have a quick word before your meeting?” Nelson asks.

“Lisa, why don’t you and Miss James head into my office. I’ll be right in.”

The moment they’re out of earshot, Nelson’s smile disappears and his almost purple cheeks grow a shade darker.

“I hope you’re not doing anything stupid, Cyrus.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, knowing full well what he’s implying.

“We both know this is dangerous for you. Please don’t fuck this up.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Nelson. I can control myself; I’m not an animal.” I excuse myself and walk to my office for my meeting, knowing damn well he has every right to be worried because if I don’t nip this in the bud right now, I’m not too sure I will be able to control myself.

“Ladies, apologies for the delay.” I close my office door and take a seat behind my desk.

“Not at all, Cyrus. I promise we won’t take up much of your time. Presley and I have spent the morning going over the general tasks that Becky did while managing your relationship. She’s currently working on some social media strategies that will center around your charity work and your upcoming deal with Meridian. We really want to focus on that since they are

positioned as a family-friendly company, and also on your newest position of adjunct professor.”

“Okay.” I lean back in my chair. “Sounds easy enough, not too complicated.”

“Also, we did secure you to be the keynote speaker at the annual Chicago Youth in Leadership conference and charity gala. You have done a lot of work with them and they were beyond excited to hear that you’d be willing to not only speak at and attend the gala, but to talk to the children at their conference.”

My chest tightens a little at the thought of spending time with these kids. In truth, I’ve wanted to do this for a long time. Hell, I’ve wanted to mentor them, but I never made the time. I’d also convinced myself that I wasn’t exactly the kind of role model these kids needed to be listening to.

“That sounds great, actually. Are you sure”—I clear my throat—“that I’m the kind of person who should be speaking to children?”

“Yes,” Lisa says with that look she’s famous for. “We’ve been through this before, Cyrus. You’re an inspiration and you have a lot of wisdom to share with the younger generations. I’m not asking you to father these kids, just share with them about your journey and how you founded your company. Think about what would have been inspiring to you when you were in your early teen years.”

“I can do that.” I glance over at Presley who is furiously writing notes. “How does that sound to you, Presley?”

Her head snaps up. “Good, sir.” She gives me a slight smile. That innocent girl is back. I can’t tell if it’s a show for Lisa or my threat yesterday really did scare her back into her shell.

“As for the gala, Presley will be attending with you. She has a list of some key people that I think you should spend some quality time speaking with. She will even have some talking points for you. There’s going to be a few elected officials there.”

“As in babysitting me? I’ll attend and she and I can go over the list of people the day before, but I don’t need a handler, Lisa.”

She pulls her glasses from her nose. “You’ll do it my way, Cyrus. This isn’t a negotiation. I’m the expert here, not you, so you’re going to trust me and you’re going to follow orders, okay?”

“No negotiation?” I drum my fingertips. “You might be the only person who can get me to agree to that.”

“Agree or fire me.” She shrugs.

“Fine,” I say begrudgingly just as her cell phone rings in her hand.

“I need to take this,” she says, glancing down at it before darting out of my office. “I’ll be quick.”

Presley snickers beneath her breath.

“Something amusing, Miss James?”

“Just that for all your *backbone* talk, yours seems to have disappeared with Lisa.”

I stand up slowly and walk over to where she’s seated.

“There’s a difference between being obstinate and listening to sound advice. You’d do yourself a favor if you did the same.”

“It’s good to see that you can give up control, take commands too... especially from a woman.” She flashes that sheepish grin.

I chuckle, closing the distance between us as I reach down and grip her chin lightly. I tilt it upward, reaching my thumb out to drag it slowly over her bottom lip.

“It’s cute you think that, but you need to remember one thing. I’m always in control. Even if I let someone else take the lead or make a decision, I’m in control.”

“Is that so?” She’s being defiant and it sends a signal straight to my cock.

I grit my teeth, reminding myself that Lisa is just on the other side of that door.

“I’m the boss, Presley. Don’t forget that.”

“Lisa’s my boss; you are the client.”

I grip her chin tighter as I lean down a little, leveling my eyes on hers. I lower my voice as I say, “You answer to me, little girl. I warned you yesterday. Whatever game you think you’re playing, you’ll run screaming if you knew how it ends if you don’t learn to behave. If you don’t accept that and get it through your pretty little head, I will spend the next however long reminding you every single fucking day who you work for. And trust me, I’ll enjoy it a lot more than you will.”

I can see her thighs squeeze together as her hands grip the armrests so tightly her knuckles grow white.

I release her chin. Sliding my fingertips down the front of her throat, I let my hand drop down to her lap, her eyes still burning into mine as my fingers slide down her lap till I reach the edge of her skirt. I lift the hem, just enough to rest my hand gently on her inner thigh as I lean in closer, my lips an inch from hers.

“Do you understand me?”

She nods her head yes, a whisper of a response tumbling from her lips.

“Yes.”

“Good girl.”

Then I remove my hand from her thigh, stand back up, and take my spot back behind my desk.

Chapter 8

Presley

*H*e likes this. He wants me to misbehave so that he can reprimand me.

My eyes drop down to his tented pants where he makes no effort to hide adjusting his erection before sitting back down.

Something inside me ignites, knowing a man this powerful, this sexy wants me. I know it's nothing more than a game of domination for him. Men like him get off on conquering anything and anyone.

"Sorry about that," Lisa says, bursting back into the office. "Feels like the world is burning down everywhere at the moment. Where were we?"

She looks over at me and I pray I'm not as red as I feel.

"Uh, the charity gala."

"Right. So Presley will get you the details for it and she will do an introductory speech for you at the event, highlighting some of your achievements with the organization and the community."

"Mr. Gates." I turn my attention toward him. "If you could also send me a copy of your keynote speech before the event so that I can go over it and make any necessary changes?"

"Of course." He offers a strained smile, and I have to bite my tongue so I don't giggle again.

He might enjoy watching me squirm under his gaze, but I enjoy watching his discomfort just as much.

We finish up the meeting quickly and say our goodbyes before heading back down to Lisa's waiting car. The great thing about taking meetings with her is, she always has a driver.

"That went better than I expected."

"Don't stress about Cyrus. His bark is bigger than his bite; trust me."

"I was thinking that maybe I could get the University of Chicago to run a profile on him in the *Chicago Booth Review*."

"That is a genius idea," Lisa says with excitement.

"One of the editors, Forrest Devry, is actually in my class so I'm going to mention it to him this week. I'll also reach out to a few of the other organizations that Mr. Gates has had a relationship with over the years and see if there are any press opportunities there."

"You're a natural at this, Presley. I see why he recommended you to me. Once you get a few things on the books for him, let's schedule a press release as well. The main thing you have to know about Cyrus is, he truly doesn't care what people think about him which can be a good thing and a bad thing."

"Bad thing?"

"He'll self-sabotage purely out of spite. It's his biggest flaw."

"Can I ask—" I hesitate, not wanting to overstep a boundary but also feeling like I need to have a better understanding of him as my client. "Why is he the way that he is?"

"He's extremely guarded but it's not without reason. He's a good man. I'm not saying he doesn't have his issues and God knows he's done some stupid things, but he pretends to be bad more than he is. It's deflection. His father was fucked over royally—excuse my language, but there really isn't any other way to put it."

"Oh, I had no idea. Who's his father?"

“Archie Gates. He started a grocery store here in Chicago back when Cyrus was just a boy. It was successful, very successful actually, and within a decade he had five stores in Chicagoland and more downstate. He kept expanding and while he was successful—a millionaire—he was nowhere near what Cyrus is today. That being said, he put everything he had into his business and even more when his wife Beth passed away from cancer when Cyrus was only thirteen.”

I gasp. I had no idea he had lost his mother at such a young age. “Is he an only child?”

“Yes. Archie buried himself in his business after that, expanding all up and down the east coast. Business was booming; he couldn’t seem to open stores fast enough, but he also was incurring a lot of debt by expanding at such a rapid pace. He was kind of a hero in Chicago. Everyone admired him. He was a first-generation American who had established himself and built this family-owned empire, but then a bigger chain became interested in buying him out. His father was good at what he did. He knew grocery stores, but he wasn’t too wise on negotiations.”

“Didn’t he have a team of lawyers though?”

She shakes her head. “He had one lawyer, the same lawyer he had used since he opened his first store. Cyrus tried telling him that he should hire a major firm, but his dad was old school and wanted to stick with his attorney. He also naïvely believed that this grocery chain wouldn’t try to screw him over.”

“How old was Mr. Gates at this point?”

“Young, mid-twenties. Anyway, his father started getting a lot of hate and backlash from the community and the employees. They were angry that their local family-owned business was now going to be taken over by this global conglomerate. Cyrus offered to take things over for his father, but he told him that’s not what he wanted. He revealed to his son that he had been diagnosed with lung cancer. He wanted to be able to sell the business so that his debts would be covered and it would set Cyrus up for success.”

“Oh my God.” I rest my hand against my chest. “I can’t imagine the pain of losing both your parents so young in life.”

“The grocery chain got wind that Archie was wavering and he tried to negotiate with them, to make sure that the employees would be protected, but instead of working with him, they pulled the deal. His dad felt helpless and in the end, he basically went back and groveled to them. They ended up reaching a deal but it was nothing close to the original amount. It barely covered the debts, and after all the medical bills that Archie incurred, he pretty much died penniless. The thing that really hardened Cyrus against people like that is the fact that all those rich people who once loved to rub elbows with his dad, bailed on him in his time of need and not a single one showed up to his father’s funeral. He had to bury him alone.”

I feel tears prick my eyes, and my chest burns, imagining the pain and loss he must have felt.

“That grocery chain threatened him, sued him, literally scared him into practically giving away everything he’d worked and sacrificed so hard to build, and Cyrus had to sit back and watch it happen. He tried to fight for his dad, but it was like throwing pebbles at a giant. He blamed himself for years—still does—but more than anything, it’s made him so jaded and angry which is why he always says it doesn’t matter what people think about him because people turned on his father even though he tried everything to make sure that everyone around him was happy and taken care of. They didn’t want to hear the truth. They wanted to hate him so they did.”

“Wow, how do you know all this?”

“Cyrus and I go way back. I actually met him in college. We’ve worked together over the years and run in a few of the same circles, but as you can imagine, he tends to keep to himself these days. And when he does venture out, he tends to make a mess of things.” She laughs and shakes her head. “But that’s why we’re here.” She pats my shoulder. “To keep him in line since he can’t seem to pull his head out of his own ass most of the time. He wants to project this facade of being a

careless asshole because then he feels like people can't make him out to be worse than he is. It's convoluted."

The car stops in front of our office building and we make our way inside. My head is swimming with information, but at the same time, it all makes things a little clearer regarding Cyrus Gates. Now I understand why he made those comments about how he doesn't pretend to be a good guy like a lot of the companies out there; meanwhile, they're screwing people over left and right.

I spend the rest of the day brainstorming ideas to get Cyrus out into the community. I send over an email to Forrest Devry, explaining my role at Wade Public Relations and how I think it would be great if the school ran a publication highlighting Mr. Gates' new adjunct professor position as well as some of his outstanding achievements and ways he gives back to Chicago.

I go through a couple drafts of my speech as well for the upcoming charity gala. I keep it short and sweet, making a few notes along the way. I'm about to finish up my day when I decide to look through the list of organizations that Cyrus is on the board for when I see a nonprofit for animals. I smile at the thought. I hadn't pictured Cyrus as an animal lover or pet kind of guy, but maybe I'm wrong. I look on their website to see if there's any upcoming events when I see a race that takes place in early April.

The annual 5k Paw Trot. I find the email for the organizer and send them over a quick note mentioning that Cyrus is interested in running this year. I smile when I think about how he's going to react when I tell him about this.

"You're still here?" I glance up to Lisa poking her head in my office.

"Yeah, I wanted to knock some things out. I'm just about to send an email over to Mr. Gates with the rough draft of my speech along with the idea I had for the *Chicago Booth Review* article. I also found an unconventional opportunity I feel like he will immediately shoot down but it's worth a shot." I shrug.

"Unconventional?" She raises her Botoxed brow the tiniest amount it can move.

“A 5k race.” I smile.

“Ha! I would love to see his face when he sees that. Well, I’m heading out. Have a great night.” She walks away, then reappears seconds later. “And by the way, if he does give you any shit about any of the PR opportunities you present to him, unconventional or not, tell him to take it up with me and that I’ll make him do them, so there’s no point in fighting it.”

I type up the email to Cyrus, letting him know that my speech is still a work in progress, but he’s welcome to make changes or omit things. I fill him in on the article that’s in the works and end with a little note about the 5k.

I hit send and shut down for the night, ready for a glass of wine and a soak in the tub to relive every delicious second of my interaction with him today and the way my thigh still burns where his fingers touched me.

Chapter 9

Cyrus

I t's getting late but I decide to check my email once more before heading to bed. I tip the crystal tumbler back in my hand, finishing off the whiskey I've been nursing. I scroll through, making note of a few emails I need to respond to when I see one from Presley's new work address.

I click on it, my balls tightening just reading her name.

"Get a fucking grip," I mutter to myself, reaching down to adjust my already hardening cock.

I open the email and read over her message. I read through her introduction speech for me and it brings a smile to my face. I imagine her saying it and wonder if it pisses her off that she has to make me sound like a fucking saint. I'm about to click out of the email when I see a little note at the bottom that makes me do a double take.

PS I noticed you've been involved with PAWS for years and thought it would be the perfect opportunity for you to run their upcoming 5k. I have reached out to the organizers for you so all you have to do is show up on race day.

My head lulls back as I laugh; of course she did this. If she thinks for one second I'm going to run a damn race, she's out of her mind.

I lean back in my chair, debating and then deciding to have another finger of whiskey. I pour a little more into my glass, then put on a record of the Dave Brubeck Quartet and settle back into my chair.

I feel exhausted. These days have been taking a toll on me lately, this deal with Meridian and the way Nelson has been on my ass, pushing me to my limit. I close my eyes and let my head fall back against the chair as the music fills my home office.

An image of Presley's flirty smile and big round eyes as she looked up at me today drifts through my brain and instead of pushing it aside, I indulge. I imagine what *could* have happened if Lisa hadn't been with her.

Would I have pushed it further? Tried to scare her a little more so she understands the kinds of things I fantasize about doing to her?

I'm not frustrated by my attraction to her; she's breathtakingly beautiful, stunning. It's the mix of naiveté and her bold tongue that's quick to say something she knows will elicit a response from me. It drives me wild and I can barely contain my desire to own her, to act out my most fucked-up desires when I'm near her. It's why I bolted at lunch; it's why I shoved her out of my office the second I felt her pressed against me. I have no self-control just being near her, let alone if I actually allowed myself to act on it.

I wonder what kind of woman she is in bed... in a relationship. My stomach curdles at the thought of her in a relationship. I haven't heard her talk about a man in her life, but then again, neither of us have divulged much of anything about our personal lives.

Pushing that thought aside, I think back to the feeling of her silky skin beneath my fingertips today. I knew I was risking losing control when I touched her thigh, but I couldn't tell myself to stop. I justified it in my head, that maybe if I crossed a boundary so deliberately, she would see that I'm willing to risk everything to take what I want and it would scare her.

My mouth waters imagining sliding my hand further up her thigh. My cock jumps to attention at the thought of feeling her heat radiating against my hand. Would her panties have been wet?

I reach down, unlatching my belt and sliding my zipper down my pants as I reach inside and fish out my cock. I stroke myself slowly, gripping my shaft tightly as I begin to pump my hand up and down its length.

I want her to watch me while I slide my fingers inside her. I want to hear my name tumble from her lips as I bring her to a climax with my fingers.

My breath grows jagged as I quicken my pace. I'm close already. I imagine her gripping the armrests tightly as she trembles, coming on my fingers so I can taste every drop of her sweet release.

"Fuuuuck," I groan, emptying myself onto the floor of my office. Shame instantly washes over me as I sink back in the chair.

I STARE AT MY PHONE, PRETENDING TO BE FOCUSED ON something important, but I watch Presley out of the corner of my eye.

She laughs, reaching her hand out to touch Forrest Devry's arm as they talk animatedly. I know who Forrest is; his dad is a federal judge and his mom is on the board at Rush-Copley Medical Center. He's a bright kid, tall, blond, and known for having a different woman on his arm every other month... not so different than me at that age. I'm not surprised he would take an interest in Presley, although I doubt she's his normal type. For as much as she makes me want to bend her over my knee half the time with her questions, I think she pretends to be a lot more bold than she is when it comes to men.

He checks his phone, then motions toward the door as she waves goodbye to him and slings her bag over her shoulder. I stay behind a moment after she leaves, then follow her out into the hallway.

I quicken my pace just before she passes the narrow hallway where my office is located and reach my hand out to hook her elbow.

“Hey!” she half shouts as I pull her down the hallway and back into my office again. Stupid, I know.

“You know you can schedule a meeting with me, right? You don’t have to keep accosting me in the hallway and dragging me in here.” She rubs her arm where my hand was.

“Did I hurt you?” I ask sincerely, reaching out for her, but she pulls away.

“No, just startled me. What did you want to see me about? Oh, did you get my email last night?”

“You and Forrest were rather chatty today.”

She looks at me questioningly, like she expects me to elaborate or as if I should know why she was talking to him.

“Yeah, he’s one of the editors of the *Chicago Booth Review*. I emailed you about it last night, how I reached out to them regarding running a profile on you. They want to run it next month.”

Okay, she’s right; I should have known. Now I feel stupid, but I double down on my jealous bullshit.

“You were laughing a lot.”

“Is that against the rules?” That snarky attitude is back, but I don’t respond. “Actually, I’m meeting with him tonight to discuss the interview. Are there any topics or questions that are off-limits? Anything you want to focus on?” She reaches into her bag and pulls out her phone, opening the notes app before staring back at me.

“You are meeting with Forrest?”

“Yes.”

“As in—a date?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “It’s professional, as in it’s my job as your publicist to get you opportunities like this. I was thinking we could focus on what it means for you to be back teaching at your alma mater and maybe how that ties into you mentoring Chicago youth?”

I sit back on the desk, leaning my elbow on my knee. “And does he know that? That it’s *not* a date?”

“What? Of course he does. I’m the one who told him we should meet tonight and I did not say anything about it being a date.”

“He thinks it’s a date.”

“And what if he does? I don’t and that’s what matters. I’m there for work and that’s it.”

“Why not just email each other whatever you plan to discuss?” I realize I’m on thin ice here, really making this into something when she’s made it clear it’s nothing. I hate the way I’m feeling—territorial.

“What are you really asking here, Mr. Gates?” She leans forward, narrowing her gaze.

“Think I said exactly what I’m asking. As my publicist, I want to make sure you’re not crossing lines you shouldn’t be with your resources. I don’t think Lisa would like you *dating* someone to get me an interview.”

“Seriously! I wouldn’t ever date or sleep with a source or anyone to get you an interview and I resent the implication.” She lets out an annoyed sigh and reaches down for her bag that she let fall to the floor. “You know what? I think we’re done here. My personal life really isn’t any of your business.” She turns and reaches for the door.

“I’m sorry. You’re right.” Her hand drops and she looks back over her shoulder at me. “I crossed the line but... I’m not running that damn 5k,” I say matter-of-factly.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to.” Now I grab my coat, ready to walk out of the office. I hate this feeling of jealousy, of wanting to know more about her, wanting to spend time with her, but knowing it won’t work; it can’t work. I know she would never compromise herself for a job. I’m just angry that she can casually hang out with Forrest and date him if she damn well wants to, but I don’t have that option because no matter how

many ways I try to justify it or make it work, she's off-fucking-limits. "And because I said so."

"Lisa said you would say that. She also said that if you object to anything that I schedule for you, to take it up with her and she'll make you do it. So, you can either make my life easier and just trust me on these things, or you can go cry to Lisa and I'm sure she'd be more than happy to boss you around again."

This. This right here. I see her eye twitch and I know she loves waving the Lisa card right now. It's the only form of power she has. I like this side of her, but at the same time my palm itches with the desire to spank the ever-loving shit out of her ass right now and remind her that I'm the boss. That she takes orders from me.

"So that's how it's going to be?" I toss my coat back onto the desk.

"Doesn't have to be"—she shrugs casually—"but if you insist on making things difficult, I'm more than happy to oblige." She flashes a petty smile and pulls the door open.

"Shut the door," I command.

"Make me." Her tone is playful, but her expression changes the instant I take one step toward her. She shuts the door and turns to face me.

I shake my head. "You really don't learn, do you?" I walk closer to her. "Fine, I'll run the 5k, but you're going to run it with me."

"What? No, absolutely not. I don't have anywhere to train and it's freezing outside... and icy!"

"It's a 5k, Presley. You're twenty-four; you can manage just fine." She glares at me. "What's your level of"—I'm aware of the way I'm saying it and I can't hide the smirk that naturally finds its way to my lips—"physical activity lately?"

"Nonexistent. I work and when I'm not working, I'm in school."

"You can train at my place. I have a personal gym."

“Your place?” Her eyebrows shoot upward.

I check the time. I’m going to be late for my next meeting if I don’t leave. I open my phone and hand it to her before sliding my coat over my arms.

“Put your number in.”

“Why?”

I roll my eyes. “Jesus, are you always so difficult? Because you work for me, and I need to be able to reach you.”

She frowns, turning her attention to the screen and entering her information before handing it back to me.

I hit her name and type out a new text to her with my home address, hitting send. She looks down at her lap where her cell lights up with an alert.

“Now you have my number and my home address. Be there tomorrow night at seven for your first training session.” I step around her and swing my office door open.

“I don’t run.”

“Neither do I, but you didn’t seem to consider that before committing me to it so now we’re both going to suffer. If you insist on making things difficult for me, sweetheart”—I wink at her, throwing her words right back at her—“then I’m happy to oblige.”

Chapter 10

Presley

I glance around the bar on Wabash, spotting Forrest immediately by the bar. He smiles, waving me over.

“Oh, I’m just meeting someone,” I say to the hostess as I point toward him. I walk over to where he’s standing, and he bends down to give me an unexpected hug.

“Hey, thanks again for meeting with me.” I smile and shrug off my coat, placing it on the barstool.

“Yeah, of course. Hope you don’t mind”—he lifts up his half-empty pint of beer—“got started without you.”

My brain immediately does that thing where it compares him to Cyrus. I think back to our lunch where he ordered for me, something I’ve seen dominant and powerful men do in movies but never knew it was actually a thing. I’d always thought if a man ordered for me, I’d demand to pick my own food, but he actually asked me and weirdly... it was kind of hot. That’s one of the things that drives me wild about Cyrus—the fact that he’s bossy and demands to be in control. It makes me want to toss every feminine urge to tell him that I’m strong and independent and don’t need a man right out the window and fall to my knees.

“Earth to Presley.”

I inhale audibly, jerking my head back to Forrest who’s waving his hand in front of my face.

“Sorry, yeah, totally fine,” I say, waving away his apology. The bartender nods his head toward me as he approaches. “I’ll

have a Stella.”

“Good choice.”

“So,” I start to ask about the interview but he interrupts me.

“Do you go out a lot?”

“Um, not really. I’m kind of a homebody and plus with work and school, I stay pretty busy. Do you?”

He nods, finishing off his beer. “Yeah, I mean this is our youth, you know, so I might as well enjoy it. At least, that’s what my dad always says. My buddies and I like to party on the weekends. In the summer we go out on my dad’s boat a lot on Lake Michigan.” He motions to the bartender for another beer. “You should come out sometime.”

He nudges me and I laugh nervously. “Yeah, maybe... if I get some free time. This new job is only part-time right now and it already takes up a lot of my time, but I’m hopeful that once grad school is finished, it will go full-time. Speaking of this job, did you get approval for the interview with Mr. Gates?”

“Yup, they signed off on it. So, did you do your undergrad at the University of Chicago? Because I feel like I would have noticed you around campus, or at least your hair.”

“I did actually. We had a few other classes together, but they were big and I tend to sit in the back.” I blush at his comment about my hair and about the fact that we very much crossed paths several times over the years. I don’t have the heart to tell him that we actually sat close in one of our classes, but he was usually focused on Tina McGil... or rather, her breasts. I’m not exactly Forrest Devry’s usual type.

“I like your hair. Redheads are usually pretty fun.” He winks at me and it’s pretty cringe but it makes me giggle.

“So,” I say again, attempting to steer the conversation back to the reason we’re here. If Cyrus could hear him right now, he’d probably be giving me a big *I told you so* lecture. “I was thinking we could focus the interview on Mr. Gates’ role as the newest adjunct professor at school, maybe what made him

decide to take the opportunity, how he sees it as an asset for someone like him to teach there, and then highlight his work with the Chicago Youth in Leadership organization. He is very passionate about instilling confidence in young people, helping them reach their full potential.”

“That’s cool. I think that’s a great approach.” We both take a sip of our beer. “What’s he like?”

“Cyrus—er, Mr. Gates?” Forrest nods his head. “Oh, he’s...” I pause, thinking about how I would describe him to someone. I haven’t known him that long and I don’t think I have any special insight into his life or who he really is, but I do know what Lisa’s told me about him. I let out a slight snort thinking about how I’ve seen him behave.

“What?”

“Well, I guess he’s exactly what you’d expect. He’s demanding, moody, and really, really doesn’t like being told no or what to do.”

“Sounds like a real pleasure to work for.”

I blush, my mind instantly thinking about all the things I didn’t say. My hand absentmindedly settles on my thigh where he touched me briefly the other day. I’m still second-guessing if that actually happened or if I imagined it. I know for a fact that our little mishap in his office happened though. I close my eyes for a brief second, reaching for my beer to cool off as a bead of sweat runs down my back. I can’t decide if he hates the fact that his body responded that way toward me or the fact that he regrets ever recommending me for this publicist job in the first place.

“He’s not that bad. He’s going to be the keynote speaker at a charity gala next week. I have to give his introductory speech and I’m trying to slip a little joke into it because I know it’ll piss him off, but it’ll be funny to watch him get pissed at me.”

“Wait, is it for the Chicago Youth in Leadership you mentioned?”

“Yeah, it is. Why?”

He grins wryly. “I’ll be there too. My parents are big donors.”

“Oh, cool. Small world. What do your parents do?”

“My dad is a federal judge and my mom is a surgeon, head of surgery at Rush-Copley actually.”

“Impressive.” I raise my glass toward him.

“Hey, since we’re both going, you want to be my date?”

“That’s sweet, but I can’t. I’ll be there in a work capacity so it wouldn’t be very professional of me.”

“No worries, totally get it. We should most definitely go on a date though.”

“Oh yeah?” I say in my most flirty tone.

“Yeah, would be a shame not to.” He gives me a look, bumping my shoulder playfully as we both laugh into our glasses.

“I would love to.” The moment I say yes, my stomach feels like it’s twisted into knots. I don’t know if it’s because I feel guilt for agreeing to a date while in a meeting, a meeting I swore to Cyrus was strictly professional, or because I know that for as nice as Forrest Devry is, I feel no attraction toward him. Instead, I’m lusting after my very unavailable and *way too old for me* professor.

The moment I leave the bar and head home, I get an alert that I have a new follower on Instagram... it’s Forrest. I haven’t posted anything on my profile in almost two years, but I open the app and follow him back. His profile is filled with current pictures, mostly of him and his friends partying, at sporting events, and of course, on his dad’s boat.

I decide to call Serenity, hoping that if I tell her about Forrest, her excitement about him will make me realize that he’s the right choice... the smart choice.

“Helloooo,” she sings into the phone when she picks up.

“Hey, hope I’m not interrupting your night.”

“Nah, I just got home from the gym and I’m currently folding laundry like a housewife. What’s up?”

“I had that meeting with Forrest tonight, about doing the interview.” I told her about it in class and she had actually teased me about how cute he is.

“Oh, that’s right. How’d it go? Is it happening?”

“Yeah, he got approval so we’re going to get it on the books. I just have to find time in Mr. Gates’ schedule. I found out he’s going to be at that charity gala I have to attend as well, and he, uh, asked me to be his date.”

“Oh my God! Did you say yes? He’s so cute.”

“I didn’t.” I laugh. “I told him I’m there working so it wouldn’t be professional but... he said we should definitely go on a real date though.”

She gasps. “You said yes, right?”

“I did.” I try to sound excited, but I can hear the hesitation in my voice. “He also followed me on Instagram the second I left the bar.”

“Of course he did. Is his profile full of shirtless thirst trap pictures?”

“Some, lots with his bros.”

“So what’s with the tone? You don’t sound excited.” I try to brush it off, but she knows me too well. “Pres, I know you.”

“I dunno. I guess I’m just super out of practice when it comes to dating.”

“It’s not like it has to be anything serious and with a guy like Forrest, no offense to him, but we both know he probably isn’t looking for something long term. When’s the last time you got laid?”

“Ugh,” I groan, “I don’t even know... maybe summer before grad school?”

“Holy shit, that long! Girl, time to take Forrest for a ride and let loose. Maybe he’s just the man you need to let that inner bad girl out once and for all.”

I hang up and walk the rest of the way home, Serenity's words haunting me because the only man I want to release my inner bad girl with is a man I have no business wanting.

I STARE AT THE MESSAGE I'VE TYPED OUT ON MY PHONE.

Me: *Mr. Gates, apologies for the short notice but unfortunately something came up tonight and I won't be able to make it.*

The cursor blinks at me as I hover my finger over the send button. I highlight the text, deleting it before tossing my phone on my bed in frustration, knowing full well there's no use in fighting Cyrus Gates. He's going to get his way one way or another. I stomp over to my dresser, rifling through my workout clothes that I haven't put on in months.

I pull out several pieces, holding them up before choosing my most flattering pair of black leggings, a pink sports bra, and black tank top. I crane my neck in my floor-length mirror, my ass looking flatter than I remember when my phone dings.

"Nothing I can do about it now," I grumble, throwing on a hoodie and pulling my hair into a bun piled on top of my head. By the time I pull on my sneakers and coat and head out the door, I'm already late.

"Miss James?"

"Yes?" I glance around as if that's going to explain the suited man standing outside my building next to an expensive-looking car.

"I'm Wes. Mr. Gates sent me to pick you up."

I roll my eyes. "Of course he did."

He holds the door open, closing it after me once I'm inside.

We arrive outside a stunning gothic-looking house I've seen probably a thousand times in my years in Chicago. It's a piece of history here, something I assumed was either a

museum or had been bought out by one of those wedding venue companies.

“This”—I point out the window—“this is Mr. Gates’ house?”

“It is,” Wes responds as he pulls the car into a multicar garage.

In my mind, Cyrus Gates lived in some modern skyrise penthouse, but this is an architectural landmark in the city. I follow Wes through the garage, which looks more like a high-end exotic car showroom, and into the house. He leads me down a hallway that opens into a stunning foyer complete with marble floors, a chandelier that looks like it belongs in an opera house, and two staircases that wind their way up to a large landing. The ceilings in the entryway are probably twenty feet tall. I’m completely engrossed in taking it all in, and I barely notice the tapping of someone walking up behind me.

“You’re late.”

I spin around to see Cyrus standing in the doorway. He’s still in his suit pants, his shirt partly undone, his tie missing as he unbuttons his cuff links. My eyes fall to the small patch of dark hair on his chest that’s usually not visible.

I love a hairy chest on a man; hell, I love hair everywhere on a man. It’s so different than the two guys I’ve been with in college. They were practically waxed clean. I used to joke with Serenity that it was like hooking up with a seal.

“Didn’t trust me to make it here on my own?” I smirk.

“Not in the slightest.” He smirks back. “I apologize I’m also running late. Let me show you to the gym before I go change.” He holds out his hand. “Your coat?”

“Oh.” I pull it off my shoulders and hand it to him. He holds on to it while he starts walking down a different hallway. We wind our way through the house a little until he opens a door and reaches inside to turn on a light.

This isn’t just a room with a treadmill and some weights. This is like a full-on gym complete with so many pieces of

machinery I've never even seen.

"This is—" I turn around but he's already gone. "Okay." I wander around the room, looking at some of the machines. I sit on one and try it, then another. I pick up a weight and do a curl, realizing just how noodly my arms have become. I glance into another room off to the side that has a sauna in it.

"We can use that after."

"Would you stop doing that." I clutch at my chest, my heart racing. I'd say him startling me is to blame, but that's not the only thing that has my pulse elevated. He's changed into a slim pair of shorts that showcase his muscular thighs and a t-shirt that's had the sleeves ripped off, leaving two very large openings that dip down his sides. His arms look like pythons, a visible vein running down the front. They're tan with dark hair covering them.

"You're staring."

"Just never seen you in anything but a suit. Was beginning to think you slept in one." I turn my back toward him to hide the embarrassment I can feel staining my cheeks.

"Time to show me your running skill, Miss James." He walks me toward a set of treadmills.

I step onto it, pressing the start button.

"Are you going to be too hot in that?" He motions toward my oversized hoodie that I've kept on.

"No," I say, knowing full well I will be, but I'm way too self-conscious to be this close to him in spandex. I've seen some of the curvy women he's been photographed with. Nikki Frisk looks like Jessica Rabbit with blond hair. I'm not about to embarrass my skinny ass.

"Suit yourself. We can warm up with a five-minute walk first."

"Are you a *work out seven days a week* kind of guy?"

"Five or six." He keeps his answer short, his gaze forward.

“What do you do for fun?” I figure if I’m stuck awkwardly walking on a treadmill with him without music, I might as well make small talk so I’m not so focused on how nervous I am.

“Fun? I’ve had enough fun for three lifetimes. Now I only work, work out, and—”

“And?” I ask when he doesn’t finish the sentence.

He looks at me out of the corner of his eye. “And nothing.”

“Oh, Forrest got approval for the interview so I reached out to your admin Abigail today to get it scheduled.” I smile, hoping to see some excitement on his face but he just looks annoyed.

“Okay.”

“Get this. He’s actually going to be at the charity gala next week. I guess his parents are some big shot pe—”

“I know who they are,” he snaps, cutting me off.

What the hell did I do now?

He punches the buttons on his treadmill, increasing the speed till he’s running.

“Turn yours up,” he barks.

I turn it up a little, picking up my pace to a slow jog, but it’s clearly not enough. He reaches over and hits my button a few times till I’m running.

“Hey, that’s too fast.” I turn it down a little, but he increases his till he’s in an all-out sprint, making it look completely effortless. He reaches down, tugging his shirt over his head and tossing it to the floor.

I try to keep my gaze forward, but it’s so hard when sweat starts to glisten on his chiseled chest. He’s way more ripped than I expected, and the way his torso flexes as his body twists causes my mouth to go dry. The small hint of dark hair that teased me earlier where his Oxford was unbuttoned makes my eyes grow heavy with lust. Dark hair trailing across his pecs,

down his abs, and disappearing beneath his low-slung shorts sends me into orbit and I trip, one foot catching on the other.

I yelp, darting my hands out as I attempt to catch myself but it's no use. I fall on my hands and knees, the belt of the treadmill shooting me backward into a crumpled ball on the floor.

“Shit!” Cyrus jumps off his treadmill seamlessly as I attempt to right myself. I am beyond mortified.

“Are you okay?” He reaches his hands beneath my arms, pulling me up and onto my feet effortlessly. His hands rest on my shoulders, his thumbs beneath my chin as he tilts my head up and examines me.

“Yup, just my pride is hurt.” My attempt to play it off is useless. My ass and hands really do hurt.

“Lose this.” He reaches down, pulling the hoodie up and over my head in one swift move.

I cross my arms nervously. Somehow, I missed how low-cut this tank was when I put it on. My breasts are pushed together by my bra, giving me way more cleavage than I'm used to having. His eyes turn back to me, dropping from my line of vision right to my chest before slowly inching their way back up.

“Walk for two minutes, then bump it up to a slow run for one minute. It will help you increase your stamina. Repeat that for as long as you can.”

He turns and walks over to the weights as I climb back onto the treadmill. I catch glimpses of him in the floor-length mirror on the opposite end of the gym but he's too focused on what he's doing to notice. After fifteen minutes, I'm exhausted and sweaty. I hit the stop button on the treadmill.

“I think I'm done.”

“Already?” He walks over, handing me a towel as he takes a drink from his water bottle. Sweat glistens on his body and I have the indescribable urge to reach out and run my hands down his abs. “You're going to have to put in some serious

work if you plan to keep up with me.” His flirty demeanor is back.

Maybe it’s that switch or maybe it’s the endorphins coursing through my body, but I boldly reach out, taking the water from him and bringing it to my lips. His eyes stay on mine as I tip the bottle back and drink before handing it back to him.

He’s standing at the end of the treadmill, only a few inches between us. I reach out and press a single finger against his chest. “Move,” I say playfully, pushing him back a few inches so I can step down off the belt.

He looks down to where my finger is resting against his bare chest. We’re so close, I can smell the remnants of his expensive cologne mixed with sweat. I don’t know what makes me do it, but I slowly start to drag my finger downward. He darts his hand out, almost instantly wrapping his hand around my own and shaking his head slowly.

“Don’t.” His voice is deep, gravelly almost. When he lifts his eyes to mine again, they’re dark, his eyelids heavy.

“Don’t what?”

“Look at me like that.”

“Like what?” I know I shouldn’t tease him, but I want to. The excitement feels like a ribbon unfurling in my stomach.

He tugs my arm, pulling me forward before walking us backward. My back hits the mirrored wall behind us as he grabs my other hand, pinning them both above my head. An audible huff of shock leaves my chest. I can feel his firm length against my thigh.

“Like you think you can handle me. You’re exhausted after fifteen minutes on a treadmill.” He chuckles, running his nose up my neck until his lips are at my ear, his warm breath tickling me. “Imagine what you’d feel like if I had my way with you.”

I’m biting down on my bottom lip so hard to keep from groaning I wouldn’t be surprised if I tasted blood. My eyes

flutter closed, my nipples hardening at the feeling of his hands gripping my wrists so tight.

“I warned you not to play this game with me.” He pulls back, his eyes finding mine. “This is the last time I’m going to hold back. You pull this shit with me again and I swear—”

He’s studying me, like he’s contemplating if he should finish what he’s saying or if he should shut it down. But in an instant his eyes go from hazy with lust to cold and dark. He drops my hands and steps back.

“Go home, Presley, and do us both a favor and stop embarrassing yourself like this. Wes will give you a ride.” He tosses his towel in the basket near the door and walks out of the gym.

I stand there mortified, even though I should know better by now. Cyrus Gates likes to play the game too, but the second it starts to get too real, he’s over it. Maybe this fantasy of mine is one-sided; maybe it’s not that he wants me; maybe it’s the thrill of the forbidden, but the second I become something attainable, he loses all interest.

Chapter II

Cyrus

“Cyrus, is there a reason why Miss James reached out to *my* secretary to see if I would be interested in giving a quote about you for some interview?” Nelson peers at me over his reading glasses from across the boardroom.

“Hmm?” I glance at him, then turn my attention back to the report in my hand.

“Presley, your new publicist.” I hate the way he says publicist, like it’s not actually her job and this is all some ruse.

“What about her?” I ask firmly, tossing the report onto the table.

“What’s this interview she has you doing?”

“It’s a profile for the *Chicago Booth Review*. As an alumni and now professor there, they want to interview me, simple as that. She and another student, Forrest who is an editor, set it up.”

“She’s a student?” I don’t know why this is so shocking to him. “Your new publicist is one of *your* students?”

“Yes,” I say, continuing to fiddle with my phone.

“Seems a touch unethical, don’t you think? A conflict of interest?”

“How? She wasn’t hired by me; Lisa Wade hired her. Not to mention, she wasn’t hired to be my competition’s publicist. *That* would be a conflict of interest; this is not.”

“And things are going well with her?” He nods his head, pulling his glasses off and chewing the earpiece for a brief second.

“What the hell are you trying to say, Nelson? I really don’t have time for this shit. She’s my publicist; she works for Lisa. You didn’t seem to have all these suspicious concerns when Becky was my publicist. If you don’t want to give a quote, don’t give one; simple as that.” I stand up and button my suit coat. “Get me the final numbers for Meridian by the end of the week. I have that gala this weekend and I don’t want to be worried about anything else while I’m there. Miss James has a list of people I’ll need to speak to and I want to make sure I can be focused.”

“Miss James is attending the gala?” If I thought his ears were burning before, they’re on fire now.

“Yes.”

“Peter Frisk will be there,” he says quickly, shooting up out of his chair.

“And? Peter is always at these things. He’s a professional ass-kissing snake, Nelson; we know that.” I turn and walk toward the door. “Don’t forget the report.”

“Just—be careful is all.”

I stop and turn back around. “Be careful? What do you mean?”

His face grows red and his cheeks jiggle as he shakes his head rapidly. “I—I just mean with her there and Peter is all. He might get the wrong idea.”

I stare at him for several seconds. I’m good at reading people—fucking great at it actually—and something in my gut tells me that there’s more to what Nelson is saying. I nod. “Noted.”

It hasn’t gone unnoticed by me how up my ass Nelson has been lately, whether it’s about this Meridian deal or now with Presley. I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m going to find out.

I ADJUST MY BOW TIE IN THE MIRROR, TWO FROWN LINES already rooted between my brows. I haven't been to a public event like this in over a year and I haven't missed them. If there's one thing I can't stand, more than denying myself the fantasy of Presley James in my bed, it's kissing ass and pretending to give a shit about other rich people's new yachts and summer homes on the French Riviera.

The last few days have been agonizing. After our little moment in my gym, Presley has barely spoken to me outside of professional necessity. She sat quietly in class, taking her notes studiously and disappearing before I could even put my coat on. I remind myself that this is exactly what I wanted to happen. She needs to realize that while a flirty comment here and there won't push me over the edge, tempting me with a look that's begging me to defile her will.

My phone buzzes and I slide my thumb across the screen to answer it.

"Wes, everything okay?"

"Sir, she's already left her building, I think. I've rang the buzzer several times and there's no answer. Would you like me to wait longer or come back and get you?"

I rub my temple. Of course she didn't listen to me. I told her yesterday that I would send Wes by to pick her up for the gala, and then he would swing by and get me so we'd arrive together.

"No, don't wait. Just come back and get me."

By the time we arrive at the function, my frustration is through the roof. I smile and nod as I walk inside, my focus on the dozens of people milling about as I try to find her. I hear her before I see her, that sweet, innocent-sounding laugh echoing through the room.

Her back is to me; it's exposed. She's wearing a floor-length black velvet gown that hugs her body like a glove,

flaring out slightly below her knees. If it dips that low in the back, all the way down to the top of her ass, I can only imagine the front. Her hair is pinned to her head in loose curls, a few hanging around her neck.

I'm staring and she must be able to sense it because she slowly turns her head to look at me, her eyes finding mine. That's when I see she's talking to Forrest and his parents... of course she is. My stomach burns. I want to march over to her, drag her to a private area, and ask her why she insists on being obstinate, but I play it cool. I tip my head toward her, then walk slowly over to the bar.

"Whiskey, neat," I say to the bartender. A moment later, Presley wanders up to my side.

"Good evening, Mr. Gates."

I take a long sip of the whiskey, savoring the burn that glides down and unfurls in my chest.

"Evening, Miss Presley. You look beautiful. Drink?" I want to linger on the compliment, tell her she looks stunning, mouthwatering, sexier than any woman I've ever seen. Then I want to drag her out of this building and take her home where I can slowly peel the dress from her body and devour her.

She shakes her head no, smiling politely. "Not when I'm working. And thank you, you look very handsome." Her cheeks look rosy and her eyes dart from me down to her feet.

We're in a room full of people yet instantly, the second my eyes settle on her, it feels like we're alone. I want to step closer to her, to push the silky curls away from her neck and softly trail my lips over her tempting skin.

"Is there a reason you disregarded my instruction about Wes picking you up this evening?"

"I didn't agree to being picked up. In fact, I told you previously I would meet you here and I expected my wishes to be respected. This is a work function; my boss doesn't give me a ride to work every day, so this is no different."

I roll my eyes. I want to tell her to cut the shit and ask her how the view is on her high horse.

“How soon can I leave?”

“You just got here.” Her head swivels around to look at me.

“Exactly and I don’t plan on staying a second longer than I have to.”

“Your speech is the first thing tonight so once that’s over, I’d like to have you speak with a few people and mingle, please.” She reaches for my glass. “And try to keep this to a minimum.”

“You met the parents already, I see.” I tried not to bring it up but I’m petty.

“Forrest’s parents? Yes, they’re lovely people and I think you should go spend a few moments with them as well.”

I reach out and snatch the glass of whiskey back from her. She attempts to reach for it again, but I grab her arm and hold it while I tip the glass back and finish it in one swallow.

“Seriously?”

“If I have to be here, I might as well make it fun. Shall we?” I say, motioning toward the floor to go mingle. She takes a step, and I place my hand at her lower back. The second my fingertips touch her skin, I know it’s a mistake because now, it’s all I’m going to be focused on this entire evening.

Every time I’m talking to someone, I’m not really listening. I’m too lost, focused on who is keeping Presley’s attention. If it’s not Forrest, it’s some other man making her laugh or offering her a drink. I’ve already had three whiskeys, which doesn’t affect me too much—I’m a big man and I can handle my liquor—but I grab a bottle of water and chug it before my speech.

I watch Presley graciously introduce me. You wouldn’t know that she’s pissed at me by the way she’s smiling. Her bright eyes are sparkling, her alabaster skin glowing. Her lips are a deep red tonight, her cleavage begging me to run my tongue over it. Looking at her, the almost unbearable desire that’s coursing through me right now feels hopeless. Like I know it’s only a matter of time before I snap. I’ve never

craved a woman like I do her. This feeling of jealousy, of wanting to spend time with her, to get to know her is more than just lust... and it's starting to scare me.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Cyrus Gates.” The room erupts in applause as I walk onto the stage. For as much as I hate this shit, I care about this organization and I'm more than willing to kiss these people's asses if it means they'll donate.

I'm finishing up my speech when out of the corner of my eye I see Peter Frisk. He's wormed his way through the crowd and sidled up beside Presley.

“Thank you.” I finish the speech and try to exit the stage quickly, but it's no use. A few people surround me and I'm stuck answering questions. I watch as he flirts with her, his hand resting gently on her arm as he leans in to speak with her. I turn my attention back to Denise and Paul Devry who have made their way over to me with Forrest.

“Our son tells us he's about to interview you for *The Review*.” They smile like two proud parents should, looking at their son, then back to me.

“Yes, he is”—I reach my hand out to Paul—“you've got a great son here. Very driven and sharp, you both did well.”

Denise smiles widely, her eyes almost tearful as she rubs her son's arm. “We are so proud of him. He really looks up to you. He was so ecstatic when he found out you were going to be his professor this semester.”

I glance over Paul's shoulder and see Peter leading Presley onto the dance floor.

You've got to be fucking kidding me.

“I apologize,” I say. “I need to go take care of something. Pleasure meeting you both and I would love to talk more later.”

I excuse myself, my hands already balled into fists as I walk up behind Presley. Peter looks at me, that slimy look in his eyes. He stops dancing, bringing Presley's hand up to his lips and planting a kiss.

“Cyrus.” He smiles and it’s soulless. “I had the absolute pleasure of meeting your new publicist.” He winks at her as I reach my arm out and pull her back toward me. “Watch yourself with him,” he says to her.

“Excuse us,” I say to her as I step off the dance floor with Peter. I keep my smile in place until we’re well out of her earshot before turning to face him. “What the fuck do you want?”

He laughs. “Just had to see for myself is all.”

“See what?”

His eyes drift over toward Presley who’s still looking at us. “A little birdie told me that you hired your newest plaything as your publicist. I thought, he can’t be that stupid but—guess I was wrong.”

“Don’t ever fucking refer to her like that again. She is my publicist. End of story.”

“Better keep it that way, or you might be the first man to lose a billion-dollar deal over pussy.” He’s smiling so wide I feel like I can see all his teeth.

I step closer, looking down on him. I’ve got at least half a foot on this dick weasel. “Are you threatening me?”

He shrugs. “You might want to make sure your own house is in order, Cyrus, or rumor has it, Meridian will be looking for a new buyer.”

He walks away, and my gaze drifts back to the dance floor where Forrest has his arms wrapped around Presley, moving her to the music as a smile spreads across her face.

I head to the bar. “Double whiskey.” He barely hands it to me before I take it down in one gulp. “Another.”

By the time I’ve finished both glasses and mingled a little more, my head is starting to swim and pound. I send a text to Wes to bring the car around before finding Presley.

“Time to go,” I say, grabbing her arm and leading her toward the coat check.

“Excuse me.” She attempts to pull away, but I hold her tightly.

“We’re leaving. Wes is waiting,” I say as I grab our coats and lead us out into the night.

We slide into the back of the limo, her on one side, me on the other. I lean back, closing my eyes for a moment as I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

I don’t respond. I reach into the small liquor cabinet and pour myself another drink. After a few minutes, I ask, “What did Peter say to you?”

“Nothing really.” She shrugs one shoulder. “Introduced himself and asked me how long I’d been working for Lisa.”

“You mean *me*, how long you’ve been working for me?”

She rolls her eyes. “No. Working for Lisa.”

I laugh, taking a sip of my liquor. “Yeah, but you answer to me. If I wanted you gone tomorrow, you would be.”

“That’s a messed-up thing to say. Are you threatening my job? Is that how this plays out now? If I don’t behave exactly like you want, you fire me?”

“No, I’m not threatening your job. I’m threatening to remind you who’s in charge here.”

She scoffs. “Let me guess, another empty threat.”

“Excuse me?” I pause, the glass halfway to my lips.

“You’re constantly threatening me, to remind me what happens if I don’t obey you, if I touch you, if I say the wrong thing or question you. I’m starting to think you don’t even know what those threats are.” She leans forward. “You’re just so used to intimidating people to get your way, threatening them into submission, that you can’t stand that it doesn’t work on me.”

“Are you dating Forrest?”

“And then you deflect.” She sits back.

“Answer me.”

“No, I’m not dating him.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “But he did ask me on a date.”

My chest tightens. “Are you going to go?”

“Maybe.” I keep my eyes on her and I can tell it’s making her uncomfortable. “What are you thinking?”

“I shouldn’t say.”

“I thought you did what you wanted, Mr. Gates—didn’t care what people thought.” She’s acting like a spoiled brat, but she’s right.

“Fuck it.” I toss back the rest of the whiskey and place the tumbler on the cabinet. I lean back, stretching my arms out over the back of the seat. “I’m thinking the same thing I’ve thought all night, or really since the moment I saw you in class... no, actually that night at The Waterhouse.”

“Which is?”

I smirk, knowing full well she’s not expecting what I’m about to say.

“What your pussy tastes like. What your lips would look like wrapped around my thick cock. What sounds you’d make if I fucked you for hours on end... hell, if you could even handle all nine inches of me buried inside you. We both know you’d be gagging if I even half attempted to fuck your smart mouth.”

That smart-ass look on her face slips away as her lips fall open slightly.

“You want me to go on?”

She doesn’t say anything, but she doesn’t have to. Her desire is written all over her face. I’m clearly three sheets to the wind right now, all inhibitions gone.

“Now, what I can’t entirely figure out about you”—I spread my legs out, placing one on either side of hers—“is if this is a facade or if the other version of you is an act. When you sit there, doe-eyed, your hands neatly folded in your lap as

you timidly agree to be a good girl... is that the real you? Or is it this woman sitting across from me tonight? Bold, pushing the limits, begging me to reveal what I want to do to her, what I can't stop thinking about. Is that the real you, Presley? This woman right here, looking for trouble?"

She doesn't respond and it makes me chuckle. Gone is that false bravado; back is the meek little woman with her big eyes, chewing her bottom lip.

"I'm not looking for trouble."

"Then why don't you run away?" I lean forward in my seat. "Every time I challenge you, push the limits, make an innuendo about having my way with you, you keep coming back for more. But you're afraid, too afraid to actually act on anything. You want to push me to do it, don't you?" I shake my head. "You don't fool me, Miss James. I spotted your innocence from a mile away. I know you want to be that version of yourself, that good girl who wants to unleash her naughty side, but you're too scared of the consequences, aren't you?"

I slowly remove my suit jacket, undoing my bow tie, then one of the cuffs on my shirt.

"Consequences?" The question sounds like a squeak.

"You didn't think there wouldn't be consequences for pushing my limits, did you? This is what you wanted, isn't it—to tempt me until I can't take it anymore? Didn't I warn you last time that I wouldn't hold back again?"

I flip up my cuff, then reach my other hand out to grasp her throat, tugging her gently to the edge of the seat. "You've been a very naughty girl, Miss James. I think you need to learn a lesson about your bratty little attitude."

"I-I'm sorry."

"Tsk, tsk, it's too late for apologies, sweetheart." I smile as I squeeze her throat a little tighter. Her hands dart out to rest on my thighs. "Are you ready to obey me and pay your penance?"

She slowly nods her head yes.

“That’s my good girl.” I reach my hand down beneath her dress, slowly dragging my fingers up her warm skin. “Are you wet?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“Mmm, let’s find out.” I push her thighs apart, my fingers finding the edge of her panties. I run my thumb over her warm center a few times, the wetness already seeping through the silk. I slide her panties to the side, my finger running straight up her slit which causes her eyes to roll back in her head and a moan to slip past her lips.

“You’re soaked. You do like this, don’t you? You like being punished.”

I tease her, then slide my finger deep inside her, causing her to instantly clench around it, her fingers curling into my pant legs.

I pull her closer to me, our lips so close, but I don’t touch. “Look at me, Presley.” Her eyes pop open. “Keep your eyes on me; don’t you dare close them. Look what you made me do to you. You filthy little girl, if you’d just behaved, I wouldn’t have to do this to you.”

I slip a second finger inside her. “Goddamn, you’re tight.” Sweat beads at my temple as I hold myself back. “There’s no way in fuck I could even get an inch of my cock inside you.”

“Ohhh!” she pants, her fingers digging into my legs so hard it hurts but I don’t care. She’s getting close. Her eyes struggle to remain focused on me. My cock throbs, rock hard against my thigh. I need a release so bad but I know it won’t happen with her... at least not tonight.

“I’m-I-I...” She’s going to come. Her body trembles; her pussy quivers, but just as I feel her release start to take over, I slide my fingers out of her, releasing her throat as well. I bring them to my mouth, licking them clean.

“Fuck me.” I reach down and adjust myself. “You taste sweeter than I imagined.”

She looks at me, confused.

“Oh, you didn’t think I was going to let you finish, did you?”

“What?” Her chest rises and falls rapidly, and her hands release from my thighs as she stares at me blankly.

“Now, Presley, you’ve been a very naughty girl. Did you think my punishments, my threats were that I was going to let you come?” I readjust my cuff, buttoning it. “Good girls get rewarded; bad girls get punished. So, I got what I wanted tonight. I got to taste your sweet, wet cunt and I got to teach you a lesson that if you push me, I will use you in whatever way I see fit, for my pleasure.” I reach out and run my thumb over her bottom lip. “Not yours.”

“Now,” I say, looking out the window at her building as Wes slows the car down. “Go inside and clean yourself up and think about if you want to be a good girl or not.”

Chapter 12

Presley

I exit the limo, looking back over my shoulder just once before I enter the building. I feel like I'm in a daze, my head floating far above my body as I take the two flights of stairs up to my apartment.

"Did that just happen?" I close my door and lean against it. I can't stifle the giggle of disbelief that erupts from my chest, almost startling me. Butterflies dance through my belly as I feel warmth spread across my body.

I know I should feel shame, but I don't—just pure unbridled lust and excitement. The kind of excitement I've never felt for a man. The kind of excitement that's mixed with very real danger. When he asked me if I wanted him to go on, I wanted to say yes. I wanted to hear in detail every thought he's had about me because nobody has ever said anything even half that dirty to me.

I reach into my coat pocket to grab my phone, opening the text thread between Serenity and me, but then I hesitate. While I want to tell her, as my best friend, I know she won't approve. She's already made it abundantly clear that Cyrus Gates has trouble written all over him... and she's not wrong.

Even though we're the same age, Serenity has always seen herself as my big sister. While she grew up in the city, I was the country bumpkin who has been attempting to navigate her way through life. I know it comes from a good place; she's always so protective of me. And while she's always encouraged me to get out there and experience life, whenever I would meet a guy at a party or start dating someone, she

would often threaten them if they hurt me or tell me they weren't worth my time or energy—which she was always so right again, it's not like I can be upset with her for being protective.

I shrug off my coat, placing my phone on my studio kitchen counter. For now, I want to keep this naughty little secret all my own. I drift through my apartment listlessly, like a ship on the ocean, a smile on my face as my mind replays the way Cyrus touched me... the way his eyes burned into mine as his fingers toyed with me.

I touch my neck where his fingers gripped my throat. I've never had a man do that to me before. If that's how he chose to punish me, I can't imagine how delicious it must feel to be praised by him, to allow him to worship my body.

I'm lost in thought as I strip out of my dress, letting it fall to the floor before I make my way to my bathroom to draw a bath. It's late already and I do have to work tomorrow, but I need to unwind, to sink beneath a lavender bubble bath and try to figure out where my head is right now. I glance over at my bedside table, debating on if I should allow myself the indulgence of finishing where he left off. Before I can second-guess it, I slide open the drawer and reach for my waterproof toy.

The amber glow of the candles I've lit bounce off the white subway tile walls of the shower. I reach down, running my hand through the warm water, the calming scent of lavender and vanilla reaching my nostrils. I remove my panties and dip my toe in the water, inching down slowly until I'm fully submerged.

The bubbles swirl around me as I wonder if he's thinking about me right now. If he's wishing he would have kissed me the way I was begging him to in my head. I could smell the whiskey on his breath and see it in his eyes, so part of me wonders if he'll even remember this tomorrow.

“Think about if you want to be a good girl or not.”

His words echo through my head.

Does he want me to be a good girl?

He said that my punishment would be for his pleasure so clearly he enjoyed it, right?

Maybe I should ask him what being a *good girl* entails. Or maybe I should focus on what I *want* to do. I close my eyes and hold my breath, sinking beneath the water to escape my thoughts, but it doesn't help. My thoughts keep drifting back to the way my body came alive under his touch, how close I was to coming before he slid his fingers out of me. I feel my pulse quicken at the image of him bringing his sticky fingers to his mouth and wrapping his lips around them. His eyes rolled back in his head as his tongue cleaned up every last drop. Grabbing my toy, I turn it on and slide it between my thighs, the buzz turning into a low hum beneath the water.

For the rest of the night, all through my bedtime routine, my head and my heart are in all-out war between what I *want* and what I *should* do.

I turn out my lights and double-check the lock on my front door before slipping between the cool sheets of my bed. I lie on my back, staring up at the ceiling, knowing what I'm going to choose... what I should choose.

I'm going to be a good girl.

“PRESLEY IS SUBMITTING THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS OVER TO Cyrus today, correct? And the interview is taking place this week?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes.” I nod my head, sitting up straighter. I'm trying to stay focused in our weekly staff meeting, but my thoughts are still consumed with last night.

“Perfect. And how did the gala go last night?”

“Great.” I half cough the response as I dart my hand toward my water bottle. “Great,” I repeat, my cheeks feeling like they're two seconds from catching fire. “I sent the press release to publication this morning, highlighting some of Mr.

Gates' speaking points as well as talking about his upcoming work with the Chicago Youth in Leadership conference."

"Excellent," Lisa says, ticking something off on her tablet. "I'm sending you over the file with the photos right now from our photographer, Grant, who attended last night." She taps furiously on her tablet before looking back up at me. "I need you to choose two photos that will be published with the press release. I trust your discretion so once you've chosen them and signed off, send them to publication as well."

"Yes, ma'am." I smile.

Photos? We had a photographer there last night?

I don't know why I suddenly panic like he was inside the limo with us.

"Natalie, did you finalize that contract with Norris Publishing?" Lisa turns her attention to the next person in the room, so I pull up my email.

I open the file and scroll through the images. Most of them are of Cyrus speaking on stage. He looks beyond sexy, like a young George Clooney mixed with Henry Cavill. How the hell is this man real? I select the two that look the most candid and download them, attaching them to the email I've drafted to Cyrus with his interview questions, then attach the folder with the remaining photos and hit send.

I slide my thumb across my phone screen and go to the text he sent me with his address.

Me: *Good morning. Just sent you an email with the interview questions. If you could sign off on them, that would be great, or let me know if you want me to omit any. Also, I included the two photos of you from last night for the press release that's going out tomorrow. Just need your approval on those as well. Thanks.*

Moments later, he responds. My breath hitches in my chest when I see his name appear on my phone.

Cyrus: *Questions look good.*

I read the response and I'd be lying if I said I hadn't hoped it would be different. Although I know it goes completely against what I decided, I'd hoped that some of the tone from last night might linger. But then, a second later he texts again.

Cyrus: *I prefer this photo.*

I click on the image he chose—it's us by the bar. My back is to the camera, my face turned to look at him. His eyes are looking at my back. It's intimate, almost like a stolen moment that I didn't even know was captured. I feel the butterflies again, the excitement making my heart race as I bite my lip to keep from grinning. I know he isn't serious about choosing that photo; it's the one he likes the best, but he knows it can't go to print.

Me: *How about any other questions? Should we add more? Any topics you want to discuss that I didn't mention?*

I turn my attention back to the meeting—or attempt to anyway. I try to keep from staring at my phone, waiting for it to light up again. But a minute later, it does.

Cyrus: *How are you feeling today...*

He ignores my question, taking the conversation in a direction I know it has no business going. I know I shouldn't. I tell myself it's dangerous territory. But I tease him back.

Me: *Frustrated.*

He responds with the devil emoji.

Cyrus: *Have you made a decision yet, young lady?*

Young lady... a completely innocent phrase that does all sorts of things to me. I can imagine him saying it in that deep tenor, his eyes dark, his lips so close to my ear.

Me: *Still thinking about it. Honestly, I think a lot of last night was the liquor talking.*

I know exactly what I'm doing... and so does he.

Cyrus: *Hmm... you're mighty bold with that tongue over text, Miss James. I strongly encourage you to reconsider that kind of behavior.*

Oh shit! My stomach does a flip at his threat. The meeting is drawing to a close and as much as I want to continue that banter, I have a lot of work to get done today. I type out a response that I know will not only drive him wild, but will leave him hanging.

Me: *Yes, sir. See you in class tomorrow, Professor Gates.*

I SLING MY BAG OVER MY ARM, MAKING MY WAY TOWARD THE classroom exit, Cyrus' eyes burning through me.

"My office, now," he growls, grabbing my arm as I walk past him.

"Hey, I have to go chat with Mr. Gates," I say to Serenity as he walks past us down the hallway.

"Okay, we'll catch up later."

When I reach his office door, I take in a deep breath before turning the handle and slowly opening it. He's already leaning against the desk, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

"Please"—he motions toward the chair in front of him—"have a seat."

I sit down slowly, my nerves on edge as he slowly uncrosses his arms, wrapping his hands around the edge of the desk. His fingers are long and thick, my body instantly remembering what it felt like to have just two of them stretching me wide open.

"Something on your mind, Presley?"

My eyes dart upward to look at him. "Hmm? No."

"Don't lie to me." He smiles.

"I'm not. I, uh, I've made my decision."

"You have?"

"I'm going to be good. I'm going to behave." I say the words confidently—as confidently as I can under the

circumstances.

“Are you sure about that?” His voice grows deeper.

“Yes. Why?” My throat is dry, but I slowly nod my head yes.

“Why do you keep staring at my hands?”

The heat from my core spreads rapidly through my body. It must show all over my face because it makes him chuckle almost beneath his breath.

“Did you finish yourself off when you went inside your apartment?”

My shoulders dart upward toward my ears as the rest of my body clenches tightly at the memory of what I did that night.

“I don’t think I should answer that.”

“Why not?”

“A good girl wouldn’t.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to. Your body already told me the answer.” He reaches his hand out, placing it under my chin. “That being said, a good girl will obey me and answer my questions. But what I really want to know—did you use your fingers or a toy?”

“A toy,” I blurt out.

“Just on your clit or did you fuck yourself with it?”

“Both.” I feel like I’m two seconds away from melting into a puddle in front of him. This has to be the most turned on I’ve ever been in my life. I can feel my panties growing wetter by the second and all I want to do is to beg him to take me.

“Fuck,” he groans, squeezing his eyes shut momentarily while reaching down with his other hand to adjust himself. “That’s an image that’s going to be in my head all day. You see what you do to me?”

I look down at the bulge in his pants, threatening to rip through the fabric at any second, then drag my eyes back up to

meet his gaze.

“I know what you’re thinking, sweetheart, but no, as much as I want you to offer me release, everyone in this fucking building would know what I was doing to you in here if I pull my cock out.”

God, the way this man talks, so crass, so bold. It only makes me want more.

He stands up, taking a step closer to me while I stare up at him.

“So, you’re ready to behave and stop being obstinate?”

“Yes.”

“You know that means you have to obey me, right?” He reaches his hand out, brushing my hair behind my ear, his finger sliding along my jaw. “No matter what I say, you’ll do it. Understand me?”

“I’m going to try my hardest, but I’m still going to do my job the best way I see fit, even if you don’t like it.”

He laughs, stepping back and sliding his hand into his pocket. “I wouldn’t expect anything less, Miss James.”

“I should head to the office.”

“Of course.” He steps behind me as I walk to the door, his hand resting gently on my hip again.

I look over my shoulder when he stays behind, expecting him to walk out with me.

“I, uh, I need a moment.” He laughs as we both look down at his crotch.

“Have a good afternoon, sir. I’ll see you at the interview tomorrow.”

I’m practically bouncing on the balls of my feet as I walk down the long hallway and make my way outside. I opt for a taxi instead of the train to get over to my office. My body feels like it’s still vibrating from my interaction with Cyrus as I approach the revolving door.

“Miss James.”

I stop, my hand outstretched. I look to my left as Peter Frisk approaches me.

“Miss James, apologies for ambushing you. Peter Frisk,” he says, reintroducing himself.

“Yes, yes, I remember you, Mr. Frisk, from the gala. What can I do for you?” I can’t hide the confusion on my face. He’s wearing a black fedora over his thinning gray hair, his short body almost engulfed in a long black coat. With his pinstripe suit pants and beady eyes, this man could be a *Batman* villain.

“I just wanted a moment of your time.”

“Did you want to come up to my office?”

“No.” He shakes his head as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small business card. “I’m actually in the market for someone with your services.” He nods toward the building. “Just wanted to give you my card.” He stretches out his arm, the card dangling between his middle and forefinger.

“Oh.” I take the card, looking at it for a second.

“No need for an answer, but if you get a few moments, give me a call so we can discuss.”

“Well, I’m not really freelance, and I don’t get to hire my own clients, so you’d have to discuss all this with Lisa.”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “Apologies. I think I’ve confused you. I don’t mean hire you through this firm. I mean hire you to come work for me—exclusively. Triple whatever you’re making here.” He eyes me for a moment. “Think about it,” he says before turning and walking back toward the street where a car is waiting for him.

Chapter 13

Cyrus

“T hanks again for your time, sir. Honestly, this has been the highlight of my career as one of the editors of *The Chicago Booth Review*.”

“Thank you.” I smile, shaking Forrest’s eager hand. “I appreciate you taking the time and if you ever need a letter of recommendation for a job, let me know. I’m happy to oblige.”

“Seriously?” His eyes bug out as he smiles from ear to ear. “That’s—I’m speechless.”

“Absolutely.” My phone buzzes and I look down at it to see that it’s my lawyers. “Apologies. I have to take this,” I say, holding it up before stepping away to answer.

“Terry,” I say into the phone as I watch Forrest walk back over to Presley. I try to focus on what Terry is saying to me, but I’m distracted at the way they’re interacting. Forrest touches her arm gently and whatever the hell he says makes her smile, then laugh, a genuine laugh.

“Don’t worry,” I say to him as he fills me in on Nelson freaking out again. “I’ll talk him off a ledge.”

I hang up the phone and stand back, watching them from afar. She playfully smacks his arm as he does some sort of impression. Her eyes catch mine and she does a double take, her smile slowly fading, morphing from laughter into something else. Her parted lips turn up at one corner, and her eyes grow heavy. If I had to guess, it’s the look of desire.

I mouth the words *come here* to her and she turns back to Forrest, excusing herself before approaching me.

I lean in a little closer to her, making sure my voice is low enough nobody else can hear us. “Good girl, you’re learning.”

“What can I do for you, sir?” she asks sweetly.

“Mmm, loaded question. Let’s go to lunch.”

She looks over her shoulder at Forrest, then back to me. “Should we invite him?”

“Why, are you fucking him?”

“No.” Annoyance flashes across her face.

“He did ask you out on a date though; have you gone?”

“No.”

“Are you interested in going?”

She shrugs. “I should be, shouldn’t I?” She turns to stand next to me so we’re both facing him where he’s talking animatedly to someone else. “He’s attractive, accomplished, comes from a good family, ticks all those boxes.”

“And isn’t old enough to be your father,” I interject. She looks over at me.

“And there’s that. Although, he’d probably still let me call him daddy.” She can’t hold in her giggle.

I turn my head slowly to look down at her, her laugh disappearing the second she sees the look in my eyes. I glance behind us to make sure there’s no one before letting my hand slowly slide down her back to rest against her ass. There are only a few other people in the large classroom where the interview took place and they’re completely engrossed in conversation. I take the opportunity to rear my hand back and bring it down hard against her backside, startling her.

“Ow!” she yelps, her mouth falling open as she looks up at me.

“If you think that hurt, just wait till later. Now go get in the fucking car.”

“HOW DID YOU FEEL THE INTERVIEW WENT?”

“Good. I enjoyed the conversation. Forrest is a good interviewer. How did you think it went?” I take a sip of my whiskey, not something I typically do at lunch, but my nerves around her are completely fried. I’m having to talk myself out of taking her back to my house and fucking her senseless every passing second.

As much as I pretend to be in control with her, the reality is, I have no idea what I’m doing. I do know that this is beyond stupid, but I also know I don’t want to stop. I want to lose myself in her body, but I haven’t decided if I’m going to go all the way with her. I want to; it’s all I think about; it consumes me, but that’s why I’ve told myself I can’t. I know that once I feel her tight pussy wrapped around my cock, I’ll be done for.

“I think it went great. I’m really excited to see it in print.” She takes a bite of her panini.

“You were right on the money with the idea. I know Lisa was very impressed with the idea; she has been impressed with all your ideas.”

She swallows, her eyes big and round. “Seriously?”

“Yes. How are you liking the job?”

“I love it!” Her eyes light up and it makes me feel happy. “I can’t thank you enough for suggesting me to Lisa. She’s such a powerhouse and genius to learn from. I completely recognize that this is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

And this is when the guilt kicks in... because I know that if Lisa knew what I’d done to Presley, the things I planned on doing to her, she’d fire her and deliver on her promise to me to make me regret the day I was born.

But something in me tells me that it’s worth it, that it’s more than just desire. I like hearing how happy she is in her

job, how fulfilled she feels. I want to know more and that scares me more than possibly ruining her career. I feel torn.

“Well, like I said before your interview, I knew you’d be great at it.”

“Yes,” she says slowly, “when you called me *kid*.”

I chuckle. “I did, didn’t I? Did that bother you?”

She looks at me like she’s calculating her response. But instead of answering, she looks down at my untouched plate of food.

“You haven’t eaten.”

“No, I haven’t,” I say, looking at the plate before bring the tumbler to my lips for another sip of whiskey. “Not really hungry... for food.”

“So”—she clears her throat—“are you enjoying teaching?”

“Enjoying it? I wouldn’t go that far. Then again, I met you through it.”

“Ah, yes, your *favorite* student,” she says in a teasing manner.

“You think I don’t mean that?”

“It’s not that. I think that I’m your favorite for a reason though.”

I lean forward, resting my hands on the table. “And what reason would that be, Miss James?”

She blushes, something I’ve come to realize is a tell when she’s turned on.

“Um, well, the reasons you listed in the car the other night.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re referring to.” I give her a look that says *I have no idea what you’re talking about*. She doesn’t give in. Her eyes dart away from mine like she’s too embarrassed to say the reasons out loud. “Oh, you mean because I wanted to know what your pussy tastes like? Or

because I've imagined your face when you're coming probably a hundred times by now?"

She shifts nervously in her seat, glancing around the restaurant. "People can hear you."

I shake my head. "Relax, sweetheart, they're too caught up in their own conversations to listen to us." I take another sip of my liquor, finishing it off. "Tastes fucking delicious by the way. Exquisite. Mouthwatering." I lean back in my chair again, reliving the flavor of her, my jaw clenching as I salivate.

"So is that the only reason? That I'm your favorite?"

"No, far from it actually. You are bold and as much as you are hard on yourself, you do think for yourself. You navigate your way through your own arguments, starting off with a preconceived idea, then worming your way through it till you find your own thoughts and opinions on it. It's refreshing; *you* are refreshing, Presley. We need more young people like you to run this world."

Her blush is back and this time it's because of a compliment, something else that I've come to recognize about her. She doesn't quite recognize her own worth yet.

"Thank you," she says quietly.

"Now we both know that I'm not actually your favorite professor, but for now, let's just keep letting me believe that." I wink and it makes her giggle. "I'll have Wes drop you at home on my way back to the office if you're finished?"

"I am and thanks, that would be great."

We exit the restaurant and slide into the back of my car, then Wes navigates into traffic.

"I would apologize for making you uncomfortable at lunch talking about how tasty you are, but I'm not sorry."

"I didn't ask you to apologize... or to be sorry."

"Good. And don't forget about our workout date tonight."

"Ugh," she groans.

“Tsk, tsk. You’re the one that chose to be a good girl, so that means you show up and you don’t complain.”

“I never agreed to no complaining.”

“We’ll see about that.” I glance down at her breasts. “And make sure you wear one of those giant hoodies again.”

“What? Why?”

“Because it’s not very well behaved of you to tease me with your tits on display like last time.”

Her mouth falls open. “Excuse me, you’re the one who pulled my hoodie off me. I had every intention of keeping it on.”

“And why’s that?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“Um, I just—I guess I was self-conscious.”

“You? Self-conscious about what?” How the fuck could a woman this sexy be self-conscious about anything? Her body has me wanting to do backflips just for a glimpse of what’s beneath her blouse.

“I’m a little thin. I haven’t really worked out for... well, honestly, it’s probably been the better part of a year and I’m not exactly used to having my body wrapped in spandex in front of my boss with, as you put it, my ti—breasts on display.”

“Trust me, you have absolutely nothing to be self-conscious about. I mean fuck,” I say, reaching down to adjust myself for probably the fifth time today. I reach over, taking her hand and placing it right on my hard cock. “Does that feel like you should be self-conscious, baby?”

I fully expect her to roll her eyes or make a snarky comment about how it’s smaller than she expected... although we both know that would never actually be the case, but instead—she looks down at where her hand is pressed against me, her fingers slowly tightening around my shaft that’s running down my thigh. Her eyes look up at Wes in the rearview mirror, then to me.

Fuck, I did not think this through.

I thought she would pull her hand away. I didn't expect curiosity to get the best of her and now me. I reach around her to where the divider button is and press it. I don't know what I'm expecting to happen in the five minutes we have left till we're at her building, but I don't tell her to stop.

She grips me tighter, then she slowly begins to move her hand up and down my shaft through my pants. I groan, my head falling back against the seat as she continues to explore me. I haven't been this wound tight for a hand job since I was fifteen.

I hear the clank of my belt being undone, my zipper being dragged down, and I lift my head to tell her no, but she already has her hand inside my boxer briefs. Seconds later, the warmth of her skin is against my bare cock.

"Fuuuuuck." I reach my hand overhead, pressing it against the ceiling of the car as I bite down on my fist. I've never in my life been ready to come after thirty seconds of being stroked, yet I'm about to explode. But just when I think I can't handle any more, she lowers her head and the sweet, wet warmth of her lips wrap around me.

"Oh shit, oh fuck!" I feel my balls tighten as her tongue swirls around the underside of my head, and her lips suck me harder. I want to reach down and grab a handful of her hair and force myself deeper down her throat but just as I'm about to, she pulls away.

"What? No," I say as the car slows to a stop and I look out the window, realizing we're at her building.

"Now you know how it feels," she says in a sultry voice as she opens the door and swings her leg out of the car.

I reach my hand out, grabbing her arm and tugging her back in the car till we're almost nose to nose.

"This isn't over, sweetheart. Wes will pick you up tonight."

She closes the door and I lean my head back, debating if it would be terribly fucked up to jerk off in the back of my car before redoing my pants and counting down the hours until I can take out my frustration on her.

THIS TIME, SHE'S ON TIME AND I'M ALREADY DRESSED, waiting for her. I told Wes to have her meet me in the gym when he brings her back to the house.

I hear her walking down the long hallway and step toward the entry of the gym. I lean against the doorframe, stopping her from entering.

“Evening, Miss James.”

“Evening, Mr. Gates.”

“I see you can follow orders.” I nod toward the hoodie that hangs to her mid-thigh.

She looks down her body, then grabs the hem of it, pulling it over her head and tossing it past me into the gym in one swift move. Her tits look even better than last time and now she's not even wearing a shirt, just a strappy little sports bra that's barely holding her in. I can only imagine what they're going to look like bouncing in that thing while she runs.

“Guess I spoke too soon.”

“Oh no, I did follow your orders. You said to wear an oversized hoodie and I did. But...” She gives me that flirty grin I've come to love and dread so much because I know there's always something coming after it that drives me up the wall. “You didn't say anything about not taking it off.”

I shake my head at her attitude. “There you go again, looking.”

“Looking?” She crooks her brow.

“Yes, for trouble.”

“Hmm, doesn't seem like something a good girl would do. You know, some might say that *you* often find yourself in trouble. Are you looking, Mr. Gates?”

I slide my hands into the pockets of my shorts to keep from reaching out and grabbing her. “I wouldn't say I go

looking for it, no.” I shrug. “More often than not, it just so happens to find me and I do a piss-poor job of running when it does.”

“Seems like we’re both not very good at behaving then.”

“You know what they say about trouble, right?”

“What do they say?” She tilts her head.

“That if you go looking for it, you’ll find it.”

She purses her lips like she’s contemplating something. “So, did I come to the right place then?”

I stare at her for a few seconds, seeing if her facade starts to crack, but this time, it doesn’t.

I push off the doorway, stepping aside so I’m no longer blocking the entryway. I motion with my hand and she steps over the threshold.

“You know, I’d already planned on punishing you for the way you left me hanging this afternoon in the car, but now that you’re here, you’re just begging for it, aren’t you?”

Chapter 14

Presley

I fully expect him to grab me or press me up against the wall when I walk past him, but he doesn't even touch me.

"Let's warm up on the treadmill again. Just a walk."

"Okay." I follow behind him and step up onto the treadmill. "I know you said you don't run, but last time I was here, you sprinted on that thing and made it look so easy. Are you sure you want me to run this race with you? I feel like I'm going to slow you down."

"You're not getting out of it, Presley."

"Fine," I groan. "Can I just walk the whole thing?" He looks over at me and I can see he's already growing annoyed, so I flash him a little smile and bounce my eyebrows. "Please?"

"Does that work with the younger men? With Forrest?"

I roll my eyes; we're back on this again. Although, in a messed-up kind of way, I like that he's jealous... so maybe I should play into it like I did earlier today.

"Yeah, sometimes. Sexual favors go much further though."

The second I say it, his head whips sideways to look at me and I'm already laughing as he reaches around to smack my ass again. This time he grabs a handful too.

"Just for that, the warmup is cut in half." He hits the speed button on my machine, increasing it rapidly. "Time to pick it up."

I swing my arms with my strides, keeping my shoulders back and head up so that I don't go flying off the back again. It actually feels good to channel some of my pent-up frustrations and anxiety into physical activity. I pass the one-minute mark and decide to push it another thirty seconds.

"Look at you, getting better already." Meanwhile, he's running twice as fast as me but it's still a job for him. His hair flops with his movements that once again, he makes look completely effortless.

"Mind if I turn on some music?" I ask, reaching for my phone after slowing to a walk.

"Not at all."

Once the music starts pumping and I get into a groove of my intervals, Cyrus hops off his treadmill and heads over to the weights. I attempt to zone out and think about work or what I'm going to eat after this workout, but I'm distracted by his movements.

He reaches for the pull-up bar, his body moving in one swift motion up, then back down, over and over again. I can guarantee that even if I jumped, I couldn't reach the bar, let alone pull myself up even an inch. I watch the muscles of his upper back and shoulders ripple with the movement, but his shirt blocks most of it.

"Take your shirt off."

I don't know what possesses me to say it, but the words are out of my mouth before I realize it. I pray that he didn't hear it over the whirring of the treadmill and the pounding of the music, but he dismounts from the bar, reaching over his head to grab the shirt and pull it off, tossing it to the ground.

That electric current shoots straight down my body again, right to my inner thighs. He turns to face me, this time keeping his arms extended long as he hangs from the bar as his legs swing from side to side in a very slow and controlled motion like a windshield wiper. The muscles on his ribs flex, popping out. This man looks unreal and all I want to do right now is

crawl to him and beg him to let me finish what I started earlier today.

He moves through his workout as I continue to run and walk. I finish my last running effort, slowing the treadmill down to a leisurely pace as I daydream. Imagining what it would be like to actually feel him on me... wondering if it will ever go that far between us. In the back of the car earlier, I had wanted him to kiss me. I thought he was going to, but he didn't. In fact, I've been wanting him to since the moment I met him. I thought he would the night of the gala as well; his lips felt like they were less than a centimeter from mine that night.

I'm lost in thought when I realize he's staring at me, walking toward me like a lion stalking its prey. His pupils are dilated, his shorts slung low on his hips as he runs his hands through his hair. He steps up on the edges of the treadmill belt behind me, reaching around to turn it off.

My pace slows, finally coming to a stop just as he steps onto the belt. My back hits his chest as his hands slide over my hips, his lips featherlight against my neck. My eyes flutter closed, and my head lulls to the left to give him better access.

He doesn't speak as he drags his tongue slowly up my neck, swirling the tip of his tongue around my earlobe. I can feel him hard against my ass as he grips my hips and pulls me back against him, a low growl emanating from his chest.

“You've been a very naughty girl today, haven't you?”

I'm already ready to come undone. If he asked me to beg him for release, I wouldn't think twice.

“Haven't you?” he says again, this time spinning me around to look at him.

“Yes.”

He leans in, his large hand sliding up the front of me, my chest, my throat till he wraps his fingers around my jaw. This is it; he's finally going to kiss me. He drags his nose up my neck again, then he reaches his free hand up to slowly drag my bra strap down my arm.

He looks down, watching his movements. He pulls my bra down on one side, revealing my breast. He swipes his thumb over my already hardened nipple, causing me to gasp.

His eyes darken, darting up to meet mine before grabbing me under my arms and lifting me to rest against the large display of the treadmill. He uses his hips to anchor me in place as he pulls my bra down, both breasts bouncing free before leaning in to wrap his lips around my nipple.

“Ohhh,” I groan as his tongue teases me, swirling around my nipples between bites and kisses. My entire body is alive, like every nerve ending is firing off at the same time. I squeeze my thighs against his hips, praying for any type of relief.

He drags his tongue up my breast, to my throat, then back to my ear. “Time for your punishment, sweetheart.”

Just hearing that makes me tremble. How is it that in only a matter of days, this man has conditioned me to want to be punished by him. To be ready to fall to my knees and beg him to punish me just so I can get myself off to thoughts of it later.

He pulls me down, spinning me back around and placing my hands on the bar in front of me.

“Don’t move your hands,” he commands as he walks my hips back and presses against my back. “Bend over.”

I obey, my hands holding tight to the bar in front of me, my back flat as he grabs the waistband of my leggings and tugs them down my ass along with my panties in one swift motion.

“Fuck me, you look good.” He runs his hand down my spine and between my ass cheeks as he reaches into his shorts. I watch our reflection in the mirror on the opposite wall. His head falls back as he pulls out his cock and begins to stroke himself while he fondles me. It only lasts for a moment though before he’s tucking himself back into his shorts. The disappointment that he isn’t going to have sex with me lingers only briefly before I’m taken by surprise.

Without warning, he cocks his arm back, his hand extended far behind him before bringing it back down right on

my ass with a loud smack.

“Ow!” I yelp, my body thrusting forward, my mouth falling open in shock.

“I told you, you’re going to be punished.” He repeats the motion again and again, my ass stinging with the smacks that land on each cheek. Tears prick my eyes at the pain, but I also enjoy it. It’s a new sensation to me, pain mixing with pleasure, and it’s delicious.

“You like that, don’t you?” He runs two fingers down my crack. “Oh yes, you do,” He dips them inside me where I’m drenched. “Maybe there is a naughty girl inside you, begging to come out and play.” He teases my opening, sliding his fingers inside me again before rubbing my clit in a small circle.

“Any man ever tell you your hair makes a great leash?” He grabs my ponytail, slowly wrapping it around his wrist before tugging it back. “Are you sorry you disobeyed me, Presley?”

I want to say yes. I want to be rewarded, but I also want this to linger. I look at him in the mirror, slowly shaking my head. “No,” I say confidently which is instantly met with two more hard smacks, harder than before.

He grabs my throat, pulling me against him. “I’m going to ask you again and this time, I want to remind you...” He slides his hand down the front of me, toying with my clit again as he tightens his grip with his other hand. “How good I can make you feel if you let me.”

“Yes.” The word is practically inaudible as he continues to tease me.

“Good, because I’m hungry, baby, and the only thing I want to eat is your sweet little cunt so bend over and let me feel you come on my tongue while it’s buried deep inside you.”

“I—I’m sweaty,” I start to protest.

He pushes me down again with a throaty chuckle. “That’s the point.” Then he drops to his knees behind me as he pushes my legs further apart. He grips my ass, spreading me as he

leans in and runs his tongue right up my slit. He repeats the process, this time not stopping when he reaches my asshole. Instead, he swirls his tongue around it before dragging it slowly all the way up my spine.

This is a completely new sensation. I've never in my life felt comfortable being so exposed like this, let alone having a man's tongue exploring my most intimate parts from behind. It feels sexy and wild.

He doesn't waste time. He devours me, his tongue deep inside me, causing my legs to begin to tremble. I've never had a man eat me so thoroughly, so explicitly with such confidence.

I've only been with two men in the past, both of which were in college. Both of which left me severely lacking. Not only did I not finish with either guy, but one thought he was being the dominant, sexy alpha in the bedroom, but really he was just a selfish asshole who only wanted to be serviced. The other guy seemed lost, quite honestly, and couldn't go more than ten seconds without asking *does it feel good?*

I can feel my release building as Cyrus takes his time with me. He turns me around to face him, still on his knees. He reaches up, pulling my leggings all the way down my legs. He pulls off my shoes, tossing them aside; my leggings follow.

"Sit on my face," he commands as he adjusts himself to lie back on the belt.

I open my mouth to ask if he's sure, but he grabs my hand and yanks me down, helping me to a kneeling position. His hands are on my hips, gripping me tightly as he pulls me down to his mouth. I'm worried I'm going to crush his face, but he can't seem to get enough. His fingers dig into my flesh as my orgasm finally finds me.

"I—I—I" I can't even get the words out, I'm panting, shaking, my body ablaze with ecstasy. I barely recognize that he's standing me up after I come down from my release. He walks me toward the mirrored wall, his hands coming up to cup my breasts as he leans his lips down toward my ear.

“Look at you.” He plumps my breasts in his hands.

My ponytail has fallen to one side of my head, my cheeks flushed, my nipples hard. I barely recognize myself.

“I don’t want you to ever feel ashamed or self-conscious for one fucking second. You have the most mouthwatering, sexy body. All I want to do when I look at you is use you in every way possible.”

I feel his other hand slide down between us. He pulls his cock out again, stroking himself before pushing me forward slightly.

“Plant your hands,” he commands as he runs the tip of his dick between my ass cheeks.

“Ohhh, yes,” he groans the second he finds my entrance. “I promised myself I wouldn’t,” he moans, almost as if he’s talking to himself. He presses the tip against me, sliding it a few centimeters inside me.

“Please,” I beg.

His eyelids are so heavy, his lips parted slightly as he looks down between us. I can feel him teasing himself and me, sliding his cock against me but not entering me.

“So warm, so fucking wet.”

I’m on edge. I curl my fingers against the glass but there’s nothing to grip on to. This time when he slides against my entrance, I push back against him. He growls, grabbing my hip so hard I know there will be bruises tomorrow.

“Fuck!”

He spins me around again to face him. “On your knees, you little tease.” He grabs my shoulder, pressing me down to my knees. He’s gripping the base of his cock, his other hand coming to rest against the glass above my head.

His hand begins to pump up and down his rigid shaft, his head falling forward as his breaths become rapid. Veins bulge from his neck as he stares down at me, his pace growing erratic. I glance down at his cock. He wasn’t wrong; it has to

be nine inches at least and too thick for my fingers to fully wrap around it.

“Open your mouth,” he barks, stepping closer just as his eyes roll back in his head, a strangled groan erupting from his chest before he spills his release partly on my lips, partly dribbling down to my breasts.

He stares down at me, his chest heaving. “I—I’m sorry. Shit. Sorry.”

I want to tell him not to be, that it was exciting and hotter than anything I’ve ever experienced, but the regret on his face has already killed the mood.

Without another word, he tucks himself back into his shorts, stepping off through a doorway before returning with a washcloth. He bends down, cleaning me up before helping me to stand.

“There’s a full bathroom and shower over here.” He reaches down to grab my leggings that are still on the floor as he walks me toward the bathroom. “I’m sorry I don’t have any clean clothes for you to put on.” He reaches in to turn on the lights as I pull the tangled sports bra over my head and toss it next to my leggings. I expect him to follow me into the room, but he stays in the doorway.

“Are you not—” I thumb over my shoulder toward the shower.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “I’ll shower upstairs and meet you by the garage entrance to drive you home.”

I take my time in the large marble shower, allowing the steam to billow around me beneath the rainfall showerhead. I want to see the rest of this immaculate house, but tonight doesn’t feel like the right time.

Disappointment tightens my chest when the image of his face after he finished flashes through my brain. Before he even apologized, I could see the regret in his eyes. I wanted to ask him what he meant when he said he promised himself he wouldn’t.

Wouldn't what? Have sex with me? Allow himself to finish? Allow me to finish?

Maybe in his head, he justified teasing me but not allowing either of us to go all the way.

I close my eyes and push the thoughts from my mind, choosing to focus on how he made my body feel instead. I used to think sex was boring; I never understood people's obsession with it, but now... now I do and this wasn't even sex. Hell, the foreplay between us has been a hundred times hotter than even the hottest sex I've ever had.

I let myself stand under the water for a few more minutes before reaching up to shut it off, the glass completely fogged up. I open the glass door, reaching for a fresh, plush towel to wrap around my body.

"Even the towels are fancy," I mutter at how large and luxurious it feels against my body. That's when I notice a neatly folded pair of gray sweatpants and a black t-shirt on the counter.

I glance around, like Cyrus is hiding from me in the room, but it's still just me. I know those weren't there when I walked in here. I smile, reaching out and grabbing them as I bring them to my nose to inhale. They smell freshly laundered but with a hint of his cologne, probably from being in his closet.

I drop the towel and quickly slide them on my body, that giddy butterfly feeling taking over my belly. It's something so small but it shows me that maybe he does care about me in some small capacity or maybe he doesn't actually regret what happened between us tonight.

I quickly redo my bun that I'd fastened before my shower to keep my hair from getting wet, gather my dirty workout clothes, and slide on my tennis shoes that he must have also placed in here covertly while I showered.

I practically skip down the long hallway to the foyer, making the right turn toward the garage when I stop, the smile falling from my face when I see Wes standing by the back door with my coat in hand.

“Mr. Gates apologizes but something came up and he won’t be able to drive you home.”

“Oh, okay, no problem.” I smile, hoping it hides the disappointment I’m feeling.

Chapter 15

Cyrus

“Great write-up, Cyrus,” Ken says to me from across the boardroom. “I have to say, I—well, none of us actually—thought we’d ever see you teaching, let alone talking about it so fondly.” He laughs, looking over at his lawyer and the rest of his board that join in.

I look over at Nelson also joining in, laughing a little too hard. His expression quickly changes though when he makes eye contact with me.

“And why’s that, Ken? You can’t imagine that I have something of value to impart to the younger generations?”

“Oh, come on now, Cyrus, I’m just teasing you. Of course I think you have some value to add; I truly am impressed. This is the kind of stuff that people want to see. I had no idea you were so active in the Chicago Youth in Leadership organization and honestly, I think I speak for all of us when we say well done.”

I smile, a sense of relief weirdly washing over me. *When the hell did I start caring what these schmucks think about me?* Then I realize, it’s not that I care what they think about me; it’s that I feel a sense of pride that Presley’s efforts are paying off... She was right on the money.

“Well, as much as I’d like to take the credit here, it’s my publicist who encouraged me to do the interview. She thought it would not only benefit my image, but showcase my longstanding relationship with the University of Chicago. I know a few of you are alumni.” I gesture toward the people in

the room. “And for as much as I know most of you don’t respect me, I think we all are fond of the university, what they represent, and our time there.”

“Let knowledge grow from more to more, and so be human life enriched,” one of the members says the school motto.

“Agreed,” Ken replies, “and tell your publicist that it was a great move and if it’s just the beginning of your relationship with them, I’m sure they’ll do wonders for your career and reputation.”

My expression is a tight-lipped smile, guilt causing a burning sensation to bubble in my stomach, traveling up through my chest. I’ve felt it since the moment I jerked off and finished in Presley’s mouth and on her tits. It was one of the most erotic scenes I’ve ever experienced and it wasn’t even anything crazy, not compared to some of my past sexual escapades anyway. But seeing her sitting there, hands in her lap, those big eyes staring up at me like she was at my mercy pushed me over the edge; there was no way I could stop myself.

I don’t want to feel guilt. I think it’s probably the first time I ever have, apart from Nikki Frisk. That was guilt that stemmed from facts I wasn’t aware of, the aftereffect of the fling. But this, this is guilt over what I want, guilt because I know she deserves far better than me.

If it ever came out that she and I were fooling around, it would end her career with Wade Public Relations for sure. The meeting carries on around me and while I appear to be engaged, my mind is completely preoccupied with thoughts of her. The images from the other night are burned in my brain. The desires I have feel so all-consuming like no matter the risk, I know I’m going to take it.

The reality is, this situation won’t have to be forever, just until this deal goes through. I have no doubt we could keep things secret until then, and then once it’s out in the open, I’m sure I could convince Lisa that Presley still deserves her job at Wade, that it started after she was hired on there so

technically... *technically* I truly didn't have any ulterior motives when I suggested her for the job. And hell, even if it all came out before this deal is through, I'm Cyrus fucking Gates. I'll handle it.

"Thanks for your time, gentlemen. I think we can all confidently agree that things are moving quickly and in the right direction, and if I had to be optimistic, I'd say this deal will be wrapped up by the end of next quarter."

"Gentlemen." I stand and shake their hands as they exit the room.

"I guess I was wrong about the interview and Miss James?" Nelson says, hot on my heels as I walk back to my office.

"It would seem that way," I say as I unbutton my coat and walk around my desk.

"I don't mean to overstep boundaries, Cyrus, honestly. I just know how much work I've put into this deal and it could be the legacy of my career."

"You mean *we*. How much work we've put into this deal, all of us on the board at Gates Enterprises and our team of lawyers." I don't attempt to hide my annoyance. Nelson has worked for me for almost fifteen years and he's more than likely going to retire at Gates. I have no issue with that. He deserves it; he's been my right hand for over a decade, but something about him has changed in the last two years and it's driving me up the damn wall. He's like a lost puppy, following me around and always up my ass about every little thing I do. I want to remind him that not so long ago, he was the one trying to convince me to invite those party girls onto my yacht with him so that he could let loose. Maybe it's just something that has come with age, but I'll be damn glad when this deal is over and I can go back to not having him trying to pry his way into every detail of my life.

"Yes, yes, of course. I just mean that, well, you know I'll be retiring in the next few years and I'd like to have something like this to hang my career on when I'm done. It just means a

lot to me, Cyrus, the fact that you've trusted me to really run with this deal as much as you have. So—thank you.”

“Yeah, no problem,” I say, distracted by the physical copy of *The Chicago Booth Review* on my desk, open to my interview with a handwritten note next to it.

Thought you should have a copy. Meet for celebratory drinks tonight at The Waterhouse. Seven p.m. Don't be late.

It's not signed, but there's only one person it could be from. One person who without even signing their name causes a firework of excitement to explode in my chest, all feelings of doubt and regret instantly disappearing.

“Good news?” Nelson asks, craning his neck over my desk to attempt to see what has me smiling. I grab the note and slide it in my pocket.

“Just the interview,” I say, holding up the paper before taking a seat at my desk. “Shut the door on your way out,” I say to Nelson, who takes the hint and sheepishly walks out of my office.

I'VE THOUGHT OF NOTHING BUT OUR DRINK TONIGHT THE REST of the afternoon. I work until half past six, instructing Wes to drop me at The Waterhouse when I finally leave the office.

I feel giddy, a feeling I don't think I've ever experienced. I also can't get this damn smile off my face. But the moment I walk past the threshold of the bar and spot Presley, my excitement fizzles when I see who's sitting next to her... Forrest. Her eyes light up when she sees me, and she lifts her hand slightly to wave at me.

“Right on time.”

“Well, I was instructed pretty thoroughly not to be late. Forrest.” I reach my hand out to shake his.

“Good to know you *can* follow orders then.” She flashes me a flirty grin and I flash her a look that says *don't fucking*

push it.

“Thank you both for inviting me out and once again for the interview. It has been the most viewed interview the *Review* has ever done.”

“Well, it seems like we should toast to that,” I say as I nod toward Frank who’s already walking over with my tumbler of whiskey.

“To both of your hard work and your futures.” I smile, lifting my glass as they both do the same.

“I can only stay for one drink,” Forrest says apologetically toward me. “It’s my parents’ anniversary and me and my siblings are throwing them a surprise dinner at The Capital Grille. I already told Presley.”

“No worries at all. Sounds like a much more important celebration.” Relief washes over me as I catch Presley’s eye. If I’m reading her expression correctly, she’s hoping I’ll stick around after Forrest leaves and vice versa.

The three of us talk about their plans after school, how the football team did this year, and summer plans after graduation.

“Well,” Forrest says, looking at his phone. “I have to get going. Thanks again and I really am so sorry.”

“Not at all,” Presley says, reaching out to touch his forearm. “You were amazing in all this and there’s some work stuff I need to run by Mr. Gates anyway.”

My eyes are glued to where her hand is still resting on his arm.

“Great. Pres, I’ll call you?” he says questioningly.

“Sounds good.”

I wait till Forrest is clearly out of earshot. “Why aren’t you dating him again?” It’s a question I don’t want to hear an answer to, but it’s one I need to ask if I plan on pursuing anything with her. I don’t want her missing out on something with him if that’s what she wants.

She shrugs, taking a sip of her champagne cocktail. “Someone else I’m interested in.”

I study her eyes. They’re not shifting or nervous; they’re confident, looking right at me. I can’t hide the smile that threatens my lips.

“Oh yeah?” Tension hangs between us; it’s palpable, charged with desire. I haven’t had a flirty exchange like this since God knows when. I think I even feel warmth spread up my neck. *Am I blushing?*

“Well,” I hesitate, not wanting to ruin this perfect mood but wanting to be honest with where my head is right now. “I have a confession. I’ve felt a tremendous amount of guilt—since the other night in my gym.”

I study her expression, expecting to see disappointment, but she just listens as she sips her drink.

“Trust me, it was probably the best fucking orgasm I’ve had since I can remember so it’s not that I regret it; it’s just that, well—we both know the circumstances with us aren’t great and frankly, I’m not exactly the kind of man you should probably even be having these kinds of conversations with.”

“Since you’re being honest, I have a confession as well.”

Now my ears perk up. “Do tell.”

“You were right about me—that night in the limo after the gala. I am a good girl, always have been, but there’s a side of me, a naughty side I’ve always wanted to explore.” Her confidence wavers a touch, her cheeks flushing at her admission, but she continues on. “I’ve never wanted someone the way I do you. I’ve never felt that kind of excitement or sexual desire that I have with you.”

“So what are you saying, Presley?” The cocktail she’s drinking has certainly given her liquid courage, but I’m hoping to press her for more.

“That I—I want to explore that side of myself with you... more.”

Fuck me. My dick twitches, my balls already begging for release. An innocent young thing begging to let me show her how to unleash her naughty side? My fucking kryptonite.

“So just a sexual relationship? An exchange?” She nods her head. “Even though it doesn’t have the smallest chance of being anything more than that?”

“Yes.”

I think for a moment, savoring the smoky burn of the liquor I’m sipping on. “We shouldn’t. Not only am I your client, but I’m your professor, and as much as it pains me to acknowledge it, I’m far too old for you, sweetheart.”

“Those are all the things that excite me about it.”

“They should scare you. I’m not a nice guy, remember?”

She gives me that coy smile. “I’m not scared of you, Mr. Gates.”

A throaty chuckle rumbles through my chest. “You should be. Maybe you need a”—I lean in closer—“not so gentle reminder?” My eyes drop down to where her thighs squeeze together. I look over her shoulder to make sure nobody is within listening distance before I reach my hand out and place it at her knee. I slide my fingers beneath the edge of her skirt, letting them linger before I drag them up at a snail’s pace.

“Would you let me clear everyone out of here, baby? Just so I can indulge myself a little?” I tip her chin upward. “Would you let me sit your pretty little ass up on this bar and spread you wide open, devouring your sweet little pussy till you squirt on my face?”

She doesn’t respond but I can see her nervousness start to reveal itself, so I reach over and grab her hand, placing it directly on my hardening cock.

“Careful what you ask for, Miss James. I’m not the *take you home and make love to you* kind of guy. I’m the *take you home and fuck you till you can’t walk in ways you’ve never imagined and one more time for good measure* kind of guy.”

“It’s my birthday this weekend.”

“Really?” That is not the kind of response I was expecting to my threat.

“Mm-hmm. My twenty-fifth.”

“Guess I should get you a present then.”

She smiles, squeezing my cock a little tighter as she leans toward me like I’ve done to her so many times.

“All I want is for you to accept my offer.”

Our lips are almost touching. I want to kiss her, I’m so close. I smile, reaching down to remove her hand.

“I’ll certainly consider it, Miss James.” I give her a wink as I reach for her coat and nod to Frank to let him know we’re leaving and to put the drinks on my revolving tab. “But trust me, I’m not the kind of trouble you want to go looking for.”

Chapter 16

Presley

“What’s up with you?” Serenity squints one eye at me as we wait in line to place our coffee order.

“What do you mean?”

“You seem—different.”

“Vanilla almond milk latte, please. Small.” I hand my card to the barista and shrug at her comment. “Nothing’s changed. At least not that I can think of.”

I feel bad. I’m not exactly lying to her, but I’m certainly omitting the fact that there’s been some *major* developments between Cyrus and me. Oh, and the little fact that I propositioned him last night. My cheeks flush with embarrassment as I recall the way I was so shamelessly flirting with him. The cocktail I had with Forrest before Cyrus arrived went straight to my head... as did the celebratory shot of tequila Forrest insisted we take. By the time the second cocktail was in me, I was feeling pretty damn confident to offer up such a bold idea.

“You’re blushing.” She points at me after placing her coffee order. “See, this is what I mean... there’s something going on in that head of yours.”

“Uh...” My mouth hangs open like a fish and I truly have nothing to say.

“Oh, oh! Is it Forrest? Did you guys?” She wriggles her eyebrows up and down at me.

“No, we did not. We did have a celebratory cocktail and shot the other night though, after the piece he did on Mr. Gates went live.”

“A shot, ohhhh.” She elbows me teasingly. “Someone’s getting wild. You guys hanging out again?”

I shrug again. “I’m not sure, no plans yet. He was pretty flirty with me at the bar and he told me to call him before he left.”

“He left you there?” Her excitement morphs into annoyance.

“Oh, yeah, he had to go to his parents’ surprise anniversary party that he was throwing with his siblings. I knew before we met up that he couldn’t stay long. It was still a good time.”

There’s nothing I want to do more right now than pull Serenity into a quiet corner and share all the dirty little secrets between Cyrus and me like we’re little schoolgirls again. But I know that he would be upset if I shared those intimate details and truthfully, a big part of me wants to keep them for myself for as long as I can... maybe forever. I’ve never been the girl who’s had secrets, fun little stories that I could think about when I’m all alone. Something about it feels so... thrilling.

“What about you? How are things going with Jarrod? Aren’t you guys about to celebrate two years soon?”

The barista calls our names and we grab our coffees before heading over to a table by the windows.

“We are. Things are going great. We’ve both been so busy though, it just feels like we haven’t been spending as much time together. Kind of bums me out.”

“Well, the good thing is you’re in your final semester of grad school and he’s about to be matched for his residency, right?”

She nods, taking a sip of her coffee. “That’s been weighing on me too actually.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, odds are, he won’t be matched here in Chicago. I mean, he could be but you’re rarely matched to the one you want. I just—I’m happy to go wherever he goes. My job can be fully remote, but I’ll miss you.” Her mouth droops into a frown.

“Oh, Serenity.” I reach out and grab her hand. “I’d miss you too, so much, but we don’t know where he’ll end up just yet. Besides, I can fly to you, you fly to me. Nothing is going to change between us.”

“I know, it just sucks. You and I have been together at least every other day for the last six years. It’s the end of an era.” She sighs dramatically and it makes us both giggle.

“Seems like we should live it up then, huh?”

“What’d you have in mind, miss birthday girl? You ready to have some fun this weekend?”

“So ready! I’m thinking we actually go out to a club for once. I think the last time we did that was like three years ago, maybe? You were still single, remember? Because that weird guy in the banana costume wouldn’t leave you alone all night.” We burst into another fit of giggles as we try to piece together that night.

“I’m so down. Let’s get ready at your place since Jarrod will be on call. Any ideas on where you want to eat?”

“Sushi-san,” we both say in unison, referring to our favorite go-to sushi restaurant.

“Oh shit, we better leave now or we’re going to be late to class.” Serenity hops out of her chair and grabs her bag as I do the same. Little butterflies are already forming in my stomach at the thought of seeing *him* again.

ALL THROUGH THE LECTURE I FEEL LIKE I’M TRYING TO WALK a fine line between acting normal and casually trying to catch Cyrus’ gaze to toss him a flirty smile. But the reality is, I feel like I’m either looking embarrassed, my eyes darting weirdly

around the room to avoid his gaze, and then overcompensating by staring way too hard at my screen like I'm trying to shoot lasers out of my eyes. By the end of the class, I'm relieved.

“You ladies have any weekend plans?”

I turn to see Cyrus standing by his desk, his coat casually over his arm. Moments like this melt me. His hair is no longer neatly combed into place after running his hands through it a few times in class. His shirtsleeves are rolled up to expose his tanned forearms. He looks mussed and sexy, making me want to crawl into his lap.

“We do actually. It's Presley's twenty-fifth so we're going to go out, celebrate, and hopefully get into some trouble.”

My eyes dart to his at her mention of trouble, but his expression doesn't change.

“Happy birthday, Miss James.” He nods at me and I smile back.

“Thank you.” And because I forget for one second that Serenity is standing there with us, I ask, “What about you?” I can see it takes him a little by surprise as well.

“No plans. Unless you count working late.”

“Really?” Serenity frowns. “I thought when you were rich and owned the company, you could take more time off.”

He laughs. “Yeah, that's what I thought too. You ladies have a safe and fun weekend. Enjoy your birthday.” He exits the classroom and Serenity turns back toward me.

“What, does he beat you at work or something? You act like you're still scared of him.”

“He's intimidating,” I say confidently because that's the damn truth. “Enough about him. Let's go shopping for this weekend. I am in desperate need of something cute to wear.”

I feel my pocket buzz on the way out of the building. It's a text from Cyrus.

Cyrus: *I do hope you have fun tonight. Don't forget to behave.*

I have a sudden urge to tease him... maybe incentivize him to punish me later or accept my offer.

Me: *Hmm... I'll think about it.*

He responds intently with the devil emoji again, only this time it's accompanied by a hand. I slide the phone back into my pocket, a smile glued to my face.

We spend the afternoon going from store to store until I finally find *the dress*. It's way sexier than anything I've ever even considered wearing.

"It's stunning. You have to," Serenity encourages me as I spin around in the dressing room to look at the back.

It's cherry red with a deep V front. The straps grow thinner as they cross over the shoulders and crisscross over my exposed back. It's also short and tight.

"Is it too much?"

"Yes, and that's exactly the point. You will be breaking necks in that thing. Jaws will be on the floor. Men will be selling their right arm at the chance to even speak to you."

"You're ridiculous." I laugh as I do another little spin in the dress. I kind of want to feel sexy and uninhibited tonight, not because I want to attract other men, but because I want to own my sexuality, especially when so much is on the line with Cyrus. I'm tired of being afraid and scared of the things I want... of the fantasies I crave.

"I'm going to do it." I let out a confident sigh, change back into my clothes, and march up to the sales counter to buy it.

By the time we make it back to my apartment, it's already time to start getting ready. The lack of response to Cyrus' last text has clearly left him bothered. He sends me another.

"You shower first," I tell Serenity, my phone alerting me to his message.

Cyrus: *What are you wearing tonight?*

I slide the bag off the dress and hang it on my closet to take a photo to send him.

Cyrus: *Send another... wearing it.*

I take my time getting ready, curling my hair and doing a full face of makeup, something I rarely do.

“Daaaaamn!” Serenity whistles as I do a little dance in place once I have on my dress with sky-high heels. “I’d take you home.”

“Please, you look just as hot and you have the boobs to make it look even sexier.” I nod toward her cleavage that’s already spilling out of the top of her dress. She leans over, pushing her breasts up a little more.

“You gotta give the people what they want.” She smiles. “I’m just finishing up my lips. Give me two minutes, then we can head out.”

I wait for her to head back into the bathroom before snapping another photo in the floor-length mirror in my bedroom. I jut one hip slightly forward, my leg extended so it looks a mile long while I give my best pouty face. I feel ridiculous. Before I can talk myself out of it, I send it to Cyrus.

Cyrus: *Fuck. How do you even wear panties under that thing?*

Me: *Gotta run!*

I giggle as I toss my phone into my clutch just as Serenity exits the bathroom.

“Let’s go party!” We head downstairs to our waiting Uber and off to dinner.

I have no idea how many hours have passed since dinner, but I’m having the time of my life. Serenity gives me her best model walk across the dance floor, a martini in each hand as she reaches our high-top table.

“I thought my feet would be killing me by now, but I don’t feel anything,” I shout in her ear over the music.

“Thanks to all these drinks.” She laughs, handing me another as we clink our glasses together.

We dance, we laugh so hard I'm afraid I might pee, then drink and dance some more. This is exactly the kind of night I needed.

"What time is it even?" I ask Serenity as I reach into my clutch for my phone.

"Who cares?" She laughs, dancing in her seat.

I notice there are two messages from Cyrus. I completely forgot that I had left him hanging again earlier.

Cyrus: *You've gotta be fucking kidding me.*

I look at the previous text to remember what he's referring to. The question about how I even fit panties under my dress.

Cyrus: *If you think that last spanking hurt, it will feel like a massage compared to what's coming next.*

My stomach coils with excitement. "I have to go to the restroom."

Serenity looks over her shoulder to where they are, then back at our fresh drinks. "You go. I'll stay here to watch our drinks."

I slide off the stool and walk back to where there's surprisingly no line. I step into the restroom and look under the two stalls. I'm all alone. I reach over quickly and lock the door. Then I stand in front of the mirror, backing up so that you can almost see my full body. I hold the camera up higher, sliding my dress up over my hips to reveal my sheer red thong and snap a picture, sending it back to him. He responds immediately.

Cyrus: *I bet you taste like a fucking dream right now. Matching bra?*

Me: *No... no bra.*

Cyrus: *Prove it.*

I slide the straps of my dress to the sides of my shoulders, my bare breasts pressed together as I snap another picture and send it.

Cyrus: *Perfect. All they're missing is my cum on them.*

Tingles shoot through me at the thought.

Cyrus: *Thanks for the pictures. Be safe and get home soon. Hope you've had fun.*

I'm not ready to end the conversation.

Me: *What are you doing for the rest of the night?*

Cyrus: *I'm going to use your pictures, then take my tired ass to bed.*

Me: *Use my pictures?*

I'm pretty damn sure I know what he means, even after several drinks, but I want him to say it. A few seconds later, a picture comes through... His pants are undone, his massive cock at full mast with his hand wrapped around it.

"Holy shit!" I clamp my hand over my mouth and glance around, forgetting that I'm all alone.

Me: *Why, when you could have the real thing?*

Cyrus: *Because the way I'm feeling tonight, I'd break you in half. Good night. Behave and get home... NOW.*

I straighten out my dress and walk back to the table, my legs wobbly with adrenaline.

"I'm exhausted." Serenity yawns.

"Me too," I agree, sitting back down. "Ready to head home?"

"Very."

We pay our tab and take an Uber back to my place where all I want to do is crawl into bed and dream about Cyrus saying yes.

Chapter 17

Cyrus

I pace the floor of my office, my mind spinning. I can't decide if it's a healthy dose of fear or paranoia at this point. In the moment, sending that picture to Presley was hot and exciting. Believe it or not, it's the first and most likely last time in my life I've ever sent a "dick pic" to anyone.

There have been too many threats, too many uneasy feelings lately for me to ignore them. Between the Nikki Frisk situation which I stupidly fell for, then Peter threatening me about keeping my own house in order, to randomly meeting Presley at The Waterhouse right before this deal goes through...

"Sir, Miss James is here for your ten o'clock."

Abigail's voice interrupts my thoughts before they can spiral too much out of control. I take in a deep breath, exhaling it slowly as I try to rationalize what I'm feeling. The last thing I want to be true, is for Presley to be some sort of corporate spy or another setup by Peter.

"Send her in."

"Afternoon, sir," she says with a pleasant tone to her voice as she steps into my office, closing the door behind her. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, thanks for making the trip to my office." I don't take a seat; neither does she. "Why were you at The Waterhouse?" I launch right into it.

"What?" Her brow furrows.

“The night we first met. Why were you there? I’ve never seen you there, in all my years of going.”

“I was just grabbing a drink. Why? What’s this about?”

“Did you purposely go there? To meet me? Did you know that I went there often?”

Her confusion deepens. “What? No. I just said I went there to grab a drink. I think I ordered French fries too. It had started to rain and I forgot my umbrella so I just ducked in to stay dry. Seriously, what’s this about?”

I stare at her and I believe her. Not just because it’s clear that she is completely caught off guard and has no idea what I’m insinuating, but because I trust her. I shake my head in embarrassment, rubbing my forehead with my fingers.

“Sorry, I just—I let my brain get tangled around itself and fall down a rabbit hole of paranoia.”

“So your fear was that I sought you out that night to do what?”

“I don’t know honestly. I can’t help but feel like Peter made Nikki Frisk seduce me, make me believe she was getting divorced so he could smear my reputation a little more right before this big deal, and then he threatened me at the gala.”

“He threatened you?” She takes a step toward me. “How?”

“Well, maybe it wasn’t a threat, but it seemed like one. Made mention of ‘my house’ being in disorder and that it might cause Meridian to look for a new buyer. It’s bullshit but it just made my mind spin on all kinds of ridiculous what-if scenarios. I know how these people operate, Presley. I mean it when I say they’re fucking snakes.”

“I don’t doubt that, but I can honestly say I’m not trying to trick you at all. Did what we talked about at drinks the other night bring this on? My”—she looks down at her feet sheepishly—“offer.”

I step closer to her, reaching out to tilt her head back up so I can see her eyes. “Yes. I’ve thought of pretty much nothing besides what you offered me and the photos you sent me.”

Her hands come up to cover her face and it makes me laugh. “Oh, God,” she groans. “I had momentarily forgot about that.”

“Don’t be ashamed. I’m the one who should be. Nobody wants to see a man’s dick in their text, let alone an unsolicited one. You,” I say, reaching to brush a tendril of her hair behind her ear, “looked absolutely beautiful that night. Sexy as hell too, but you just looked radiant, happy. Did you have a good birthday?”

“I did. It was fun, but I think those days are over for me.” She laughs. “I felt awful the next day.” She reaches down and intertwines our fingers together. “I understand why you were uneasy and have questions, but to put your mind at ease about all of this, remember that you came to me about this job with Wade. I never would have gotten the job without that. I never would have even known to apply. I can promise you, our meeting right before finding out you were my professor was a total coincidence.”

I can’t help but smile at that thought. “A lovely one.” She returns the smile, but it quickly falls from her face.

“Actually, speaking of weird things...” She steps away, looking off like she’s remembering something. “I meant to ask you about this. I’ve just been so focused on the interview and school and everything else I completely forgot, but the other week when I went back to work after class, Peter Frisk was waiting for me outside the building.”

“What?” That gets my attention. “What do you mean, waiting for you?”

“Yeah, he said he was waiting for me. I offered for him to come inside and talk in my office, but he wouldn’t.”

My hands curl into fists at my sides. The thought of that piece of shit even speaking to Presley again, let alone in her office, makes my stomach curl. I try to tamp down my emotions, uncurling my fingers slowly as I try not to let my emotions take over.

“He gave me his card and offered me a job—I think?”

“A job? I don’t understand.”

“I mentioned that if he needed a publicist—oh, because he said he could use my services or skills or something like that—he’d need to set up a meeting with Lisa because I don’t hire on new clients. He said that I was confused, that he was extending an offer for me to work exclusively for him.”

I don’t know if I want to know the answer to the question I’m about to ask, but I know I have to ask it. I try to remain as calm as possible.

“And are you considering it?”

“God, no!” She gasps, her hand coming up to her chest. “First of all, my allegiance lies with you and Lisa. I would never leave a job like that just because he’s offering more money. Second, he gives me the creeps.”

“More money?”

“Yeah, he said he’d pay three times what I’m making now.”

Now I know this is just some sick, fucked-up game by him. I don’t know why, but I know he wants Presley in his pocket and he’ll do anything to get her there. Okay, I know why; it’s to fuck me over somehow, but I can’t seem to figure out his game yet. An image of the way he kissed her hand that night at the gala while he looked in her eyes and warned her to watch out for me has my blood boiling. That thought pushes me over the edge.

I take two large steps to close the distance between us, backing her against my desk as I snake my hand up around the back of her neck, the other resting on her waist.

“You’re mine.” The words just come out, low and deep. I’m not even sure in what capacity I mean them, but it doesn’t stop me from continuing on with the sentiment. “You work for me. You belong to me. You understand me?”

She’s startled, her eyes wide as she nods her head yes. I lean in closer. I can smell the warmth of her perfume, the sweet notes making me want to bury my nose in her hair.

“Yes”—her eyes grow heavy—“I’m yours.”

I can’t fight the urge any longer. The desire to taste her plump lips has been burning inside me for weeks, months. I close the distance, pressing my mouth against hers softly. Her lips begin to move against mine as I slide her up onto the desk. Her thighs spread as I step between them to deepen the kiss. My hands reach up to tangle in her hair so I can tilt her head, my tongue snaking past her lips and mingling with hers.

She moans, pressing her thighs against me as her hands reach out to clutch my chest. I can’t get enough of her, her taste, her scent, her warmth.

“Why did I ever deny myself?” I mutter, finally breaking the kiss for just a moment before pulling her back to me. My cock feels like it’s itching to explode already, just from the taste of her lips on mine. I’ve never been so turned on from just a kiss before. The buildup to it has been worth it all.

Finally, I pull back. Her lips are swollen, her breathing rapid as her fingers clutch my shirt.

“Have you ever had a man tell you in explicit detail the things he wants to do to you?”

“No.”

I brush her hair away from her face as I contemplate how I want to proceed. “I’ve thought long and hard about your offer, and I want you to know one thing first. You didn’t tease me into this agreement. Your flirty and downright naughty texts you sent me were very much appreciated, but don’t think for one second that you have the upper hand with me because you don’t. I’m in control here.”

“Okay.” Her big eyes stare at me like she’s hanging on every word I’m saying. The innocent look in her eyes right now is what always does me in, like she’s just waiting for me to do whatever I want to her.

“If you knew the thoughts I have when I look at you.” My words trail off as I lean back in to plant a whisper of a kiss against her lips.

“Like what?”

I chuckle. “Like every time I look at your ass”—I lean in and kiss her again—“touch it”—another kiss—“spank it”—and another. “I picture biting it, licking it, bruising it, coming on it—fucking it.”

Her eyes grow wide. “Won’t that hurt?”

“Mm-hmm. Probably, but the pain would give way to pleasure. It’s not an *on a whim* type of thing—don’t worry—it’s something you work up to. Does that excite you, Presley?”

Her eyes dart away from mine, her teeth gnawing that bottom lip again. I reach up and place my hand around her neck, my thumb coming to rest beneath her chin.

“Look at me.” She obeys. “I know that excites you.” I lean into her, gently running my tongue up her neck as she releases a slight gasp. “I know that if I slipped my fingers into your panties right now, you’d be soaked. All I have to do is”—I bring my lips to her ear—“whisper something naughty in your ear, flick your earlobe with my tongue”—I bite down on her earlobe softly—“and your pussy will throb for me.”

Her hands grip my biceps, her nails digging into my flesh through my shirt. I pull back to watch her; her eyes are closed, her cheeks flush.

“Look at me, sweetheart.” Her eyes flutter open. “I will gladly give you every single fantasy you have and some you don’t even realize yet. I’ll indulge every kinky idea you want to explore, but there are some rules we need to follow. I’m the only person you derive pleasure from. I’m in complete control of your pleasure too, so that means no toys, no fingers... unless I give you permission. Also, this stays between us and only us, not even Serenity. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she says quickly.

“One other request.” I slide my hand up her thigh, beneath her skirt. “I don’t want you to hold back with me. I want you to be the filthiest”—I pull her panties to the side as I begin to tease her—“little slut you want to be with me. There’s zero judgment.” Her lips part, her thighs falling open a little wider

as I begin to leisurely pump a finger in and out of her. “Can you do that for daddy?”

“Ye—ye,” her voice hitches, unable to even finish the words.

“Good girl.” I continue to pleasure her, crooking my finger inside her. “You look like you want to come?”

“Please.” She’s panting, begging.

“Are you sure you want to be a bad girl, Presley? Are you sure you can handle being my little toy, fulfilling all my fantasies?” I continue my pace, slow enough that I know she needs more, fast enough I’m keeping her just on edge. “I won’t go easy on you, baby. If I want to fuck you ten times a day, I’m going to. Do you understand me? If I want you crawling around my office on your hands and knees with a collar on, you will. I will use you for my pleasure.”

“Yes, yes,” she groans, “please.” She begs again for release.

“Kiss me.” I place my thumb against her clit as she throws her arms around my neck. Her kiss is heated, hungry. I feel her tighten around me, and her thighs begin to shake as she breaks the kiss, coming on my fingers.

“Kissing you”—I pull my finger from her, bringing it to my mouth to lick—“makes me want to fuck you.” My cock strains so hard against my pants as I savor her.

I know I’m fully operating on lust right now, but I can’t wait. I reach down, unzipping my pants and pulling my cock free. I reach beneath her skirt, pushing her panties to the side and lining the head of my cock up at her entrance.

“Lean back on your hands.”

I’m right there, the tip slowly starting to disappear into her wet, hot heat when there’s a loud knock on my office door.

“You gotta be fucking kidding me,” I groan.

“Cyrus, I need a minute, please.” Of course it’s Nelson.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a second before looking up to see a startled Presley. She sits up, attempting to slide off my desk, but I grab her hips to still her.

“Don’t,” I say before turning to look over my shoulder toward the door, then back at her. I contemplate just ignoring him and taking her on my desk, but the reality is, I want to savor her the first time. I want to take my time getting her ready. I reach beneath her skirt, grabbing her panties and sliding them down her thighs before balling them up and shoving them in my pocket. I help her down and we both silently right ourselves.

“Do I look okay?” she whispers and it makes me smile.

“You look fucking delicious.” I reach out and grab her, shoving my hand into her hair as I take her mouth a little more forcefully than I intended. “Sorry,” I pant, stepping back as my cock reminds me to cut it out.

“I mean, do I look like I was just—”

“Like you just came on my desk? I mean, a little. I’m sorry, baby, but you definitely look pleased.”

She giggles, then clamps her hand over her mouth. “Okay.” She lets out a shaky breath and straightens out her dress, running her hands through her hair before grabbing her bag. “I can do this.”

“I’m going to sit behind my desk”—I point down to my raging erection—“you walk out and let Nelson know I can see him.”

I want to reach out and kiss her again, but I know that is not the right move now. She walks to the door, her hand on the knob.

“Presley?”

“Hmm?” She turns back around to look at me.

“I’ll see you tonight.” I don’t give her specifics, but she smiles, then opens the door as I take a seat behind my desk.

“What can I do for you, Nelson?” I type on my laptop, hoping to appear busy and annoyed.

“I—” He glances over his shoulder, then shuts the door. “I’m sorry to interrupt unexpectedly but—” He wrings his hands and it actually does annoy me.

When did this man become so weaselly?

“What, Nelson?”

“Well, you two were in here for some time and I asked Abigail how much longer your meeting would be, and she said that it wasn’t even on your calendar.”

“And what business is it of yours?” Before he can even answer, I cut him off. “You know, Nelson, I’m getting a little tired of your snooping and overstepping. You’ve done a damn good job of letting me know that you don’t approve of Miss James as my publicist, and you’ve also made it abundantly clear that you don’t trust me with her. You seem to be confident that I’m going to screw the pooch on this Meridian deal even though the last meeting we had—hell, the last few meetings we’ve had with them—have proven otherwise. Ken even mentioned that the deal should be wrapped up by next end of quarter. So, all that to say, what the fuck is going on with you and what are you *really* worried about here?”

Nelson squares his shoulders. His full cheeks are puffed out along with his chest. “Cyrus, is there something going on between you and that young girl or not?” He looks at me over the rim of his glasses, his signature move when he’s trying to be serious or maybe it’s intimidating.

“Tell you what, Nelson.” I toss the pen I was fiddling with in my hand and stand up. “Why don’t you focus on this deal and not on Miss James. She doesn’t concern you.”

“So you won’t just come out and say it then, huh?” He shakes his head at me, lifting his finger to point it toward me. “Is she even a publicist, Cyrus, or just another one of your whor—”

“Enough!” I shout as I slam my fists down onto the top of my desk, pain radiating up both of my arms, but I’m too angry to notice. Rage burns in my chest at the way he was about to refer to her.

His face goes from red with anger to white with shock in a flash.

“I’m only going to say this one more motherfucking time to you,” I say through gritted teeth. “Turn around and walk out of my office before you regret it. Don’t ever fucking mention Miss James’ name again and for God’s sake, trust me to handle this deal, this company, and my own goddamn personal affairs.”

He doesn’t make another peep; he just spins on his heel and waddles out of my office just as Abigail peeks her head around the door.

“Everything okay, sir?”

“Fine, Abigail.” I give her a tight-lipped smile before sitting back down in my chair. “Just Nelson,” I groan as I drag my hands over my face in frustration as she reaches inside and closes the door for me.

That feeling is back in my stomach, the one that’s telling me there’s something going on right under my nose, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. I reach my hand into my pocket, pulling out Presley’s thong and bringing it to my nose. I inhale, knowing I full well look like a creep. My jaw clenches, my mouth watering.

For the rest of the day, all I can think about is seeing her. The second I finish with my meetings, I head downstairs, instructing Wes to head to her apartment. I don’t even call or text her to make sure she’s home.

The car is barely stopped before I’m opening the door and stepping out onto the sidewalk. “I’ll text you later,” I say to Wes.

I’m about to hit her buzzer when an older lady steps out of the building and holds the door for me to enter. I take the stairs two at a time. I knock on her door rapidly, holding my breath till I hear the click of the lock being undone and the turn of the handle.

Chapter 18

Presley

“Hi.” I can’t keep the ridiculous smile off my face when I open the door and see him standing there.

“Hi.” He smiles back.

“You want to co—” I don’t even get to finish the statement before he’s stepping over the threshold, his arm snaking around my back as he pulls me toward him. His lips are on mine in seconds, his tongue already demanding entrance to my mouth.

“No talking,” he says breathlessly as he kicks the door closed behind him.

I pull at his coat, sliding it down his arms as he shrugs it onto the floor. His hands are in my hair, then they’re dropping down to my blouse where he grabs the lapels and pulls it apart, buttons scattering over the hardwood floor.

“I’ll buy you ten more.” His tongue is back in my mouth, massaging mine as he walks us backward. He hikes my skirt up, picking me up beneath my ass to wrap my legs around his hips. He presses me against the wall, his erection grinding against my still bare center.

“Did you—” He reaches down to feel for my panties, a devious grin taking over his lips when he feels me. “Good girl, keeping it ready for me.” He toys with me, teasing my clit with his thumb while he fucks my mouth with his tongue. Long, slow kisses that grow deeper, harder.

I unbutton his shirt, pulling my mouth away to pepper his neck and chest.

“Ohhh,” he groans at the contact, his hands reaching up to grab my wrists. He yanks them over my head, pinning me to the wall. “I want to take my time with you. I’ve been so tense since our meeting that I’m afraid if I don’t slow down, I’ll fuck you straight through this wall. I want to lick, kiss, and bite every fucking square inch of your tight little body, and then I want to spend the night fucking you into a coma.” He releases my hands, walking us down the hallway with me still in his arms. “Bedroom?”

“Straight ahead.” He slides me gently down the front of his body once we’re in the room. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out several condoms, tossing them onto the nightstand.

“Came prepared.” He winks, reaching up to loosen his tie before tossing it onto the bed.

“That’s a lot of preparedness.” I look at the pile of gold foil packets.

“Well, I was a Boy Scout when I was young.” He steps toward me, slowly removing my blouse the rest of the way. It glides down my arms, fluttering to the floor. “I promise, I won’t give you more than you can handle... the first time.”

My head lulls back as he runs his lips over my collarbones, dragging them to my breasts as he reaches around to remove my bra. He spins me so my back is facing the bed, then proceeds to undress the rest of me.

“Lie back on the bed.” He nods while he removes his shirt, then reaches down to remove his shoes and socks. It’s now, while he undoes his belt and starts to slide his pants down his thighs, that I’m realizing he’s seen me naked, but this is the first time I get to enjoy him. I’m propped up on my elbows.

“You’re staring.” He smirks, his hand wrapped around the shaft of his cock as he slowly slides it up and down.

“You’re sexy.” I shrug, almost embarrassed at giving him the compliment.

“I’m glad you think so.” My eyes drop down to where a bead of precum lingers on his tip. “Do you want a taste, baby?”

I nod, maneuvering up to my hands and knees as I crawl to the edge of the bed. He positions himself at my mouth. I wrap my lips around him.

“Fuck, yessss,” he hisses, his head falling back as he begins to move his hips in time with the movement of my head. We work together, in sync. I look up at him; his eyes are dark and glassy as he stares down his body at me. His mouth hangs open; he’s panting; his eyelids begin to flutter, and then without warning, he steps back.

“Sorry, I don’t want to come yet.” He takes a few steps away, running his hands through his hair, his cock bouncing with the movement. My eyes fall to the round globes of his ass, so taut, his thighs thick. This man is a god among men.

“My turn.” He marches over to me, pushing me back and grabbing my ankles to pull me to the edge of the bed as he drops to his knees and leans in to devour me. He swirls his tongue around my clit, then slides it inside me, spreading my thighs apart with his broad shoulders. My hands are in his hair; I know I’m tugging but I can’t control myself. My body shakes and quivers, my back arching off the bed as a garbled groan that doesn’t even sound like me echoes through the room as I explode on his tongue.

“Fuck me, I could eat your pussy for hours.” He drags his tongue up my belly, between my breasts, stopping to circle my nipples. He nips, biting down hard till I yelp.

“Ouch!” He smiles up at me, sucking the nipple into his mouth, then biting down again.

“Maybe another way I can push you when you’re being obstinate, Miss James.”

“Biting me?”

He crawls up my body, running his lips along my neck. “Mmm, maybe. Does it turn you on?”

“Yes.” My head falls to the side.

“What else turns you on, Miss James? What other avenues of your sexuality do you want to explore?” His fingertips trail back down my body, between my breasts, till he reaches my slit. He slides two fingers in this time.

“I—uh...” I struggle to focus as he slides his fingers in and out of me. “I haven’t experienced much.”

“No? How many men have you been with?”

“T—two.” I arch my back again, the tingling starting to build in my body.

“Really? And did they make you come?”

I shake my head no, not able to answer as goosebumps prick my skin, a thin sheen of sweat breaking out as well.

“That’s a shame.” He crooks his fingers, pressing the heel of his other hand down against my lower belly as his thumb swirls around my clit.

“Oh, oh, stop.” I clutch the sheets, a sensation I’ve never felt before taking over my body.

“Why, sweetheart?” He doesn’t stop.

“I think I need to pee,” I say, half-embarrassed but not as embarrassed as I’ll be if I actually pee the bed with him in it.

He chuckles. “You don’t need to pee, baby; that’s your orgasm. Trust me. Just relax and let it take over; don’t be embarrassed by what’s about to happen.”

“What’s about to ha—” He presses his hand down harder as he quickens his pace. My entire body tenses as my legs begin to shake and a stream of liquid shoots out of me as I fall apart. I’m in shock. I refuse to look down at what just happened, but I also can’t deny that it was the most intense orgasm I’ve ever experienced.

“That’s what was about to happen and that was hot as fuck so don’t be ashamed.”

“Did I? Was that?” I can’t even bring myself to say it.

“You squirted, sweetheart.” He winks at me, sitting up and walking to the bathroom to come back with a towel a second

later.

“I understand,” he says, positioning himself over me after cleaning me off, “that there’s a lot you’ve never experienced.” He places his cock at my entrance, reaching my hands over my head. “I want to explore all of it with you.” He pushes against me, my hips coming off the bed a little as he slowly enters me just an inch. “If you want me to just have free rein over your body, to explore and use you in any way I see fit, just tell me, baby.”

I wince as he slides out of me, then back in even further.

“I know it hurts, baby, but daddy needs to fuck you now. I can’t hold back any longer.” He pulls back again and this time, he slides in deeper and harder.

It hurts but the pleasure is building, taking over, mingling with the pain and bringing my body to life.

“Is that what you want? You want me to use you?” His pace builds as he slides in and out of me harder and deeper, but still not to the hilt.

“Yes,” I groan, my fingers wrapping around his hand that pins them to the pillow above me.

“I can do that for you.” His head falls forward, his hair tickling my face as his breath grows labored. He grunts with each thrust. “Ohhh, fuuuck, I’m so close, baby.”

Just hearing his words, my body is already so primed I feel myself start to come again. I squeeze my thighs around his hips, lifting mine in rhythm with his thrusts.

He releases my hands, pressing his palm down beneath me so that he’s hovering over me. His free hand wraps around my throat to use as leverage, pulling me down onto his cock harder. Seconds later he groans as his head falls back. His hips stutter, finally stilling as he blinks rapidly.

“Shit. I think I almost blacked out.” He leans down, kissing me before slowly pulling out of me. “Are you okay?” His breath comes out in warm puffs against my neck as he wraps his arm and leg around me.

“Yes, so good.” The moment I come down from my third... fourth orgasm? I’ve lost count today. My eyes grow heavy, my body begging for sleep already even though it can barely be past seven.

“Are you hungry?”

I turn my face to his. “Very.”

“Let’s get you fed.” His hand rests on my belly. “You’re going to need your strength for round two.”

“Round two?” My eyebrows shoot upward.

“You didn’t think that was it, did you?” He leans in to kiss me, biting my bottom lip softly. “I’m just getting started with you, baby. I’m a very greedy man and I intend to be a glutton tonight.”

We order takeout, eating at my kitchen island since I don’t have a dining table. It feels easy, natural even for us to talk and share food like we’ve been doing this for years. I wear his button-down and he’s in his boxer briefs. We talk about inane things, school, what he was like in school, even touching on his football career in college. I want to bring up the topic of his father, but it doesn’t feel like the right time.

I can see his eyes growing hungry... not for food and soon, he has me spread out on the kitchen counter as he pleasures me with his tongue for a few more orgasms. We don’t make it to the bedroom for round two. I ride him on the couch, and then he bends me over the back of it. By the time we’re finished, it’s nearing midnight.

“I need to text Wes,” he says, standing up to find his phone in his coat pocket.

“You can sleep here.” I try not to sound hopeful, but it’s no use. His eyes drift from his phone to me. He tosses it back onto the coat and pulls me to stand up.

“It’s not like that, baby girl; you know that.” He tucks my hair behind both ears and plants a kiss on my forehead, a moment so intimate and endearing it feels out of place for this conversation.

I don't press the issue. Instead, I follow him back to the bedroom where he gets dressed and I wrap myself in my fuzzy robe. I walk him to the door and he pulls me in for one last kiss that has my toes curling. I try to lose myself in the feeling, pushing aside the ache in my chest that I know is the first warning sign.

Chapter 19

Cyrus

I can't hide the spring in my step this morning or the fact that my eyes keep drifting toward Presley. I feel like I slept for fifteen hours and just got back from a month-long vacation.

"Kira, give us your take on the matter." I gesture toward one of my students who has raised her hand in response to a question I posed to the class. I sit back, crossing my arms and nodding my head, hoping it conveys that I'm listening because I'm distracted by the way Forrest keeps leaning into Presley's shoulder to whisper something to her.

My stomach curdles, a burning sensation starting to climb its way up my chest when I see her giggle and shake her head at him. I hate this feeling. I know that this is what I should want for her, to find a young man who makes her truly happy, not just satisfies some latent sexual fantasy that she's failed to get out of her system.

I turn my attention back to Kira as she finishes speaking. "Several good points there, Kira. Anyone else have anything they want to add to her comments?" I scan the room, Presley's hand slowly lifting above her head. "Yes, Presley?"

"I agree with Kira, but I do think that oftentimes we can make decisions that at the time aren't altruistic. They might even be completely for selfish reasons but can develop into something more."

"Okay, expand on that."

"Well, for example, say you donate to a specific charity or organization or start up your own foundation because of the

tax implications for yourself and your business, but then it actually turns into a passion project for you and you find yourself truly believing in this cause. What started out as a once-selfish decision has blossomed into something more, something meaningful because you took the time to nurture it and allow it to reveal itself to you.”

All the feelings of jealousy disappear as I see the glimmer in her eyes, the little smirk pulling at her lips. Is she trying to tell me something here? Is she the selfish decision I’ve made that has the potential to be something more if I just open up to the possibility of it?

“Uh, yes,” I say, looking down at the floor when I realize I’ve just been staring at her without replying. “I agree, that can certainly be the case. I don’t think it’s often that it happens but... we can certainly hope that it does.”

The bell rings seconds later, my smile back in place as I reach for my coat. I glance up at Presley who’s already looking at me. I wait back for everyone to leave and she does the same so that we exit the room together.

“Aren’t you cheeky,” I say, patting her ass softly as she steps over the threshold.

“You seem to be in an especially good mood today, Professor.”

“Mmm, yes, I do, don’t I? Can’t imagine why.” I playfully bump her shoulder.

“Are you flirting with me, Mr. Gates?”

“I don’t know about that.” I laugh. The thought of me flirting seems a bit foreign. I can be charming; that’s for damn sure. I can be suave and extremely seductive, and it’s not often that I’ve flirted, yet right now, that’s exactly what it feels like. “Don’t forget,” I remind her, “you’re coming over for your workout tonight.”

“I thought last night was my workout? Think I might be a little too sore for the gym.”

I unlock my car as we approach it. “Don’t forget, Miss James,” I say in my usual stern manner, “I can and will still

punish you if you even think twice about being disobedient with me.”

“Is that a threat?” She tilts her head, slowly pulling on her bottom lip with her teeth. “Because it sounds like a pretty fun one to me.”

“Get in the damn car so I can give you a ride home.” I shake my head in exasperation. This woman is going to be the death of me.

“Make me,” she says in her most seductive manner.

I glance around casually, then push her back against the door of the car so quick she doesn’t even realize what’s happening till her back hits it.

“You really want to play that game right now, right here?” I press my hand firmly against her belly, pinning her to the car. “I will make you come back to my office and hide under my desk all day with my cock in your mouth.”

“There are worse things.” She doubles down on her cocky attitude.

“You like this, don’t you? Pushing my limits, stretching the boundaries.” She just stares at me. “You’re a kinky little thing. I’ll keep that in mind next time I dole out a punishment.”

I step back, releasing her from the car. I place my hand at her elbow, walking her around to the passenger side.

The drive to her place is back to being normal. There’s a flirtatious undertone while we talk, but it just feels natural. I find myself feeling sad the moment her building comes into sight. I want to blow off work, ask her to hang out, and just bum around the city or lie in her bed all day. Again, all new feelings for me—at least in the last decade or two. Usually my arrangements are just that, a text arranging a time for a hookup or social event and no in-between banter or talking. For years I’ve closed myself off and slowly, it feels like those walls are starting to crumble without me even having to try to tear them down myself.

“Bring a change of clothes tonight.” She looks over at me as I help her out of the car and onto her sidewalk. “For dinner,

after the workout. Anything I should tell my chef to avoid?”

“Oh.” She seems genuinely surprised. “No, I’m not picky at all.”

“Great. See you at six, Presley. Don’t be late.” I walk around to the driver’s side door as she makes her way to the door of her building.

“You make sure of that by sending Wes anyway so I don’t know why you bother with the threatening tone.” She gives me a cute little wave, blowing me a kiss and ducking inside, leaving a huge grin back on my face.

“I’M GETTING FASTER!” PRESLEY HITS THE STOP BUTTON ON the treadmill, standing a leg on either side of the belt as it slows to a stop. She towels at the sweat on her forehead.

“Allow me,” I say, reaching for it before dabbing it on her breasts that are glistening with sweat. I pull the towel away, leaning in to run my tongue over her cleavage.

“Gross.” She giggles.

“Gross?” I lean in, pressing her tits together as I bite and lick them both. “Trust me, any man alive would kill to do that to you. A sweaty woman is a fucking tease.”

“Seriously?”

“Pheromones and your natural essence? Absolutely. I bet your panties smell fucking amazing and your pussy tastes incredible right now.”

She gasps, her mouth hanging open. “Speaking of panties, what did you do with the ones of mine that you kept?”

“They went in my private collection,” I tease as we both stretch.

“Great, how many is in this collection? Wait—” She holds up her hand. “I don’t need to know that.”

“Only one.” I laugh, reaching over to pinch her ass as she bends over to touch her toes.

“Hey, can you teach me a few other exercises?”

“Sure, what do you want to try?”

“Well, I have noodle arms. I’d like to be able to do some push-ups or oh, one of those overhand grippy pull-up things you do.”

“A pull-up, on that bar?” I point to the overhead bar.

“Yeah.”

“Can you do a push-up?”

She scrunches up her face, bending down to get on all fours. She gets into a plank position, her body shaking as she slowly lowers her chest to the floor before collapsing completely. “Shit,” she groans, switching to her knees where she’s able to pump out a few in a row. “Damn, that’s so much harder than I realized.” She’s panting when she stands up, dusting off her hands.

“Come here. Stand in front of me under the bar.” I pull her toward me, placing my hands at her waist. “I’ll help you as you jump to reach the bar, then I’ll let go and see if you can hang on it for a few seconds.”

“Okay.” She reaches her hands up, bending at the knees, then shoots upward. I grip her waist, lifting her so that her hands wrap around the bar. “Oh, God!” Immediately she’s struggling, then begins to laugh.

“Don’t laugh; that makes it worse.”

“I’m slipping!” she squeals just as her fingers lose grip.

“I’ve got you,” I say, slowly lowering her back down to her feet.

“Ow, that hurts.” She flaps her hand, then looks at her palm where it’s red.

“Let me see.” I place her hand in mine, inspecting it before bringing it to my lips. I kiss it softly, then pick up the other hand and do the same.

When I look back at her, her face is soft. I lean in, kissing her once, then twice. The third time my tongue slips past her lips, sweeping through her mouth. She moans against my tongue, both of us already lost in each other.

“We should shower,” I say, resting my forehead against hers for a second as I try to calm down. “Chef will have dinner ready soon.”

I take my time stripping her out of her sweaty sports bra and leggings, dragging them down her thighs as I lean in to inhale her scent. Her fingers tangle in my hair as I plant a soft kiss at the apex of her thighs.

“Are you sore?”

“Mm-hmm, a little.” She nods.

“Guess I should be gentle then.” I look up at her as I remove her shoes and socks, sliding the leggings off to the side.

“I’m not used to having rougher sex like that—or maybe with a penis as large as yours. Actually”—she shakes her head—“not used to having sex, period.”

I stand up, running my thumb over her lips. She seems nervous. “That wasn’t rough last night, sweetheart.”

“No?” She seems genuinely surprised.

“No. I think that my size did probably cause you the most pain and the fact that I took you several times, but it can get much rougher than that.”

“It can?”

“Mm-hmm. Does that interest you?” I study her face, not wanting her to agree to something because she thinks it’s what I want.

“How?”

“I can tie you to the bed. I can tie your hands behind your back, to your ankles. I can go much deeper inside you, harder, faster. I can choke you, pull your hair, bite you, fuck you over and over without a break.”

She swallows nervously. “Do—do you want to do those things to me?”

“Only if you want me to, sweetheart.” I kiss her again, then reach around her to open the glass shower door. “Let’s get cleaned up. I promise I’ll go easy on you in here.”

I take my time lathering her body, washing her hair, and looking after her. I run my hands over her breasts, noticing the small bruises from last night.

“Do these hurt?”

“A little when you touch them.”

My cock pulses. “I like seeing you marked by me.”

“Me too.”

I slide my hands behind her neck, pulling her to me so I can take her mouth. This kiss is needy. I want more of her; I want to consume her.

“I’m going to do something to you that you haven’t experienced before. I want you to just relax and trust me, okay? I promise it’s going to feel good.” I spin her around, planting her hands on the shower wall in front of her. “Keep your hands here,” I command as I walk her hips out a little further back so she’s partly bent over. “Spread your legs apart, baby.” I walk behind her, moving her into position as I crouch down to my knees. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

I run my hands over her ass cheeks, leaning in to kiss each one before biting it. Then I spread her cheeks, leaning in to run my tongue over her asshole. I feel her tense for a moment, but I don’t stop and soon, I feel her relaxing, even pressing further back against me as I eat her ass.

I slide two fingers inside her pussy as I continue to lap at her, making her come just moments later. While she’s still riding her orgasm, I slide my fingers from her, bringing one back to her asshole where I press gently.

“Just relax, let me in,” I say as I wrap my arm around her waist. I press harder, breaching her entrance slowly before

sliding it back out and in again. “How does that feel, Presley?”

“Good, new.”

“Imagine if I had my cock in you right now. Think you could handle being stuffed that full? Being doubly penetrated at the same time?”

“Oh, I, yes,” she pants, the mention of my cock in her pussy and my finger in her ass clearly turning her on. I slow my movements, about ready to lose my shit and bend her over and act on the suggestion, but I know she’s already sore.

I stand her back up, then reach to turn off the water. “Let’s dry off and head upstairs for dinner, okay?”

She looks over her shoulder at me, disappointment on her face, and it makes me chuckle.

“Don’t worry, baby, we’ll act out that fantasy another time. I don’t want you too sore.”

I head up to my bedroom to change, giving her some privacy down here, even though privacy seems like such a non-necessity between us already. I wait in the foyer for her, showing her to the kitchen.

“This is stunning.” She glances around the large kitchen, running her hand over the marble countertops. “This island is bigger than your car.”

“I had the marble brought in from Italy when I redid the kitchen. Sorry,” I say almost immediately. “That sounded really gauche.”

“Not at all. I just didn’t expect such an elegant yet cozy space. Fits the house perfectly.”

I pull out her chair at the island. “I hope it’s okay we’re eating here instead of the dining room. Rather large and cold in there.”

“I usually eat on my couch so this is a major step up.” She smiles, then reaches for the cloche over her plate, removing it to reveal a beautifully cooked fillet mignon. “Oh my God.” Her eyes roll back in her head as she inhales. “Did you hear my stomach?”

“Steak is a good choice then?”

“Yes. I only had steak on very rare and fancy occasions growing up so it feels pretty special to be eating it on a random Thursday night.”

We dig in to the food. It’s always top-tier when Ricardo is cooking. I have him on staff, although it’s not a nightly occurrence that he cooks for me, usually a few nights a week. I can manage to feed myself the other nights or I’m at work dinners. Her comment makes me wonder about her life before now.

“You’re not originally from Chicago, correct? Illinois though?”

“Mm-hmm.” She nods, chewing her food. “I grew up about three hours directly south of the city. Really small town, middle of nowhere.”

“And the rest of your family is still there?”

“Yeah, my mom and dad. I’m an only child; they had me a bit later in life.”

“Are you close to them?”

She shrugs. “I am but they’re not happy I’m living in Chicago. It’s hard to explain. They want me to be happy, I truly believe that, but they’re worried. They’ve lived their entire life in a small town, believing that the city is crazy dangerous and I get it. Being that I’m their only child and they tried for a decade before they got pregnant with me, they’re terrified to lose me.”

“I can understand that,” I say between bites of food. “Do you go home often?”

“Not as much as I should. I spent the holidays with them, always do. When I do go home, they kind of scold me and tell me to save my money instead of renting a car and driving down to see them.” She laughs and rolls her eyes, reaching for her wine. “What about you? Do you have family in the Chicago area?”

Unease grips my stomach. I don't like talking about my family. "I don't actually. Only child, both parents are deceased." I leave it at that, hoping she gets the hint that I don't want to discuss it.

"Oh my God." She reaches her hand over, placing it on mine. Her eyes are full of pity, a look I hate, to be honest. "I'm so sorry."

"Nothing for you to be sorry about." I turn my attention back to my food, shrugging her hand off mine. I see her studying me out of the corner of my eye and I'm guessing she picked up on my discomfort.

"Well, I'm pretty full. I have a question though. Any chance you would want to give me a tour of your house? I've seen this place for years, never knew anyone actually lived here."

I swallow down my last bite, tossing my napkin onto the countertop. "I'd be happy to." I stand, extending my hand out toward her.

I walk her from room to room, explaining the purpose followed most of the time with, "But I don't even use this room."

"You know, you kind of remind me of Bruce Wayne, all hidden away in your mansion with just Wes at your side, surrounded by your solitude. Are you a caped crusader at night as well, Mr. Gates? Rescuing the city and damsels in distress?"

"If I was," I say, placing my hands on her shoulders to turn her, "I wouldn't be able to tell you, now would I?"

"I'd like to think I get special dispensation, you know, as your current flavor of the month." She reaches her hand out, pressing it against my chest and slowly dragging it downward.

"Flavor of the month?" I reach around to pinch her ass. "Watch what you say, Miss James." I grab her hand from where it rests on my belly and pull her along toward the main staircase.

We wind our way upstairs, looking into guest rooms and bathrooms. I can feel excitement curling in my stomach as we

inch closer to my bedroom. The thought of Presley James in my personal space is alluring, like I'm giving her some insight into my private world. Mostly because—I am. I've never brought a woman home to this bedroom.

“And this room?” she says, stepping in as I flick on the lights, dimming them.

“This is my bedroom.”

She looks at me, then gingerly steps into the room.

I kept the original hardwood floors; my California king bed doesn't even look that massive compared to the size of the room. There's a real woodburning fireplace on one end and a bay window with a seat that stretches all the way along one wall. The room is dark but warm, with a large en suite off to one side and his and her walk-in closets on the other. I've opted for very minimal décor—a set of two large chairs near the fireplace, the bed, and two nightstands.

“So what made you buy this place?” She walks along the bed, turning and taking a seat on it. “The first time I came here I was completely shocked. I thought for sure you'd live in one of those cold, sterile high-rises far above all of us peasants down here.”

“I just put in an offer. It was a private sale. I had gotten wind the original family was looking to sell it and I took one look at it and just knew. And no, the thought of living in a high-rise surrounded by thousands of other people is the exact opposite of the peace and tranquility I crave. Here it's just me and like you said, my solitude.” I walk over to where she's seated on the edge of my bed; it dwarfs her petite frame. “Something about this house called to me, just like something in you called to me.” I reach down and run the back of my fingers along her cheek.

“Does it ever get lonely?”

“You are so incredibly beautiful.” I almost whisper the words, ignoring her question. The reality is, it does get lonely here, incredibly so. But the real loneliness I feel is constant, no matter where I'm living. It's a loneliness that's begun to gnaw

at me since she has come into my life, her presence highlighting just what I'm missing, making it appear that much more intense whenever she isn't around.

The soft glow of the lights make her eyes sparkle. There's something happening between us. Something is changing. I want to tell her that. I want to ask her if she feels it too, but the second I part my lips to make mention of it, her eyes dart away and she stands up to walk away from me.

“Should we continue the tour?”

I stand frozen for a moment, my heart sinking at the realization that she doesn't feel it, that this is exactly what she said it was, a sexual arrangement. I swallow down my emotions and plaster on a smile before turning around to face her.

“Of course, I have to show you the billiards room and the library yet.”

“Billiards room? You're living in a game of Clue. It was Professor Plum with the wrench in the billiards room.” She laughs and almost skips down the hallway, no idea that my heart feels like it's having the life squeezed out of it.

Chapter 20

Presley

Cyrus' lips caress mine passionately, his hands holding my head still as he presses his hips against me. This kiss feels different, like an extension of the way he was looking at me in his bedroom earlier.

"The car is ready, sir," Wes says after clearing his throat slightly.

Cyrus breaks the kiss, releasing my face and stepping back. "I'm sorry I can't take you home this evening," he says, leaning in to kiss the tip of my nose. "I can't miss this call with Tokyo."

"It's okay." I smile. "Thanks again for the dinner and the tour of the house."

"Of course." He stares at me for a few more seconds, like he wants to say something, but then he turns and takes my coat from Wes, sliding it up my arms.

"Are you excited for the workshops with the Chicago Youth in Leadership group this week?"

"I am." He zips my coat and this all feels so intimate. He's helped me several times now to remove and put on my coat, opened car doors for me, held out chairs, but this weirdly feels like he's taking care of me.

"Grant, Lisa's photographer, will be there. I thought it would be nice to get some candid photos for the community portion of your company website as well as the organization's website."

“Sounds like a good plan.” He looks over at Wes as if to say she’s ready to leave. “Have a good night, Presley.” He squeezes my hand, then turns to walk up the stairs toward his home office.

“Miss James.” Wes smiles at me and I follow him out through the garage to the waiting car.

I stare out the window of the back seat, the city glowing with lights as groups of people rush from the warmth of their cars to inside buildings. I spot a couple, walking hand in hand, seemingly oblivious to the bitter chill in the air. They smile at each other, then the man stops abruptly on the sidewalk, the woman being pulled back into his arms for a kiss. He dips her, making her laugh as she throws her arms around his neck.

Tears prick my eyes and my chest burns from the emotions I’m choking back. I close my eyes, the image of Cyrus’ expression from earlier playing over and over in my mind. The way he looked at me, the way he touched me. I had hoped to end up in his bed tonight, but he wanted me to rest, to not be too sore. A stark contrast to his words and threats from only days ago about using my body, pushing my boundaries. It feels like there are two men living inside him and they both have me confused. One minute he’s rough and demanding, then tonight, he’s gentle, more concerned about my needs than his.

I had hoped to get him to open up to me about his father but just asking him about his family changed his mood in an instant. I could see the unease in his eyes and I didn’t want to push the topic. There’s so much more to Cyrus Gates than I ever realized and I can feel myself falling for him. The way he looked at me in his bedroom had me convinced in that instant that he feels it too, that he wants more but he’s too scared to say it. But almost as quickly as that thought entered my head, Serenity’s warnings about him came rushing back when I had told her I thought he was flirting with me.

“It’s in his nature; a man like him can’t help it, probably doesn’t even realize he’s doing it.”

A single tear tumbles down my cheek as the car slows in front of my building.

“Thanks, Wes. Have a great night.”

“Good night, Miss James.”

I climb out of the car and rush inside my building. It's too early to go to bed so I grab my laptop, distracting myself with work as I go over the workshop schedule this week.

The last thing I need to deal with is hurting my own feelings because I pursued someone who warned me that this would never be anything more than physical, told me I was much too young for him and emotionally unavailable, then I go and fall for him. I actually laugh out loud thinking about it... Serenity would be shaking her head right now if she knew.

I CAN'T KEEP THE SMILE OFF MY FACE AS I WATCH CYRUS interact with these teenagers.

“I like that attitude, Lionel; that kind of belief in yourself is key to any success in life. You have what it takes, and so do you, Sharron and Elle. Each of you has potential beyond measure.” He speaks animatedly, engaging with each kid, looking them in the eyes and speaking passionately to them with belief and conviction in his voice.

My chest tightens with emotion, maybe even pride. Just in the few months that I've known Cyrus, it's like he's slowly emerging from his hard exterior, his walls slowly crumbling. He's given me the strength to develop my backbone, encouraged me to stick to what I believe and stand up for myself, and I can't help but feel I'm showing him that it's okay to be vulnerable, to embrace the things that bring you joy and fulfillment.

“You guys are not only the future of Chicago, but the future of this country. Each of you bring a special gift and a priceless value that nobody can take from you. There are going to be a lot of adults that try to diminish these dreams you have, that tell you to be ‘reasonable or realistic’ with your goals, but I don't adhere to that. I think you should set goals so high they

seem impossible to attain and then go for it. That's one of the things we want to teach you here at Chicago Youth in Leadership. We want to equip you with the tools you need to set these goals and go after them. I've been working on something for each of you for some time; this is something that I haven't told anyone about, not even your sponsors here."

What is he talking about?

He looks over at me, then over to the leadership. I look over at them as they look at me. None of us have any idea what's coming next.

"I have established the Chicago Youth in Leadership Scholarship Fund that is giving every single one of you a full ride scholarship to any school of your choosing."

The room goes silent. My mouth falls open. The head of the organization, Miss Loretta, suddenly bursts into tears as the kids burst into cheers.

I can't fight back the tears this time. They run down my cheeks as I smile at Cyrus who is being rushed by dozens of kids running up to him, throwing their arms around him.

"How long have you been planning that?" Cyrus and I walk through the city since it's an unusually warm day in Chicago. "I am still in complete shock."

"For a while. I've wanted to do something for those kids for so long, apart from just donating money and helping fund programs. I wanted to make a difference in their lives, and I don't want money to hold them back from achieving their dreams. They deserve to accomplish everything; they deserve every opportunity, and I hate that so many of them never would be given the chance all because of money."

"I loved watching you with them. They were so engaged. You really are making a difference in their lives. It's incredible."

"Thank you," he says sincerely, looking over at me, "for encouraging me to be more open."

"I would kill for a coffee right now." I nod toward a café up ahead.

“Well, let’s not go to those extremes.” He laughs, opening the door for me.

We grab our coffee and take a seat in the back of the almost empty café. He stares out the window, taking a sip.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Did you ever consider having kids?”

“Briefly, yes. I guess I assumed I would but, uh...” He looks down at his cup, fiddling with the lid. “I don’t think I ever felt it with someone and that was the deal I made myself. I wasn’t going to have kids just to have them. I wanted to feel like the person I was with made me desire that... if that makes sense.”

“It does.” I nod. “Very much so. That’s my thoughts on it actually. I’ve always just felt like I wouldn’t have them unless my partner and I desired it together.”

“And have you? With partners in the past?”

I almost choke on my coffee. I shake my head and grab a napkin to dab my mouth. “No, no, not at all. It was never serious between me and the two guys I dated. I mean, I guess it was a little serious. I dated one guy for eleven months, the other for about two years on and off, but settling down with them was never a thought that crossed my mind and I don’t think it was with them either; we were so young.”

“Still are—very young. You have plenty of time to meet that person and have those same desires.” His eyes look sad, and I want to joke that maybe I have met that person, but I remind myself not to even think like that for a second unless I want to set myself up for serious heartbreak.

“What about you? Any of your exes tick all the boxes and make you want to settle down?”

“I’ve had a few serious relationships, none lately. There was only one that I considered settling down with. Julia Owens. We were both in our early thirties, but it just didn’t

seem to be in the cards for us. Life took a different turn for both of us.”

“The one that got away?” I tease and it makes him laugh.

“No, nothing like that. She wanted it all right then, and I was more focused on building my company so I made a decision and so did she. She’s married now. I know her husband; he’s actually a great guy. They have a couple kids and live in the suburbs. I’m happy for her.”

He looks out the window again, then leans back in his chair, settling his gaze on me.

“What?” I say nervously.

“What about you, Miss James? What do you want?”

I sigh. “That’s a loaded question. In life? In love? In general?”

“All of it.” He smiles.

“Well, after graduation in May, I would love to stay working at Wade. I still can’t believe I work there. I’d like to go full-time and just immerse myself in Lisa Wade’s world, learning every possible thing I can from her.”

“That sounds like an incredibly wise decision. Who knows, maybe you’ll be the top PR firm in Chicago someday. I can see that.”

I laugh. “That’s what Serenity says.”

He glances at his watch. “Ready to head back to the office? We can go over whatever details remain for today.”

We step outside, grabbing a cab to head back to the office. As we walk up the stairs to the front of his office, Cyrus rests his arm over my shoulders, dragging his hand down my back and pulling me into him by my waist.

“Umm...” I nervously squirm out of his embrace. “We’re in public,” I say through a smile as we approach the large doors of his high-rise.

“Maybe I don’t care.”

I roll my eyes as he holds the door open for me. “Yes, you do. Don’t be careless just because you had a good day.”

He ushers me toward an elevator I haven’t taken before. “What’s this?”

“My private elevator.” He winks, pulling out a fob that he waves over a sensor and the doors open. His hands are back against my waist as he ushers me inside, reaching around to hit the floor for his office.

He turns me around, his hands sliding up my body to my hair as his lips come down on mine. He walks me backward, kissing me as he pins me against the wall.

“Cameras,” I say through the kisses.

“I really don’t give a fuck.” His tongue is in my mouth, sweeping in and out, his hard length pressing into my thigh as he grinds against me.

“But wha—”

“Nobody has access to this elevator or cameras but me, baby. Now, please...” He reaches over and hits the stop button, causing the car to come to a lurching halt. “Shut the fuck up and kiss me.”

My hands glide beneath his coat, up his chest as I tip my head to the side. He devours my mouth, sending flutters down my belly and between my thighs. I’m drowning in desire, completely oblivious to where we are as my hands drift down to his belt. I begin to release it, reaching for his zipper, when his hand darts down to stop my movements.

“What are you doing, sweetheart?”

“I—I need. I wanted more last night,” I admit.

“I didn’t want to hurt you, Presley.”

“I’m fine,” I insist.

“What do you need?” He tips my chin, looking down at me.

“You, inside me.”

“Oh, trust me, I’d love to right now, but I can’t fuck you in this elevator. The alarm is about to go off if I don’t start it up again, and besides”—he leans in and flicks my earlobe with his tongue—“I’m a big fan of delayed gratification.”

“Ugh,” I groan as he steps back and readjusts his belt and zipper. “I thought that by agreeing to this arrangement it meant there would be more sex,” I goad him, knowing full well I’m only going to make it worse on myself. Now he’ll probably make me wait twice as long for my next orgasm.

His eyes flash to mine and his smile fades. He darts his hands out, placing them on either side of my head on the wall behind me. “Is that all I am to you? A human dildo that you think you can command to fuck you whenever you want?”

At first I think he’s teasing, but the look in his eyes is different this time. He almost looks... *hurt*.

“N—no. No, you’re not,” I say, reaching out to clutch his coat. “You’re so much more to me than that.”

I almost regret saying it, thinking I’ve exposed myself too much when his expression softens. He leans in, kissing me one more time just as the alarm goes off.

“Shit.” He reaches around, hitting the button to resume the elevator ride up to his office.

When the doors open and we head to his office to finish up for the day, his stoic expression is back in place and the moment has passed before I can ask him if I mean more to him than a physical release.

Chapter 21

Cyrus

Clearly, my attempt to keep Presley on pins and needles by withholding orgasms from her has backfired. She chews the tip of her pen, her hair flipped over her shoulder as the oversized sweater she's wearing droops down, exposing her collarbone.

She knows exactly what she's doing to me.

She uncrosses, then recrosses her bare legs, her skirt sliding up slightly to reveal a small sliver of her thigh. My eyes drift down, images of her thigh-high boots up by my ears flashing through my brain as I drag my gaze upward. She's staring at me, a seductive grin on her lips.

The only reason she's getting away with this is because Serenity isn't in class today and everyone else is too buried in their own notes to notice.

I grip the podium, my cock way too alert for me to move away from it. No matter how hard I try to look elsewhere, my eyes keep finding their way back to her. There's less than fifteen minutes left of class and it's all I can do to make it through. I pull my phone out, typing out a quick text to her while one of the students answers a question I proposed.

Me: *Meet me after class in my office.*

I don't give any context. I stare at her as if trying to mentally tell her to check her phone. It must buzz because she reaches into her bag and slides her thumb across the screen. Her eyes dart up to meet mine and I give her a look that says I'm not fucking playing.

The second the bell sounds, I grab my coat and head straight to my office. I stand outside the door in case she decides to disobey me. She rounds the corner down the narrow hallway.

“Miss James,” I say, stepping aside as I hold the door open. I shut it behind her and lock it, walking around to take a seat at my desk. “Please take a seat. Do you know why I called you into my office today?” I play the role, wanting to make her sweat.

“I’m not sure, Mr. Gates.”

“That’s Professor Gates,” I correct her.

“Professor,” she corrects.

“You were being very naughty in class today, Miss James. Now, I think I’ve made it abundantly clear to you that I don’t tolerate misbehaving, haven’t I?”

“Yes, sir,” she says, her eyes staying focused on mine.

I stand up, walking casually around her as I speak. “Yes, I think you need a reminder about how I handle that kind of behavior.” I pause, resting my hands on the back of the chair she’s sitting in as I lean down toward her. Her back stiffens, and she turns her head slightly as I lean in. “Do you want to find out how rough it can get, Presley?”

“Rough?” The word squeaks out of her throat. Gone is that confident little flirt from moments ago. Her hands are folded nervously in her lap as I place a soft kiss on her exposed neck.

“Mm-hmm. Very. But first—” I reach my hand out and take one of her hands, helping her to stand up. “I want you naked.”

“Naked?” Her eyes bulge. “In here?”

“Don’t make me say it again, young lady.” I walk behind the desk and sit down. “Go on, take your clothes off.” I lean back in the chair, folding my hands in my lap as she reaches for the hem of her sweater. She pulls it over her head slowly, leaving it on the chair. She looks back at me as she unzips her skirt, dropping it down her thighs.

“Leave the boots on.” Her eyes dart back to me nervously as she reaches around to remove her bra, followed by her panties. She stands there, fully nude, her pink nipples pert with the coolness of the office.

“Come here,” I command, crooking my finger. I pat my lap as she walks over to me. I guide her down onto my thigh. “Seems like you can be an obedient girl, can’t you?”

“Sometimes.”

“So, you admit that you chose to be naughty today?” She nods her head yes. “Why?” I reach up and turn her chin so she’s looking at me. “Is it because you wanted me to punish you?”

“Yes,” she answers softly. Knowing she wants me to punish her, to use her makes my cock twitch. She must feel it because she looks down at my lap.

“You’re making me hard, sweetheart. I think you need to take care of that, don’t you?”

She licks her lips, nodding yes again.

“Me too, but first, I want you on this desk, on all fours.” I grip her waist, helping her crawl up onto the desk. “Just like that,” I say, dragging my hand down her smooth back. “Let’s see what we have at our disposal.” I open an empty desk drawer, then another. Finally, the very bottom one has a ruler.

“Would you look at that?” I say, reaching for it. I brush her hair over her shoulders, dragging the ruler slowly down her back as I walk around her. I rest one hand gently on her back as I snap my wrist back, then bring the ruler down on her bare ass with a smack.

“Ow.” She looks over at me.

“Did that hurt?”

“No, maybe a little. It stings.”

I do it again, only harder. “How about now?”

“Yes,” she says as I do it two more times.

Her ass is growing pink. I lean in and kiss it, the smell of her arousal hitting my nostrils. I spank her again, this time dragging the ruler between her cheeks, down to her glistening pussy.

“Someone is wet,” I say, looking down at the evidence on the ruler. My cock is throbbing for release at the image of her before me. Her lips parted, her ass pink, her pussy ready for me.

I drop the ruler, sliding my fingers down to dip inside her.

“Ohhh,” she moans as I slide two fingers in and out of her a few times.

“Have you tasted yourself, Presley?” I ask, walking around to face her.

“No.”

“Taste,” I say, bringing my fingers to her lips. She reaches out timidly, bringing my fingers to her lips before gently sucking them clean.

“Goddamn that mouth,” I groan, reaching down to unzip my pants. I pull my cock through the zipper, stepping forward to feed it into her mouth. I groan as she greedily begins to suck me.

“Look at me,” I command, her eyes lifting up to mine. “I want you to look at me as I fuck your mouth.” I grit my teeth, forcing myself not to lose control as my hips begin to move. My hands are tangled in her hair, her fingers wrapped around the edge of the desk as she looks up at me, her pink lips stretching wide to accommodate my girth.

“You were made for this, baby. Fuck, you look so good with my cock in your pretty mouth.” I don’t even know what the hell I’m saying. I’m completely overtaken by lust. My head is swimming, and my vision begins to blur as my balls tighten.

“Swallow me.” I barely get the words out before I shoot my load down her throat. Her eyes water, my cum seeping out the corners of her mouth as she swallows. I stumble back, my

cock falling from her mouth as she sits up, wiping away the dribble.

“Fuck me.” I fall back into my chair, blinking rapidly to regain some composure. Sweat beads at my temples as I reach up to loosen my tie. The way she’s looking at me right now, I don’t need any downtime. My cock is already twitching, ready for round two.

She slips down from the desk and I reach out to grab her. I spin her around, looping my tie around her wrists and tying her hands behind her back.

“I’m not done with you yet. You’ll get your release; don’t worry.”

She looks over her shoulder at me as I unbuckle my belt, pushing my pants down my thighs as I guide her back over my lap.

“Spread your thighs, baby. Straddle my lap.”

“Like this?” she asks, her ass at eye level with me.

“Just like that.” I run my hand over her ass, holding my cock in place. “Now squat down over my cock.”

She slowly lowers herself, my tip at her entrance. Inch by inch, I guide her tight pussy over me until I’m fully sheathed inside her.

“Oh, yesss,” I hiss as she begins to move her hips. “Lean forward.” I press her down till her cheek rests against the top of the desk. I reach out, wrapping her hair around my wrists a few times. “I’ve fantasized so many times about using your hair to pull you back onto my cock.”

“Oh, Professor,” she moans, the rhythm slow and deep. Hearing her say that makes me want to fuck her hard, but I hold back, wanting this to last, wanting her to build into an explosive release.

My phone begins to vibrate in my pocket against my knee. “Don’t stop; don’t you fucking stop,” I say as I reach for it, sliding my thumb across the screen to answer it.

“Nelson, what?” I say, attempting to keep my voice steady as Presley continues to ride me.

“I’ll be back at the office soon,” I say through a ragged breath. I don’t have a clue what he’s talking about. I can’t focus on anything but the grip she has on me right now. I release my hand from her hair, bringing my thumb to my mouth to get it wet. I drag my hand down, placing my thumb over her asshole and pressing against it.

“Ahhh,” she groans, and I press in harder till I’m knuckle deep.

“No, I haven’t heard from Ken. Why?” I answer him.

I slide my thumb in and out of her ass in time with her hips. Her moans grow louder, her hands grabbing a fistful of my shirt as I feel her walls begin to clench around me.

“I’ll let you know if I talk to him. Gotta go.” I toss the phone onto the ground, not caring if it’s shattered.

“You coming, baby?” I grab her bound wrists, tugging her back harder and faster onto me as I slide my thumb deeper inside her.

“Yessss,” she groans, quivering, shaking, coming on my cock.

I’m about two seconds behind her. I groan, tugging her back hard onto me one more time before I explode inside her. I release her hands and look down, my cum dripping from her pussy as I slide out of her.

“I—Fuck, I didn’t use a condom,” I pant. I didn’t even think about it in the heat of the moment. Her thighs are sticky, slick with our combined releases, and as much as I’m realizing I fucked up, I can’t deny how incredibly hot it is to see myself dripping out of her.

“I’m on birth control,” she says as she rests her hands on the desk, bent over, catching her breath.

“Well, in that case, don’t move for a second because this is the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen and I want this image in my brain forever.”

She looks over her shoulder at me, my hands resting on her ass as I spread them, watching myself drip from her slit. I reach down to the floor, grabbing my phone. She looks at me.

“Are you taking a photo?”

“I am,” I say, opening my camera app before snapping a picture of her bent over.

“And what do you plan on doing with that, Professor?” Her voice is low and sexy.

I toss the phone back down, leaning forward to bite her ass. “Use it when I don’t have access to you,” I say, standing up, my cock bouncing right at her entrance. I step forward, pressing against her entrance again.

“Again?” she moans, her fingers curling against the surface of the desk.

“Again,” I say as my head falls back and I slide deep inside her.

IT’S ALREADY BEEN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS SINCE I LAST SAW Presley and all I can think about is her. Only, this isn’t sexual; it’s need.

I knock back the rest of my water after a hard workout, sweat still running down my chest as I catch my breath. I thought I could get her out of my system by now, but she’s only managed to worm her way deeper into my every thought. I’m consumed by her.

I feel bad. I don’t want her to think that all she is, is a toy to me. I know I made those comments to her when we agreed to this arrangement and I’d be lying if I said those thoughts didn’t still turn me on, but I want her to know it’s deeper than that... that I see her as more than that.

I pull my shirt off and kick my shoes to the side of my closet. I strip out of the rest of my sweaty clothes and walk to

the shower. I don't let it warm up, letting the cold water wash over my body.

I contemplate texting her, explaining what's going through my head, but I don't think it will be conveyed correctly. Hell, I'm not even sure what I want to say to her, but I feel like if I see her, I'll know. I finish my shower, toweling off quickly and throwing on a pair of jeans and a wool sweater. I brush my fingers through my mostly towel dried hair and grab a pair of socks and casual loafers.

“Going somewhere, sir? I can bring the car around.”

“No, I'll drive.” I pat Wes on the back who's eating dinner at the kitchen island. “Take it easy. Maybe go on a date or watch some football, old man,” I tease him as I grab a bottle of wine from the wine cooler in the pantry.

I don't even bother with my coat. I grab my keys and head out to the garage, calling in an order to Bistronomic to be ready for pickup in twenty. I tap the wheel nervously, adjusting the heat, then the radio as I wait for my order to be brought out to the car once I arrive.

I didn't even text Presley to see if she's home. Maybe this is a terrible idea. What if I show up and she has a guy there? Panic churns my stomach, but a gentle tap on my window snaps me back to the present.

“Your order, sir.”

“Thanks, Austin.” I hand him a twenty and push the doubts out of my head as I speed off to Presley's apartment.

Chapter 22

Presley

I step into my pajama shorts, looking over my shoulder at my butt in the mirror on my closet door before pulling them all the way up. I reach back and slide my finger over the few welts across my cheeks, a smile tugging at my lips as I think about this afternoon. I reach for my shirt when I hear what sounds like the buzzer to my building.

I crane my head around the corner of my bedroom, down the hall toward the front door, listening for it again, unsure if it came from the TV that's playing.

Who would be stopping by at seven on a Friday night?

The buzzer sounds again. I pull my shirt down as I walk toward the speaker box by my door. I press the button.

“Hello?”

“Hi.” He doesn't have to say his name; excitement coils in my belly at just the sound of his voice.

“Oh, hi!” I say, this time with more enthusiasm. I hold the button down to unlock the door. “It's open.” I bounce nervously on the balls of my feet as I wait the thirty seconds for him to enter the building and climb the stairs. I look down at my pj's; it's too late to try and change.

I reach for the door, pulling it open just as he lifts his hand to knock. “Hi,” I say again with a huge grin on my face. “This is a pleasant surprise.”

“Yeah,” he says slowly, still standing in the doorway, a bag of what I assume is takeout in his hands. “I'm realizing how

rude it is to just show up at someone's house unannounced. Should I—maybe I should go?"

"What? No." I reach for his arm, pulling him inside as I shut the door behind him. "I wasn't doing anything," I look down at my pajamas that I'm already wearing this early in the evening. "Clearly."

"You look—cute," he says as he drags his eyes down my body. I blush. I don't think he's ever said I looked cute before.

"Is that food?" I point to the bag that smells delicious, making my stomach rumble.

"It is. I just ordered a random assortment of things. I hope that's okay?"

"Absolutely. I was about to eat popcorn for dinner."

"After earlier," he says in a low tenor as he places the bag on the counter and removes his coat, "you need a substantial meal, Miss James."

Before I can respond, he reaches out and grasps my wrist, pulling me toward him gently as his lips come down on mine. It's a gentle kiss, sweet yet deliberate.

"Are you feeling okay?" His arms snake around me, resting on my waist as I place my hands against his chest.

"Mm-hmm." I nod, looking up at him.

"I felt guilty again."

My brows knit together. "Why?"

"Because—" He reaches his hand up to tuck my hair behind my ear, something he does often when he's being intimate with me. "I didn't reciprocate what you said in the elevator in my building the other day, about me meaning more to you than just sex, and then earlier today, I know I handled you a bit rough. I just wanted you to know that I—you're special to me, Presley. I care about you."

His eyes search mine and I can see the vulnerability in them. He leans in, planting a kiss on my forehead, then the tip of my nose.

“Thank you.” I smile, unsure how to respond. I want to tell him how much I like him, care for him, that I’m falling for him, but I freeze.

“I think I heard your stomach growl a moment ago so let’s get you fed.” He releases me, stepping into my kitchen and pointing toward the cabinets. “Plates?”

“I’ll get them; you unpack the food.” I grab two plates and silverware as he removes his shoes, then proceeds to pull out several containers of pasta, shrimp salad, regular salad, a panini, and even a dessert or two.

“Are more people coming over?” I laugh as I reach for two wineglasses and the corkscrew. “Or are you eating for two?”

He steps up behind me, grabbing the glasses from the shelf I’m attempting to reach, and places them on the counter. His body is pressed slightly against me. He reaches up, pulling my hair back to expose my neck as he leans in to kiss it gently.

“You might be after I forgot protection earlier.”

My eyes flutter at the contact of his warm breath against my skin, his hand coming around to rest against my lower belly. Heat unfurls in my body, but it’s not just because of his proximity; it’s because of what he just said. Instead of sounding scared, he almost sounds—hopeful.

“Let’s hope not,” I say playfully, attempting to dissipate the tension.

He turns me to face him, his hips pressing me into the counter as his hands slide up my body to rest on either side of my face. He stares at me; his eyes look as though they’re trying to convey something.

“Would you tell me if you were?”

My mouth falls open, shocked at the question, but I quickly nod my head. “Yes, yes, of course.”

“Good.” He leans in, kissing me, this time his tongue sweeping into my mouth several times. When he pulls back, his expression has completely changed. “Now, let’s eat.”

He dishes up a plate of food for each of us while I pour us a glass of wine.

“Sorry again. I don’t really have space for a dinner table in here,” I apologize as we sit on the couch to eat.

“No apology necessary.”

We sit and eat in silence for a few moments before he asks, “So why are you home alone on a Friday night?”

“I’m usually home alone on a Friday night.” I laugh. “My birthday celebration was the first time I’ve gone out in almost two years.” He raises his eyebrows in surprise as he takes a sip of his wine. “What about you, Mr. Gates? Why aren’t you out with models at some hot new club on a Friday night? Oh wait, I forgot. That’s why you hired me to keep you in line.”

He looks over at me with an unamused expression on his face. “*That* is not the reason why I’m not out doing those things. I’d much rather be here with you. Besides, I’m an old man now.”

“You’d rather be in a tiny apartment with a woman who’s already in her pajamas before eight p.m. than hanging out with hot models?” I roll my eyes. “We both know that’s not true.”

He slowly places his plate on the coffee table, then reaches for me after doing the same with my plate.

“Hey, I wasn’t do—” Before I can finish, he’s grabbing my arm and pulling me to my feet. I stumble and he pulls me down so that I’m sitting on his lap.

“Do we need to have a little talk again, Miss James, about that tongue of yours?” His hand is planted firmly at the base of my neck, keeping my gaze focused on him. “I recognize that you are probably sore from your punishment earlier today but don’t think I can’t come up with plenty of other creative ways to send a message. I am here tonight because I want to be. I don’t care if we don’t fuck, if we watch a movie, or talk about nonsense all night. I’m here because I want to be with you.” He reaches up with his other hand and gently taps the underside of my chin. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl.” He helps me up and turns me to sit back on the couch. “Now, finish your dinner.”

“What were you like in school?” I ask as I recline on the couch, my feet casually in Cyrus’ lap as he rubs them. We finished dinner, had a little dessert, and have been sipping on our wine for the last hour as we talk about anything and everything.

“High school or college?”

“Both.” The wine has made me warm, relaxed, all insecurities about earlier gone.

“During high school and college, I was outgoing, quarterback on the football team, class president. Grad school, not as much. I still played football and was active in some groups, editor of the *Booth Review*, but kept more to myself.”

“Any particular reason why?” I have a pretty good idea why considering everything Lisa told me about his father but I don’t want to offer up that information. Part of me feels guilty that I know so much about it already.

He finishes his wine, reaching for the bottle. He offers it to me first, topping mine off before finishing the rest himself.

“Life had started to get complicated for me by then. My father’s business took a turn and there was some bad press. I just wanted to remain focused on school and at that point I had started to develop my own plan to become an entrepreneur.”

I’m tempted to ask him more about his father but decide against it. “Did you know back then what you wanted to do or you just knew you wanted to work for yourself?”

“Both. I had taken a big interest in mergers and acquisitions at that point. I had realized that if you were able to buy one company, you could essentially sell some of it off to fund buying another company and so on.”

“Did business come easy to you?”

“I guess you could say that. I knew how to negotiate, how to read people. Not to say there wasn’t plenty of trial and error along the way, but I guess that’s another thing I had in spades

—thick skin. I never let a setback deter me or convince me that I couldn't do something. It only lit that fire inside me all the more."

"That's attractive."

He looks over at me, his thumb rubbing my insole. "And here I thought that's what you hated about me, the drive to conquer and subdue." He's teasing me, the slow, deep massage of his thumb into my foot sending a tingle straight up my leg. "Or do you have a thing for bad men?"

I giggle, remembering the night I first met him and told him he wasn't a nice man. "Maybe I do. I've always been attracted to confidence. I think that's what my issue with men in the past has been actually."

"Intriguing, Go on."

"I—" I take another big gulp of wine, the alcohol already lowering my inhibitions enough that I feel I can open up to him more than I ever thought I would on this subject. "In college, or since I can remember actually, I've struggled with attraction. My friends would be head over heels in lust with some guy, going on and on about how hot he was and that they wanted to rip his clothes off—the usual, you know. But I never felt that, not even with the guys I dated."

"Any particular reason why?"

"Confidence. They were cocky, but when it came to me, to 'getting' me, to pleasing me in the bedroom, there was no confidence. Even when they kissed me, it was very bland, vanilla." This is probably one of those moments where tomorrow I'll think back on it and wish the couch had swallowed me whole, but right now, it feels good to express it to him. I want to tell him.

"I can understand those desires. Do you feel they're met with me?"

I stare at him. Just the way he's sitting right now makes me want to climb on top of him. His legs are spread wide; they're long, taking up space. He's the one who grabbed my legs and put them in his lap; he's the one earlier who pulled me to him.

“Yes, very much so,” I say emphatically. “Just the fact that you showed up here tonight, unprompted. You say the most bold and sometimes crass things unapologetically. You take what you want. Apart from your status in life, your money and power, I feel like even if you didn’t have those things, you’d be the same man. You just seem to know exactly what you want.”

“I’m sure age does have something to do with that,” he says slowly. “Also, life experiences but I appreciate the compliments.”

“Maybe that’s what I need then,” I say, finishing my wine and leaning over to place my glass on the table.

“What’s that?”

“An older man.”

He laughs. “Is that right? Perhaps one who’s also your professor?”

That little flutter of excitement is back. “Is it bad that the professor factor makes it even hotter?”

“Not bad, no. Not surprising either. You seem to have an affinity for the forbidden.” He smirks.

“Must be all those years of being the good girl; it’s finally catching up to me. All those years of denying myself.” I wriggle my eyebrows playfully.

“Denying yourself of old men.” He laughs and I playfully kick at him, but he grabs my foot, pressing it against his thigh. “Am I your first?”

I nod my head. “The other guys were my age when I was in college.”

“Ah yes, and I was”—he squints an eye like he’s calculating—“already forty by the time you started college.”

“Does that bother you?”

I flex my other foot that’s resting in his lap, my toes running along his cock. He looks down at what I’m doing, his length already hardening against my foot.

“Sometimes. I feel like a creep if I think about it too hard.”

I sit up, pulling my feet back and crawling toward him. I reach down, sliding my hand along him as I kiss him. I reach for the button of his pants, undoing it along with his zipper.

“Then don’t think about it,” I say as I reach into his pants, my fingers wrapping around him as I deepen our kiss. His eyes stay focused on mine as I toy with him. I reach up with my left hand, attempting to unbutton his shirt but I struggle.

“What do you want?”

“Undo your shirt.”

He unbuttons it as I stand up, moving to situate myself between his legs. He looks so sexy, so relaxed as he leans back on my couch, his shirt hanging open, his pants undone.

I lean forward, running my tongue up his chest to his neck till my lips are at his ear. “Can I please you?”

“Only if I get my turn with you after,” he says, settling back against the couch further as I sink to my knees. I free his cock, wrapping my hand around it as I bring my lips down to wrap around the tip for a brief second.

“This right here is something I’ve wanted.”

He looks down at me. “You’ve had me in your mouth before.”

I shake my head no. “You asked me before what I wanted to explore, what turned me on. This does, having Cyrus Gates, powerful billionaire at my mercy.” I take him in my mouth again, bobbing up and down his shaft a few times. “Letting me be in control of you.”

“You keep doing that, baby, and I’ll sign my entire fucking life away to you.” His words are strained as he lifts my hair, watching my every move.

I tease him, swirling my tongue around him, taking him deeper down my throat than I ever have while stroking him. He moans my name, his breathing growing heavy as he stares down his body at what I’m doing to him.

“You want me to finish?” He pants and I nod my head yes. His eyes flutter closed and his head lulls back as his hips lift off the couch slightly. I can taste his release, and I swallow it down as his body finally relaxes.

I walk to the bathroom to brush my teeth and a moment later, he’s in the doorway, his shirt and pants still undone. He leans against the doorway as I lean against the counter, brushing. It feels natural, like we’re just a typical couple. That warm feeling settles into my belly again, followed by panic. I’m not sure if it’s the wine that’s making me suddenly allow myself to get lost in these little momentary fantasies where I think he actually wants a future with me or all the sex, but I remind myself that this is exactly what it is, a physical thing.

“What’s going through that pretty head of yours?”

I smile, not giving anything away as I reach for the hand towel. “Nothing.”

“Hmm.” He reaches out and pulls me toward him. “Are you lying to me, Presley?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, sir.” I smile. I finish brushing, then turn back to him. “Teach me.”

“Teach you?” He cocks his head.

“How to be like you. How to not care what people think about you. How to not be afraid to take what you want.”

He smiles, his hand coming up to rub against his jaw. “You don’t want that; you’re far too good”—he steps up next to me, placing a hand on my waist—“far too kind to be heartless like me.” He looks at me in the reflection of the mirror. “Keep that good heart of yours; it’ll come in handy someday.”

I place my hands over his that have come to wrap around me. I look at us in the mirror. His eyes drop down to our hands resting against my belly. He looks sad. I’m about to ask him what’s on his mind but I don’t get the chance.

“Can I take you to bed?”

“Yes.”

We walk to my bedroom, his lips on my neck, his hands on my waist as he lifts my pajama shirt over my head. “I love when you don’t wear a bra.” His hands drift down to cup my breasts. I lean against his chest, the scratch of the hair on his chest against my back tickling me slightly.

“And I like when you don’t wear a shirt.”

“Maybe I can arrange that more often. Topless Tuesdays?” he teases as he releases me to spin me around.

I reach up, sliding his shirt off his broad shoulders, all the way down his arms and he removes his pants and underwear right after.

“Come here.” He puts his thumbs in the waistband of my shorts and panties, gliding them down my thighs as he drops to his knees in front of me. “Turn,” he says, guiding me so that my ass is eye level to him. He runs his hands softly over my skin. “Does it hurt?”

I look back and down at him over my shoulder as his gaze stays fixed on my ass. “A little.”

He looks at me, then leans in to plant a few kisses. “I’ll be gentle with you tonight, I promise.”

“Is that what you *want* to do—be gentle?”

He continues to kiss and lick me, dragging his tongue up my body while he stands up. “Yes. I want to show you how good I can make you feel. I want to spend all night worshipping your body, Presley.”

He kisses me, walking me back to the bed where he spends an hour buried between my thighs, devouring me. His tongue knows just how to flick, tease, lick, his fingers finding every perfect angle inside me to bring me to orgasm.

When he does finally enter me, my body is on edge already, so primed, so ready to feel his body move over me. Everything about the way he moves and touches me is erotic; the way he kisses me is like he’s fucking my mouth with his tongue.

“Are you ready for me, sweetheart?” He pins my hands over my head, his cock already pressing into me.

“Yesss,” I moan as my back arches, my thighs falling open to finally welcome him inside me. He inches his way inside me, his head falling forward as his lips wrap around one nipple and then the other.

“God, you feel so good, so fucking good.” He grunts, sliding out and back in slowly. His movements are slow and long, nothing rushed or rough. “Look at me, Presley.”

I open my eyes, his staring into mine right above me. His lips are close to mine, his breath warm against them as he continues to move inside me. Something about this is different than any other time we’ve been together. It’s not just slow; it’s romantic, emotional. My chest tightens as I try to decipher what his eyes are saying but I’m scared. Scared to read into things. I know he meant it earlier when he says that I mean something to him, that I’m special and he cares for me, but this, this feels like so much more than that.

An hour later I’m lying on top of him, my chin resting on my hands that are folded across his chest while he’s on his back. His hand is behind his head, resting against a pillow as the other plays with my hair.

“What’s on your mind?” I finally ask, unsure about if I really want to hear the answer.

“The weight of the world.” He smiles, silence settling between us before he speaks again. “I think there’s something going on right under my nose and I can’t figure it out.”

“What do you mean?”

“This Meridian deal. Nelson seems off. He’s been particularly up my ass lately, to the point I had to raise my voice at him, something I don’t like doing. He isn’t leaving well enough alone.”

“Oh.” That was not the answer I was expecting. “Did something specific happen?”

He looks away from me toward the window where the glow of the moon peeks through the curtains. “No, just a gut

feeling and my gut is never wrong. I hate that I can't put a finger on it though."

"Anything I can do to help?" I know there's nothing but I hate seeing him this way. I sit up, placing my hand next to his waist as I prop myself up on it, my other resting on his chest.

He looks back toward me, a slight smile on his lips as he stares at me. "You are so beautiful." His words are quiet, his hand coming up to brush against my cheek. "I'll be okay, baby. Just being here with you helps."

I lean into his hand, turning my face to plant a kiss on the inside of his palm. "Will you stay?" I take the chance, my breath catching in my throat.

"It'll never work, Presley." Sadness is back in his eyes. He answers a question I didn't even ask, at least not one that I verbalized, but I didn't have to. I can only imagine that it's been written on my face most of the night.

"Why not?" I whisper back. I feel the threat of tears, but I refuse to let them fall.

"Because you are sweet and good; you have a heart of glass, and I don't have one at all."

I want to tell him that he can try, that he doesn't have to be this person the world thinks he is, but I know there's no point. He's already resigned himself to the fate that the poor choices of his past have paved the way for his future.

"Just stay tonight, please."

"Just tonight," he repeats, pulling me into his arms.

Chapter 23

Cyrus

I've barely slept since spending the night with Presley in my arms a week ago. I toss and turn, flipping my pillow to the cold side, only to flip it back over a moment later. Finally, I give up, tossing the sheets to the side and flinging my legs over the edge of my bed.

The image of her sitting on my bed that night I gave her a tour of my house rushes back. Part of me is glad that she didn't let anything happen between us in this room because it would be a million times harder trying to sleep in it after... but part of me regrets it, wishing I had the memory of her in my bed just once.

I stand up, reaching for my phone to see that it's just after four a.m. I stretch, then walk over to my closet to change into my gym clothes. I flick on the light, standing there, staring, deciding a second later that I don't have the energy after a week of restless sleep.

The thought of coffee makes me trudge downstairs. I brew a double espresso and take it back upstairs to my office. I sink back in my chair, sulking at the fact that not only have I been left an insomniac since leaving Presley's apartment, but because of both of our busy schedules, I've barely seen her since. Hell, I haven't even kissed her since the morning I left her sleeping with just a peck on her forehead. I had left her a note, explaining that I had an appointment to get my car serviced that morning. A half-truth, because I called the dealership as I left her place to see if they could, in fact, squeeze me in for an oil change.

I had wanted to stay in bed with her, lazing through the morning with perhaps a late brunch, but after our exchange the night before, I needed some space or I knew I'd be the one to let the words slip—the words we both know were hanging between us all night.

Not surprisingly, the following Monday in class, Presley acted as if nothing had happened... a coping mechanism I'm guessing or perhaps it really didn't mean to her what I thought it did. She smiled, talking animatedly to Serenity and offering me a flirty wave and smile as she exited the classroom. She even sent me a funny text on Tuesday with a meme comparing me to Frankenstein since I told her I didn't have a heart.

“What the fuck,” I groan, feeling sorry for myself.

In a matter of only a few months, this woman has become my friend, the only person I want to share my thoughts and feelings with, the person I want to call or run to when I'm feeling frustrated or need to talk through what I'm thinking. She always knows what to say to talk me down or help me make sense of something.

I wish she had questioned me further that night about why things wouldn't work between us... I wish I'd been man enough to just tell her why. It's not because of this Meridian deal, which is what I'm sure she thinks it is. It's because she deserves someone who can give her a real life. Not someone twenty-plus years older that she'll have to take care of someday. Not someone who's already destroyed his reputation and she'll inherit it, living her life trying to defend it or end up resenting me because of it.

This is when the pity party really starts to settle in for me. I want her to know that I'm not tossing her aside because some deal or money is more important to me. I'm falling in love with her... I think I'm already there and that terrifies me because she's far too good for a man like me.

By the time I'm on my second coffee and thoroughly exhausted from the mental gymnastics I've put myself through this morning, it's been two hours. I watch the sun peek over the horizon, casting a bright-orange glow over Lake Michigan.

It's that time of year in Chicago, where we have officially entered spring, so we're blessed with a sixty-degree day or two in a row with sunny skies, only to have a weekend of snow and clouds as winter rears its ugly head again. Today looks like it's going to be one of the good days.

I head down the hall to my bedroom, reaching for my phone to check the time when I see a text from Presley.

Presley: *Good morning, sir. Don't forget our run tonight. I was thinking we could do it on the lakefront since it's supposed to reach sixty today? I'll meet you earlier at your place. Four work? I have a date with Serenity later.*

My heart almost falls through my ass when I see the word date, but I'm quickly relieved to see it's with Serenity. I smile, typing out a response and hitting send.

Me: *Good morning, beautiful. Four works great. See you then.*

“I OWE YOU AN APOLOGY,” PRESLEY SAYS, WIPING AWAY A few beads of sweat from her forehead.

“For?”

“You told me that I'd be fine running this race and you're right. I can't believe how easy four miles is after only a few weeks of training.”

We stroll along the lakefront after finishing our run. I look over at her and shake my head. “And yet you sure did throw a temper tantrum when I told you you were running this damn thing with me.”

“I did not.” She playfully smacks my arm. “I simply wasn't expecting to have to do it is all.”

“Is that all?” I ask hopefully.

“Well, that and”—she twists the end of her ponytail—“I was really nervous about the idea of being in forced proximity to you.”

“Forced proximity?” I scoff. “Damn, you know how to make a man feel special.”

“No, I mean—I was really attracted to you and intimidated by you so the thought of being around you like this made me really nervous.”

“And now?”

“And now I’m still very attracted to you and intimidated by you and nervous around you.” She laughs.

I loop my arm around her neck, pulling her against me, the sound of her laugh making me feel all warm and fuzzy.

“Do you have time for a shower and a bite to eat before meeting Serenity?”

She looks down at her watch. “Yeah, I think so. We’re not meeting until seven thirty for drinks. I guess it depends on what kind of shower you’re talking about.” She looks up at me with that impish little grin.

“Hmm, well, when you look at me like that, I think we both know what kind of shower it’s going to be.” I smack her on the ass as we cross the street to head back over to my house.

We barely make it through the door before I’m peeling her sweaty clothes off her, leaving a trail up the stairs to my bathroom where I place her on the counter so I can eat her pussy.

I pull her up to a sitting position, stepping between her thighs to kiss her deeply. “What kind of shower do you want this to be, Presley?” Her eyes are glassy, her lips puffy. “I want to hear you say what you want me to do to you. I know you like when I take charge—I see it in your eyes—but I know there’s something in that brain of yours right now, something on the tip of your tongue. I want to know what you’re too scared to say.”

“I—” Her eyes drift away from mine as her cheeks redden.

“Look at me, baby. Right here,” I say. “When you tell me things, like when you were kneeling between my legs at your

house and told me how you liked having me at your mercy, that was a big turn-on for me.”

“It was?”

“Why do you think I came so fast? I like hearing filthy little things come out of your sweet, innocent mouth, baby. That’s one of my kinks, knowing that to everyone else you’re a good girl, but with me, you’re free to be as naughty as you want to be.” I lean in, my tongue licking a drop of sweat from her neck. “I can’t tell you how hot it gets me to teach your class and look at you, knowing that I’ve heard you tell me you like to suck my cock. Knowing that nobody else in the room has seen you stuffed with my cum dripping out of your cunt.”

Her fingers gripping the edge of the counter, I can hear her breathing pick up. I lean back, and she licks her lips.

“I want you to fuck me.”

“Mmm, that’s better. Fuck you how, baby?”

“Fuck me hard, from behind.”

“That sounds lovely, but how do good girls ask?”

“Please fuck me hard from behind... daddy.”

“Ohhhh, fuck,” I groan, hearing her call me that. “I was just looking for please, but hearing you call me that—” I grab her by the back of the neck and pull her off the counter roughly as I pull my shirt off and step out of my pants. “That’s going to get you wrecked, sweetheart.”

I don’t even get her in the shower before I’m bending her over the counter and sinking my cock deep inside her in one long stroke. My hands grip her hips as I watch her face in the mirror, her tits bouncing with every thrust.

After taking her from behind, I place her ass on the counter, her legs around my hips. The mirror is fogged up with steam that billows out of the shower that’s been running. We’re both panting, so this time I slow my pace, pumping in and out of her as I stare down at her body covered in sweat.

“I’ll never get this image out of my head,” I say, holding her hips as she leans back against the mirror, watching myself

slide in and out of her. “I love watching your pussy swallow my cock like this.” I grit my teeth, my balls tightening. Her little mewls, moans, and the way her eyes roll back in her head send me over the edge.

“Come here, baby.” I pull her up, her limp arms hanging around my neck as I pull her off the counter and carry her to the shower, both of us spent after multiple orgasms.

I take my time, lathering her body with soap, massaging her scalp. When we’re finished showering, I dry her off, wrapping her body in a large towel.

“I feel like I ran ten miles.” She smiles lazily as she walks out of my bathroom toward my bed. She flops back on the bed, her towel parted slightly. I tighten the towel on my hips, my cock already stirring again at the sight of her bare legs.

“You look like you just spent the day at the spa.” I stand over her. She lifts her foot, pressing it gently against my belly. I grab it, massaging it slowly. I can feel those same feelings welling up again seeing her in my bed; it feels like she belongs there.

“I don’t want to leave.”

“No? Why not?”

“I want to stay here with you.” She pouts her lips.

“I’m flattered but I’m sure Serenity would be disappointed.”

She shrugs. “Maybe, but I’m the one who asked her out to drinks so I’m sure she wouldn’t care too much if I canceled.”

“And what would you want to do if you stayed here?”

She gives me that look, her teeth biting down on her bottom lip as the corners curl into a smile.

“Someone is insatiable.” I drop her foot and crawl over her. “You’re a greedy little thing, aren’t you?”

“It’s your fault.” We’re inches apart as I hover over her body, my feet still on the ground, my arms propping me up.

“My fault? You’re the one who teased me. A man can only take so much sweet temptation.” I drag my nose up her neck.

“Do you want me to stay?”

I pull back to look at her, contemplating my answer. “I do, but it feels selfish. I don’t want you canceling plans with your friends to be with me.”

I can see a touch of disappointment in her eyes. I know what she wants me to say; she wants me to say yes, no matter what, and while I feel that way, I really don’t want her to alter her life or her plans for me.

“Can we—just be honest. What do we have to lose? Why can’t we both just say what we feel instead of holding back?”

Her eyes search mine as I let her words sink in.

“Tell me,” she whispers.

Fuck it.

“Fine, yes, I want you to stay with me. I haven’t been able to sleep since the night I slept with you. I’ve thought of you in my bed every night since I gave you the tour of my house and you sat on it. I’ve regretted not having you in my bed, of not holding you in it.” I reach down and undo her towel fully, running my hands up her thigh to her waist. “No other woman has ever been in this bed, and I don’t want to see another woman in it besides you.” I lean down and kiss both of her nipples softly, her hands coming to tangle in my hair.

“More. Say more.”

“I don’t know what I’m feeling, but it scares me. Since the moment I saw you in class, I haven’t stopped thinking about you. You make me want to run away from everything and get lost in you.”

I drag my lips down her body, my mind drunk on lust. I know that I might regret saying all this, or maybe I won’t, but the outcome between us is still the same. Maybe she’s right; maybe I should just throw caution to the wind and fully lose myself in her tonight because I know that when this is all over, once she’s done with school, the race is over, the Meridian

deal done, and I no longer need her services as my publicist... the fantasy is over and I have to let her go.

I stand up, walking over to her bag where she left her cell phone and reach for it, bringing it back over to her and tossing it on the bed.

“Text Serenity. You’re not going out tonight.”

I hold Presley in my arms. She’s fast asleep after hours spent lost in each other. I stare up at the ceiling, sleep eluding me. I turn to look at the clock; it’s only just after midnight.

I know that I love this woman, but I also know that I need to start putting some space between us. The race is in two weeks. After that, she has graduation in a month, and based on the last two meetings with Meridian, this deal will close somewhere in the middle of it all.

If I were twenty years younger—hell, even a decade—I’d pursue her wholeheartedly. I would have told her that night I stayed at her apartment that I loved her. But I can’t rob her of finding someone her own age, someone like Forrest. My stomach clenches at the thought, but I saw the way he looked at her. I know that he has everything going for him. Maybe I can even sell her on the idea that he’s just a younger version of me.

I’m a bastard, I know it. A selfish asshole who was perfectly willing to indulge in every physical escape with this woman all while selling her a lie that it was just sex, letting her think that we could keep it like that between us and no one would get hurt. Then it hits me. Maybe she is capable of that. Maybe I’m the only one who is going to end up getting hurt when this is all said and done.

I tilt my chin down and kiss the top of her head, a tear threatening to fall from the corner of my eye. My chest burns. It feels like I’m falling in love and walking away from it in the same breath... because I am.

Chapter 24

Presley

Two Weeks Later...

I flip through the different streaming services I'm subscribed to, giving up after finding nothing that sounds interesting on yet another Friday night alone. I lean back further into the couch, shoving a handful of popcorn into my mouth as I reach for my phone, checking it for probably the tenth time in as many minutes.

I haven't talked to Cyrus outside of work since the last night we spent together at his house. I can't help but think he's avoiding me. After class, he darts out before I can even grab my bag. I've sent him a few texts, only one of which he's responded to, and it was just a smiley face.

I toss my phone back on the couch, sulking. Serenity has also been busy. Between our end of semester rapidly approaching, work, and her boyfriend's sister's wedding that she's part of, we've also barely hung out in the last few weeks.

The race is tomorrow. I've been so excited about it that I'm trying not to let the last two weeks ruin that for me. I stretch out on my couch, closing my eyes and replaying the things that Cyrus said to me.

I hadn't actually expected him to reveal so much, to tell me that he was feeling something for me. Butterflies dance through my lower belly as I picture the look he gave me. I know he's falling for me, but he's scared, just like I am. I didn't tell him how I felt, mainly because I know I'm in love with him and I know I would have said it, but I also didn't express my feelings because he didn't ask. Maybe that's petty, but I don't think he wanted to hear it because I think he

regretted expressing his feelings to me. Maybe because he wasn't ready yet or maybe because he doesn't want to feel that way about me.

I groan, tossing my arm over my face. Just have fun tomorrow, be your normal happy self, and see how it goes. Maybe this is all in my head, I tell myself.

“ARE YOU READY TO DO THIS?” I LOOK UP AT CYRUS AS WE wait at the start line of the race.

“I am. Thanks, by the way”—he bumps my shoulder, flashing me that playful smirk I haven't seen in a few weeks —“for getting me into this mess.”

“Oh, you know you've loved leading up to all this. All your unorthodox training methods you put me through.” I bounce my eyebrows and it makes him laugh. “Are you blushing, Mr. Gates?” I tease him and it feels like things are back to normal between us.

I let out a sigh of relief, realizing that I had built up this scenario in my head that he was pulling away from me after revealing his feelings.

“You're not going to take off and leave me in the dust, are you? I guess we never discussed our race day strategy.”

“Actually, I was planning on pushing you down and taking off so that I can win this thing. I can't have my picture taken crossing the finish line behind everyone else.” He winks at me. “I play to win, baby.”

Giddy excitement rushes through me when he calls me baby again, like I've been holding my breath, waiting on his every word just to confirm that he still likes me.

“Welcome, runners, to the annual PAWS 5k at Montrose Beach!” The announcer's voice booms over the speakers as the thousands of runners let out a chorus of cheers. “Get ready, runners. On your mark, go!”

The buzzer sounds and we take off at a leisurely pace. I appreciate that Cyrus practically cuts his stride in half to stay with me.

“Are you ready for graduation?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I say as we navigate our way around some walkers. “It will be weird, not being a student anymore.”

“Have you discussed with Lisa about transitioning full-time after?”

“Not yet but she’s mentioned it a few times and we have a meeting set up after graduation to discuss it.”

“Good.” We focus on our running for a bit, something still feeling a little off between us. “Has she discussed who you’ll be working with?”

“What do you mean?”

“After the contract with me is up.”

“Oh.” I trip on my foot, his hand darting out to catch me.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I play it off. “Uh, no, we haven’t discussed that. I guess I didn’t realize that your contract was ending soon.”

“Well, we don’t have a specific date set in stone, but it was kind of an understanding between she and I that she was helping me get through this Meridian deal.”

“Is there a final meeting or acquisition date set? I didn’t think there was yet.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Not yet but soon. The expectation is within the next few weeks.”

We round the corner and the finish line comes into view. I’m a little taken aback. Obviously, I knew that my time with him as my professor was limited, but I hadn’t realized that he was only going to use a PR firm until this deal was closed. Panic starts to bubble up at the realization that I’ll have zero reason to see him anymore, to be a part of his life.

“So, you’re no longer going to be my professor and soon, you’ll no longer be my client...” I try to put a positive spin on the situation.

He looks over at me. “Yes?”

“Meaning that there’s no reason to hide anything anymore.”

He chuckles and it feels a little forced. “I thought that was the appeal? You and your forbidden bad girl fantasy.”

“I mean, yeah, I guess I—” My words trail off. Is that why he’s been so distant? He knew things were coming to an end and he thought that this was still just about me and my little wild oats.

“And crossing the finish line is our very own sponsor and biggest supporter, Mr. Cyrus Gates!” The announcer interrupts our conversation as we cross the finish line, cheers erupting for Cyrus as several photographers snap photos of him as a medal is placed around our necks by volunteers.

I smile and clap, catching his gaze briefly before he turns to be interviewed by a local news station. I stay back, watching him smile and talk about the cause that he cares so much about.

A crowd of people gather around him and slowly edge me out. It feels like a very realistic depiction of the feelings I’m experiencing. Standing on the edge of his world, just on the outside, not really part of it but wishing so badly I could be.

There’s no point in waiting around for him. I did my job which was getting him to the race and finishing it with him. I pull out my phone and send him a text to thank him and let him know that I’m heading home.

CYRUS: *CAN WE TALK?*

I stare at the message on my screen as I lean against my kitchen island, waiting for my microwave meal to finish

cooking. My appetite is suddenly gone. After our conversation during the race today and the ominous *can we talk* text, I know it's not good.

Me: *Yeah, of course. Now?*

A moment after I hit send, my buzzer sounds.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it's me.” I hold down the button and let him in.

“Sorry I once again just showed up here unannounced.” He steps inside, and I close the door behind him.

“It's always a pleasant surprise.” I smile, attempting to hide the fear that is brewing inside me. “Coffee?” I ask, gesturing toward the fresh pot I just brewed.

“No, thank you.”

“So, you wanted to talk?”

He nods, shrugging off his coat and kicking off his shoes. A good sign, I think, meaning he plans to stay and not just ditch me and run.

“Can we sit?” I follow him to the couch, both of us taking a seat. “Thanks again for signing me up for that race. I mean it; I actually had fun... and not just training for it.” He smiles and it gives me hope. “I felt bad though. We were kind of having a serious discussion, or about to it seemed, when we finished and I got caught up in that interview.”

“No apology necessary. It wasn't exactly the ideal time to have a serious conversation.”

He looks over at me, his one arm resting on the back of the couch, the other coming up to do that thing where he runs it over his jaw. Panic grips me. I already know what's coming next and in a last-ditch effort to make him see that I'm worth it, that he should take a chance on me, I just blurt out the words... the words I've been holding in.

“I'm in love with you.”

His eyes give nothing away. He doesn't flinch or seem surprised. He just looks at me, then calmly replies, “You

shouldn't be."

"Why?"

"We both already know the answer to that, Presley. It's not just one reason; it's a multitude."

"Why? Because you're my professor? That's ending. You're not going to be my client after a few weeks. You're too old for me? Who cares as long as neither of us do? I thought that you didn't care what people thought, Cyrus?" I can feel my voice rising an octave as I fight back tears.

"It's more than that. I know you don't care that I'm older, but you're twenty-five; you have a lifetime ahead of you and I won't saddle you with being tied to someone like me, someone whose life is already laid out. It's not like being with me is just about a few more people hating me or judging me for being with a younger woman; it's about you. I've lived a life of being judged in the public eye. You haven't and I won't put you through that."

"So that's it? You just get to make my decisions for me?" I can feel myself becoming defensive, angry. "You know what's best for me?"

"Yes, I have age and life experiences you've never had. I've told you so many times how terrible people can be, that they'll destroy you—"

"Is this about what happened to your father?"

He stills, his eyes narrowing at me. "What?"

"I know about him, Cyrus. I know about how he was fucked over by people; even his friends didn't stand beside him."

"No, that's not what this is about, and frankly, that's none of your business. My father was destroyed by—"

"Not just your father," I interrupt. "You let those people destroy you too. You've taken on this burden that isn't even yours. You saw what happened to him and decided that the only way to prevent it from happening to you was to shut

everyone out, to cut off any chance of happiness because if you have nothing to lose, they can't take anything from you."

I can't hold back the tears any longer. He reaches over to hold my hand, but I pull it away.

"The messed-up part is, you do feel something for me. I've seen it in the way you look at me. You're in love with me too and you think that you're protecting me, but you're hurting me and yourself. You thought that you were preventing others from ruining this, from taking away what we have, but you're the one who's doing it. You made me believe"—I choke on my tears—"you made me want things that I didn't know I wanted. You made me believe that I could have those things with you because you wanted them too."

I'm a mess. My vision is blurring through the tears. I swipe at them furiously but they're falling faster than I can stop them. Cyrus reaches for me, this time pulling me into his arms. I don't have the energy to fight. Instead, I sob into his chest as he rubs my back.

"I'm sorry." He pulls back to look at me. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I tried to be honest from the beginning, telling you that this couldn't be more than just a physical thing between us."

"Then why did you ask me if that's all it was?" I pull back, angry again. "In your elevator, you asked me if that's all you were to me, someone who you could command to fuck you whenever you wanted. Why bait me then? That's cruel."

"It wasn't to bait you. I knew I was falling for you. I wanted to know that you were too. It is cruel, you're right." He releases my arms, standing up. "I'm fucked up and coldhearted. I was beyond selfish in this exchange, Presley." His face hardens, like his walls are going back up. "I used you; that's the bottom line. I wanted to be more to you than just a physical release. I wanted you to need me, crave me, and I wanted to be the only man who could satisfy those needs."

"But you didn't want to feel anything?"

He nods his head yes, and it feels like my heart is being destroyed. “I thought I could remain unattached. I won’t lie to you and say that’s what happened. We both know that, but I’m also not going to pretend that my feelings make all the other shit disappear. This is what I mean, you don’t want a man like me; you deserve someone far better.”

I roll my eyes. “That is such a cop-out. If you think I deserve a better man, then be that better man. It’s that simple.”

“I wish it was.”

“So what was your end game in all this? Seriously, what did you think was going to happen? That you were going to fire me from being your publicist after I graduate so then you could just wash your hands of me and walk away?”

“No, Presley.” Anger flashes through his eyes. “I didn’t and don’t want to hurt you. I wanted you to see through me. I was a coward and should have been honest with you, but I wanted you to see that you can find someone like me but better, younger, who can make you happy.”

“Let me guess. Forrest? The guy you constantly teased me about, then would get jealous at the mere mention of him?” I laugh, dropping my head in my hands. “I was such a fool. This is so messed up.” I stand up and walk over to the front door, opening it. “Please leave.”

“Presley, I’m sorry. Truly.”

“Now,” I say coldly. He walks over and puts on his shoes, sliding his coat on his arms. He turns to look at me one last time as he walks through the doorway. “You’re not the man I thought you were, and congrats, you not only proved that you are exactly like the men you pretend to be better than, but you’re also the first man to break my heart and teach me a very valuable lesson about what my self-worth is.”

I don’t wait for a response. I slam the door in his face and lock it behind him. I press my back to it, a flood of tears ready to burst through at any second as I slowly sink down to the floor.

As much as I want to hate him and as angry and hurt as I am, I cling to the hope that maybe he'll realize what he just lost and come running back to me.

Chapter 25

Cyrus

One Month Later...

“I want to take a moment to thank each of you students for this last semester. In truth, I did not want to teach this class... at all.” A few chuckles echo through the room as I sit on the edge of the desk, my eyes falling on Presley whose mouth is turned into a slight upward smile.

We haven’t spoken since that night at her apartment, at least not outside of a few words here and there regarding this class or work.

“But I have learned a lot from this class. It’s also been refreshing to hear from the younger generation. I have every confidence in each of you—some of you more than others.” The class laughs again. “And on that note, since you all handed in your final when you walked in”—I hold up the stack of reports that the students wrote—“you are free to leave. Congrats to those of you graduating in a few weeks.”

The assignment was one question. After this semester, what does ethics mean to you? There was no minimum word requirement, no expectations other than I wanted them to think through every discussion we had, every scenario we worked through, and to figure out for themselves what that ideology means to them.

“Thanks, Professor Gates,” a few students shout as they leave.

“It was amazing to have you as a professor.” Forrest stops at my desk, extending his hand toward me.

“Thank you, Forrest,” I say, shaking his hand. I glance over his shoulder as Presley walks by.

“Oh, Pres”—he turns to face her—“I have to change the plans a little tonight. Is it cool if I pick you up at eight instead of seven? My mom needs help with some furniture delivery thing.”

“Yeah, of course.” She nods, clearly trying not to make eye contact with me.

“Cool. Anyway, Professor, it’s been real,” he says before turning to half jog out of the classroom.

“Miss James,” I call after her and she freezes, turning back around to walk toward me. “I wanted to thank you, for everything. That speech was mostly directed toward you.” She clutches her bag on her shoulder tightly. “How are you doing?”

“I’m okay, good actually.” She smiles and it gives me a bit of relief. I glance around the room. The two remaining students file out silently. “Is there anything else?”

I want to tell her yes, that I take it all back, that I’m a fool, and then pull her into my arms. “So, you and Forrest, huh?”

She shrugs. “Yeah, I guess.”

I nod. “He’s a good guy.”

“He is.”

“Do you hate me?” I ask nervously.

“No,” she says genuinely, “no, I don’t hate you.”

“Are you happy?”

She sighs, looking away for a moment. “I think so. Are you?”

My heart feels like it’s being choked, but I smile. “Good. That’s all I want for you, Presley. I just want you to be happy.” I feel guilty saying it, knowing that she wanted me in order to be happy, but it seems like she’s moving on from that idea. A thought that makes me both sad and relieved at the same time. Sad that it’s not with me, sad that she’s moving on from me

when I'm so clearly not, and relieved that hopefully she can find peace.

"I should probably get to work."

"Right, sorry. I wanted to also wish you good luck, with graduation and going full-time at Wade."

"Thanks. Good luck with Meridian and... everything." She smiles again, then turns and walks out of the room.

My heart sinks. Everything feels so wrong even though I thought I was making the right decision. I thought this is what's best, that I'd feel validated when I saw her again, but I just feel worse. This can't be the last conversation. It feels like there's so much left unsaid... This can't be the end of us. I grab my coat and I'm about to run after her when I see six missed calls from my lawyer, Terry.

"Fuck, that's not good." I slide my thumb across the screen and call him back. "Hey, what's going on?"

"You need to get over here now." His voice is hushed and he sounds panicked.

"Your office or mine?"

"Mine. Meridian is here, with lawyers. It's not good, Cyrus; it's not good."

I hang up the phone, running down the hallway to my car and racing across the city to Terry's office. I can hear someone's booming voice before I even reach the conference room they're all gathered in.

"It's gone too far, Ken. This—this is beyond inappropriate!"

I walk through the door, the man yelling turning his red, pudgy face toward me, his eyes narrowing.

"You're done," he says, wagging his finger at me.

"Calm down, Rick," Ken says as he stands up and walks over to me. "There's an explanation, I'm sure." He turns to face me. "Seems like there's been a bit of a misunderstanding of sorts regarding you, Cyrus."

“It’s no misunderstanding; it’s an affair.” Rick plops down into a chair across the table from me.

“Would someone, who isn’t yelling, please explain to me what the hell is going on here.”

“Don’t play stupid. We can’t have you running around, having an affair with a woman half your age, your publicist no less.”

That gets my attention. I look over at Ken.

“It seems that there’s a rumor that you and your publicist, who also happens to be one of your students if I’m not wrong, have been having an affair?”

“Based on what exactly?” I attempt to play it cool, taking a seat in one of the high-back chairs.

“There’s a source, Cyrus,” Terry says, looking at me seriously.

“A source?”

“Someone has come forward with accusations,” Rick says smugly. “Look, son...” Instantly, that annoys me. This man has to be within fifteen years of me. “Frankly, I don’t give a shit who you flounce around with or bring into your bed, but the moment it threatens to interfere with my money, then we’ve got a problem.”

“Gentlemen,” I say, holding my hands up to quiet them. “I’m not sure what source or evidence you think you have, but I can assure you it won’t interfere with your money. And frankly, I still can’t understand how you think that my personal life will impact anything to do with Gates Enterprises taking over Meridian. I let you keep the board, didn’t I? They’ll still be making whatever decisions you think they should be making; am I right? You really think your stock is going to plummet just because the parent company who owns them has a CEO who doesn’t fit into some perfect ideal they’ve created?”

“That’s exactly what we fear will happen,” Ken says. “You remember what happened with Centrix, right?”

“Centrix? You mean the company that turned out to basically be a Ponzi scheme and their CEO was funding terrorism? That’s what you’re comparing me to?” I can’t hold back the laugh. “This is a fucking joke. If you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to work. So unless you have an actual concern or proof of any of these accusations, I’ll be on my way.”

I stand, readjusting my coat just as Ken reaches into a folder, placing an enlarged black-and-white photo on the table and sliding it toward me. I look at it, then back up to the men in the room who are all staring at me.

“What the—” My words trail off as I reach out and pick up the photo, taking a closer look at it. It’s a picture of me and Presley kissing in an elevator... my private elevator.

How? Who could have gotten this?

“The evidence of your affair you demanded,” Rick spits at me.

“Stop calling it a fucking affair,” I grit the words out as I stare at the photo.

Nobody besides my security has access to the cameras in this elevator. Nobody would even think to look at them. Then again, money does talk and one thing I’ve learned is everyone has a price.

“Who’s the source?” I say, turning to look at Ken.

“I can’t say.”

“Can’t? Or won’t?” He looks at me, his palms raised upward as he shrugs. “Pathetic,” I mutter, tossing the photo back onto the table and spinning on my heel to march out of the office.

I don’t need a room full of overpriced assholes to tell me what I already know. I yank my car door open harder than necessary, sliding behind the wheel and pulling into traffic to head to Peter Frisk’s office.

“He in?” I ask his secretary, not stopping to give her time to warn him as I march toward his office.

“Mr. Gates. Sir, wait.” She scrambles up from her chair, attempting to chase me down, but it’s no use. I swing the large double doors of his office open.

“You’ve crossed the fucking line.” I point to Peter who’s sitting back at his desk, a smug smile on his ugly face like he was expecting me.

“Cyrus,” he says in that drawn-out nasal accent. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I know it was you. Did you really think I was just going to bend over and take it?”

He laughs. “Trust me, I would love to take the full credit here, but it wasn’t me who did the dirty work. I’m merely the messenger.”

I ball my hands into fists. I hate these fucking games. “Who was it? Who’s the source?”

He stares at me, enjoying having the upper hand. “Oh, what the hell. It was Nelson.” I almost take a step back in shock. Did I hear him correctly? “He came to me, said he knew you were going to lose this deal, and made me an offer. He said he could provide me what I would need to go to Meridian with a better offer.”

I knew my gut wasn’t lying to me, but I sure as shit wasn’t expecting this.

“So that’s it. He told them about Presley and me, and what, you guys think you’re going to snake this deal from me because of that and he’s going to sit at your right hand once you sign the deal with them?”

“Oh, come on now, Cyrus. You’re smarter than that. The photograph in the elevator was just the icing on the cake, a personal vendetta against you from Nelson. The real information was all the nitty-gritty details of your plan for Meridian once the ink was dry. He provided me access to information nobody else had, and it allowed me to craft the perfect offer to them with a fifteen percent higher price tag, better stock options for the board, and no plans to sell off divisions of their company.”

“There were never any plans to sell off any part of their company.”

“Well, Meridian doesn’t know that, but when your CFO comes to them and me and says otherwise, it doesn’t look good, Cyrus.”

“So what now? Nelson is your new CFO?”

He laughs even harder. “Not a chance in hell. I wouldn’t trust that rat with my ex-mother-in-law and that says something because that woman is the spawn of Satan himself. I got what I wanted from Nelson; he can rot for all I care.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “I’ve dealt with a lot of *bottom of the barrel* type people in my day, but this is a new low, even for you. It’s almost like none of you actually give a shit about NDAs or noncompetes or insider information laws, and yet I’m the piece of shit in this deal according to Meridian? I don’t care about my feelings; they’re not hurt. But you’re willing to throw away so much more than your reputation; you’re willing to have charges brought against you? Fuck this deal and fuck you, Peter.”

I turn to walk away, wanting nothing more than to run to Presley and tell her everything. She’s the only person who can give me any sort of relief right now, the only person who can make me feel better about the fact that I really did miss all of this happening right under my nose. That’s what I’m angry about here. Not because they’re trying to fuck me over, but because I ignored my gut and gave Nelson the benefit of the doubt when I knew there was something going on.

“I did you a favor, you know?”

I stop, turning back around. “How do you figure?”

“I revealed a fox in your henhouse, Cyrus. You should be thanking me.”

“Is this your way of trying to be altruistic or sell me some silver lining?”

He smiles. “I tried to warn you at that gala, didn’t I? You thought it was a threat when I told you to get your own house in order. A man you thought you could trust, a man you did

trust for a decade and a half sold you out. That's a pretty damn priceless lesson if I do say so myself."

I sigh, my shoulders falling. "Peter, I learned a long time ago that all of this really is just business and not to take it personally because no matter how well you think you know someone, everyone has a price."

I don't know what I'm going to do, but if it means I have to walk away from this deal to keep Lisa from thinking that it had anything to do with Presley, I'll do it. As far as I know, she hasn't found out and I'll make damn sure that this information doesn't get out or I'll use every last bit of information I have on each and every board member of Meridian. I don't give a shit about this deal anymore. I've lost the only real thing that ever mattered to me.

Chapter 26

Presley

“So, any after graduation plans? Spend a few weeks in Italy, head to Bali?”

“How rich do you think I am?” I laugh, taking a bite of my gelato.

“You could come with my family to Spain,” Forrest says in all seriousness. “My parents would love to have you around.”

“I don’t think Alicia, your new girlfriend, would be too fond of that idea.”

“Probably not.” He laughs, finishing his cone.

While Forrest and I never ended up actually dating, after our one date that we eventually went on, we both agreed that we thought we were better off as friends. It kind of feels like I have a big brother, even though he’s only a year older than me.

“Speaking of, how are things going with you two?”

“Good. Better for sure now that you two have met and she finally realizes there’s nothing to worry about.”

He met Alicia the night he had to leave our celebration early for his parents’ anniversary party. She was one of the waitresses at the restaurant they hosted the party at. He had come to me for advice about her after only two dates. He was head over heels and terrified he was going to screw it up; it was cute. But she saw my name on his phone once and it concerned her since he hadn’t told her about me. It was all a big misunderstanding, something I helped him realize is a pretty big deal in a relationship with a woman—total

transparency about other women in your life. Since then, I've met her and we've talked and she's realized that he and I are truly just friends.

I, on the other hand, knew that Cyrus thought Forrest and I had finally taken the plunge and started dating, especially after the way he mentioned our plans right in front of him earlier today, and I let him believe that we are. Petty? Yeah, probably, but I want him to hurt a little. It was a little validating to see jealousy in his eyes. I worried that he had moved on already. I won't lie. A few nights I've had a bit too much to drink and spent the night searching the internet to see if he's been spotted out and about with any models or socialites. So far, nothing.

"Have you thought about inviting her along?" I ask him.

"I have."

"But?"

"I dunno. I'm worried it will freak her out to be going on a vacation with her boyfriend's family this early in. We've only been official for like seven weeks."

"I get it, but you guys also seem to be really solid in your communication now. Couldn't hurt to just offer it to her and let her know that you understand if it's moving way too fast."

"True." He looks out the window of the café we're at. "I told her I loved her last night."

"Shit!" I swallow down the bite of gelato I just took. "And you're worried that a vacation is moving too fast?" I laugh. "What'd she say when you told her?"

He can't hide the huge grin that spreads across his face. "She said she knew it and that she loved me too."

"Awww. Oh my God." He blushes, waving away my sentiment. He hates when I get sappy about his relationship. "Just ask her on the vacation. I promise, she's going to be excited."

"So, what are you doing after graduation? I assume stay with Wade? I mean, that's kind of a dream job."

I shrug. “Yeah, it really is. But, um, I’ve actually been thinking about moving—away from here.”

“Really? To where?”

“I haven’t discussed it with Lisa yet. We have a meeting tomorrow actually, but I was hoping she could recommend me to a few firms in New York that I want to apply to.”

“Damn, New York? I mean I get it; it’s a great city, but are you sure you want to leave Wade behind? Couldn’t hurt to put in at least two solid years there first.”

“Who knows, nothing is set in stone. It’s just an idea I’m rolling around for now.” I smile, not wanting to go into detail just how serious I am about leaving this city behind. I did my best to pretend that things between Cyrus and me didn’t hurt me as bad as they did, but the truth is, it feels like I’m drowning here and the only way I can save myself is to get out.

“WELL, HOW ARE YOU FEELING? YOU HAVE VERY NEARLY SEEN through an extremely successful contract with Cyrus Gates”—she looks over her glasses at me—“not a very easy task, might I add. You’re about to finish grad school with honors, I hear?”

“Yeah.” I let out a long sigh. “Seems like it all flew by.”

“What’s wrong?” Her smile fades as she studies me.

“Nothing. I’m just exhausted is all. In need of a vacation.” I laugh, trying to sound convincing, but I don’t think she’s buying it.

“You can take some time off, Presley. Don’t think you have to jump into full-time just because your semester is finished. You can stay part-time through summer even. With the close of this Meridian deal, I think we both know that Cyrus won’t be renewing so I can move you over to a different account or let you choose.”

“I appreciate that, Lisa, more than you know, honestly.”

“But?” I see why she’s the best; this woman is beyond perceptive.

“But I have been considering moving.”

“Oh.” She leans back in her chair, removing her glasses.

“To New York.”

“What’s in New York?”

“A change of scenery.” I shrug. “Just something new. I feel a little burned out in Chicago, but I also don’t want to leave here. You have given me the opportunity of a lifetime and I feel like I’m being ungrateful and foolish to even consider walking away from it.”

“Listen, ungrateful and foolish are the last words I would ever use to describe you. You are extremely bright, Presley. You have the world at your fingertips with a fantastic education, incredible experience at such a young age, and ambition. You’d be foolish not to explore other avenues. There are some fantastic firms in New York. I know two that would hire you if I picked up this phone right now. Name a firm. I’ll write you a letter of recommendation. I’ll be your reference. Whatever you need, consider it done. You can even stay in my condo on the Upper West Side for as long as you want.”

“That means so much to me, and again, I can’t thank you enough for taking a chance on me, even if it was out of sheer desperation.” I make her laugh.

“Cyrus was right about you. He has his flaws, but that man is a good judge of character. I hope he didn’t scare you too much working with him?” She lifts an eyebrow suspiciously.

“No, not at all.” I can’t help but smile thinking about my time with him. “He was great and I learned so much.”

“Good. I’ll send you over the information for those two firms I mentioned. If you’re interested, let me know which one and I’ll put in a call.”

“Thanks, Lisa.”

“I CAN’T BELIEVE FORTY-EIGHT HOURS AGO YOU TOLD ME you’re considering moving to New York, and here you are packing for an interview already.” Serenity pouts, refusing to help me pack in protest.

“Who was it just a few months ago telling me they might be moving to who knows where because of their boyfriend’s residency?”

“Yeah, that was before he got the one he wanted here in Chicago.” She flops back dramatically on my bed. “Now what am I going to do? I’ll be stuck having happy hours with my lame coworkers.”

“You know you can come visit me, girls’ weekends in the Hamptons.”

She sits up. “Ohhh, I like the sound of that.”

“See, there’s an upside. Plus, it’s New York. I mean, come on.”

“I just don’t understand why you feel like you can’t find yourself in Chicago. I know, I’m being a shitty friend by wanting you to stay here, but realistically you’ve only lived here for six years and that’s all been through college and now grad school. There’s still so much living we have yet to do now that all that stuff is over with.”

Guilt tugs at my heart. I haven’t told her the real reason I need space to breathe. I plan to tonight. I place the last of my items in my suitcase and zip it up. “Well, you ready to open that rosé you brought over? I’ll explain where my head’s at once I have a glass in my hand.”

“Yes, please!” I follow her to the kitchen and we both pour a generous glass and walk to the couch.

“I, um, there’s another reason why I’m considering moving. I sort of made some decisions that pushed me in that direction.” I swallow down the nerves, telling myself that I

have to tell her about Cyrus. I have to tell someone or I'm going to lose my mind. "I need to tell you something."

"If you tell me you've already signed a lease in New York and this is your last night in Chicago, I'm going to throw up and then cry my eyes out."

"No, I haven't done that and most certainly would not do that. It is about as shocking as that though." I stare at her with a wincing grimace.

"Tell me already! I'm two seconds from freaking out, Pres."

"I fell in love with him." I just blurt the words out with zero context.

"With who? With Forrest? But I thought he was dating someone else? Oh God, is this a love triangle now?"

I purse my lips, shaking my head slowly. "No, not Forrest."

Before I can say his name, she gasps loudly, her hand clamping over her mouth. "Noooo! With Mr. Gates?"

"Yeah. That's about the reaction I expected." I take a few gulps of wine as Serenity's mouth hangs open.

"I—how? When? Oh my God. Did you?"

"Easily, pretty much right away, and oh, yes, a lot."

She places her glass down on the coffee table and stands up, then sits back down, then stands up and begins to pace.

"I can't compute. Seriously, my mind is melting right now. Wait..." Her face softens and she slowly sinks back down on the couch as she puts two and two together. "Is that why you're leaving? You have a broken heart, don't you?"

I nod, tears welling up even though I start to laugh. "I know, I know... you told me. And trust me, you were right. He's not the kind of man I wanted to learn a lesson from."

"Oh, Pres. Oh, sweet girl." She pulls me in for a hug, a warm, big Serenity hug that makes this all so much harder.

“I’m so sorry.” She rubs my back, my tears falling in big drops onto her shoulder.

“I’m such an idiot,” I choke, starting to laugh again.

“No, no, you’re not. He’s an asshole and he took advantage of you.”

“He didn’t,” I say, shaking my head. “We both fell in love, but he was honest with me from the beginning. He told me there was no chance it could ever be anything more than a hookup. And a few times throughout he said something similar. I wanted to blame him. I did blame him, pretty unfairly too when things ended, but I know that I set myself up for failure with all of it.”

Serenity gives me a knowing look. “Listen, girl, I know how you are. You want to believe the best in everyone, but don’t act like you’re not hurt if you are. If he led you to believe there was a chance at something more or encouraged it, then that’s not okay.”

She’s right. I feel the hurt and anger start to bubble up again. “You’re right, he is an asshole,” I agree. “What pisses me off the most about it all is that he hides behind this fear that he doesn’t want to end up like his father. I mean, I get it, his dad basically got screwed over by people and life and no matter how hard he tried to make everyone else happy, he couldn’t. So Cyrus has this mental block that he’s destined to be alone and heartless forever, that if he just pretends to be that person, then nobody can hurt him. But it’s insane. He’s far too smart for that nonsense and he knows it. Bottom line is, he’s a coward and I do deserve better.” The wine is starting to hit me already. “I deserve a man who’s going to show up and be proud to be with me, a man who knows what he wants and isn’t afraid to go after it and get it, no matter the cost!”

“Preach it!” Serenity chimes in, laughing at how worked up I’ve gotten myself. “The real question is, if he showed up right here, right now, and said he fucked up and he’s sorry, would you take him back?”

I think about it for a second. “Yes, but I’d make him work for it.”

“How so?”

“Actually, seeing that it’s Cyrus, I can’t imagine I could make that man do anything. If he showed up here or anywhere for that matter because he wanted to take me back, he probably wouldn’t even give me a chance to say otherwise before he took control of the situation, if you know what I mean.” I feel the warmth of the wine reach my cheeks as I slump back against the couch cushion, memories of some of the things he said and did to me rushing back.

“Have you spoken to him since things ended? When did they end?”

“About a month ago and yeah, just on the last day of class. Since you handed in your assignment early, you weren’t there, but it was very cordial and short. He wished me good luck and asked me if I hated him. He thinks I’m dating Forrest.” I chuckle.

“He does? I bet he’s jealous. He should be. You’re a helluva catch to lose. This is going to sound rude maybe, but did you want it to last? Did you really want a future with him even though he’s older?”

“I did.” I nod. “I suppose it’s not practical, but I’ve never had my life planned out like so many other people. All I wanted was that kind of connection, and it was wonderful while it lasted.”

“And there’s no second chances?”

I shake my head no. “I don’t think so. I had hoped. I thought that he’d come running back, but I don’t think Cyrus Gates is that kind of man.”

We both sip our wine, leaning back against the couch as we let it all sink in.

“Well, shit, this isn’t the good luck at your interview sendoff party I was expecting.” We both laugh. “Damn, I can’t believe you kept it a secret that entire time. Good for you.” She lifts her glass to mine and we toast.

“Want to hear something even crazier?”

“Can it get crazier?”

“Mm-hmm. I was the one who propositioned him with all of this. I mean, he was kind of the one who started blatantly flirting with me and making these little comments, but yeah, that’s why I said I couldn’t blame him.”

“Yup, it got crazier.” She laughs, drinking her wine, then looks over at me. “Is it too soon to ask how *it* was?”

“Oh God.” I cover my face with my hand. “That conversation is going to require tequila or anything a lot stronger than wine.”

Serenity jumps off the couch, running over to my liquor cabinet to grab a bottle of tequila and two shot glasses, returning to the couch in a flash.

“Tell. Me. Everything.”

Chapter 27

Cyrus

“Is this *the* meeting? Are they signing the deal?” Nelson falls in step beside me, his short legs working twice as hard to keep up with my stride as we make our way to the conference room where everyone is waiting.

I called a meeting with the entire board of Meridian; Ken Felps, their CEO; and their lawyers with zero context. Nelson doesn't know that they came to me a few days ago with the photo he so generously supplied to Peter who in turn gave it to them. Truthfully, I wish I knew what the hell was going on in Nelson's head. How did he think this was going to play out? That they'd pull the deal, offer it to Peter, and then he'd quit and go work for him, and I'd be none the wiser? He clearly takes me for a fool.

“Just need to say a few final things to everyone, make sure we're all on the same page about this deal and the direction it's going.” I offer him a tight-lipped smile as I punch the button to call the elevator. “How are you feeling about things, Nelson?” I grab his shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

“Solid, sir. I think we are moving in the right direction, and I have to say, I have a good feeling about my fut—our future.” He smiles back at me, and it takes everything I have not to laugh in his face and tell him to cut the shit.

“Good deal,” I say, stepping into the elevator after him.

“And, sir, can I just say I'm sorry if I overstepped with things regarding Miss James. You're right. I had no business getting involved in that and you *clearly* were able to handle

things professionally. Going forward, I'll stick to my business and let you handle yours."

I can hear the smug tone of his voice, the arrogance practically dripping from his lips. He thinks he's gotten away with it. That little spark of excitement begins to burn in my chest. If there's one thing I love, it's holding my cards close to the vest and at the last minute, revealing them... after my victim thinks they're safe, but by then it's too late. They realize that this entire time they were being stalked by a predator more vicious than they could have imagined.

"Gentlemen," I acknowledge the men sitting at the table as I enter the conference room. There is a stack of folders already in the center of the large wooden table, a request I made to Abigail before the meeting convened. "I use that term very loosely because I think we can all agree that none of you in this room are actually gentlemen."

Their faces immediately morph from smiles and head nods to anger and confusion. They glance around at one another, seeing if they misheard me.

"Let me just cut to the chase as to why I've called this meeting. I'm not interested in a deal with Meridian."

Gasps echo throughout the room. Ken laughs nervously. "Cyrus, what? What's going on?"

"There's no deal. I'm pulling it."

"You can't do that. You can't back out of a contractual obligation. We'll sue," Rick, their lead attorney, says, already raising his voice.

I stand up, chuckling at the idea that he thinks I haven't thought of that. "I'm aware of the contractual obligations. I'm also very prepared for your threat to sue me. So here's my counteroffer." I place my fingertips on the table, leaning forward and leveling my eyes at Rick. "Take the deal with Peter Frisk."

The room is dead silent. Ken glances at Rick who looks back at him, then to a few of the others.

“If you thought that I was going to fight to keep this deal while you attempted to blackmail me into your demands based on a private relationship I had with my publicist; meanwhile, you were going behind my back to Peter Frisk and shopping for another deal, then clearly you don’t know who the fuck you’re dealing with. You can take your threats and your offer and shove them up your ass.”

Nelson is glowing red, his eyes about to bug out of his head. I’m still waiting for the right moment to reveal to him in front of everyone that I know it was him.

“Cyrus, we didn’t make any decisions. We were simply pointing out a concern we had about you and this publicist. Come on.” Ken’s voice is growing frantic; he’s almost begging, and it would be flattering if it weren’t so pathetic.

“Now, another reason why I know that all you soulless assholes in here forgot who the fuck I am,” I say, leaning over to grab the stack of files from the table and placing it in front of me. “Is because I’ve had a file on each and every one of you since before this deal happened. The second we even mentioned the idea of Gates Enterprises acquiring Meridian, I did my due diligence and then some.” I see the panicked look spreading from face to face in the room, everyone wondering just how deep my digging went.

God, I love this part.

“I know more about each of you than your wives, girlfriends, mistresses, secret love children, hookers, drug dealers, bookies, mob friends, cops you have in your pockets... Should I keep going?” Nobody says a word. “That’s what I thought. So here you all are, riding on your moral high horse, trying to strong-arm me into conceding things along the way of this deal by holding a morality clause over my head. Meanwhile, I could have destroyed you all professionally, personally, and financially years ago, yet I chose not to. I chose to play fairly in this deal, even though you didn’t.” I wag my finger at them. They’re like a bunch of scared little kids, staring at me, praying for mercy. “I have no interest in dealing with people like you.”

I begin to walk around the room, placing everyone's file down in front of them. "If you think for one second that I was going to sell out the woman I love to gain this deal, to make all of you happy, you're out of your damn minds. But there's one of you that went above and beyond." I save the last file, Nelson's file, still holding on to it as I slowly walk toward where he's sitting. "One of you is the epitome of a spineless, bloodsucking leech that I was actually fooled by, silly me." I place the file down in front of a shocked Nelson, his mouth falling open.

"Cyrus, please. I didn't know. I mean, I was just trying to ___"

I hold my hand up to silence him. "I can't tell you how uninterested I am in hearing your excuses. Oh, and by the way, I spoke with your new boss, Peter. Turns out he's pulling the offer he extended to you. Seems like you not only threw away your retirement after fifteen years here at Gates, but you don't have another job and you violated at least four different laws concerning your contract here, your noncompete, and the NDA you signed."

"Cyrus, please!" he begs, literally pressing his hands together, almost falling out of his chair.

I can't hide the disgust on my face as I look down at him. "I hope it was worth it." I turn to look back to the rest of the men in the room as I button my suit coat. "Now get the fuck out of my building." I march out of the conference room, pulling out my phone to call Presley, but it goes straight to voicemail.

I don't bother trying again. Instead, I head downstairs to drive over to Lisa's office. When I arrive, I look up Presley's name on the registry and find where her cubicle is located. I nod at a few people in passing, taking the elevator and heading to her floor, but when I approach her desk, it's empty. I check the time; it's nowhere near lunch. I don't really have a choice. I decide to head up to Lisa's office to find out where she is.

"Hi, Mr. Gates." Her assistant smiles at me warmly as I exit the elevator and approach her office. "I didn't see you on

the schedule today; did I mess that up?”

“No, Wendy, I am here unofficially. She wouldn’t happen to be in, would she?”

“She is. Let me just buzz her.” I nod. “Lisa, Mr. Gates is here. Any chance you have a few minutes?”

She doesn’t respond. Instead, her door swings open and she stands in the doorway. “Cyrus? Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. Thank you, Wendy.” I walk around her desk and head into Lisa’s office, closing the door. “Is Presley in today? I tried calling her and it went to voicemail. I didn’t see her at her desk either.”

“She’s not actually. Is there something I can help you with?”

I slide my hands in my pockets, trying to think about how to explain that I just need to talk to her. She clearly reads the expression on my face. She pulls her glasses off and sinks down into her chair.

“You’re the reason, aren’t you?”

“Pardon?”

“The reason she’s on a flight to New York City today to interview at Pemberly & Associates PR.”

“She’s what?” I don’t even attempt to hide the shock in my voice. “Why?”

“You tell me, Cyrus. What did you do to that girl?”

I drag my hands over my face. “Fuck,” I mutter.

“I warned you, didn’t I? What did I tell you?” Lisa has the ability to remain so stoically calm while she’s threatening someone.

“I know and you have every right, but it’s not like that, Lisa,” I say, sitting down on the chair across from her. I look up at her, leaning forward as I rest my elbows on my knees. “I’m in love with her.”

Chapter 28

Presley

I look out the window as the captain makes our final descent into New York. I want to be excited; I'm trying to be, but all I can think about is Cyrus and this deal with Meridian.

I don't know when his final meeting with them is, but I know it's soon. As hurt as I was by his decision to walk away from me, I want the best for him. I want him to be happy. He looked defeated that last day of class. I know he's hurting too. As much as I want to hate him, I can't.

When I land, I turn airplane mode off on my phone and a text pops up from Serenity.

Serenity: *Good luck at the interview. As much as I'll be sad and miserable if you leave me here all alone, I really just want you to be happy more than anything. You deserve it all, babe. Knock them dead. ;)*

I smile as I read the message, the captain welcoming us to New York as our plane reaches the gate. I grab my bags and exit the plane, making my way out to my driver to take me to my hotel.

I have a few hours before the interview, enough time to settle in, go over my notes, and freshen up before heading over to the offices of Pemberly & Associates PR. This firm is absolutely the best in New York, the founder Kiera a good friend of Lisa's.

"Good morning, ma'am," the doorman of the hotel greets me as I make my way inside and check in. Lisa made the arrangements for me, insisting I stay at this boutique hotel

that's near the offices and also offers great accommodations. I told her that I can pay for the flight and hotel, but she insisted, also making sure that I had a driver so I didn't have to rely on public transportation.

I flop back on the large king-sized bed, letting out a sigh I feel like I've been holding in since I woke up this morning. My mind starts to wander, imagining starting over in a brand-new city where I know nobody. A city that already feels overwhelming at best. A tear threatens to fall and I sit up frantically. Something I've realized over the last several weeks is that if I keep my mind preoccupied and don't let it start sliding down rabbit holes of 'what-ifs' and 'maybes' that I can manage to not have a panic attack.

I spend the next few hours prepping for my interview, ordering room service, and freshening up before I head downstairs to my waiting car.

"It was an absolute pleasure, Presley, truly. I can see why Lisa hired you and why she's so sad to see you go." Kiera looks over at the two other women I interviewed with. "I think I can speak for all three of us when I say that we can see you fitting in here perfectly and we would be honored to have you represent Pemberly."

I smile, shaking each of their hands again. "Thank you so much for the opportunity to interview here and for your time and consideration. I also appreciate the recommendation from Lisa. I know I wouldn't be standing here without her so that doesn't go unrecognized."

"Maybe not this early in your career, but you would have ended up here or working for her, even without her input, trust us."

I thank them all again and make my way toward the elevator to exit the building, my shoulders finally dropping from up by my ears where I feel like they've settled over the last two hours.

When I reach the lobby, my phone rings; it's Lisa.

"Hey, Lisa, I just left the interview."

“I know. I got a text just now from Kiera. She was beyond impressed with you, like I knew she would be—she wants to extend an offer, Presley.”

“Oh my God,” I gasp, stopping in the middle of the lobby. It all feels like it’s too real now.

“Which is why I wanted to call you and tell you first. I know about Cyrus Presley.”

My body goes flush. “You do?” I ask nervously.

“I do and I want to say that I’m not mad at you. I spoke with him. He stopped by my office because he couldn’t reach you and he broke down and told me everything.”

Everything?

“I told him that you were interviewing in New York today. I also know that this is none of my business, but I have to ask before you uproot your life and start over somewhere, are you sure this is the right choice or are you running?”

I swallow down a lump in my throat. “I, uh, I’m not... I don’t know,” I finally say, breaking down. “I truly don’t know, Lisa.”

I can hear the sympathy in her voice. “Do me a favor; don’t make any rash decisions. This offer from Pemberly will be good for a while; they don’t expect you to start tomorrow, and she knows you’re a fresh grad who needs some time, so take it. Figure out your life for you, okay?”

“Okay,” I say softly, nodding as if she can see me. She hangs up the phone, and I step out into the afternoon sun. A weight feels like it’s been lifted from my shoulders, but now I feel even more lost than before.

“Did you get the job?”

I freeze, turning slowly to see Cyrus casually leaning against the railing.

“What are you doing here?”

He pushes off the railing, taking a few steps until he’s standing next to me, looking down.

“I came to take you home.”

I turn and walk down the stairs to the sidewalk where my car is waiting, but he follows me, reaching out to grab my arm.

“You told me to go live my life, to find someone else, so that’s what I’m doing. I’m out living my life.”

“No, you’re not,” he says matter-of-factly. “We both know you’re running.”

“This is an amazing opportunity for me. This firm is—”

“Bullshit.” He shakes his head, interrupting me, his attitude pissing me off. “You work for the best PR firm already. This,” he says, gesturing with his hand, “is running.”

“Why do you even care? You made it abundantly clear that I was collateral damage for you. You don’t want me, remember?” I stand defiantly in front of him, my fists resting on my hips.

“That’s not true and we both know it.” He has that cocky little smirk on his face. “Now get in the car.”

“No. Even if you want me, for how long? I’m done being your dirty little secret, Cyrus. You can’t lose this deal, and I won’t hide myself anymore.”

Anger flashes through his eyes as he takes a step toward me, backing me against his car as he leans into me. “You are not a dirty little secret, and if you say that again, I’m going to make sure you never fucking forget it.”

“So, what am I then?”

He reaches up, his hand brushing my hair out of my face. He hovers his lips over mine and it feels like we’re completely alone in the middle of Manhattan.

“You’re mine.”

“What about the deal?”

“Fuck the deal,” he says, bringing his other hand up to cup my face. “I walked away from it. I told them I wasn’t going to sacrifice the woman I love for a fucking deal.”

“The woman you love?” My lips part, a warmth spreading through my body as my pulse quickens. “You love me?”

“Of course I love you. You know I love you.” He’s so close to kissing me, but then he steps back, holding his hand out.

“Give me your phone. Unlocked.” I look at him in confusion as I hand it to him. He taps around on the screen for a second before holding it out to me, Forrest’s contact information on the screen. “Call him and tell him it’s over.”

I look at it, then back up at him. “Forrest? Over?”

“End things with him. I’m not going to kiss another man’s woman.” It looks like it pains him to say those words. “And I’m certainly not going to do the things I plan to do to you when you belong to someone else.”

“I’m not—he’s not my boyfriend. We were never together.” His brows furrow. “We’ve hung out, but he has a girlfriend and she’s really sweet. We realized pretty quickly that we’re like brother and sister.”

He nods, realizing. “So you let me believe that you two were together that day in class. You knew what you were doing to me?”

I feel my cheeks grow red. “Um, maybe.” I try to lessen the blow by smiling but it doesn’t work.

He chuckles, but it’s not a funny chuckle, more like a threatening one. He slides his hand up my neck, grabbing a handful of my hair and lowering his lips to my ear.

“Get in the fucking car,” he says slowly and deliberately. “Or I’m going to punish you right here on this street and I won’t give a fuck who watches. You need a very rough”—he tugs my hair when says the word—“reminder of who the fuck you fell in love with.”

He reaches around me, opening the door and practically shoving me into the back seat before walking around and getting in on the other side.

“Oh, you brought Wes? Hi, Wes,” I say but the divider starts to slide up as Cyrus presses the button.

“You can say hi later.” He grabs me, pulling me onto his lap. His tongue slips in my mouth, past my lips. The kiss is reckless, wet, and demanding. He’s almost frantic as he grips my neck and waist.

“I’m only going to warn you once,” he says, pulling back to look at me, his eyes dark and wild. “I’m going to take out every ounce of pent-up frustration I have on you and you’re going to take it, you understand me?” I nod, but he tugs my hair. “Say it.”

“Yes.”

“Good girl.” His tongue is running up my neck as his fingers slide up my dress, pushing my panties aside and sliding inside me.

“Ohhh,” I groan at the unexpected intrusion.

“You’re so wet already.” He looks at me, then down where my dress is up over my hips so he can watch his fingers slide in and out of me. “You love this, don’t you? You like when I’m rough with your little body, demanding, telling you who you belong to. You like being used. You like pissing me off so that I punish you, don’t you?”

I can’t speak. Tingles start to build as he continues to pleasure me. He’s not wrong. It might be messed up, but I crave it. I crave the way he’s rough, the way he tells me what to do, the way he takes what he wants so unapologetically.

The car slows before I can come. He pulls his fingers from me, licking them clean before leaning in to plant a soft kiss on my lips. He pulls my dress back down.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, daddy’s just getting started with you.”

Chapter 29

Cyrus

“This isn’t where I’m staying.” Presley looks up at the hotel as she exits the car.

“It is now.” I place my hand at her back and usher her toward the door, a gentleman greeting us as he holds it open.

“Mr. Gates, Miss James.” He smiles and nods.

“How does he know my name?”

“I told them you would be staying with me.”

“Presumptuous much?” She looks at me over her shoulder as we walk toward the elevator.

“Not at all.” I reach around her to scan the key card that takes us to the penthouse. “You think you have a choice? You do what I tell you.”

The second the doors close, she reaches for me, pulling me toward her as she stretches up on her tippy-toes. I wrap my hand around her throat, stilling her movements, her lips a centimeter from mine.

“Tsk, tsk, I’m in charge here, Miss James, not you.” I want her on edge, needy, practically begging for me to touch her.

The doors open into the large multiroom suite, the city surrounding us in the floor-to-ceiling windows.

“This is incredible.” She walks over to the window, looking out as I help slide her coat down her arms.

“Would you like something to drink? Perhaps champagne to celebrate your job offer?”

She spins around to look at me. She's trying to determine if I'm joking.

"You did get an offer, didn't you?"

"Not officially, no. Lisa called to tell me that they were going to extend an offer."

"I see." Folding her coat, I gently lay it over the back of the couch. "And?"

"And what?"

"Are you going to accept it when they do extend the offer?"

"Would you let me accept it?"

I smile. She's catching on. "We both know the answer to that. The important question is, do you *want* to take it, Presley? Do you want to move here?"

She looks back out the window, then slowly walks over to where I'm standing. She places her hands on my chest, looking up at me with those big blue eyes.

"No."

"What do you want?" I run my fingers through her hair.

"You."

"How?"

Her eyes search mine. "In every way, all of you."

"I like that answer. Later, after I've used you in every way possible and spent several more hours getting reacquainted with every inch of your lovely body, we're going to discuss what that looks like."

"Okay."

"Did you get your period?"

She nods. "Yes. Is that a good thing?" she asks timidly.

"We'll discuss that too. For now, let's just say that it is so that I can spend a lot more time trying to get you pregnant."

“Oh.” Her eyes grow big as I finally close the distance and kiss her.

“Let’s go to the bedroom.” I lead the way back.

“How’d my stuff get here?” she asks, noticing her luggage in the corner.

“I had Wes bring it over.”

“How?”

“I’m Cyrus Gates, baby. Isn’t it time you realize that nobody tells me no?”

She rolls her eyes. “Isn’t it about time that you’re really arrogant.”

It makes me laugh. “I’m aware, but you like it.” I wink at her. “Now shut up and take your clothes off.”

I remove my suit coat and tie, tossing them on the chair in the corner as I reach for a small toiletry bag from my suitcase and toss it on the bed.

“Demanding too.” She walks over to me, turning so I can undo her zipper.

“You have no idea,” I say, sliding it down. My lips are on the nape of her neck, my hands pushing the dress down her body so she’s left standing in her heels, thong, bra, and thigh-highs.

“Fuck me, you look good.” I run my hands down her back, grabbing a handful of her ass with each hand. I step back, admiring her in front of me. “Leave the thigh-highs and garters on,” I say, reaching around to undo her bra. I hook my thumbs into her panties, sliding them down slowly as I kneel in front of her. I lean in, sliding my nose between her thighs, right to her pussy, inhaling deeply.

“Mmm, makes my mouth water.” I lean in and kiss her, swirling my tongue between her folds and around her clit as my hands grip her ass, pulling her closer to me.

“Ohh, yesss.” Her hands are in my hair, tugging it as I lap at her. I want to toss her onto the bed and impale her instantly,

sinking myself balls deep into her, but I refrain, sitting back on my heels to look up at her.

I stand up, dragging my hands up her body to cup her breasts, leaning in and sucking each nipple into my mouth.

“I want you on the bed,” I say, walking her back and pushing against her shoulders so she falls backward. “On your hands and knees first,” I command, reaching for the bag I placed on the bed a moment ago.

She obeys, looking over as she hears me unzip it. She watches as I pull out a set of handcuffs, a vibrator, and a butt plug.

“I came prepared,” I say as her eyes fall to the butt plug I pick up. “You,” I say, hauling my hand back and bringing it down with a loud smack right on her ass cheek. “Have been a very naughty girl, haven’t you? Making me think you were dating Forrest.” I pull back and spank her again. “Running away to New York without telling me.” Again, the sound of her flesh being smacked echoed through the room followed by a moan.

I walk to the side of the bed, bringing the toy to her mouth. “Get it wet for me.” She looks at me, then slowly opens her mouth so I can slide it inside. I pull it out, stepping back around her and toying her pussy with it for a moment before placing it at her tight bud.

“Relax for me, baby.” I press it into her, and she moves forward an inch. “I said relax. Breathe.” I grip her hip and pull her back so the toy slides in deeper.

“Ohhh, that’s...”

“I promise it’s going to feel good.” I lean over and reach for the handcuffs. “Crawl toward the headboard.” I help her, maneuvering her to lie back so that I can cuff her hands to the bar that runs across the top of the headboard.

She tugs on the cuffs, the chain jangling against the metal pole. “Spread your thighs for me.” She obeys and I crawl onto the bed with the vibrator in my hand. I turn it on and it begins

to buzz. “Now, I think it’s time you get punished for all those naughty things you did.”

I drag the vibrator over her pussy lightly, her legs flinching. I drag it upward, around her nipples, then back down to her clit. I tease her, edging her a few times.

“Please,” she begs.

“Oh, sweetheart, this isn’t even the real torture.” I lean down and spit on her pussy, sliding the toy deep inside her and turning up the vibration.

She’s panting, her thighs spread open, her arms pinned overhead while the toy vibrates deep inside her.

“How do you feel?”

“Full.” She barely gets the word out.

I stand up, walking over to one of the chairs. I drag it to the end of the bed, taking a seat.

“What are you—please.” She tugs on the cuffs, her thighs shaking.

“Don’t you dare close your legs. You do and it lasts longer.” I sit back, extending my legs out in front of me as I watch her, trembling. I undo my belt, then my zipper, pulling my cock free as I stroke myself. “Keep your eyes on me.”

Her eyes flutter closed, but she stays focused on me as I pump my hand slowly up and down my shaft.

“I’m a big fan of delayed gratification, and this is going to be so good.” I groan, my head falling back for a second as my pleasure builds. “Are you sorry, Presley?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“That’s right. Are you ready to be a good girl?”

“Yes.”

I reach up with my free hand, unbuttoning my shirt. I shrug it off, standing and making my way over to where she’s splayed on the bed.

“Your pussy is throbbing, baby.” I push her thighs open a little further, watching as she milks the vibrator, her juices coating it.

“You know what you need?” I climb onto the bed, straddling her waist and placing my cock right at her lips. “You need daddy’s cock in your mouth.” She opens and I slide it past her lips. “Suck me.”

I reach back to grip the bar behind her head, my other hand tangling in her hair as I begin to thrust my hips forward as I pull her head forward onto me. I’m so close, I look down, watching her.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck.” My balls tighten but I don’t want to come until I’m inside her. “Look at me,” I bark, her eyes darting upward to meet my gaze. “Who do you belong to?” I lean back, my cock falling from her lips.

“You.”

“That’s right, baby girl.” I step back, reaching down to pull the vibrator from her as I line myself up, sliding deep inside her. “After this, I’m going to worship you, but first, I’m going to fuck the living shit out of you.”

I’m on my knees, my hands on her waist as I pull her onto my cock hard, over and over. “You want to come, baby?”

“Please,” she begs.

I grab the vibrator that’s still on, placing it against her clit as I thrust in deep, two more times, stilling as I dump my load inside her, her legs quivering, my name falling from her lips as she explodes on my cock.

I reach up and undo the handcuffs, then slide the butt plug out of her, making her wince. I situate myself over her, my cock still inside her and tip her chin to look at me. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

“Mm-hmm.” She smiles lazily, the look of absolute bliss in her eyes.

“How did it feel being stuffed with my cock and two toys? Because I can die a happy man now; that was the hottest

fucking fantasy of my life.”

“It was exciting.” She blushes, looking away.

“Don’t be embarrassed that you liked it.” I kiss her nose. “Remember I promised to explore all sorts of kinks with you.”

“I like the sound of that.” She nuzzles into my neck as I wrap my arms around her. I’m still in my suit pants and shoes.

“Are you hungry?”

She shakes her head no. “Not for food.”

“Mmm, glutton.” I lean down, kissing her. “Do you want to take a nice warm bath?”

“Later.”

“What do you want to do, Presley?”

She places her hand against my bare chest, dragging it down slowly. “You.”

I smile. “That is certainly a better option than the bath.” I swing my legs off the bed, removing my shoes and pants before crawling back in bed, pulling her into my arms.

“My flight leaves tomorrow morning at nine so I probably shouldn’t stay up too late.”

“No, it doesn’t. I have my private plane. We’re going to spend the rest of the week exploring the city.” I kiss her neck. “Exploring each other.”

“I love you,” she says softly, and I pull back to look at her.

“Say it again.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too and I’m sorry I didn’t say it back when you first told me. I’m sorry I pushed you away. You were right, about everything. I shouldn’t have let shit that happened to my dad determine my future. I can’t thank you enough for being honest with me about all that, for just calling me out on it.”

“I know I didn’t do it very gracefully. I was hurt and angry, but it was just because I knew we were meant to be together and you couldn’t see it yet.”

“I knew too, sweetheart; I was just scared.”

“Cyrus Gates—scared?”

“Let’s keep that between us.”

“Wait, so what happened with the deal? You said you walked away?”

I slide my hand between her thighs, swirling my tongue around her nipple. “Let’s talk about all that later. Right now, all I want to do is get lost in your body.”



I SIP MY COFFEE, LOOKING DOWN AT PRESLEY WHO’S STILL fast asleep. Her long auburn hair is splayed across the pillow.

In my hand, my phone buzzes, Ken Felps’ name on the screen. I step out of the bedroom, closing the door behind me softly as I answer the phone.

“Cyrus, hi. Sorry to call so early but this can’t wait. We were never going to go with Peter; that deal wasn’t seriously on the table.”

Just like I knew they would, they come crawling back.

“We only wanted, want, to do business with you. What can we do here, Cyrus?”

I let him linger for a second. “Take out all the contingencies. No morality clause. I get to fire the board, and stay the fuck out my business. I know how to run my company.”

“Done. I’ll get you a new contract by close of business tomorrow. Do we have a deal?”

“We have a deal,” I say, hanging up the phone.

“Everything okay?” I turn to see Presley dressed in my t-shirt, her hair mussed as she wipes her eyes.

“Perfect. I made you a coffee,” I say, motioning toward the machine with her espresso.

“Thank you.” She grabs the coffee, coming over to stand beside me as we look out the windows. “What was that about?”

“Ken at Meridian, groveling. Begging me to take the deal.”

“Really? Are you going to?”

I nod, sipping my coffee. “I am. I told them to remove all contingencies and I’d sign it. That simple, that’s all they had to do from the jump.”

“So how did everything go down?”

I take in a deep breath. “You sure you want to hear about all this bullshit?”

“Absolutely.”

We sit on the couch, and she tucks her feet up beneath her as I tell her every gritty detail, including the photo of us in the elevator.

“What?” She leans forward, her eyes huge.

“Don’t worry, I took care of Nelson.”

“So, wait, you had those files on all those people from day one of negotiations? You could have just laid it all out then, told them that you had all their skeletons, and this is how this deal was going to play out.”

“Yup.”

“Why didn’t you then?”

“One thing I learned, among others, over the years in business is if you give your enemies enough rope, they’ll hang themselves... every time. If I had come in to those negotiations like that, I’d have been the bad guy once again. The reality is, that’s how I always play it. I never come in making demands and blackmailing people. I let them make their moves, paint themselves into a corner, and then I offer them a way out by means of agreeing to my terms or a simple threat of what information I have on them.”

“Would you have leaked all of that?”

I shake my head. “No. I’ve never once had to act on a single threat. They’re too scared. If I did, they’d blame me for ruining their lives. I’d be the scapegoat even though it’s just them not wanting to take responsibility for their actions. But if I just show them that I know who they really are, all the little dirty secrets they think they’ve kept hidden... they’ll bend over backward to keep that private.”

She stares at me, smiling.

“What?”

“You really are smart. Sneaky, but smart as hell. You’re the kind of person who is good at calling people’s bluff.”

“I’m glad you recognize who I am, the kind of man you fell in love with.”

“Not a very nice man,” she teases, referring back to the night we met.

“And you’re such a good girl. Only fitting that we’d end up together.”

“Are we—together?”

“Forever, baby.” I lean over and kiss her. “Now, you get to tell me what you meant the night we ended things when you said I made you want things you didn’t want before.”

“Yeah, that.” She looks down at her coffee cup. “I think we’ve kind of talked about it before, at that coffee shop.”

“Mm-hmm. Look at me, Presley.” She lifts her head. “Is that what you want, for me to get you pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“After a year?”

“After a year,” I repeat back to her, reaching over to run my hand over her hair.

“Is that—what about you? What do you want?”

“I’d knock you up right now if you’d let me.” I lean forward and place my coffee cup on the table. Hers too. I grab

her and pull her onto my lap, her legs on either side of my waist. “But I’d like to meet your parents first and marry you.”

“Oh boy, my parents.” She giggles. “I know they’ll think you’re amazing, but they might be shocked that you’re only two years younger than them.”

“Leave all of that to me. I’m a great negotiator and I can be very persuasive. About the other thing?”

“I want to marry you too.” She places her palms on either side of my face, kissing me. “And have your babies.” She kisses me again. “And live happily ever after.”

Chapter 30

Presley

One Year Later...

“Are you sure you’re ready to do this?” Serenity looks over at me as she prepares to walk down the aisle.

“Are you trying to talk me out of it?”

“I don’t think that’s possible, and no, I’ve never seen you this happy. I’m pretty sure you’re exactly where you’re meant to be.”

“Thank you.” I fight back a tear as she pulls me in for a hug. “For everything.”

“Of course, you’re my other half... despite Jarrod and Cyrus. We,” she says, pointing at her eyes, then mine, “are the true soulmates here. You know that, right?”

“I know that and I’m pretty sure they do too. I just can’t believe I’m getting married before you. How is that possible?” Jarrod proposed to Serenity less than six months ago and she hasn’t even thought once about picking a date.

“Are you kidding? I always knew you would. Jarrod and I are slow movers but more than that, I didn’t want him stressed about a wedding and all that with his finishing up med school and his residency. I’m sure that we’ll pick a date soon enough. But what I’m really excited about,” she squeals as she rests her hand on my lower belly, “is being an aunt!”

“Shhh.” I look around frantically, making sure my father isn’t in earshot. Thankfully, he’s preoccupied with my mother fastening a flower to his lapel.

“When are you going to tell them?”

“After the honeymoon. Obviously, I didn’t plan on telling anyone until after my first trimester, but I kept pushing it off because I liked that it was just between Cyrus and me.”

“And me.” She laughs. She was there when I took the test, but that’s our little secret. Obviously, the baby was a surprise since we had planned to wait until after the wedding, but we weren’t exactly careful. I was only a few days late when I jokingly took a test at Serenity’s apartment. We had been hanging out, having a girls’ brunch day when I mentioned that I needed to pick up tampons after because I should be getting my period any day. When I looked at my tracking app, I realized I was a few days late to which Serenity replied I should take a test. She pulled one out from her bathroom sink and being confident it would be negative, I took it.

“That also remains between us,” I remind her. “But now that I’m pushing five months, I know I’m going to show any second.”

“Will your parents be excited?”

“Over the moon. My mom will immediately go into grandma mode which is another reason I wanted to hold off. I know she’ll be texting me, calling me, or showing up on our doorstep every other day with new things for the baby or checking up on me. She’s going to be in absolute heaven.”

I smile, looking over at my parents. My dad kisses my mom’s forehead as she looks up at him. I was terrified to tell my parents about Cyrus, but the moment they met him and spent more than five minutes talking to him, all my fears disappeared. When I pulled my dad aside and asked him how he felt, he told me that as long as I was happy and he treated me well, that’s all that mattered. My mom was immediately smitten with him, something my dad has now grown to tease her about.

“Sweetie, are you ready?” My dad approaches me, my mom on his arm.

“I think so.”

Serenity walks down the aisle, arm in arm with Jarrod as our maid of honor and best man. My dad walks my mom to her seat, then returns, looping his arm through mine.

Our ceremony is incredibly small, just a few of our closest friends and family on a rooftop garden in the city.

The moment I step through the opening, Cyrus coming into view at the end of the aisle, any doubt, fear, or nerves melt away, replaced with the feeling of warmth and comfort. Every time I look at him, touch him, feel him near me, it feels like home. I feel like I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

We spend a few hours dancing, mingling, taking in every moment of our wedding. I smile into Cyrus' shoulder as his arm snakes around my back, pulling me closer on the dance floor.

“Are you ready to head home sweetheart?”

“I think so,” I close my eyes briefly as his fingers press against my back.

“Good, because I'm ready to peel the dress off you and spend several hours worshipping your body.”

“That sounds lovely.” I smile up at him, his eyes darkening as he pulls me off the dance floor. We say a quick goodbye to friends and family before he's ushering me outside and into the back of our waiting car.

Cyrus' arms wrap around me as he carries me over the threshold of our home and up the stairs to our bedroom. I moved in with him the day we came back from New York. Of course, there was no negotiation and I didn't mind because I didn't want to spend another night away from him.

“How does it feel to be Mrs. Presley Gates?” His lips graze my neck as he undoes the buttons of my wedding dress.

“I don't recall agreeing to change my last name,” I tease him. His hands still, then I hear a swift sound right before the sting of his palm lands square against my ass.

“Don't test me, Mrs. Gates. Is this how you want to start off our marriage?”

I look over my shoulder at him. “Maybe.”

He slides the dress down my body, his arms wrapping around me as his hands come to rest against my belly.

“How’s my son doing? Are you both feeling okay?”

“Yes, sending my hormones into overdrive, but we’re both feeling well.”

Since the second I told Cyrus I was pregnant, his protective instincts kicked into high gear. I didn’t realize he could get any more protective. I also didn’t realize he could get more turned on, but the man can’t get enough of me.

“How can I help with that?” He doesn’t give me time to respond before turning me to face him, his hands sliding up my neck as his mouth finds mine.

“Just don’t stop.” I moan as he trails kisses down to my breasts.

“It’s been a year now and we’re officially married so you know what that means?” He pulls back to look at me. “I can get you pregnant.”

“Um, I think we already accomplished that.” I laugh.

“Mmm, yes. Well, let’s just pretend I haven’t so we’re going to need to try really”—he kisses my nipple—“really”—then my other nipple—“hard.”

“I like the sound of that, Mr. Gates.”

He leads me to the bed, undressing himself and crawling up my body to settle over me.

“You have completely transformed my life, making me realize what I was missing, making me realize that I could be a better man. You and”—he reaches down to touch my belly again—“our family is all that matters to me, my entire world.”

“You’re my world too, baby.” I wrap my arms around his neck. “There’s nothing else I need or want. I feel so blessed to not only have my dream job, my dream husband, and now our son... It feels like it’s all too good to be true.”

“And you’re happy? Truly happy?” he asks.

“More than I ever thought possible.”

“Good.” He leans in and kisses me gently. “But the real question I have for you, Mrs. Gates, is, are you done looking for trouble?” I laugh as he squeezes my ribs.

“Yes.” I smile. “I was done looking for trouble the second I met you... because I finally found it.”

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I've ever seen, it's the way he stares at me like it takes
everything he has to keep from devouring me.

The way he curls his hands into fists to avoid touching me.
The way he reprimands me through gritted teeth while his lust
filled eyes burn through me.

The naughty things he whispers against my lips as his hands
explore me.

Way over my head.

Caring for his daughter is a dream—even his mother loves me.

Soon, I'm head over heels in this fantasy I'm living.

I'm even able to ignore the cryptic threats from his house-keeper who's hellbent on getting me fired.

But I'm not prepared for the world of high-powered billionaires and glitzy parties.

Besides, Graham isn't like these people—he's different.

At least, I think he is...until a shady character I've tried to leave in the past reappears as Graham's new business partner and I'm reminded that I don't belong in this world.

Sometimes life changing news comes in the form of just *three simple words*.

Sometimes it comes in the form of an unexpected, heart-wrenching secret and the fairytale is shattered.

Sometimes, it comes in the form of the opportunity of a fresh new start.

You just have to be willing to take the risk and walk away or maybe...there's three little words that can fix it all.

Chapter 31

Chapter 1

Margot

“I ’m *fired*?”

The words feel so foreign rolling off my tongue. I’ve never been fired. I’m only twenty-six, but it still feels like a kick to the stomach.

“Not technically *fired*. It’s not because of your performance, if that makes it any better. It’s simply a matter of budget cuts.” Mr. Diaz says the words with a sympathetic look on his face as if that will soften the blow of the situation.

It does not.

“I just don’t understand. The music education program has grown so much in the last three years with me managing it. The ki—” My words hitch in my throat that is thick with emotion. “The kids. What about the kids? They love my class.”

“Like I said, Miss Silver, regrettably, we just don’t have the funding anymore to keep the program going. I’m sure you understand how all this bureaucratic red tape messes things up. Unfortunately, it’s out of my hands.”

I stare at the ground, my vision blurring through my tears.

“We can offer you two weeks’ pay.” He holds out an envelope to me, but I don’t take it. “I’m sorry, Miss Silver. Truly, I am.” Mr. Diaz places the envelope on the small table next to me before standing up and exiting the room.

Two weeks? That’s it? I bounce my legs nervously, trying to divert my anxiousness into movement instead of having a

full emotional breakdown in the teacher's lounge.

I've loved every second of being a music teacher. It was my dream job, what I went to school for. Both my parents were musicians. My mom taught me to read music and my dad taught me to feel it.

I pick up the envelope. Between this paycheck and my small savings, I'd say I have about enough money to live in my current Chicago studio for another month and a half before I'm evicted.

I let out a breath and gather my bag, then head back to my classroom. It's the end of the semester so it won't look strange that I'm carrying a box of items to my car. Most teachers clean out their classrooms for the summer.

"Bye, Miss Silver. See you next year!" Two of my students, Bryant and Adam, wave to me as I step into my classroom.

"Have a good summer, boys," I say as they both dart past me down the hallway and out the door.

I shut the door behind me and lean against it briefly. Already the pain of realizing I won't see Bryant and Adam next school year is threatening to break through. I push the thoughts aside, still probably a little numb from being fired.

I'll miss the smell of my classroom. That probably sounds weird but every classroom still has that same smell of pencil shavings and Lysol wipes from our childhood. Even though I'm pretty sure none of these kids have ever seen or used a number two pencil in their life.

I smile to myself, thinking about my favorite elementary teacher, Miss Nyguard. She was always so kind and sweet. Her wardrobe of pastel cardigans and floral skirts looked as though she'd borrowed them from someone twice her age. I wish I could tell her the impact she had on me. It was because of her that I wanted to be an educator.

Memories of her calm me as I pack up my final item, a small succulent that my students bought me at the beginning

of the year. I gather the box in my arms and walk to the door, not stopping to look around for a final time.

“Hey, Margot, I was looking for you.”

I turn to see Hank Byers, the PE teacher, jogging toward me as he waves.

“Some of us are going to that karaoke bar over off Wabash tonight. Nothing crazy, just celebrating the end of another school year. You should come by.”

I smile. Hank has been friendly to everyone here from day one. He’s a big guy, tall and burly with a big mop of blond curls and cherubic cheeks with perfect dimples. He’s the local man candy that all the single teachers have taken a shot at, but as far as I know, none have been successful.

“I dunno,” I say, chewing on my bottom lip. I wasn’t planning on telling anyone that my position was eliminated, and if I go out to a bar, odds are I’ll wallow, have a few too many, and probably cry desperately to anyone who will listen to me.

“Come on. Just come out for one drink. I’ll buy.” He smiles and holds out his hands.

“Okay, one drink.”

“Nice!” He claps his hands together. “I gotta get back in there.” He points both thumbs over one shoulder. “Need to do some inventory on the sports equipment and see what I need to buy for next year.”

“Sounds good and thanks for the invite.”

“See you tonight,” he says, turning to jog back toward the gymnasium. “And don’t even think about bailing!” he shouts through cupped hands before disappearing inside.

I toss the box of items into my back seat and look around the mostly empty parking lot one last time before driving home.

“SO WHAT DO YOU PLAN TO DO WITH YOUR SUMMER?”

Ah, the dreaded teacher question we all ask each other.

“I’ll probably do private music lessons like I do every summer.”

I swallow down my beer, my stomach uneasy at the thought that I should have reached out to parents weeks ago. Between end-of-year stuff and counting on the fact I’d still have a job next school year, I’d let it slip. I usually have about six or seven private students each summer, but that’s nowhere near enough to cover even half my rent.

“What about you? Still coaching little league?”

“Yup. I’ll be coaching again. Also do some umping for adult teams and playing in the over-thirty league. My uncle Roy needs some help with his painting business too so that’ll be some nice extra cash.” He spins his beer bottle on the bar in front of him.

Hank really is an attractive guy and he’s clearly a man with drive, but I’ve never felt any sort of attraction to him. I’m not sure why. Maybe because we are coworkers I’ve never let myself even consider it.

“It’s funny how everyone thinks being a teacher is this walk in the park because we get summers off. Nobody realizes we all pretty much have summer jobs to keep the lights on, especially in Chicago.”

I nod in agreement, both of us chuckling.

“I, uh, I got fired today.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop myself from saying them.

“What?” Hank’s head whips toward me, his expression shocked. “Why?”

“Budget cuts,” I say, picking at the label on my beer bottle.

“Fuck, man, I’m so sorry.” He shakes his head. I can feel pity radiating off him and I instantly regret saying anything.

“It’s fine. I’ll find something else.” I’m trying to convince myself.

“No, it’s not fine. You are an amazing teacher and those kids love you. It’s more than a job, Margot; this is your life.”

I purse my lips and nod my head, his words conveying exactly why it hurts so bad. I hang my head as the tears start to fall. No point in trying to fight them.

“I know that, Hank,” I whisper as he stands up, reaching for my arm to pull me in for a hug.

“Let it out,” he says, his large hands wrapping halfway around my back as my shoulders start to bob up and down.

I don’t have the luxury of caring if I look pathetic right now. Maybe everyone will just think I’ve had too much to drink and can’t keep it together. Anything is better than the humiliation of being fired, even if it’s not my fault.

We stand there for several more moments before I excuse myself to freshen up in the restroom. By the time I’ve returned to my seat, Hank has ordered us another round.

“Thank you.” I gesture toward the drink with my head as I reach into my purse for my wallet. “But I need to go home. It’s been an emotional day.”

His countenance falls a little as he nods. “I understand. This is on me,” he says as I pull my wallet out.

“Thanks, Hank.” I reach out and grab his hand, giving it a quick squeeze.

“Don’t be a stranger, okay? You have my number. If you need someone to vent to or a job reference or anything, call me?” He raises his eyebrows with the question.

“Of course.” I offer a polite nod before heading back home.

I’m almost to my apartment building when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I reach down and pull it out, looking at the screen to see who would be calling me at this time of night.

It’s a name and number I haven’t seen in the better part of four years. In fact, the last time I saw Warren Dorsey’s name on my phone was right after my mother passed away.

I don't answer it. Instead, I hit the ignore button and shove the phone back in my pocket. The last thing I need right now is whatever the hell my biological deadbeat dad has brewing.

I SPEND THE ENTIRE WEEKEND COMBING THROUGH JOB postings. I apply to every job that is even remotely related to music first, then start in on the local cafés and stores.

I've checked my account balance a record forty-two times over a few days, staring at it like it's going to magically morph into enough money to save me from being evicted.

I also check my email at least a hundred times over the next week, hoping, praying for any kind of reply from my applications. A few are immediately returned with, *position has been filled* or *we regret to inform you...* I don't even bother reading past that point.

Exasperated, I open my last bottle of wine. It's not even one I bought. It's a dusty old table blend that was given out by our school administration during the holidays a few years back.

"Desperate times, desperate measures," I mutter as I pour myself a generous glass and open my laptop.

I scroll through Craigslist on the off chance anyone might need private music lessons. Over half the emails I sent out to parents about lessons over the summer were returned with explanations about traveling or not in the budget. Another blow to my nonexistent savings.

A listing catches my eye and I click the link to open it.

Needed: Live-in nanny. Full-time 5-6 days per week. All expenses covered. Dental, vision, and medical insurance. Competitive salary. Immediate hire.

“WHOA, WHAT?” I PULL THE LAPTOP SCREEN CLOSER TO ME AS I read the salary. “That can’t be right.” I squint, reading it again.

How the hell can someone pay more than twice what I make as a teacher for a nanny and offer living expenses covered and health insurance?

My excitement builds as I read over the qualifications. Okay, now I see why they pay so well. They want someone with a preferred degree in childcare or related field, CPR certified, 5+ years’ experience with children, no pets, can teach music.

“Holy shit!” I yelp as I hop up off the couch. I can’t hold back the smile as my heart thuds wildly in my chest. I am literally a perfect candidate for this job, and they want someone who can start ASAP.

I open my email and copy the address. I attach my resume and spend the next thirty minutes crafting a perfectly worded cover letter and link to my LinkedIn profile. I hold my breath, hit send, and flop back against the couch.

Finally, a glimmer of hope.

“AND YOU HAVE A DEGREE IN EDUCATION?” MISS PERRY, A willowy woman with a perfectly tight bun and beige skirt suit, reads over my resume. Her short-clipped nails are the softest shade of pink and her skin is smooth and shiny, like she’s been freshly Botoxed.

“Yes, a double degree actually in music education as well as early childhood education.”

I squeeze my fingers together in my lap, trying to calm my nerves.

“I see and your last job ended because?” She peers precariously over the glasses that are perched on her nose.

“Budget cuts unfortunately. I was there for three years but the funding for the music program wasn’t renewed so... here I am.” I plaster a nervous smile on my face as she returns her gaze back to the paper in her hands.

“Oh, and I brought a letter of recommendation from the school I just taught at.” I reach into my bag and produce the document, handing it to her.

I resist the urge to recite my resume for her. I want to explain why I’m perfect for this position, but something about how uptight she is makes me lose my nerve. Not to mention the sheer monstrosity of a house that I drove up to, complete with a massive wrought iron gate. I had no idea places even existed like this in the Chicago suburbs.

“Great.” She gives a tight-lipped smile and places the resume on the desk in front of her, along with the letter. “We’ll call you.” She stands and juts her hand out to me.

“Okay.” I shake her hand. “Thanks again so much for taking the time to interview me. I’ll be anxiously waiting to hear from you.”

She walks me to the front door in silence, only the clicking of her heels on the marble floor echoing around us.

“Oh, and just so you know, my schedule is completely open. I have no obligations so if I got the job, I’d be fully committed.” She stares at me blankly, her hand resting on the front door handle. “What I mean is no husband or kids or pets or anything. Not even a boyfriend,” I say around a chuckle.

“Bye now,” she says and I take the hint, stepping through the front door, and it closes behind me.

ONE FULL WEEK AND NOTHING.

No callback.

No email.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and double-check the ringer is on. I also make sure I don't have any missed calls or texts. I've left two voicemails and a follow-up email. I know I sound desperate, but I *am* desperate. I'm on my last month's rent and I have a total of \$122 to my name.

A fleeting thought pops through my head. *Maybe now is the time to reach out to Warren Dorsey. He's a billionaire several times over.* I push the thought from my head as quickly as it enters.

"Still nothing?" Shelly, my coworker at the local café I managed to snag a barista job at, asks.

"Nope." I sigh, putting my phone back into my apron.

"Dammit, that sucks," she says as she hops off the counter and removes her apron.

I'm grateful for the cash tips we split each day at this place but it's still minimum wage and I won't get my first paycheck for another week.

I walk over to the neon open sign in the window and turn it off before locking the door. Because we're a café, we open early so I've been able to work a twelve-hour shift every day this week—four a.m. to four p.m.

"Have a great night, Shelly." I wave as we both walk our separate ways.

My phone rings and I jump, then dig my hand into my pocket and pull it out. I don't recognize the number but as someone who has just applied to dozens of jobs, I know it could be a possible employer.

"Hello, this is Margot."

"Miss Silver?" A deep, syrupy voice says my name on the other end.

"Yes, this is Margot Silver." I try to sound chipper and upbeat, as if that will help them determine if they want to hire me.

"This is Graham Hayes," the man's voice says. "The nanny position."

“Oh!” I say, surprised. Who is this calling me? It’s certainly not Miss Uptight Perry. “Yes, how can I help you, Mr. Hayes?”

He clears his throat before speaking again, his voice doing weird things to my insides.

“I realize this is very unorthodox, but I’m kind of in a bind here. My housekeeper, Fiona Perry, who you interviewed with, is on vacation and didn’t hire anyone yet. I found your resume in a pile and thought maybe you could help me?”

“Yeah, absolutely. What can I do for you?”

“I need a nanny to start right away.”

“Okay, like how soon?”

“Tonight. Right now, actually. I’ll pay cash.”

I don’t think twice. I accept the job, jump in my car, and rush to the Hayes’ residence. I’m once again reminded just how imposing his residence is when I ring the buzzer at the front gate that is adorned with a massive *H*, for Hayes I assume.

“A little pretentious for my taste,” I say as the gate opens and I zip up the driveway.

The moment I pull up to the house, I realize that if he’s needing me to stay the night, I didn’t bring anything other than the clothes I’m wearing and my wallet. I walk to the front porch and raise my hand to ring the bell when the door swings open and a tall, raven-haired man greets me. I jump back, startled.

Holy shit. Is this him?

I feel my mouth fall open and I instinctively bring my fingers to my lips to make sure I haven’t actually just drooled on myself.

If James Bond and Henry Cavill had a baby, it would be Graham Hayes. His long, lean body is wrapped perfectly in what I can only assume is a custom-made tuxedo. He adjusts the cuff link on one of his wrists, his tanned fingers long

enough they could probably encircle my waist if he put his hands together.

Suddenly my mouth feels dry and I'm very aware of my scuffed-up Converse and torn jeans, remembering that I just worked a twelve-hour shift and I look every bit the part. I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear that has fallen loose from my braid and try to stand up a little taller, like that's going to cover anything up.

"Miss Silver? Graham Hayes," he says curtly as he extends his hand toward me.

"I thought for sure you were gonna say Bruce Wayne." I laugh but his expression stays stoic. I reach my hand out to shake his and it's completely engulfed.

"Like Batman—never mind. Pleasure to meet you, sir."

"Please, come inside."

He gestures with his right hand, his left still holding the door. I step inside. The woodsy scent of his very expensive cologne envelops me and I have to remind myself to breathe.

But just as I'm almost clear of the doorway, my toe catches the lip and I catapult myself forward. I throw my hands out dramatically to catch myself, somehow making it worse and ending up doing a half somersault while falling into a crumpled pile of embarrassment at his feet.

In all those books and movies I've seen and read, this is the meet cute. This is the part where the handsome stranger gallantly thrusts his arms out and catches the heroine before she falls, their eyes drawn to each other's as her breasts smash against his body and he suddenly realizes she's everything he's been looking for.

But not in my case. Instead, Mr. Hayes makes zero effort to catch me and instead, he shoves his hands in his pockets and looks at me with exasperation, like I'm a bug that he's considering squishing.

Chapter 32

Chapter 2

Graham

I catch myself staring a little too long at the small, impish woman standing on my front porch.

Is this the nanny?

She looks like she's barely bigger than a child herself.

Her strawberry-blond hair is swept up haphazardly in some sort of braid that has fallen, a few stray tendrils clinging to her slender neck. She thrusts her small hand into mine, a smile stretching across her face to her eyes. I feel the warmth of her fingers against the inside of my palm and instantly release it when my mind questions if the rest of her body is this soft and inviting.

I hold back a smile at her Bruce Wayne comment. It was certainly not the first time someone called me that.

I'm completely distracted by the smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks that come into view once she steps over the threshold and into the entryway. Then suddenly she tumbles forward, landing in a heap at my feet.

"Are you alright, Miss Silver?"

I keep my hands in my pockets, too scared to reach out and touch her again.

"Yup." She stands, adjusting her shirt. "Only my pride is hurt."

I close the door behind her. "Please." I gesture for her to step into the parlor to the right of the entrance. I pick up her

resume from the table where I placed it and we both take a seat opposite one another.

She looks nervous, her fingers knotting together in her lap as she sits up board straight.

“You can relax,” I say, but she just offers a tight-lipped smile.

“I apologize for the out-of-the-blue call and fire drill request to have you work this evening, but my housekeeper, Miss Perry, is unfortunately on vacation and she failed to procure a new nanny before she left.”

“I had assumed that the position had been filled when I didn’t hear back from her.”

I give her a questioning look and she continues. “Well, after I interviewed a week or so ago, I followed up with two phone calls and left her a voicemail, but I didn’t hear anything back.” She shrugs.

“Hmm.” That is strange considering Miss Silver’s impeccable background in education and her relevant work experience with young children. I’m not sure what Miss Perry’s angle is recently; it’s been like pulling teeth to get her to hire a new nanny ever since my last one had to return home to attend to some family business. I don’t express any of this out loud; instead, I read over her resume again.

“Is there a reason you’re not returning to teach music education at Jefferson Elementary? Or are you only looking for a summer position since you’re a teacher?”

“I, uh, the position was downsized unfortunately. I was told that our funding wasn’t renewed so they had to cut the program. Which is such a shame because I don’t think people truly realize how important introducing music and teaching children to read music and play instruments really is. Such a transferable life skill if you ask me.”

I didn’t. I think it myself, but I can appreciate someone who is passionate about their career.

“Have you ever been a nanny or live-in caretaker before?” I lean back in my chair and watch as she shakes her head

vigorously. She's young. Based on her graduation date, I'd guess she's barely over twenty-five.

"I haven't but I have spent my entire professional career wrangling children of all ages for several hours a day." She lets out another nervous laugh that wrinkles her nose and it's fucking adorable.

Nope. Get that thought out of your head.

"I love kids. I'm such a believer in enriching not only their lives with skills but also their day-to-day experiences, ya know? They're like little sponges; they just soak everything up so it's a waste to just stick them in front of a screen all day."

Her nervousness seems to have subsided. She's speaking animatedly, gesturing with her hands and laughing and smiling.

"Eleanor is five. It's just me and her. Her mother is not in the picture any longer. I need someone extremely reliable and the live-in portion is non-negotiable. I travel a lot for work. I'm gone early and often not home till late so I need someone that can really take the reins. I'm not looking for someone who needs babysitting themselves. Miss Perry is always around during the work hours to assist with anything, but to be clear, childcare and anything that goes along with it is not her job."

She nods her head vigorously as she pulls out her phone and taps around before holding it in front of her face and typing vigorously.

"Am I boring you, Miss Silver?" I can't hide the annoyance in my voice. Maybe it's a generational thing, but these damn phones are always in people's faces to the point it's exhausting.

"Oh, no. Sorry. I'm just taking notes on everything."

I nod and continue.

"As I was saying, all childcare-related responsibilities fall to you, including food preparation, meal times, laundry, classes, and schooling, etc. This position is six days a week. Sundays are yours and sometimes even Saturdays. There is an extensive outlined book detailing any and all preferences,

allergies, likes and dislikes, contact information for doctors and teachers. Do you have any questions?”

She looks through her phone notes for a moment before her eyes dart upward to find mine.

“So, did you just want me for the night, or do I have the job?”

The words did you want me for the night shoot straight to my dick.

“The job is yours if you want it, Miss Silver.” I toss her resume on the table next to me.

“Oh my God. Absolutely! Thank you so much, Mr. Hayes. I promise I won’t let you down.”

“Great. I’ll sort out everything with Miss Perry when she’s back. I assume she shared the compensation details. She’ll have you fill out the proper tax documents and insurance information. As for tonight”—I glance at my watch and see that I need to leave in the next twenty minutes—“I have a work event that I cannot miss so I’ll need you to watch Eleanor. I don’t need you to spend the night. You can start work on Monday. That way you can move into your room this weekend. I’ll have Miss Perry show you that on Saturday or Sunday. She’ll call you.”

I stand and she does as well, her big green eyes staring at me as she nods her head at what I’m saying.

“I’ll introduce you to Eleanor.”

I walk up the main staircase and down the hallway to Eleanor’s room, Miss Silver on my heels. I raise my hand to knock when she shoots her hand out to grab my wrist. I stop and slowly turn my head to face her.

“Sorry, but, um, really quick question. Is she okay with a new nanny? I mean, is she onboard with this or is it going to be one of those situations where she’s angry at me?” The nervousness is back as she grips my wrist.

I slowly maneuver myself out of her grip just as the bedroom door opens and Eleanor stands there, hip cocked.

“What’s going on?” she says with her best suspicious look on her face. I squat down till I’m eye level with her.

“Eleanor, this is Miss Silver, your new nanny. She is a music teacher that loves kids and she’s very excited to meet you and get to know you.”

I turn to look back at Miss Silver. Her hands are knotted together as she smiles and then robotically waves at Eleanor.

“Hi, so lovely to meet you, Miss Eleanor. I’m Margot and I have to say your princess dress is by far the prettiest and most pink dress I’ve ever seen!”

I watch as Eleanor’s eyes light up at the compliment and the way Miss Silver naturally charms her way into my little girl’s heart instantly.

“It is?” Eleanor’s big blue eyes almost bug out of her face as she twirls around. “I think so too!” she squeals.

Eleanor reaches for Miss Silver’s hand, grabbing it and pulling her through the doorway and past me.

“Wanna see my matching shoes? They have a high heel!” She drags her toward her closet.

“Oh my goodness, those are prettier than anything I could have ever imagined. You look like you should be in a Disney movie with little birdies singing all around you and chipmunks and bunnies sitting at your feet.”

“An, an, and cats? I love cats.” Eleanor is instantly entranced.

I give Miss Silver a slight nod. “Eleanor, Daddy has to go to a work event. Please be on your best behavior.”

“Bye, Daddy.” She waves dismissively, her attention fully on showing Miss Silver her animal collection.

I close the door behind me and start back downstairs. It warms my heart that Eleanor is such a receptive little girl and that someone like Miss Silver can bring her the warmth and connection she needs.

Ever since her mom died when she was only six months old, I've struggled. I want to be engaged with her, to give her the kind of love and life she deserves and needs, but every time I look in her big, blue eyes, all I see is her mother, Meredith, and all the pain of that loss comes rushing back.

Some days it feels like just yesterday I was happy and fun-loving. I was ecstatic to be a father. I loved every second of Meredith's pregnancy cravings and mood swings. I know that sounds crazy, but nothing made me happier than running to three stores at eleven at night to find the very specific brand of cracker she was craving.

We met when the telecommunications company I had founded, landed a contract with the hospital she was a director at. I was instantly drawn to her, moth to the flame and all that, but she wasn't interested. She was focused on her career, had just gotten out of a toxic marriage, and was ready to dominate her thirties and travel the world. But I'm nothing if not persistent and after begging her for a first date that lasted a full twenty-six hours of just talking and sharing a bottle of wine, we both realized we were meant to be.

We were inseparable after that.

Nine months later we were married.

We enjoyed our time as newlyweds but after five years, we decided that our family of two was ready to be a family of three. Meredith got pregnant pretty easily, had no major complications, and was an instant natural at being a mother. She radiated pure joy and contentment.

Some of my favorite memories were those two and three a.m. feedings. She'd get Eleanor and come back to our bed and lean against me. We'd both sit there and just stare at our baby girl, gushing over how beautiful she was, who she looked like, how we both never thought love like this existed.

It was bliss... until two months later when Meredith's postpartum symptoms became strange and unbearable. After several tests, a CT scan revealed a large tumor on one of her ovaries. The biopsy came back as cancerous and unfortunately, it had already spread to her uterus and her other ovary. They

did an emergency hysterectomy but it was too late. Within three months she had wasted away to nothing and the doctors had said there was nothing they could do.

One month later, she took her final breath as I held her hand and sobbed.

I grab my phone and wallet and head outside to meet my driver Phil and head to my work event.

“Good evening, Mr. Hayes.”

“Evening, Phil,” I say, ducking into the car as Phil closes the door behind me.

I glance up at the house, seeing the light in Eleanor’s room still on, that image of Miss Silver at my feet dancing in my head, accompanied by her words, *Did you only want me for the night?* I shake the thoughts away just as quickly as they appear and attempt to make small talk with Phil to distract me.

“How are the kids, Phil? Gerald still pursuing biology at Northwestern?”

I stare out the window on the drive as Phil tells me about Gerald’s first year in college. I do my best to push any filthy ideas about seeing Miss Silver on her knees in front of me out of my head.

I’m forty-two; the last thing I need to do is get involved with a twenty-something-year-old, especially since she’s my nanny.

Even if it’s torturous to have her living in my house.

Even if she stirs a desire in me that’s been dormant for so long.

I refuse to be that cliché.

Keep Reading [Those Three Words.](#)

A BILLIONAIRE BOSS ROMANCE

**BEG
FOR
IT**

ALEXIS WINTER

You know that feeling—the one
where you tell yourself it's a
terrible idea but you're going to
do it anyway?

*Even though you know that this man isn't just your father's
best friend who's twenty years your senior...he's your new
boss.*

I'm the good girl that's always done the right thing and yet
here I am, fresh out of grad school feeling directionless in life
and love.

So at the suggestion of my once estranged billionaire father, I
agree to an interview at his best friend's company.

The moment I step into Beckham Archer's office, I
recognize "*Mr. Daddy Issues.*"

The mysterious, older man I shamelessly flirted with only a
few nights ago...the same man who left my number in a
crumpled ball on the bar top before disappearing.

The power he possesses drives me absolutely wild, making me
want to cross the boundaries he demanded we put into place.

Soon, I'm kneeling before him as he shows me all the ways a
man should please me.

Dominating me.

Controlling me.

Allowing me how to let go under his command but with one
caveat...he's not my happily ever after.

***"I won't cuddle you or hold you or kiss you good night. All I
can offer you is a fantasy."***

But no amount of warnings that he's the wicked man who will
break my heart can scare me away.

No amount of reminders that he's old enough to be my father
can deter me from wanting him.

I realize there's more to this man than a billion dollar empire
and a wall around his heart.

He listens to me, offering to mentor me and providing me the
guidance I lacked in my childhood.

As hard as I try to keep my heart out of it, the harder I fall.

I want more than the fantasy...I want it all, even at the risk of
losing everything.

But our little secret doesn't stay quiet for long and soon, my
father finding out is the least of my worries...it's the secret
that Beckham's been hiding from me.

**One thing I've learned about Beckham Archer—he's the
type of man that doesn't wait for people to do something; if
he wants it, he makes it happen.**

The type of man that has me wanting to break all the rules.

The type of man that can make me *beg for it*.

Chapter 33

Chapter 1

Brontë

“Congratulations to my daughter, Brontë, on her graduation from grad school. Your stepmother and I are incredibly proud of you.”

My father, Jonas Ramsay, lifts his champagne flute toward the sky as he toasts to me. The room fills with cheers and echoes of congratulations as I smile shyly and nod my thanks.

I’m still not used to this kind of wealth. The kind of wealth where spending probably fifty thousand on a graduation party at one of the most exclusive restaurants in Chicago is merely a gesture.

“Come here, sweetie.” My dad approaches and wraps his arm around my shoulders. “Have you thought any more about my offer to join Ramsay Consulting?”

I look down at my glass of champagne and shrug.

My dad is one of the most, if not the most, powerful billionaires in Chicago but he’s only been a part of my life for the last year. He and my mother met when they were young and had me at only twenty-five, something I later learned was unplanned and a source of contention between them. As expected, they divorced when I was seven after Dad was unfaithful and Mom moved us to the suburbs where we lived a quiet, normal middle-class life away from the glitz and glam of the world’s elite.

“I’ve thought about it a little but I’m still just—unsure.”

“Well, that’s why I think it’s a great idea. You can come in at an entry level position, feel it out, see if finance and

business are what you want. I can tell you for sure though that they're in your blood." He squeezes my shoulder and I look over at him. He's referring to my mother.

My mom, Nadia Spencer, was an accountant for as long as I can remember and she loved it. That's how she met my father. In college they were both finance majors and they hit it off. After I was born, Mom stopped working to raise me, but once she and Dad divorced, she went back to work to support us. Dad wasn't yet the billionaire tycoon he is now but I do know she received child support and alimony payments every month; however, she always said she refused to be beholden to a man and wanted to show me that a single mom could do it on her own.

She was fierce and incredibly brave. It's been almost three years now since she's been gone and not a day goes by that I don't miss her. It's actually because of her that I'm working on my relationship with my father... or that I even have a relationship with him. On her deathbed she made me promise that I'd forgive him and try to get to know him and my half-siblings. I put it off for about two years, but now here I am, having this elaborate graduation party thrown by him in my honor.

"That's part of the problem though. I know everyone will just assume I'm working there because you're my father which will probably lead to some resentment by my peers because they'll assume I can get away with anything or they'll just wonder why I'm working in the first place, like I'm trying too hard to prove myself to everyone."

I gulp down the half a glass of champagne I've been nursing and grab a fresh one off a waiter's tray as they pass by. Even talking about my future instantly stresses me out. I feel like an asshole, like I'm complaining about my gold shoes being too tight with the amount of opportunity that's sitting in my lap, but I want to be fulfilled with my career, like my mom was.

I want to know that I'm making a difference in the world.

“I think you nipped that fear in the bud when you took your mother’s last name.” He doesn’t have to tell me that it disappoints him that I’m not proudly a Ramsay.

“Oh, trust me, with social media nowadays, everyone will know who I am the second I get hired on at your company.” He nods once, giving a half-hearted smile before looking down at his shoes. I feel guilty. “I’m not ashamed of you, Dad; that’s not it.” I reach my hand out and touch his arm. “I’m just feeling a little lost is all. You know how it is to be twenty-four.”

I give him a smile and his eyes brighten, his own lips curling into a smile. The truth is I am ashamed of the Ramsay name. For years my dad didn’t have a great reputation. I know he’s changed, or that’s what his new wife Chantelle says, along with a few others, but it’s hard to trust that when the only version I’d known of him was an angry, cheating liar who walked out on me when I was seven and barely showed back up, only to drop off a check or make a half-hearted attempt to celebrate a birthday or milestone too late.

“Okay, this is my last resort. My good friend, Beckham Archer, owns Archer Financial just across the street from my building. He’s looking for an admin immediately. His last one left unexpectedly. I could send him your resume and set up a meeting, if you’d like?”

“Now you’re pawning me off onto your friends who need assistants?” I crook an eyebrow at him. “Dad, I appreciate the offer, but I’m just not sure.”

“Okay, just promise me you’ll think about it.”

“I promise.”

“Come on.” He motions with a quick nod of his head.

“Where?”

“To your gift.” He smiles and grabs my hand, leading me toward the center of the room.

“Dad,” I groan, feeling like I’m that young girl all over again who just wants to spend time with her dad, instead of being showered with elaborate gifts. “I told you I didn’t need

or want any gifts besides donations being made to the Chicago Boys and Girls Club.”

“Oh, pish.” He waves away my suggestion in classic Jonas Ramsay fashion. Sure, he gives to charity—what billionaire doesn’t donate more money in a year than most of us will see in a lifetime to various causes—but do they care about them?

My dad doesn’t. Which is why I haven’t told him that for the last several years, I’ve volunteered at a few different nonprofits in the city for underprivileged children, something that has become such a passion of mine I can’t help but keep going back to the idea that maybe I should start my own nonprofit.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it’s gift time!” He grabs a spoon off a table and clinks it against his glass, the guests turning to listen to his announcement.

“I cannot wait to see what he got you for a gift.” My best friend Sylvia stands next to me along with our mutual friend Taylor, who are both giggling.

“Stop it.” I give them both a glare, but it only eggs them on.

They’ve been by my side for this entire journey with my father and they’ve been in the room with me while he’s on the phone trying to talk me into letting him buy me a new house in the suburbs, a penthouse downtown, or even a flat in London or Paris.

“I wanted to do something special for my baby girl because she not only deserves it, but she’s always wanted one.” My dad smiles at me and motions for us to head outside.

I’m so confused as to what might be on the other side of these walls. I walk next to him as the host walks ahead of us and dramatically opens both doors of the restaurant in a sweeping gesture.

I gasp when I see it.

Parked on the street in front of the restaurant with a giant bow on top is a brand-new cherry-red Porsche 911 Carrera Cabriole.

“Dad, this is too much.”

“Nonsense.” He walks me over to the car and slides the key in my hand. “Remember when you were just a little girl and you’d beg me to take you driving in mine with the top down? You couldn’t get enough of that car.”

He smiles so proudly as he looks at it and for a second I think I almost see a tear in his eye. I’m not sure if it’s a tear about my childhood or if it’s because he loved that car so damn much. He conveniently doesn’t mention when I accidentally crashed my bike into the rear fender and he screamed at me like I did it on purpose. I remember sobbing in my room for hours, my mom coming to rub my back and comfort me, but my dad pulling her out of my room because I needed to think about what I did.

“It’s a hundred-thousand-dollar car, Dad. I don’t have anywhere to put it.”

“We can sell your old car.”

“I like my car,” I say nervously. “And it’s only three years old.”

I feel guilty for not being super excited about a gift I not only didn’t want, but one I don’t need. I like the fact that I saved up and worked hard, busting my ass doing double shifts at the restaurant I worked at to buy my Kia. I was so proud when I did buy it since it was not only new, but had cooled and heated seats, plus a moonroof.

“Chantelle enjoys having a few different cars. She says it’s nice to have one as a daily driver and one when the weather isn’t so great.”

“Yes, well, you two have a ten-thousand-square-foot garage. I have a single parking spot.”

I can see his smile fade again as he leans in to plant a kiss on my cheek.

“Tell you what,” he says, taking the key from my hand, “you can keep it parked at my house. When you come over to our neighborhood, we can drop the top and take her out for a spin; how about that?”

“Sounds good, Dad.”

I stand there staring at the car along with two valet guys who are admiring her from every angle.

“That’s what he enjoys doing, you know?” I turn to my right where Chantelle, my stepmother, has sidled up beside me. “Giving gifts is one of his love languages.”

“Or maybe that’s an excuse that rich people give instead of actually taking the time to think out something thoughtful or meaningful or just respect the person’s wishes when they said no gifts?” Her lips form into a thin smile and I shake my head. “Sorry, that was rude. You’re just being kind.”

Chantelle is clearly a lot younger than my father, but she’s also probably one of the best things that has ever happened to him. I still struggle with the notion that people can really, fully change who they are at their core, but I also feel like a hypocrite when I see the way my father has changed because of her. When I heard that he was forty, marrying a woman who was my age, I laughed. I didn’t think for a second that it would last; it was merely a cliché life crisis move. But here they are, ten years and two kids later and he couldn’t be happier.

“He’s working on it, Brontë. I know it’s practically a slap in the face to ask for your patience and understanding with him, but I promise you,” she says softly, reaching her perfectly manicured hand out to rest on my arm, “he wants a genuine relationship with you. He talks about it all the time.”

“I know. Sometimes it’s just hard to forgive and forget.”

“I have no doubt. You’re justified in those feelings, Brontë. The boys were upset they couldn’t come tonight by the way, Silas in particular. He and Jenson made this for you.” She reaches into her clutch and pulls out a hand-drawn card that brings a huge smile to my face.

Silas and Jenson are the two little gems that came out of my family’s toxic breakup. From the first day I got to meet them, it’s like I’ve always been their big sister. And one thing that Chantelle always makes sure they know is that we are brother and sister, no half this or half that.

“Aw, those boys. I need to come see them this weekend.”

“They would love that and your father would love it too, so he can take you out in your new car.” She winks at me. “I better go find him, but I want to throw a fun little family cookout in the next few weeks, kick off summer right and celebrate your birthday. The boys will want to show you all their new flips and tricks they learned in swim lessons over the winter.”

“That sounds lovely, Chantelle.” I pull her in for a tight hug. “Tell the boys I missed them and I’ll see them soon.”

I head back inside to find my friends. “Hey, you guys want to go grab a drink somewhere else? I’m feeling a little celebrated out.”

“Oh yes, please!” Taylor says, grabbing her clutch and hopping down from her stool.

“Just a second,” I say, looking around for my dad. I spot him and head over to let him know we’re leaving.

“Thanks again, Dad.” I give him a hug and he squeezes me so tight, like he’s trying to make up for years lost.

“I’m so proud of you, Brontë. Your mother would be too.”

This time I can clearly see the tears and for some reason, maybe because I don’t want to disappoint him or maybe because I’m tired of feeling guilty, I agree to the meeting with his friend.

“I’ll do it. I’ll meet with Beckham Archer for an interview.”

A few moments later, Sylvia, Taylor, and I are making our way into a dimly lit speakeasy type bar in The Loop. This isn’t our usual neighborhood and the bars here are filled with finance bros in overpriced suits and clearly veneered teeth, all trying to shout over each other about their “big win.”

“You sure you want to stay here?” Sylvia asks, looking around, and I shrug, grabbing a high-top table. “Doesn’t seem like our vibe.”

“Yeah, but it’s close by. I don’t feel like Ubering anywhere. I just need something stronger than the glasses of champagne I downed.”

“Did your dad manage to talk you into working at his company?” Taylor asks.

“No, but I did something stupid.” I roll my eyes. “I agreed to take an interview at his fellow billionaire friend’s company, Archer Financial. I guess he needs an admin or something. Ugh, I’m so disappointed in myself that I didn’t just tell him I want to work in nonprofit and maybe start my own someday.”

“Honestly, Brontë, I think it’s a smart idea.” Sylvia shrugs and I look at her sideways. “Remember when you met me in undergrad? I was the teacher’s assistant and I told you that I was unsure about getting my master’s in education? Well, I didn’t listen to that gut feeling and now I’m a teacher and honestly, I kind of hate it.”

“You hate it?” Taylor’s ears perk up.

“I don’t *hate* it all the time, but it just doesn’t feel like it was my passion, what I’m meant to do; it’s something I’m good at so I convinced myself it was my dream. Sometimes I don’t think I’ve even figured out what my dream is yet, but I know it’s not in the education world.”

“So you think taking this job, if I get it, would be a way for me to try out the financial world before I either fully commit or walk away?”

“Exactly!” She slaps the table dramatically. “And if you think there’s an interest there, I’m sure you could move into a financial position within the company. With your forensic accounting master’s, you’ll be able to find work at any financial firm. Fraud is always going on. You know what they say, scammers are the new serial killers.”

“True,” I say, laughing at her comment. I’m feeling better already about my decision.

“But first,” Taylor says, looking around the bar, “we need to get you laid because it’s been over two years now and you’ve graduated so no more excuses.”

I duck my head in embarrassment. “Okay, maybe yell it a little louder next time so the bartender can hear you?”

I slide off my stool, flipping her the bird as they both fall into a fit of giggles.

“I’m getting a round of old-fashioneds.”

I walk to the bar and wait for the bartender to notice me when a shadowy figure to my right catches my eye. This guy is not your average twenty-something frat boy. His suit looks expensive, bespoke like it was made for him. It hugs his arms and shoulders, accentuating a very toned physique. A lock of his dirty-blond hair has fallen over one eye as he reads something on his phone.

I take the advantage of going unnoticed by him to really look him over. His jaw is rough with stubble, but it’s cut and angular. His lips full. He reaches for his cocktail, bringing it to his mouth to take a sip before placing it back on the bar top without looking away from his phone.

“What’s with you finance guys?” A burst of confidence surges through me as I make small talk with the stranger. “Always working.” I shake my head and place my order as the man turns to look at me.

He glances over his shoulder to make sure I’m speaking to him before sliding his phone in his pocket and turning on his stool to look at me. He doesn’t hide his gaze as it slowly travels down my body, then back up again before he replies.

“Guilty.” He smirks.

The dim light catches his icy-blue eyes and makes my stomach do a little flip. Maybe that champagne hit me harder than I realized because this man is so sexy I feel my mouth grow dry.

“Married to the job?” I say coyly, dragging my teeth over my bottom lip seductively like I’m in a cheesy rom-com. I brush my hair back in a flirty manner, leaning a bit forward on the bar top so it presses my breasts together.

Who the hell am I right now?

“Afraid so. She’s my wife, mistress, and lover.” He tosses back the rest of the amber liquid in his tumbler and places it on the bar top.

“Shame.” I smile as the bartender places my drinks down in front of me and I go to hand him my credit card.

“Allow me, please?” he says, nodding toward my card.

“Thank you.” I pull my card back and place it in my wallet. I gather the three tumblers between my fingers, and then I set them back down on the bar, not yet ready to break up this little flirt fest.

“So what brings a beautiful young woman like you to a place like this?” The way he looks at me has my stomach doing all sorts of little flip-flops.

“You mean to a bar in The Loop filled with young finance gurus foaming at the mouth to be the next Wolf of Wall Street?” He chuckles and I shrug. “Just something in the way they all brag about how they can really see Jordan Belfort in themselves gets me going. Like it’s going to make a woman’s panties drop that they can resonate with a selfish, narcissistic scam artist like they really are Leonardo DiCaprio in the movie.”

“You’re fiery. Funny as hell too.” His eyes do that lazy perusal of my body again and it sends my stomach into somersaults. “Please tell me a woman as gorgeous as you hasn’t been lured into the soul-crushing world of finance?”

“You mean because I’m pretty it would be a shame?”

He nods. “Not a shame. We need more women like you who call it like it is, but you’re young. Seems like there’s probably more fun and exciting things to fill your time than long hours and hanging out at bars with men like me.”

“Men like you, huh?” I cock my head, bringing back my flirty demeanor. “And what kind of man are you?”

“The kind your dad wouldn’t want you talking to.” His voice is deep and a little ragged as he leans back in his seat, running his hand through his hair as his eyes drop down to my lips. I stare at him, debating my next move, when I notice the

sexy lines at the corner of his eyes. It was obvious he wasn't a fresh graduate when I first saw him, but it's only now that I can see he definitely has a few years on me.

Damn, an older man—my kryptonite.

“Look, I don't normally do this.” He laughs at my statement. “Right. Cliché, I know, especially after your little ominous warning but...” I rummage through my wallet for an old receipt and grab a pen from the bar, scribbling down my first name, last initial, and my phone number and hand it to him.

“Is that an initial?” He looks at the paper, then to me.

“Yes, I figure a man who looks like you must have at least twenty different *I don't normally do this* women's numbers in his phone. So, with a last initial, maybe I'll stand out.”

“Only twenty?” He hooks an eyebrow at me, making me laugh. “Why only the initial? Scared to give me your last name?”

I grab the paper and write out the rest of my last name before handing it back to him.

“There.”

He looks at it, then his smile falters a little. “Brontë Spencer?”

“Yes, that's me. I guess you probably don't have a lot of Brontës in your phone so the last name is a little redundant now that I think about it.”

“Yeah,” he says almost nervously as he runs his hand over his jaw. “That's for certain.”

“I'll be right back. The ladies are frothing at the mouth over there for these,” I say as I look over at my friends who are giving me ridiculous hand signals and eye gestures, thinking they're being subtle.

I walk the drinks over to the table and place them down.

“Holy shit, you guys. I just met the finest man I have ever seen in my life. I think I almost blacked out and peed myself

talking to him,” I whisper as if he could hear me over the loud ruckus the frat boys are causing in the center of the bar.

“And of course he’s older.” Taylor bounces her eyebrows. “Daddy issues coming in stroooong.” They both laugh. They’ve always teased me about my affinity for older men.

Is it daddy issues? I’m ninety-nine percent sure it is. We can thank Jonas for that.

“I gave him my number!” I shriek just as both of their faces fall. “What?”

“Uh, I think he just left?”

“What?” I spin around and sure enough, he’s nowhere to be found. I walk back up to the bar and look around. “Where did that guy go?” I ask the bartender who shrugs and turns to help someone else.

And then that’s when I see it, the crumpled-up piece of paper left on the bar top with my name and number.

I GROAN AND STRETCH MY ARMS OVERHEAD, TRUDGING TO THE kitchen to make a much-needed espresso before getting ready for my interview at Archer Financial... a decision I’m now regretting giving in to.

Instead of taking time to learn about the company, I’ve spent far too long thinking about the rejection from a total stranger this weekend.

I make myself a latte and open my iPad to do a little research, but my mind keeps drifting to that sexy smirk from Mr. Daddy Issues at the bar.

“Ugh.” I shut my iPad and march to the bathroom for a shower, hoping if I get my day going it will take my mind off Taylor’s all-too-true comment that I haven’t been laid in over two years and if I’m not careful, my virginity will grow back at any second.

I finish applying my makeup and pull my long hair up into a professional high ponytail. I slide my feet into a sensible pair of black pumps and do a quick spin in front of my floor-length mirror to double-check my pencil skirt isn't tucked into my panties or there isn't a hole in my white blouse.

After this weekend's rejection, I really don't need a double dose of embarrassment for my self-esteem. I look polished and professional.

"I'd hire me." I smile at my reflection before grabbing my portfolio and heading to Archer Financial.

I stop outside the reflective building and stare up at the towering skyscraper. My dad was right; it's literally across the street from his building. I feel my chest tighten as I watch several people walking into the building, their heads turned down as they stare at their phones, completely oblivious to the world around them.

Is this really the life I want?

I square my shoulders and march into the building, reminding myself that this is a good opportunity and like my dad and my friends mentioned, a way to feel out if a life in finance is really what I want.

"Hi, I have an interview with Mr. Beckham Archer at nine thirty."

I smile at the man sitting behind the front desk, but he doesn't reciprocate.

"Name." He doesn't even look up from his computer screen.

"Brontë Spencer."

"It's the fortieth floor. Take the elevator bank behind me to your left. Here's your visitor's badge. Make sure it's visible on your person."

"Thank you."

I walk timidly around the massive desk, my heels echoing against the marble floor as several others rush past me to enter the elevator. When I arrive on the floor, there's a second

reception desk with two women smiling at me. I repeat the process of introducing myself.

“Mr. Archer is ready for you.” One of the ladies smiles as she stands and walks around the desk. “I’ll show you the way.”

She brings me to two massive wooden doors that she opens and ushers me inside before turning to walk back down the hallway.

I step inside the office, nervously looking around when I spot him. His back is to me as he faces the floor-to-ceiling windows. He’s clearly typing furiously on his phone but finishes and slides it into his pocket to turn around and face me, a casual smirk on his face as he speaks.

“Thanks for meeting me, Miss Spencer.”

Holy fucking shit, you have to be kidding me. This cannot be real.

I almost want to pinch myself, convinced I’m having a nightmare right now. Before I can stop myself, the words fall from my lips in a somewhat whisper.

“Mr. Daddy Issues?”

Chapter 34

Chapter 2

Beckham

Her face says it all and it's fucking priceless. "Pardon?"

I watch her delicate throat constrict as she attempts to swallow down the realization that the man she tried to pick up last night, is not only her dad's best friend, but I very well could be her new boss.

"Uh, nice to meet you," she says, clutching the folder to her chest, her cheeks flaming.

"Brontë Spencer then, I presume?" I take her hand in mine.

"Ye—yes, that's me." She smiles nervously, shifting her folder and purse to shake my hand. "Pleasure to meet you, sir. And thank you."

"Pleasure's all mine." Her hand is thin and soft, and I'm tempted to hold on to her fingers longer than professional or necessary. I gesture for her to take a seat in the chair across from my desk and she does. Crossing one slim ankle over the other, she smooths out her black pencil skirt.

"I've heard a lot about you from your father, all good things of course." I offer her a genuine smile to ease her tension but it doesn't work. In fact, it seems to have the opposite effect. Her shoulders lift as she hugs the folder in her arms a little tighter.

"So why don't you tell me about yourself, Brontë, what your background looks like, what interests you, what line of work you think you want to end up in."

I lean back in my chair and fold my hands in my lap.

“Well, honestly, I’m a little unsure what I want to do with my life which is why I’m here. My father suggested I come work for you till I figure out what I actually want to do.” I chuckle and she nervously tries to backpedal. “Not that I don’t think that this is a real job or anything; I’m extremely grateful for the opportunity and for you even taking the time to speak with me.”

“No explanation needed.” I hold up my hand. “I’ve been in your shoes before and I think it’s a smart plan. Too often we’re pushed into specific careers based on what we decided to study when we were eighteen years old. A lot can happen between now and then.”

“I studied finance and accounting in undergrad and just graduated from grad school with my master’s in forensic accounting. My mom was an accountant and she loved her job so I followed in her footsteps.”

“But now you’re unsure about that path for yourself?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I lean forward in my chair and intertwine my fingers. “What is it that excites you? When you picture yourself twenty years from now, what career do you see yourself in?”

Her shoulders finally drop as she chews on the corner of her lip.

“Helping people. I like volunteering and I think nonprofit is something I could see myself in long term.”

“Well, that’s good news. We have some great relationships with a few here in Chicago. In fact, we have a foundation. The Archer Foundation focuses on single mothers or women in need of prenatal care... basically families in need. We do fundraisers and group volunteering throughout the company. We also offer five paid days off per month for volunteering.”

Her eyes grow wide as I explain about our efforts here at Archer Financial to give back to our community and help those in need.

“That sounds wonderful. My mom was big into volunteering and took me even before I can remember.

Anyway, I do like finance as well. I enjoy solving problems and finding errors. I just—it's a big commitment to choose a career and jump in when you're not one hundred percent certain."

Gone is the bold, flirty woman from last night who shamelessly approached me at the bar—replaced with an almost timid and nervous little creature. Her eyes dart from mine to the floor and back again as she speaks. They sparkle when the sun hits them through the blinds behind me. Her lips are full, almost too large for her delicate features, yet they fit her perfectly. Everything about her seems ethereal, like she could be a Disney princess locked away in a tower by an evil witch... a far cry from her commanding and at times tyrannical father.

"Tell you what, Brontë. If you were to accept the position here at Archer, you would be hired on as my assistant. I am in desperate need of someone who can help me manage my calendar and gate-keep my time, also someone who can attend meetings with me, book travel, manage my emails and messages. Basically, my right arm. I'm not looking for someone to work twelve-hour days or pick up my dry cleaning. I'm pretty easygoing and approachable. I do—"

"I'm really sorry about last night," she interrupts me, blurting out her apology nervously. "I had no idea who you were and I *never*"—she gestures with her arms like she's an umpire calling a runner safe—"do that. I had some champagne at my graduation party; that's why we were there, we were celebrating. I don't know what came over me, but I wanted to be bold and felt confident and I just... I'm so sorry."

She shakes her head and I can see the shame on her face but it doesn't stop me from chuckling.

"Absolutely no need to apologize about it, Brontë. We are two adults and asking someone out is part of life. I, uh, I feel like I owe you an apology actually. When you said your name, I recognized it immediately and because of who your father is... and because he's one of my closest friends, I removed myself from the situation."

“My ego appreciates the explanation.” She looks down as she says it, a sly smile on her face and it feels like her nervousness is melting.

“I should have offered you an explanation, but I panicked. I think I was just in shock at the coincidence considering you were on my calendar this morning. Guess I should have just explained that right then but felt it might have been embarrassing... Then again, showing up to find me behind this desk today probably wasn't any better.” She shrugs and we both laugh again. “So, water under the bridge on both our parts?”

“Deal.” She smiles.

“Great. So back to the job, how does all that sound? And for the record, I am fully aware that if you took this job, you could realize in a month that you hate it and want to leave. That is completely fine and won't be an issue. I just wanted to extend the offer to you if it was in any way something you feel you would be interested in.”

“I appreciate it. I think it sounds perfectly manageable on my part. When do I need to give an answer?”

“How about the end of the week? Give you enough time to think things over?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect. Here...” I grab my business card and scribble down my personal cell number on it. “This has my email and work phone, but this is my personal cell. If you have any questions or need more time to make the decision, just shoot me a text or email.”

My fingers graze hers as she takes it from my hand. The touch is quick and subtle, but it instantly sets my nerves ablaze. Her fire-red nail polish isn't helping the matter because all I see when I look down at them is having them wrapped around my cock.

“Looks like I got your number after all.” She giggles, that blush spreading up her neck and over her cheeks again. “Sorry, that wasn't professional. I don't know why I said that.”

It makes me laugh again. “Don’t apologize; we’re not that uptight here.” She looks up at me from where she’s still sitting in her chair. I’m towering over and for some stupid reason, I take it a step further. I reach out and tip her chin upward so she’s looking up at me. “I promise I don’t bite, Brontë. You can relax.”

The tension in this second is palpable, but just as quickly it vanishes when she clears her throat and stuffs the card into her purse as she gathers her things to stand up.

“Thanks again for your time, Mr. Archer. I will be in touch with you shortly.”

“Beckham,” I correct her.

“Beckham.” She nods and heads toward my office door. She stops just before she reaches it and slowly turns back around to face me. “Just one other thing.”

“Hmm?”

“Could we keep last night between us? As in, don’t tell my father.”

I want to say I wouldn’t dream of it because if your father knew that I even contemplated for one second taking his daughter home, he’d cut my balls off and feed them to his dogs.

“Of course, it’ll be our little secret.” And just to make things even more tense, I throw in a wink for good measure.

I’M NOT PROUD OF IT, BUT I’VE SPENT THE LAST THREE DAYS thinking of very little but Brontë.

Something about her, beyond her obvious beauty, is so compelling to me. The way she seems to hold herself back, the way she presents so innocently, yet lurking beneath that surface I sense a curious woman begging for a man to coax out her naughty side.

I grip my golf club tighter as I imagine being that man. It excites me to imagine helping her find that confidence again she displayed the other night in the bar. To see her ask for what she wants, to demand it from me.

“Something on your mind? You’re awfully quiet today,” her father, Jonas, asks me, snapping me back to reality.

Is it fucked up beyond measure that I’m standing fifteen feet away from Brontë’s father, imagining doing all sorts of debase things to her? Yeah, I’d say that’s about as fucked as you can get, but maybe that’s part of the allure.

The forbidden fruit.

“Heard anything from Brontë about the job?” I ask as I take my position at the tee.

“No, haven’t spoken to her since the graduation party. I can give her a call if you want?” He holds his cell phone up, but I shake my head no.

“That’s okay. I don’t want her feeling pressured. I told her to let me know by Friday. I’m sure she will.”

“She’s a very bright woman, just like her mother. I just worry she’ll end up wasting her aptitude for finance and problem solving on some silly do-good endeavor in nonprofit. Now I know,” he says, lifting his gloved hands, “others need help and don’t have the opportunity like I had but still, she’s got something and it would be a shame to toss that aside. Even her professors have said as much, that she’s gifted.”

I smile, not surprised at all that she’s whip-smart. I could tell just from our short interaction she’s the kind of woman who has it all.

I’m trying to play it cool but I’m hoping she takes the job. I don’t know why because I know that no matter how much I want to, no matter how much she wants me to... I can’t touch her.

I *won’t* touch her.

I tee off, the ball sailing down the fairway.

“Not a bad shot but still won’t be enough to beat me. Get that checkbook ready.” He laughs as we climb inside the golf cart.

We’ve had a long-standing bet between us when we play golf. Loser has to donate winner’s chosen amount to winner’s chosen charity.

“We’ll see about that.”

“Wouldn’t bet money on a shot like that.”

I turn when I hear the grating voice of Mitchell Reardon, a joke of a man, pulling up beside me in his golf cart. I look to his left and see my ex, socialite Venus Davenport’s father Miles sitting shotgun.

Venus Davenport’s father, Miles, sitting shotgun.

“I see Miles has you being his little bi—I mean caddy today, Mitchell. I’m sure he’ll tip you well.” I give him a hearty grin and his freckled face flushes.

“Beckham, Jonas,” Miles says dismissively as if we’re bothering him.

We both tip our heads toward him and Mitchell drives off, flipping me the bird behind Miles’ back.

“What an arrogant little shit,” Jonas says. “What’s his deal? Why does he hate you?”

“He’s always had something against me. I think it has something to do with my dating Venus, but I don’t know for sure.”

I know for a fact it’s because of my relationship with Venus. Mitchell’s always had it bad for her and she’s always said he wasn’t her type but toward the end of our relationship, there were a few clues that she might have stepped out on me with him. Nothing I could prove or even cared to prove since I moved on.

“So any more thoughts about Pierce Investments? With almost twenty nationwide locations, it’s only upside for Archer if you guys acquire them from Ramsay Consulting.”

“I think you’re right. I’m actually going to be meeting with them in the next few weeks. They want to come to Chicago and see how we do things here. If they end up not wanting to go through with the acquisition, will you keep them?”

Jonas shakes his head as he reaches for his beer. “They’ve been on the chopping block for a while with us. I think there’s a lot of potential with them, could easily triple their locations nationwide, but in the last few years I’ve backed away from investment firms. I think it would be right up your alley to acquire them and rebrand them as Archer. Already have the overhead and infrastructure in place.”

He’s right. I’ve been looking to do a major expansion with Archer Financial and acquiring an already established company is the best way to do it.

“Bottom line,” he says, “they want to expand their portfolio and footprint but they need the capital from somewhere and they know they’re not going to get it from me.”

We finish our game and I head back home to try and relax and push the ever-present thoughts of my best friend’s daughter from my mind.

I’m just stepping out of the shower when my phone chirps at me from the counter. I look down to see a text from a number that’s not in my phone. It just reads: *I’ll take the job.*

I smile and add Brontë’s name to my contacts.

Brontë: *Sorry. I said I would email, didn’t I? Will send an email now so it’s official.*

Me: *No need for the email, Brontë. Thank you for letting me know and for taking the job.*

And because I clearly can’t seem to not fan the flames, I send another text.

Me: *I was actually just talking about you.*

Brontë: *Oh?*

Me: *With your father.*

Brontë: *Oh.*

I want to read into her response. Was it disappointment that I didn't say I was telling a friend about a sexy little thing I met at the bar this weekend that has my brain doing all sorts of fucked-up backflips trying to justify wanting to fuck my best friend's daughter?

Me: *He'll be happy to hear you took the job. Have a good night, Brontë. See you Monday.*

Brontë: *Thanks again. See you Monday, Mr. Archer.*

She doesn't correct it to Beckham and I don't want her to because standing here butt-ass naked out of the shower, my cock growing harder by the second, all I want is to see her on her knees in front of me calling me Mr. Archer in that slightly breathy voice of hers.

I look back over my shoulder at the shower, my cock throbbing, begging for release at the images in my head right now.

I know I shouldn't. It's fucked up. It's so wrong on so many levels that I'm pretty sure even Freud would have a field day with me.

"Fuck it." I reach back into the shower and turn on the water as I step in and begin to slowly stroke myself.

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About the Author

Alexis Winter is a contemporary romance author who loves to share her steamy stories with the world. She specializes in billionaires, alpha males and the women they love.

If you love to curl up with a good romance book you will certainly enjoy her work. Whether it's a story about an innocent young woman learning about the world or a sassy and fierce heroine who knows what she wants you, 're sure to enjoy the happily ever afters she provides.

When Alexis isn't writing away furiously, you can find her exploring the Rocky Mountains, traveling, enjoying a cup of coffee or petting a cat.

You can find her books on Amazon or here: <https://www.alexiswinterauthor.com/>



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