

BAXTER ENTERPRISES



EST 1823



# LUXE



THE BAXTER BILLIONAIRES

DAISY ALLEN

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# CONTENTS

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1. ONE](#)

[2. TWO](#)

[3. THREE](#)

[4. FOUR](#)

[5. FIVE](#)

[6. SIX](#)

[7. SEVEN](#)

[8. EIGHT](#)

[9. NINE](#)

[10. TEN](#)

[11. ELEVEN](#)

[12. TWELVE](#)

[13. THIRTEEN](#)

[14. FOURTEEN](#)

15. FIFTEEN

16. SIXTEEN

17. SEVENTEEN

18. EIGHTEEN

19. NINETEEN

20. TWENTY

21. TWENTY-ONE

22. TWENTY-TWO

23. TWENTY-THREE

24. TWENTY-FOUR

25. TWENTY-FIVE

26. TWENTY-SIX

27. TWENTY-SEVEN

28. TWENTY-EIGHT

29. TWENTY-NINE

30. THIRTY

31. THIRTY-ONE

32. THIRTY-TWO

33. THIRTY-THREE

34. THIRTY-FOUR

35. THIRTY-FIVE

36. THIRTY-SIX

37. THIRTY-SEVEN



38. THIRTY-EIGHT

Epilogue

Other Book Type Thingos Daisy Allen Wrote

About The Author

Acknowledgments

*This is for all the readers who like  
their romance with a double serving  
of smut and sass.*

*And food. They eat a lot in this book.  
I guess I was hungry while I was  
writing it.*



# PROLOGUE



*“You’re just going to leave without saying goodbye? What am I supposed to tell them?”*

*“It doesn’t matter. Tell them whatever you want. Because one day they’re going to learn that it doesn’t matter what you say. In the end, it only matters what you do.”*



# ONE

## *Damien*

“YOU CAN GO TO hell, you arrogant sonofabitch. I never want to see your smug, smirking, soul-sucking, douchebag, fucking face again!”

I look up from the spreadsheet on my desk, and she’s still standing there, her perfectly contoured nose flaring from yelling, the leather of her Gucci clutch dimpling where her perfectly manicured red nails are digging into it.

“Well?! Aren’t you going to say anything?” she shouts again.

I don’t even bother to shrug. She knows I’ve already said everything I’m ever going to say about the matter.

“I’m going to give you three seconds to take back what you said, Damien Baxter,” she threatens.

*That’s three seconds too many,* I think, as I look back down at the report on my desk, clicking the seconds away with my pen against the polished wooden oak of my desk. Even out of

the corner of my eyes, I can tell with each pen click, she's getting even angrier. I hadn't even thought that was possible.

"Fuck you, Damien! You're going to pay for this," she hisses, ripping her left shoe off her foot and flinging it at me.

I catch it easily with one hand, then hold the stiletto, point first, out to her.

With a huff, she ignores the shoe and hobbles out of the office, leaving a sickening cloud of Hypnôse wafting in her wake.

"Melissa," I say, pressing on the buzzer, before the door is even closed.

My executive assistant appears instantly in my office. "Yes, Mr. Baxter?"

"Now that you've had your entertainment for the day, let's get to the next item on our agenda, shall we?"

She bites back a laugh but doesn't comment on the incident. I have to give her credit for that. "Of course, sir; I'll just go grab the files we need."

I'm already engrossed in the report again before she's gone and I'm not sure how long I've been staring at the numbers on the page when I hear someone clear their throat. Looking up, I see a young woman standing by the door, a large yellow envelope in her hand.

"What?" I snap. Only one person is allowed to enter my office unannounced and that person is me.

“Good morning! I’m here to deliver this,” she says cheerfully, waving the envelope in the air.

“Just leave it on the desk out there.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t!” she tells me, still annoyingly cheery. “I need someone to sign for it.”

I huff, irritated by the interruption. “My assistant should be —”

“Oh, she’s not out here. Just saw her run off somewhere. I’ve been standing out here since...” Her voice tapers off.

“Since what?” I snarl, surely sounding like the dick I’ve just been accused of being. And that’s okay with me.

“Since that really pretty, but really pissed off woman stormed out of here muttering about how Damien Baxter was going to live to regret ever coming into her life. She was *really* mad. I almost feel sorry for that Damien fellow,” she says, her voice catching in a chuckle as she takes a few steps into my office. Even from here, I can see her dark brown eyes sparkling in amusement. “You better warn him, if you know him.”

“I’ll send him an urgent interoffice memo immediately,” I reply, surprising myself by engaging. There’s something unnerving about the casual confidence of the strange woman standing in my office like she belongs there. And I’m not one to be thrown by confidence. She also appears completely oblivious to how she stands out against my minimalist designer decor and collection of abstract impressionism



artwork. It's hard to ignore her as she stands there in her torn jeans, fading T-shirt with a pink flamingo on it, and a neon bright hi-visibility vest. Somehow, though, she pulls it off.

“You do that. Tell him he should wear a cup over his bits to bed if he intends on ever having children.” She giggles as she tucks a long black curl out back behind her ear, showing off her pale neck. I swallow; I'm a sucker for necks, everything about them, and hers is long, supple, elegant. I'd probably find it even more attractive if it wasn't attached to someone currently laughing at my expense and interrupting my day. “Anyway, I'm gonna need you to sign for this,” she says, strolling right up to my desk and throwing the package down. “Just your initials are fine,” she adds, handing me a small device.

Taking it, I glance at the dotted line on the dull gray screen, and there's a small stylus attached to the side of the device. I've never signed for a parcel before, but I'm not about to tell her that.

“I don't have all day, dude,” she rushes, bouncing from foot to foot, still with a smile on her face.

Did she just call me “Dude”? I look back down at the device and then back up at her, still unnerved. It's worse now that she's so close I can smell her. There's waft of something sweet, fruity, and I can't pick it out. It's faint but mesmerizing. But her scent aside, her eyes are what are unnerving me; they're such a dark brown, they look bottomless. And even though she's looking at me like I'm a dunce, I can't help

noticing how they're an inexplicable combination of kind and sexy. Inviting. I want to instantly RSVP yes.

“Sir?” she prompts me. Well, I guess that's better than “Dude”.

“Uh, yeah,” I murmur, and fumble with the stylus as an impatient frown flashes across her forehead.

“No, no. Just use your finger,” she says, swiping her finger in the air.

I feel an embarrassed scowl settle on my face as my index finger tentatively presses against the screen and a little dot appears. I press against the screen again and scribble my initials, then pull back to survey it.

It looks nothing like my signature.

“Should I do it again?” I ask. “It looks like something a baby Jackson Pollock painted.”

The laugh that blurts out of her mouth surprises me.

I return it with a deeper scowl. “What?”

“Wow,” she mutters under her breath.

“What?!” I snarl, my voice louder than I expected. I suspect there's a tinge of mockery in her laughter, and it's grating on me.

She swallows the remnants of her laugh and clears her throat. “Um, yeah, no, that's fine. I better be going. Deliveries to make. Messy signatures to get.”

She reaches out to take the device and her finger grazes against the side of my hand, sending a painful spark up my wrist. My arm snaps back to my side, and I force myself not to rub my skin where she'd touched. I refuse to admit there's any reason my body should be reacting to this woman. The sooner she leaves, the better.

“Oopsy! Sorry 'bout that! Must be these clonkers!” she says, pointing to the thick rubber soles on her maroon Doc Martens boots. “Anyway, gotta run. Send Damien my best wishes!”

She turns to leave and I find myself watching her. Her steps are light and bouncy while her jeans cling to the ample curves of her ass as it sways to its own rhythm out of my office. The door closes silently behind her, and for a moment it feels like the space around me is darker, colder. My feet itch to follow her but then I look back down at my desk and spot the scattered mess of paperwork the dropped envelope has left on my desk.

This is why I have an executive assistant and two personal secretaries; so I don't have to deal with this shit.

*But then you wouldn't have had the pleasure of seeing that ass walking out of here, my tingling cock reminds me.*

*Down, boy, I tell it. But it doesn't listen, traitor.*

“I'm sorry that took so long, Mr. Baxter. Had to get the toner cartridge changed in the printer for the second time this week,” Melissa pants, carrying a stack of files in her arms.

She dumps them on the side desk where she sits when she's working with me and prattles on about something I'm barely listening to, my mind stuck on the woman who just left. A woman whose presence I'm already missing.

"Melissa," I say, abruptly interrupting her rambling.

"Yes, sir?"

"I need you to go get that woman who was just here," I say before I can stop myself.

"Miss Mas—"

"No! No, the delivery woman. Who brought this package." I pick it up, trying not to sniff it to see if she left any of that mystery scent behind. "She just left. Can you go grab her, please? She can't have gone far."

Melissa complies without question.

I get up from my desk, pull out my money clip from my pocket, and set a hundred dollar bill on the corner of my desk. I have no idea what the hell I'm doing, just that I need an excuse to see her again.

I glance to the left and see the only personal piece of decor in the room. It's a framed, preserved picture of my great, great, great grandfather standing outside the little bakery that started it all. I wonder what he'd think about me, one of his descendants, having my assistant scurry off to retrieve a delivery woman for a reason...I'm not sure of yet.

Why is it taking so long? How far could she have gone?

Right on cue, Melissa returns to my office, followed by the woman.

“Thank you, Melissa, we’ll just be a minute.” I dismiss my assistant, who just nods and leaves. My antics are no longer as shocking to her as they used to be.

“What’s up? Did I forget something? Did you really want to sign your initials again?” the woman jokes, her entire face bright as she grins at me. Where does her cheeriness come from? I’d have thought being a courier would’ve beaten the cheer right out of a person.

“Um. Yes, you forgot your tip,” I say, tilting my chin towards the money.

Her eyes glance at the note on the desk and she frowns. “That’s a ridiculous amount to tip someone for just bringing up a package. Also, you don’t have to tip me.”

“Well, from where I’m from we tip. I’m not from here,” I tell her.

“‘Here’ being Sydney?”

“Well, Australia.”

“Ah, well, then Mr. Foreigner, let me save you some...er, pounds...?” She looks at me for confirmation.

“Euros,” I answer. “Euros. Don’t let the English accent fool you.”

“Well, Mr. Euros, we don’t tip here in Australia. We get paid a fair amount for doing our jobs. And I’d like to keep it

that way,” she declares, waving a finger at me.

I slide a tongue over my lips, trying not to notice the way the front of her T-shirt is riding up from her jeans, giving me a peek of a strip of smooth, pale skin. I’m afraid if I focus on it too long, I might start wondering if it’s as soft as the skin of her hands. And what it tastes like...

I clear my throat. “It’s not just for that. I, er, I know you heard some of the argument that happened here before with that woman. Consider this incentive for you to keep quiet about it.”

Before the last words have left my mouth, her entire face contorts into a scowl.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” she spits.

The curse shocks me, I’m not really sure why, but I thought she had probably never sworn once in her life. And while that assumed innocence tickled me, the sound of the word “fuck” coming out of her mouth has my cock tingling again.

“What do you mean?” I force myself to answer.

“You want to bribe me to keep my mouth shut about something that wasn’t any of my business to start with?” she says, as if insulted that I would suggest she would do otherwise.

“Yes.”

“What makes you think I could care less about what I heard anyway?”

“You might not. But there are people who would.”

“Then you and those people can both go to hell. Keep your damn tip.” She spins around to leave and then pivots back to face me, her face red. “But before I do, let me give *you* a tip. Maybe instead of insulting me, you should tell the people who would care about a stupid fight you had with your girlfriend to go fuck themselves and mind their own business!”

“Miss—”

She makes a hush gesture with her hand. “And one last thing, if you are going to bribe me to keep my mouth shut, maybe try offering me something more than the cost of the Gucci socks on your feet!”

“They’re Dior,” I say before I can stop myself. Something about arguing with her is making the blood rush to my head. Heads.

“Oh, geez.” She rolls her eyes.

“Wait. You’re right.” I retrieve my money clip and strip off another nine hundred dollar bills and lay it on top of the first one. “Is that better?”

Her hands ball up into fist by her sides. “You smug...”

Now it’s my turn to hold my hand up. “If you’re going to insult me, just let me stop you right there. You already heard what I’ve been called today, and I doubt anything you think of can compare to what she said. She’s had much more practice at it. So why don’t you just take the money and save your breath.”

Her eyes narrow into slits so thin I can barely see the brown of her pupils through them.

“I’m starting to think that woman had it right about you after all. And here I was feeling sorry for you.”

“You mean you were feeling sorry for Damien,” I say with a smirk.

She rolls her eyes and points to my nameplate on my desk.

“Touché.” I take a step closer to her, and she doesn’t back away as I thought she would. It emphasizes the height difference between us. She tilts her head almost all the way back to look up at me, eyes wide and wild. “Anyway, as you may have heard, my dinner plans for tonight have fallen through. What are you doing tonight?”

She almost chokes on her incredulity. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I want to take you out to a nice dinner. And after that, I want to have you for dessert. All. Night. Long,” I say, my eyes locked on hers. I don’t want to miss it, I want to see her reaction.

She doesn’t disappoint. Her eyes widen, and then for a moment, her pupils hover, the mind behind them racing. Could she be considering it?

She takes two steps towards me, and I hold my breath as the scent of her skin wafts, that scent that is being inhaled through my nostrils, racing through my body, and driving my blood to my cock.



The front of her T-shirt presses against my arm, and even through multiple layers of fabric, her skin burns. She reaches up on her tiptoes and whispers, low and quiet into my ear, “I wouldn’t have a meal with you if you tipped me a *hundred* thousand dollars.”

I grin. “You’re not refusing *being* the meal though. Trust me, I could make you feel like the most delectable dessert known to mankind.”

She glares at me, stepping away before she spits, “Not even for a million dollars.”

I hide my disappointment behind a wink. “Careful. I could make that happen, you know. Do you really want to know what you’d decide if that was offered?”

A small grunt sticks in her throat and she reaches over and snatches up the ten bills and tucks them into her pocket. “I’ve changed my mind. I will have a very nice dinner tonight. On you. I’m afraid you’ll just have to have yourself for dessert.” She gives me an exaggerated wink and turns and storms out of the room.

I can’t help letting out a laugh, noticing how her ass sways even more when she’s angry. I could spend a large part of my life arguing with her if it granted me that view on a regular basis.

A quick glance at the clock tells me she was only in here for two minutes, an expensive two minutes.

But worth it.

I settle back down behind my desk. If I'm going to get any work done today, I'm going to have to stop thinking about the way her eyes looked as she glared, and imagining those same eyes, glazed over, as I wrap her legs around my waist and ram my cock deep inside her.

"Mr. Baxter? Everything okay?" Melissa comes in, glasses perched on her nose.

"Perfectly. Just taking care of a little bit of business," I say.

"Whatever you say, sir. It's just...that's two women who have stormed out of your office, cursing you this afternoon."

"What can I say, Melissa?" I shrug as I beckon her to her desk. "It's been a slow day."



# TWO

One Year Later

*My-Linh*

I CAN'T BELIEVE WHAT I'm hearing.

If it didn't make me look like a three-year-old who didn't take her afternoon nap and wasn't getting her way, I'd cover my ears and throw myself onto the floor, kicking my legs out, throwing a tantrum to end all tantrums.

I settle for staring down at the tissue slowly being shredded in my hands instead, as my advisor tears apart my proposed thesis idea, word for word.

“And this part here,” he says, jabbing his pen at the printed page in front of him. “You know we covered a very similar study just two months ago. I think it's going to be hard to argue why your method is almost exactly the same, with not many different parameters.”

*Don't cry*, I will myself. Just don't cry.

I drop my head and my bangs fall over my eyes as it dawns on me what this means: I'm back at square one. I've spent the last three months living and breathing this literature review, and all that has come of it is that I'm nothing but a copycat? Half an hour ago I was so nervous about this meeting but I'd give anything now to go back to that feeling of uncertainty. I'll take the unknown over knowing you're a loser, any day.

"My-Linh. My-Linh, look at me," Jeremy tells me.

I tried to call him Doctor Baker once, but if I think he looks disappointed now, it's nothing compared to the look he gave me at that time. It's been "Jeremy" ever since. However weird it felt to call my 65-year-old professor that.

"Come on, please, look at me," he repeats, and I take a deep breath before I tear my eyes away from the almost completely disintegrated tissue on the floor at my feet.

The disappointment has been replaced with sympathy. Sympathy, not pity. I don't know how it's different, but it is. He smiles, and the tears teetering on the rims of my eyes become almost impossible to hold back.

"I'm so sorry," I say, my voice quivering.

"About what? About not getting it right on your first try?"

"Yes!" I say, louder than I mean to.

The chuckle that bubbles from his chest surprises me. "If you guys all knew what you were doing without any help from me, what the hell am I here for?"

“Eye candy?” I joke, although it’s the last thing I feel like doing.

“Well, then, I need a raise,” he winks, his crystal blue eyes sparkling.

“So...what now?” I say, my shoulders slumping on either side of me.

“You’ve still got ten weeks until the deadline to submit your application for the PhD. candidacy and go in front of the panel. That’s plenty of time. We’ll work on what needs work. But, I have to be honest, there’s a lot of work to be done. I’ve seen the other submissions. Your competition is going to be rough, My-Linh.”

I turn my name over in my head, remembering how Jeremy had been one of the only few people who’d pronounced it right just from reading it. Mee-Ling. He’s done so much for me, and yet...I wince, and say the thing I haven’t wanted to say. “Maybe—”

He shakes his head. “No. Absolutely not.”

“I haven’t said anything yet.”

“Firstly, I was your advisor all through your MBA. I don’t need you to open your mouth to know what’s going to come out of it. And two, not trying for this PhD spot is simply not an option. You have such an affinity for this field; this is just a hiccup. A big hiccup, but a hiccup I have absolute certainty you can overcome.”

The words are comforting, but right now it just feels like it isn't enough. All that work, and it still wasn't enough. How much more of my life am I going to spend on my studies? By my age, most people are well onto their first, if not second, "real" jobs, and here I am, still riding a scooter around the Sydney CBD delivering parcels while I spend my Friday nights and weekends poring over business journals and writing up thesis proposals that are just poor carbon copies of other people's.

Maybe it's time to make a change. Maybe it's time to give up the fantasy. A certain someone's voice telling me to stop chasing a pipe dream rises like bile up my throat.

The wooden chair squeaks on the floor under me as I spring to my feet and I throw my backpack over my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Baker," I say, feeling a strange need for formality. "I'm just...not sure if this is the right thing for me anymore."

"My-Linh, wait," I hear him say as I lurch out of his office and into the hallway.

"Hey!" someone protests, as I cut them off.

I mumble an apology as I stumble towards the exit. Towards the sunlight. And fresh air.

If I'm going to be facing a new life, I'm going to have to start breathing again first.



FOUR-THIRTY IN THE AFTERNOON down Pitt St. in Sydney's central business district is probably the closest thing there is to hell on earth.

Busy, chaotic, noisy, and hot.

The sweat trickling down my brow temporarily blinds me as it drips into my eye as I lean my electric scooter against the side of the Soul Pattinson Building. I'd sincerely considered ignoring the alert on my phone when this last job popped up, but then I remembered it would be an extra twenty dollars to add to my take for today. It wasn't long before I'd started imagining all the ways I could spend that extra twenty dollars, the ideas scrolling in my mind's eye like the opening credits to Star Wars, and before I knew it I was traveling down Pitt St at the pace of a lethargic snail on Prozac.

It's just a quick drop-off job though, and within minutes I'm back on my scooter, waiting for a break in the foot traffic on the sidewalk. I pull out the box of matcha Pocky I keep in my back pocket for an energy snack and pop one into my mouth just as a buzz in my pocket has me tapping on my Bluetooth earpiece.

"Hell—"

"How did it go with your advisor?" Mandy, my roommate yells into the phone. She only has one volume—loud. And even over the bustling noise of the peak hour traffic, I can hear her crystal clear.

I groan. "It didn't go great. Can we talk about this tonight? I've had a really long day and only just finished my last



delivery. I'm exhausted," I say. "All I want is a long hot bath, some of that leftover Chinese food from last night, and to pass out before I have to do it all again tomorrow."

"Not a chance. Sandy got his bonus so we're going to go out and help him spend it!"

Sandy is Mandy's twin brother, and also my roommate. Trust me, there's nothing anyone can say about them being named Mandy and Sandy that they haven't heard before.

"Can't we do it tomorrow?" I shout over the noise of the car horns.

"Nope. As Rod Stewart sang 'Tonight's the night'."

I have to laugh. For a twenty-six-year-old, she sure has some out-of-date references. "Fine. But I'm enacting our two drinks on a school night maximum rule then you two will be on your own for the rest of the night."

"Yay!"



SIX HOURS, THREE BARS, and a considerable amount more than two drinks later, I'm yelling at the top of my voice at the bartender at our usual bar, The Glass.

"Louis! You have to call her, you can't just text. She needs to hear the desperation in your voooooice when you tell her how much you want to see her!" I say. Or slur.

“Sandy, will you get Dear Abby outta here?” Louis says, grinning as he throws the damp towel over his shoulder.

“Promise me you’ll call her when you get off tonight!” I shout as my friends gather our jackets and pull me down off the stool where I’d parked myself over the last hour.

“I think the point is that I call her *before* I get off, My-Linh.”

“Ugh. Such a man. Fine! Enjoying the self getting off...for the rest of your life!” I fling my parting shot as Sandy laughs and pushes me out into the cool night air. “He’s not going to call her, is he?” I ask my friends as they look around for the closest cab stand.

“I’m guessing Louis is a man of few words. Even his texts are probably just ‘wyd.’” Mandy says, linking her arms into my and her twin’s arms, and pushes us down the street.

“This is why I don’t date.” I screw up my face at just the word. “Can you imagine pining for some dude all day only to get a booty call text?”

Sandy pops a piece of chewing gum into his mouth and throws the wrapper into a nearby trash can. “Em, that’s not why you don’t date.”

“It’s because I have standards,” I declare, puffing out my chest.

“Pffft. Exactly. You have ridiculous standards. *Unreachable* standards.”

“Hey! I take offense. I see the good in all people.”

Mandy nods and pats my arm. “That is actually true. You do see the good in people...as a whole. As romantic interests, less so. Not to mention, you are so bad at reading cues.”

I scoff. “What are you talking about now?”

“Remember Louis? He wasn’t interested in that girl; he was just making up an excuse to talk to you.”

I frown. “Why?”

“Beats me, you’re annoying as all fuck. With your optimism and do-gooderiness,” Mandy giggles and kisses me on the forehead.

I screw up my face. “You should be the last person who should hate that side of me!”

“Why?”

“Because without it, I never would’ve taken pity and become friends with you two losers.”

Giggling, we turn the corner onto Elizabeth St towards the cab stand, and what I see has me stopping dead in my tracks.

“Oh. Hey, My-Linh. Long time no see.”

Adam Dalbec.

The *actual* reason I don’t date. Standing there with his arm around the petite blonde he’d told me not to worry about, even after I’d found a six-month string of sexts with her in his phone.

“Adam,” I say, because I can’t think of anything else to say.

“Hi, My-Linh,” The Blonde says, either completely unaware of the awkwardness or unbothered by it. Either way, I find myself jealous of her. Again.

“How are you doing?” he asks.

I shrug. “Fine. You?”

“I’m okay. Plodding along.”

“Oh, he’s just being modest, he just landed a great short term contract that could lead to even bigger things,” The Blonde, whose name my brain is refusing to remember, chirps as she pats his arm.

“Yeah. Great. Whatever,” Sandy cuts in before I can respond. “Let’s go, girls. Something smells like rotten fish round here,” he says, pulling us away.

“It was nice to see you again, My-Linh. You look good,” Adam says as I push past him.

“I’d like to chop his wiener off and make a pig in a blanket with it and feed it to him,” Mandy says before we’re even out of earshot. “You okay, Linh-Linh?” she asks when I don’t laugh.

I just swallow.

I haven’t seen Adam in over a year, ever since I collected my things from the apartment we rented together as the first step in our five-year plan. That five-year plan was supposed to end in marriage and starting a family. That dream had quickly crumbled once he started an internship at the Campbell

Marketing Group. Soon he was leaving earlier and earlier in the mornings, and coming home later and later at night.

But even after I found out about The Blonde, I stayed with him. Stayed until there was nothing left to stay for.

One day, finally, I got up and left, taking only a box of my clothes and the cherry Le Creuset pot my grandmother had left me. I might've let him take my dignity, but even in my brokenhearted stupor, I wasn't going to let him have my pot. I showed up on the twins' doorstep, and within fifteen minutes they'd cleaned out their exercise/never-go-into room, set up a blanket and pillow fort in the lounge room, and had some chili simmering in my pot on the stove.

I've been there ever since.

"My-Linh? You okay?" Sandy asks, his voice filled with a tenderness he usually only reserves for puppies.

I force a smile and feel it stop at the edges of my lips.

"I'm fine. What better way to top off the day? Dr. Baker eviscerating my thesis proposal then running into my ex who told me I was wasting my time in graduate school anyway."

"Men!" Mandy yells.

I nod, agreeing. We both turn to Sandy, who knows what he has to do.

"Fucking men!" he yells and takes our hands. "Come on, no better way to keep the fucking men away than with a mouth full of garlic breath!" He drags us past the cab stand and down the street to our favorite gyro stand.

For the rest of the night, I try not to think about either my past or my future.



*Damien*

IT'S JUST TICKED OVER to midnight when I finally leave the office.

My chauffeur is waiting by the open car door as I step out of our building when my phone buzzes. I skim the message that appears in the notification bar and my breath hisses through my teeth.

“Just a minute, Roger,” I say, handing him my briefcase.

“Of course, sir,” he says and I step around the building into the darkened alleyway by the building.

“Fuck!” I hiss, trying to keep my voice low. But the blood boiling in my veins wants more. “Fuck it all the hell!!” I scream, and slam my fist into the wall.

A sharp pain streak through my knuckles, up my wrist, jarring all the way up to my shoulder.

But it helps.

I take two or three deep breaths to compose myself and walk back to the car.

“Home, sir?” Roger asks through the partition.

“No, Roger. Let’s go to the club.”

“Yes, sir,” he responds, and presses the button to raise the partition.

He knows it’s a night when I need to be alone and not alone all at once.

I lay my head back against the cool leather as I focus on the burning of the grazed skin on my knuckles. The night lights of this strange but beautiful city whizzing by outside my tinted windows and the sound of Sydney-siders whooping outside late-night gyros joints.





# THREE

*My-Linh*

To: mltran@sydney.edu.au

From: j.baker@sydney.edu.au

Subject: Proposal...proposal

I have a proposal for you to help you with your PhD thesis. Call me at your earliest convenience, please.

To: j.baker@sydney.edu.au

From: ml.tran@sydney.edu.au

Subject: Re: Proposal...proposal

I'm afraid I'm very busy with work this week. Not sure I will have a chance to call you.

To: ml.tran@sydney.edu.au

From: j.baker@sydney.edu.au

Subject: Re: Re: Proposal...proposal

That wasn't actually a request. Call me. I think I have a way we can

make this work.

To: j.baker@sydney.edu.au  
From: ml.tran@sydney.edu.au  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Proposal...  
proposal  
Maybe I can call on Friday?

To: ml.tran@sydney.edu.au  
From: j.baker@sydney.edu.au  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Proposal...  
proposal  
If you make me actually have to  
leave the comfort of my office, which  
I have not left in \*makes old Titanic  
lady's voice\* 84 years, I'm going to  
make life even harder for you than I  
already have.

To: ml.tran@sydney.edu.au  
From: j.baker@sydney.edu.au  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Proposal...  
proposal  
Pick up the phone, Ms. Tran.

To: ml.tran@sydney.edu.au  
From: j.baker@sydney.edu.au  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re:  
Re:Proposal...proposal

I left a voice message. I suggest you don't listen to it with other people around. I wouldn't want my reputation as a nice guy tarnished. The offer is time limited and the clock is ticking. Don't disappoint me, My-Linh.



*Damien*

“NEXT?” I BARK AT Melissa as I storm into my office. The last meeting had not gone well and I am in no mood for pleasantries.

“You’ve got the meeting wi—”

“Got it. Give me a minute and send her in.”

I pull the door closed behind me, and I’m annoyed I’d been so adamant that I’d wanted a door that had a hydraulic close so that it wouldn’t slam. A slammed door is an easy and effective way of telling everyone on my floor that I am not in the mood to take anybody’s shit.

I’m barely in my leather chair when the door opens and a woman steps in, dressed in a pair of faded black jeans and a bright yellow T-shirt with the words “Bee Kind” with a bee drawn on it, buzzing around the lettering.

She opens her mouth, but, like I said, I don't have time for pleasantries.

“I assume you know why you're here. Curtis told me what you've been doing, and I'm going to tell you right now, not only does it stop right now, but you are going to spend the rest of the week making personal calls to all of our clients personally affected by what you did. You are going to sit and listen to each and every one of them tell you about all the ways you fucked up their plans. And then, and only then, am I even going to think about discussing whether you have a future at this company. I deplore dishonesty even more than I hate irresponsibility. And you are going to take responsibility. No one should have to bear the consequences of what you did. Did you hear me?”

“I—” Her face is bright red, and there's a the beginning of a quivering of her bottom lip. Great. Tears.

“At least wait until you're out of my office before you start crying. I'm almost done with you,” I scold her.

She doesn't say anything, just digs her teeth into her bottom lip to stop it shaking. The effect is almost pitiful, and I would laugh if she isn't somehow making it actually kind of cute. To be honest, though, even though she definitely looks familiar, I don't really remember seeing her around the office.

“One last thing—next time I see you around the office, you better be dressed appropriately. Jeans and a T-shirt are fine if you're wandering around Luna Park, but we frequently have tours through our offices, and we have a dress code for a

reason. Not to mention, that, on your shirt is a bumblebee and bumblebees don't fucking make honey! Now, do you have anything to say?"

She blinks, and her brown eyes grow wide as she opens her mouth and closes it again. Her chest fills with breath before she opens her mouth again. "Yes. Two things. I think you have the wrong person. But that's okay, because I hope next time you give that speech you just gave me, you try to sound less like a heartless fucktard and a little more like an actual human being. And secondly, please tell Jeremy I tried. But, no thank you. I'd rather walk barefoot across a football field filled with searing hot Lego pieces than spend another minute with you, let alone two whole months. Goodbye. Have whatever the hell day the universe thinks you deserve." She spins and sprints out of my office before I can even process her words.

Had she mentioned Jeremy? How does she know him and why would she want me to send a message to him?

"Melissa!" I roar, not even bothering with the intercom.

"Mr. Baxter?" she pants, pushing the door open.

"Who was that?"

"That was My-Linh Tran, she's one of Dr Baxter's students. He asked you if you'd let her shadow you for a little while, give her a bigger view of the business world, remember?"

"Shit." It'd completely slipped my mind. He mentioned it in passing a few days ago and I haven't given it another moment's thought since. "Get her back. Right now."

“I don’t think...”

“Nevermind, I’ll do it myself,” I say, surprising the both of us, and run out of the office.

The woman’s not in the elevator lobby when I get there. An elevator arrives before I call for it and as the door opens, I step in, glaring at the group of other workers about to follow me.

“Er, we’ll take the next one, Mr. Baxter,” one of them says.

“Smart choice,” I mumble under my breath as my finger presses the close door button over and over. My hand runs through my hair as I wait for the elevator to race to the bottom. If she isn’t the employee I thought she was, who is she and why does she look so familiar? I don’t have time to ponder on it; the elevator doors open out to the lobby and I spot her a few feet from the front entrance.

“Hey! Hey, stop!!” I yell, my voice echoing throughout the marble foyer. “Stop!”

“Mr. Baxter?” one of the security guards calls after me as I run past the security station.

“Stop that woman, the one in the bright yellow bee T-shirt.”

Fuck, it’s ridiculous just describing it, let alone wearing it.

As I reach the entrance, one of the doormen, Frank, is blocking her from leaving.

“Get out of my way,” she’s saying.

“Please, Miss. Mr. Baxter is just—”

“Miss,” I say, breathing heavily.

“It’s *not* ‘miss’. My name is *My-Linh*,” she snaps at the both of us.

Frank makes a face at me over her head and returns to his spot by the door.

“My-Linh. Whatever,” I say impatiently.

“Seriously? ‘Whatever’?” she splutters.

I hold my hand up. This is going even worse than the meeting upstairs. “Look, I made a mistake. I thought you were somebody else.”

“Lucky them. Bye. Again.” She tries to push past me and I take a step to the left to block her.

“Wait. Yes, Dr. Baker asked me to meet with you. He also mentioned something about you spending some time at Baxter Enterprises. You’re doing an MBA?”

She folds her arms. “PhD.”

“Oh, really?”

She glares at me. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

Fuck, I am going to have to watch every word I say around this woman. How fucking annoying. Like I don’t have enough to do. But I owe him a favor, one that I intend to pay back.

“Look. I made a mistake.” I hold up my hands in surrender. “I admit that. I thought you were someone else. Someone who, believe it or not, actually does deserve to be spoken to that way. But that person isn’t you.”

She looks at me, square in the face, then drags her gaze all the way down my body and then all the way back up to my eyes. I feel two feet tall, and a member of an insect family that she wants to exterminate.

“So, you’ll talk to someone like *that*, who you insist deserves it, but you can’t even tell the difference between them and a complete stranger?”

“You look...familiar,” I explain.

“Well, Mr. Bamford—”

“It’s *Baxter*.”

“Whatever,” she says, looking me dead in the eye.

That almost has me smiling. This woman is a piece of work.

“My-Linh, please. Come back up to the office with me and we’ll get your paperwork sorted for your employment.”

She pauses but she doesn’t say no. “I’m not an employee. I’m just here to observe.”

“No one just observes at Baxter Enterprises. I don’t care who you are and what you’re doing here. If you’re going to be in my building every day for two months, then you’re going to be working.”

Something I said must’ve resonated because she seems interested for the first time since we started speaking. “You want me to work for free?”

I hold up two fingers. “Second thing about Baxter Enterprises—we *pay* our employees. Fairly. No unpaid



internships. You'll work and you'll get paid fairly for it. And who knows, you might just learn something from it all. That's why you're here, after all, right?"

Her forehead twitches and I look down to see her thumb rubbing against the inside of her other hand.

"Well?" I ask, recognizing that I need to hit while the iron's hot.

"I'm *thinking*."

"Stop thinking. And just say yes."

"That sounds dangerous."

Something in the way she says the word "dangerous" and her tongue running against her bottom lip tells me the concept is more enticing than she wants to admit to herself.

I take a step forward and lean in, ready to close the deal. "That's what makes it all worth it. Trust me," I say, my voice suddenly lowering, deepening,

She blinks but doesn't move back. Instead, she leans in even closer, so her mouth is almost brushing against my ear, "I'm going to hold you to that, Mr. Baxter."

Her voice swirls around my head and I have to straighten up, suddenly wary of losing my balance. "Deal. Now are you coming upstairs or are we going to keep giving Frank a show?" I say, deliberately directing my words to the doorman.

"Didn't hear a thing, Mr. Baxter," he says with a nod.

"Good man," I wink at him.

“Fine. But, I have two conditions of my own,” she says, her voice serious.

I feel my left eyebrow raise. “I’m pretty sure I’m the one that’s supposed to be giving you business negotiation guidance.”

She rolls her eyes, and smooths out her T-shirt with her hand. “Firstly, I get to wear whatever I want. I’m not showing up suffocating in a pantsuit every day. I’ll be clean and tidy, but otherwise, I’m wearing whatever I want.”

I nod. “Fine. This is a professional company though, so try to be appropriate. Use your discretion as to what that is. And two?”

“Two is this is just a two-month deal. I didn’t apply for this job, or even interview for it.”

“Well, that’s what this is—”

“Shush!” she commands.

My mouth clamps shut; I can’t remember the last time I’ve been shushed.

“Two months,” she continues. “I have no intention of working for a place like Baxter Enterprises, this is just to further my education. I truly thank you for the opportunity but I’m not going to let my soul wither away and die here.”

I swallow a smile. “I’m meant to not take offense to that, right?”

“You can take offense if you want. That’s not my problem.”  
She shrugs.

“Ok. Miss...?”

“Tran.”

“Miss My-Linh Tran. Fine. Deal.”

She smiles. “Pinky swear?”

“Are you serious?” She can’t be.

She wiggles her little finger at me and nods. “When I have to be. But I try to avoid it if possible. Although I’m going to guess that you’re serious enough for the both of us.”

I’m about to argue, when she hooks her slim little finger with mine and gives it a little shake.

“Pinky swear activated,” she says with a smile that lights up her whole face.

“You know, Miss Tran, in some cultures that would mean we’re married,” I tease, the line about me being overly serious irking me and I feel an inexplicable urge to prove her wrong.

“Good thing you didn’t sign a prenup then!” she quips back.

I laugh.

I laugh hard and long. And it feels good.

“I see I’m going to have to be on my toes around you.” I lead her over to the elevators, waiting for her to enter before I follow behind her.

Some of the junior legal team move to join us on the elevator until they look up and see me and step back. “Oh, um, Mr. Baxter, we didn’t see you there. We’ll take the next one.”

I don’t protest and just reach over to press the 9 on the button panel.

“What was that?” My-Linh asks, frowning, as the doors close.

“What was what?” I feign ignorance.

“Why didn’t they take the elevator?”

My shoulders raise. “Who knows?”

“It’s because of you, right?” She doesn’t look impressed. “You realize hogging the elevator is counterproductive? That’s a lot of wasted time waiting for an elevator because *you* never learned to share.”

The elevator dings before I get a chance to retort and she steps off the elevator, asking, “Where to?”

“HR is the office three doors down. Ask to speak to Patricia Ramsey, I’ll have my assistant send her the details right now.”

“Are you not coming?” she asks, surprised.

“Oh. Um. It’s not really—It’s not my—”

She waves my excuses away. “It’s okay, I’m sure you’re busy. You’ve taken up enough of your day teaching me the vagaries of negotiating a business deal and all. See you later!” She turns and is gone before I can stop her.

But something makes me want to chase her. Again.

Instead, I force myself to just watch her ass sway as she half-walks, half-skips down the hallway, smiling and waving to my employees as she goes.

Waving and smiling. At complete strangers. Who the hell does that?

Something makes me want to wrap my arms tight around her, protecting that purity.

While also wanting to ravage every last ounce of it out of her.

“Where did that come from?” I murmur under my breath, my head shaking to clear the thought.

But it’s too late, the image of her naked in my arms takes hold of my brain and the elevator doors close as I realize my cock is rock-hard in my pants.

I am going to have to be careful around Miss My-Linh Tran.



*My-Linh*

“OH MY GOSH! AND then what?” Mandy squeals.

“And then I turned around and went to the HR office.”

“What did he say after that?”

I shrug, “Who knows? I was already gone. Talking to himself for all I care.”

Mandy falls back onto the sofa, giggling. “He’s going to regret hiring you.”

“I think he already does. Who knows what kind of favor he owes Jeremy, but it must be big.”

“The *biggest*.”

“Hey!”

“What? You’re sweet but under that exterior is a sassy lil bitch with a brutally honest mouth.”

I grin. I have no intention of making anything easy on Damien Baxter. I hadn’t known who Jeremy had organized the internship interview with before I’d accepted his proposal and I might not have gone at all if I had. All he’d told me was that he had called in a favor and asked one of his former colleagues to let me shadow him at work for a few months, to help me build a bigger vision for my thesis proposal. It wasn’t until after I agreed that he told me it was with Damien Baxter.

I still haven’t forgotten my run-in with him in his office a year ago.

Or my parting shot to him that day.

I cover my head with a pillow and groan.

“What?” Mandy asks, surprised by my sudden change in mood.

“Nothing. Just thinking about having to go to work every day like a grown-up.”

“You have been working every day like a grown-up, except now you’re going to get paid like one, instead of running around the Sydney CBD in a neon vest for minimum wage.”

“Hey! That vest keeps me safe!”

“Yeah, from rich suitors,” Mandy laughs, picking the vest up off the floor where I threw it when I came home. She waves it like a flag in my face. “So when do you start?”

“Tomorrow. 8 a.m. Sharp!” I say, impersonating the HR lady. “Why?”

My roommate grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet. “We’re going out for celebratory drinks, of course!”

I groan, but also can’t help smiling. I’m actually excited about my time at Baxter Enterprises.

Suddenly things are looking up again.



“ONE MORE SONG, COME on! You can’t deny me this one wish, milady,” Sandy shouts, grabbing me around the waist and pulling me back to the dance floor.

Somehow, we have actually stuck to the two drinks on a school night rule and over those two drinks, we’d dubbed the next phase of my life, the Months of My-Linh. A time for me to learn and grow and have fun. After that, we’d run into Sandy’s manager at The Glass, who’d helped us get into the VIP room at Montecristo, an exclusive club that opened about a year and a half ago.

“Okay, one more song! Only because it’s your favorite!” I scream, as the Skrillex Remix of Kendrick Lamar’s Humble blasts around us. I close my eyes, swaying my body to the music as Sandy dances around me, one arm around my waist as the other keeps a strong hold of my wrist to make sure we don’t lose each other in the writhing crowd. We’ve already lost Mandy to some hot guy in the crowd.

I have always loved to dance, but I also love my parents, and being the strict Vietnamese parents that they are, I spent most of my late teens at home watching Korean dramas with them rather than out clubbing with my friends. And while I’ve never felt like I missed out, after I moved in with the twins, they introduced a whole new world of clubs and dancing to me.

I drape my arms around Sandy and move closer to him.

“Hey, check out that guy over there,” he shouts into my ear. “So fucking hot, right?”

Sandy’s favorite pastime is pointing out hot guys, then doing nothing about it. He’s still pining for his high school boyfriend, and in the entire time I’ve lived with him, he hasn’t brought a single guy home.

I just nod and throw my head back, letting the thrum of the music travel up my spine and take over my body.

There’s something different about tonight.

Maybe it’s the club.



Maybe it's the velvet walls, or the free flowing Dom or that our shoes don't stick to the floor.

But I could get used to it.

Something makes me feel sexy, feminine, and wanted.

Like someone is watching me, and is enjoying what they see.

So I dance, inhibited, dance for the invisible eyes.

The song finally ends and I let Sandy pull me into a big hug as I laugh, tickling the back of his neck with my nails.



*Damien*

I CAN'T STOP WATCHING her.

She's the last person I expected to see here tonight.

After a long day of one disappointing meeting after another, I left the office just a few minutes shy of 11 p.m., one of the earlier nights this week.

All I wanted was to sit in my booth, nurse a cognac or five, let the driving thump of the music ease the soreness in my muscles, and go home.

And maybe, just maybe, if someone caught my eye, and she didn't look like she'd talk too much between the time it took to get her from the club to my apartment, then I'd make her a one-night offer that would be hard to refuse.

I just hadn't expected that person to be My-Linh, the very woman I came here to try to forget.

I spent the afternoon nursing a hard-on, ignoring the urge to tell Melissa to cancel my next appointments so I could wrap my hand around my cock and give me the release I really fucking needed.

I have no idea why this ridiculously cheerful, bee T-shirt wearing woman has turned my libido up full blast, but I hope it fades before I have to start seeing her around my office building.

Now there she is, in a black minidress that she must've had to be poured into, moving that criminally curvy ass to the music.

In the dark of the club, I shove my hand in my pocket, running my finger over the line of my stiff shaft as I watch her. Her head is thrown back, eyes closed, the flash of the light intermittently flickering over her upturned face. She's giving her body up to do what it obviously does best, writhing, twisting, swaying, to the beat.

My breath catches in my throat as I watch her, my thumb and forefinger stroking the tip of my aching cock as I imagine positioning behind her, her ass rubbing against me, my hands coming up around to cup the fullness of her breasts.

Then, I'd spread her legs with my knee, bend her over and ram my hard cock into her deliciously wet pussy.

Fuck.

Just the thought almost has me coming on the spot.

I have to move my hand away as the song hits its climax.

Or else I'll hit mine.

And that's just what I want, to go home with a cold, wet spot in my pants.

The song ends and she wraps her arms around the guy she's dancing with, and he pulls her in close, embracing her close, his face in her neck.

Fucker.

I swallow down the bitter jealousy rising in my throat, washing it down with another sip of my Remy Martin and crook my finger at the waitress sauntering past.

She's just going to have to do for the night.



# FOUR

*My-Linh*

THERE ARE SOME THINGS you can always rely on— no, nothing as mundane as death and taxes. 1. That the upstairs neighbor is always going to shower at the exact same time I want to, resulting in sucky water pressure for the both of us, and 2. Sydney trains are going to run on their own schedule—which sometimes means, not at all.

The warbled announcement over the PA system tells me either I'm going to have to start coming up with a good reason I'm forty-five minutes late for my first day at Baxter Enterprises or I'm going to have to hitch up my skirt and make a run for it.

What a day to decide to wear a skirt, but despite my bravado yesterday during my attire negotiation with Damien Baxter, I still want to make a good impression. Not on him, he could get strangled by my bee T-shirt for all I care. I saw him last night as we were leaving the club, leading a waitress from the club into his car. So cliché.

I'd picked a black A-line pencil skirt and paired it with a fitted black tee that has a small peace sign embroidered on the breast. It's comfy but hugs me in all the right places. What isn't comfortable are the heels I'm wearing; they're only about two inches, but are making it almost impossible to weave through the foot traffic as I hug my crossbody bag to my chest and run the twelve blocks to the Baxter building.

It doesn't help that hundreds of people have decided, as I have, to emerge from the train station to hoof it to work as well.

"Outta my way, please Sorry! Thank you! Have a great day!" I shout as I make a path for myself.

I'm not going to make it on time, and all I can hear is the way the HR lady had said, "8 a.m. sharp!" jabbing the tip of her stylus at me as she'd said it. Hopefully, they'll take pity on me considering it's my first day. That sounds like the corporate world, doesn't it?

"Hi, Frank!" I yell as I push past him. "Hold the elevator!" I shout across the lobby and slip my body through the rapidly closing doors.

The elevator is empty.

Except for one person.

Him.

"Good morning, Damien," I say, through pants, pressing my floor number on the panel.

He stares at me as the elevator takes us both to the 11th floor. “I’d prefer it if you called me Mr. Baxter.”

I shrug. “You got it. Good morning, Mr. Baxter.”

He glances down at the watch on his wrist, then back up at me.

“It’s 8:13.”

“Okay...” Was there a question I missed?

He keeps staring.

“Is there something else?” I prompt.

“You’re late.”

“Oh, okay, so that’s what you meant when you said ‘it’s 8:13’? I thought you just liked making random statements.”

He’s not charmed. “We start either early or on time here, Miss Tran.”

I nod. “I’m sorry, the trains weren’t running.”

“Then you need to take that into account,” His voice is cold, flat.

*Like his personality*, I think, traitorously, and try not to giggle out loud. But I nod. He does have a point. Annoyingly. “I will. Tomorrow. Promise.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

Wow, what’s up his ass? I would’ve thought getting laid last night would’ve relaxed him. Maybe she just hadn’t done it for him. Maybe he just took her home and sat her there while he

made random statements at her and made her nod and say “Yes, sir, whatever you say, sir.”

The thought forces out a laugh before I can stop it.

“What?” He glares, as if he knows what I was thinking.

“Nothing, Mr. Baxter. Oh, here’s my floor. I’ll see you at the morning meeting.” I wave at him and he just stares back at me, his eyes cold. Steel-hard. “Um. Okay then...Have a good day!” I say, waiting until the elevator doors close behind me before I burst out laughing.

Good thing he looks good in a suit; he doesn’t really have anything else going for him.

My first hour is filled with paperwork and onboarding. I put all of my mnemonic name devices to good use as I try to remember all the people I’m introduced to on my office tour.

Baxter Enterprises owns and takes up almost half of the building with their offices. I hadn’t realized it was such a huge company. Spanning over four continents, Australia is a relatively new market for Baxter Enterprises, really only having a presence here in the last decade despite being established as a company almost a hundred years ago.

I guess I’m going to have to pay more attention to Baxter, to both the business and the man. Before I’d fallen asleep last night, I quick google search had brought up about 1.2 million results on Damien Baxter, some of them lauding his looks, but most of them talking about how him taking the helm of the Australia and Oceanic division of Baxter Enterprises was



going to revitalize the entire region. Ruthless and with an affinity for bringing stagnating companies into a changing business landscape, all eyes were on his moves in the next 2-3 years.

I'm assigned a small cubicle in the marketing department next to a woman in her early thirties who instantly warms me from the inside out with her smile.

"Hi! I'm Raquel Williams," she says, and we both reach in for a hug before laughing. "Oh, I'm so glad you're a hugger. I usually freak people out when they reach out for a handshake and I pull them in like I'm their old aunt Ida," she says.

"No way, hugger all the way," I say as I throw my bag down on my empty desk. "How long have you been here?"

"Only just over a year, I returned to the workplace after having two kids."

"Oh, how lovely!" I beam. "Admit it, how much easier is it going to work compared to chasing around two kids?"

She gives me an exasperated look. "Not even close. I'm totally okay with giving my nanny two-thirds of my pay. She deserves it."

I giggle and Raquel takes a few minutes to give me a quick rundown on some of my new coworkers.

"Have you met Mr. Baxter?" she asks, playing with the troll doll I pull out of my bag and place on my desk. He's been my good luck charm ever since high school.

I swallow the urge to roll my eyes, and just give a noncommittal shrug. “I ran into him on the elevator this morning.”

Raquel’s eyes get so wide, they almost take up half of her face. “Y-You rode the elevator with him?”

“Sure. Why?” I ask, playing dumb.

“He...er, apparently he does not like that.”

“Well, he seemed fine with it. I mean, he grunted a bit when I asked him to hold the elevator but he didn’t throw me out or anything.”

“You’re lucky. And brave.”

“Or just plain stupid! Let’s see which it is!”

A short, balding man walks past, tilting his head towards the meeting room, and Raquel jumps to her feet.

“Come on. Huddle time,” she tells me and points to the big meeting room down the hall.

“What’s that?”

“It’s what they call the morning meeting here.”

“Oh, Patricia told me about that. You call it the ‘huddle’?”

“Yeah, they started calling it that when Mr. Baxter started here apparently. Something about football. *American* football, that is, not Aussie rules. It won’t take long, it’s really just for the heads of the departments to give a quick rundown on what the priorities are for the day and week.”

“My personal priority is to make it to the end of the day in one piece.”

Raquel grins at me as we step into the room, joining the big group. “We’ll get you through it. But if not, are there some pics or internet searches you want me to delete off your phone?”

I giggle. I like her already.

“I’ll send you a list.” I give her a wink and the bald guy from before turns around and gives me an angry glare and presses his fingers to his lips.

That just makes the both of us dissolve into full-blown laughter.

“If everyone will just settle down, we’ll get started.”

A tall elegant blonde steps into the middle of the crowd. A pair of black rimmed glasses are pushed up on top of her head, pulling her hair back, showing off her face. She looks around forty, and yet somehow has managed to avoid the harsh Australian sun.

“That’s Kayleigh Whittaker. She’s the Senior VP of Operations of the Australia and Oceanic division. She conducts the Huddle and directs questions to the upper level managers,” Raquel explains under her breath.

I nod, listening in, and get a quick summary on what the different teams’ main focus are for the coming week.

“Marketing, I want the reports on the focus groups we ran last week by COB. I should’ve gotten them yesterday. No

excuses. I need to study them for the board meeting next week,” Kayleigh says, turning in our direction.

There’s a soft murmur of understanding, including from Raquel.

“I think that’s it for the rounding up today. But, guys, if you can hang around for another minute, we just have one more item.”

There’s a clearing of throats and she steps back in the outer circle, making room.

I crane my neck as Damien Baxter steps into the circle. I hadn’t noticed how tall he was in the previous interactions I’ve had with him. At what I’m estimating about 6’4”, he towers over almost everyone else. Slowly, he spins in a complete circle, taking a moment to scan his steely vision over everyone at the meeting. I’m not sure why but I hold my breath when he turns towards me, waiting.

Our eyes lock, for one second, two seconds, and just as I start to feel a stirring in the bottom of my stomach, he blinks and looks away.

“Phew, he’s hot, isn’t he?” Raquel whispers.

I nod. There’s no denying that part. Whatever other faults he might have, Damien Baxter is smoking hot. Movie hot. Cover of a romance book hot. Panty dropping, gagging for it, lose your mind hot.

But as I watch him, I realize there’s something else about him, something magnetic. Intangible. It’s not just his perfectly

chiseled face, or the way he fills out his tailored suit. There's something about him that makes you stare at him and only him even amongst a crowd of other people.

As I was doing right now.

*Even after being scolded in the elevator,* I remind myself.

“Good morning,” he says, his voice quiet but firm. “I won't be taking up too much of your time. I just wanted to remind you that we are having our end of financial year assessment coming up soon. We have all worked so hard but I think you'll all agree this last quarter, in particular, has been challenging. Let's make sure the numbers properly reflect all the hard work you have all put in, shall we? I'll be taking a closer look at each department in the coming weeks and expecting some early mornings and late nights. But let me reassure you that I will almost always be the first to arrive and the last to leave. I'm in this with all of you. On that note, as I understand it, we have a new member starting today. Can you raise your hand, please?” he says, staring right at me.

My face blares red, and Raquel cheers and lifts my hand over my head.

“Ah yes, Miss My-Linh Tran. A recent MBA graduate and future PhD prospect from Sydney University and was highly recommended. She will be joining the marketing team, as well as shadowing some of the other teams.”

I continue blushing but raise my hand to wave. “I—” I open my mouth to say hi, but I barely get the word out before he cuts me off.

“Just make sure you arrive on time, next time, Miss Tran,” he continues, horrifying me. “This isn’t school. We’re not going to punish you for tardies, but it’s not going to reflect well on you. What do we say about the Sydney train system, everyone?”

“I’d trust the Campbell Group before I trust the Sydney Train service,” everyone recites and then laughs.

He looks directly at me and smirks, before dismissing the meeting and joining the group of managers in a group.

“Twinkledick,” I murmur under my breath, my cheeks burning as I follow my new colleagues back to our area.

The morning is hectic once we return to the marketing department and are thrown into back-to-back meetings discussing the new advertising campaign that everyone is working on for a recent acquisition—Wattle Foods.

I try to contribute as much as I can, but without all the information behind the current projects, I don’t want to sound stupid so I try to keep my opinions as general as possible. In my busy-ness, I completely forget about being embarrassed in front of everyone by Damien (I refuse to think of him as Mr. Baxter in my head. He’s lucky I stopped inwardly thinking of him as Twinkledick). I’ve almost forgiven him when noon rolls around and he strolls down the hallway towards my cubicle.

“Working through lunch, Miss Tran?”

“Um, I was just...”

“She’s just helping me finish up this file, Mr. Baxter,” Raquel pipes up.

He ignores her and keeps his eyes pinned on me. “I hope you can keep up here, Miss Tran. We work hard and fast here. No one coasts at Baxter.”

I bite back the scowl. “I have no intention of coasting, Twin —, er, Mr. Baxter.”

“Good. You came highly recommended. I’d hate to have to tell that person not to vouch for you anymore. We’ve had our share of MBA students here who don’t realize what really goes into an honest day’s work.”

Is he serious? Does he take special dick pills in the morning or does he just come up with this smug, superior bullshit all on his own?

“Actually, Mr. Baxter, I’ve been working pretty much my whole life. Ever since I was old enough to take a job. Other than working in my family’s tea shop, I’ve done everything from handing out fliers at the local car wash to manning the drive-thru at McDonalds, and taking any job that could work around the fifty hours a week I spent at uni so that I could graduate in only three years, and still on top of my class. But I bet you’d know exactly what it’s like to work for everything you have.”

Behind the partition I hear Raquel gasp. This must be the sassy little bitch mouth that Mandy was talking about. There’s a twitching in the corners of Damien’s mouth, and his eyes narrow, but that’s the only response he gives me,

I don't give him a chance to think up a retort. "Now, if you will excuse me, I am going to take my new friend and colleague out for a nice lunch since she has been so lovely to welcome me to this company that I have heard such wonderful things about. It's too bad that so far I've only seen those good things on the lower employee level, though." I grab my purse and wave to Raquel, who is now ducking low behind her side of the partition.

"Um. Yup, coming. Please excuse me, Mr. Baxter," she says and then takes off towards the elevator.

Damien looks in her direction for a second, then grabs my arm as I try to push past him. "Hey, small tip. You might not want to antagonize the director of the company."

"Why? Or else you'll fire me?" I challenge him.

There's a strong twitch of his jaw. "My-Linh..."

"*Miss Tran*, please. It's more professional, don't you think? And if you don't mind, I've had enough tips from you to last me a lifetime. Have a nice lunch, *sir*."

I sweep my hair over my left shoulder and storm off to meet Raquel.

What a douche-knuckle. Where does he get off giving me a speech about hard work when he was probably literally born into a basin made of liquid gold. Not to mention, he hasn't given a single indication that he remembered our run-in from last year, and whether I want to admit it or not, that smarts a little.



Lunch turns out to be the best I've had in a long time. There's a restaurant on the first floor of the Baxter Building that serves a cafeteria style lunch for only twelve dollars including a drink. There are a wide variety of hot foods and salads, options for every dietary need, and it all looks delicious.

"I'm in heaven," I sigh, setting my overly stacked food tray down. "I would work here forever just for this cafeteria alone."

"I hear you. I'm guessing Baxter prefers you stay in the building if you must leave your desk for lunch," Alex, a striking redhead from the research department says, as she takes a sip of her coconut water. I'm envious of how she looks in her pink and gray pinstripe suit. Maybe I'd like office wear too if I could carry it off like she does. My ample ass makes for good cushioning, but looks a little ridiculous in fitted pants and dresses.

I ponder what she says about how having a restaurant in the building keeps the employees on the premises during the lunch hour, and probably back at their desks in a timely manner. The idea is actually quite brilliant. Increasing productivity is a billion-dollar industry, and it starts the cranks in my head in terms of a new thesis proposal.

The afternoon brings the best activity of the day. I'm assigned to shadow Raquel as she assists in a brainstorming session for the winter advertising campaign for a new coffee flavor that is part of their cafe's drinks range.

It's energetic and interactive, and while some of the icebreaking activities at first seem out of place in a corporate environment, it all makes sense when everyone returns to the table relaxed, open to each other's, and even more importantly, their own creativity.

"Oh my gosh, Raquel, that was incredible! Do you think they'll use any of the ideas that we came up with today?" I gush after the meeting, practically skipping next to her as we return to our desks.

She grins and takes a swig of her water bottle. "I hope not!"

"Why not?"

"Because then we get to do it all again next week!" she jokes.

I laugh, enjoying the natural rapport we already have between us.

The day ends before I'm even ready and I fall asleep exhausted but optimistic about my future for the first time in a long time.



# FIVE

## *Damien*

THE SWEAT FROM MY jog drips off every single inch of my body. It's steamy and humid and being surrounded by concrete doesn't help. I don't get to run out in the open as often as I'd like, most of the time only grabbing a half hour in the office gym between meetings, but when I go, it's worth it to go the extra mile or so to get to the botanical gardens and jog up the Fleet Steps. The greenery and the view of the harbor make for a refreshing start to the day.

The elevator is waiting for me as I step onto it, and it takes me straight up to my penthouse apartment. I strip as I walk to the shower, peeling the drenched white T-shirt from my torso and stepping out of my shorts that look like I went wading into the harbor instead of just running next to it.

My phone buzzes as I jump into the shower, and I say a quiet *thank you* to whoever discovered waterproof technology, while simultaneously cursing that Baxter Enterprises wasn't the first. Someone dropped the ball on that one.

It's an email and I swipe up to skim it.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

From: j.baker@sydney.edu.au

Subject: My-Linh Tran

Damien,

I hope everything is going well with Miss Tran.

She might appear a little resistant at first, but between you and me, she is one of the brightest students I've seen in a long time. And her heart is going to take her far. She just needs some guidance. She hasn't been afforded the same opportunities in life that you have. But a little help will go a long way with her.

Thank you for doing this favor for me. I truly appreciate it.

A groan leaves my lips.

I'd spent a sleepless night trying not to think of her, and much of my run. And just when I thought I might be able to get to the office without looking like I'd done nothing but tossed and turned in bed, imagining her naked and writhing under me, I get this email.

Now not only is she back at the forefront of my mind, but now I'm tinged with guilt.

He's right.

I'd accepted this favor because Jeremy had appealed to my sense of guilt for the life I've been blessed to have. But instead of thinking of ways I could make the experience more beneficial for her, I've been thinking how I can get her into my bed.

I put the phone down on the bench and run my hand over my hair, rubbing the shampoo in, and in the process, try to rub the thought of My-Linh Tran out.



“IT’S QUITE BUSY TODAY, sir,” Roger says from the driver’s seat later on the way to work

He’s not kidding; it took him almost five minutes just to pull into traffic and now that we’re in it, we haven’t moved much.

“Sorry, sir,” he apologizes.

I click my tongue. “It’s not your fault, Roger. Just part of the trials of living in a bigger city. However, if there’s some way you could control it, I’d appreciate it if you did.”

He chuckles. “Yes, sir. I’ll get right on it.”

I busy myself with the day’s schedule; there are a bunch of meetings in the morning and two onsite visits in the afternoon. I’m glad Melissa’s done better at scheduling a combination of different types of appointments for me during the day. Too many consecutive days stuck in the office and never getting a chance to see the light of day has not made me a pleasure to work with.

I remind myself to have something sent to her as a thank you. The last thing I need is to have to break in another assistant.

The car inches forward, and my feet itch under me.

If I hadn't taken a punishing hour-long run this morning, I'd be tempted to just walk the eight blocks to the office.

"What on earth?" Roger mutters from his seat and leans forward.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, it's nothing, sir. I think...someone's having a little bit of trouble up ahead."

I nod absentmindedly and stare at the side window, thinking about the first of my tasks for the day. My daydream lasts all of fifteen seconds before Roger bursts out laughing.

"Oh, dear. Poor thing," he guffaws.

This time my curiosity is piqued and I lean forward, looking in the direction of Roger's pointing finger.

"Holy fucking hell," I mutter, when I see what he's looking at.

There, on a steaming hot and busy Sydney sidewalk, is My-Linh dragging along a bright pink scooter by the handle. She stops for a moment, runs her hand over her face before she continues forward, still pulling the scooter along behind her like a dog reluctant to leave the park.

I watch her as her shoulder bag falls to the ground and she stops, stomps her foot, and leans over, shaking her finger at the bag, as if telling it off.

Then on her way she goes, slinging her bag back on her shoulder, scooter dragging behind her.

It's utterly hilarious and I can't stop laughing.

"Do you think she knows she's supposed to get *on* the scooter?" Roger chuckles.

I laugh even louder, then the guilt rises as I remember the email I received this morning, and I realize what I have to do.

"Fuck it all to hell," I mutter under my breath.

"Wha—?"

"Just...ugh, wait here," I grumble, pulling my suit coat off and throwing it onto the seat beside me before kicking the car door open.

"Hey, girly! You need a ride? I have a spot on my lap!" I hear some dickhead stuck in traffic yell out from his rolled down window.

She flips him the bird and yells, "You couldn't handle me, buster!" before I can even react. Guess she didn't need me to.

"Good morning, Miss Tran," I call out to her

She sees me and instantly scowls. "What are you doing here?"

I shrug, rolling my shirt sleeves up. "You know, just in the neighborhood. Are you doing okay?"



“Yes. Just fine. Gotta go. Can’t make conversation. Can’t be late for work and all,” she says.

“You’re already late.”

She glances at her watch and holds her wrist up to my face.

That scent. Damn.

“Um, no,” she says, pointedly. “It’s only 7:56. I still have four minutes.”

“Come on,” I say, pulling on the free handle of her scooter. “My car’s over there.”

“Good for you. My office is over there.” She gestures with her head and tries to pull away.

I hold on tight, fist white-knuckled on the scooter. “My-Linh. Don’t be silly. Let me give you a ride.”

She makes a face. “I’m not being silly. I’m trying to be punctual.”

“Then why don’t you try actually riding your scooter.” How I keep a straight face is beyond me.

“Oh my god. I can’t believe I didn’t think of that! No wonder you have all that money and all I have is this scooter that went two blocks and then died.” She makes no effort to hide the sarcasm in her voice.

I tug again on the scooter. “You’re wasting time arguing with me. We could be there by now.”

She scoffs. “Your car hasn’t even moved ten feet.”

I don't really have an answer to that. "Fine. But at least in the car you'll be out of the heat."

"Mr. Baxter, kindly let go of my scooter. Or else I'm. Going. To. Be. Late!" she shouts and more than just a few of the people in the stationary cars are looking at us now.

I lean in. "Why must you always be so stubborn?"

She doesn't move. If anything, she leans in a little as well. "I don't know. Why are you always so bossy?"

"Because I'm the fucking boss. And why are you soooo..." I have to bite back the urge to say "sexy" so I decide to end the sentence there. "Look. How about you work while you ride with me? I have to dictate a letter that needs to be sent out in half an hour but Melissa is already busy with something else. If you join me in the car we'll consider it as you clocking in. On time."

She doesn't say yes. But she doesn't say no right away either. "Don't pity me," she finally says.

"Why would I pity you? You have this awesome scooter," I tease.

A loud truck lays on his car horn, and along with the heat and traffic, there's just a lot of chaos around us, and she grimaces.

"Come on, you'll be helping me out. I can't think and type at the same time," I add.

The way she folds her arms across her chest and glares at me tells me she's not entirely convinced, but part of her wants

to. So I give her no choice but to agree; my hand wraps around her wrist and I drag her to the car.

She digs her heels in, but I'm strong.

"Damien!! Get your hands off me!"

I ignore her. Roger is already on his feet and has the back car door open when we get there.

"Get in," I say, letting go of her wrist.

Her hair whips around her face as she shakes her head, eyes wide, furious. "Like hell. I'm not into kidnapping."

"Get. In," I say, through gritted teeth. I'm not enjoying either the heat or the growing audience.

She takes a deep breath, rocks back on her heel, and opens her mouth.

I quickly grab her wrist, lift her over my shoulder, and dump her inside the car before she can let loose.

Roger closes the door quickly.

"One minute," I tell him and he nods.

I run over and grab her ridiculous scooter and drag it back to the car. No wonder she was struggling. It's heavier than it looks and she's only half my size. Roger pops the trunk and I throw the scooter into it and climb into the car on the other side.

She's sitting here, arms crossed again, huffing. "Why did you do that?"

"You looked like you were struggling."

“I was doing just fine.”

“I’m tired just from dragging it twenty feet. The office is over six blocks away. You’d have been dead by the time you got there.”

“I was fine,” she mutters again under her breath. “You know there were witnesses, right?”

“Of what? Me rescuing you and your scooter from the heat? Good. I could always use the good publicity.”

She slides to the edge of her seat and leans in close to me, her voice low and soft. “You’re a bossy motherfucker, aren’t you, Damien Baxter?”

Something about the way she says “motherfucker” sends tingles down my spine. Dirty. Sexy. I have to stop myself leaning into the few inches left between her face and mine and kissing her. I lean away from her to put some distance between us under the guise of pulling my phone from my pocket and hand it to her. “Here, open the notes app and start typing.”

“I’m not your secretary.”

“No, my secretary knows better than to ride a toy to work.”

She hisses under her breath but complies.

I start dictating a nonsense email; it keeps my mind focused on something other than the way she looks sitting there, face and legs glowing from her exertion, her brow furrowed and biting her bottom lip as she concentrates on typing. Something about her is familiar but I still can’t quite pinpoint it, and it’s like it’s short-circuiting the wiring in my brain.

“Do I need to...format it?” she says when I take a break from my fake email.

“No, Melissa will do that.”

She nods and looks at me, waiting.

I can't think for a moment as I get lost in her eyes.

Are they the reason Jeremy is so taken with her?

The thought of him sobers me, and I clear my throat and force myself to look away. “Sincerely, Damien Baxter,” I end the email.

She taps in the final words and swipes up, checking her work.

“All done. That was easy enough. Although you could've just recorded it and had your assistant transcribe it.”

I hadn't...thought of that. “Um, it was faster this way, she'll appreciate the help.”

She hands the phone back to me with a smile, the animosity from before seemingly forgotten. Our fingers graze as I take it from her, making a concerted effort to let my hand linger longer than it should.

“How is your first week going?” I ask, glad to see we're only a block away from the office now.

“Great! I mean, my coworkers are pretty cool. Boss is a bit of a dick, though,” she says with a grin.

“Oh? I actually heard he was pretty charming.”

“He probably started that rumor himself. Thinks highly of himself, I think.”

She has no fear. Of me, at least. “Maybe he feels that way because he knows he can put his money where his mouth is.”

“He does have plenty of money.”

“And I bet there are plenty of other things he’d want to put where his mouth is,” I say before I can stop myself. It just slips out.

Her jaw drops open for a split second, then she clamps her mouth shut. “Seriously? You always have to go there?”

“Go where?”

“Sex!” she exclaims, throwing her hands in the air.

I feel a lazy smile spread across my face and this time it’s my turn to lean in. “Why not? It’s fun,” I whisper, low and deep.

She just shakes her head and scoffs. “There’s more to life than sex.”

“Spoken as someone who has never had really good sex. You should try it sometime. You might find yourself surprised.”

Her eyes narrow just as Roger pulls the car to the curb outside the building.

“I might...but you’d ever know,” she teases with a playful wink.

With that she climbs out of the car and sprints off towards the building, leaving me and her scooter in the car.

“You alright, sir?” Roger asks when he notices I haven’t gotten out.

“Just taking a minute, Roger,” I say, as I wait for my cock to soften.

Every time.

Every time I’m near her, I want her.

Every single time.



*My-Linh*

“SEX-CRAZED, SLEAZY, SONOFABISH,” I mutter under my breath as I storm from the elevator to my desk.

“Woah, you look like a storm in a teacup,” Raquel says, taking a sip from her coffee cup.

“More like a hurricane,” I grumble but then chuckle when Raquel makes a surprised face. I can never really stay mad for too long.

“Wrong side of the bed?”

“Of the car, more like.”

I explain, leaving out the sex part, and Raquel can’t help listening, her eyes getting wider and wider.

“Wow, I would not have thought Damien Baxter would’ve even noticed a Baxter employee stranded on the side of the road, let alone stop to help them.”

“I wish he hadn’t seen me!”

“I don’t know...I wouldn’t mind getting in a car with him.”

I grumble again. “You’re free to take my place next time.”

“Old, married me? Not a chance! Have you seen the kinds of women he dates?”

I grimace, remembering the waitress I’d seen him leave the club with the other night. I know just the kind of woman Raquel means—slim everywhere where it counts. Gorgeous and blonde. Not a short, Asian woman who dresses in thrifted graphic Tees with curves that make it hard to find jeans and skirts to wear.

“You’re too good for him,” I tell my lovely coworker, meaning every word.

“Shhh, speak of the devil,” Raquel whispers.

He steps off the elevator and immediately looks over at me on his way to the meeting room, that arrogant, aggravating smile on his lips. For a traitorous moment, my mind wonders what it would take for Damien Baxter to ever even notice me as a woman, even just for a second. I don’t take any of his flirtations with me seriously, it’s just part of the sex-obsessed character of his that he can’t turn off.

There’s a tapping on my cubicle wall.



“Miss Tran. I appreciate the effort to get to work on time this morning,” he says, amused. And I fight the urge to give him a swift left hook. “Your scooter will be fixed and waiting for you downstairs when you finish work tonight. No need to thank me,” he finishes and leaves.

Twinkledick.



# SIX

## *Damien*

“MR. BAXTER, SHOULD WE go through your messages now, sir?” Melissa asks the second I arrive at the office later that week.

I want to say no, but she has that look on her face that tells me that would absolutely be the wrong answer. Instead I agree and push the door into my office with her close behind.

“Here’s the first one,” she says, handing me the Post-it on the top of her too big stack as we walk over to my desk.

I scan the name, curse under my breath, scrunch it up, and throw it into the bin.

“Next?” I ask.

She frowns at the wadded up paper, but then moves on. “Er, okay—”

“What the fuck is this?” I interrupt her, pointing at a small purple package sitting in the middle of my tidy desk.

I pick it up with my thumb and forefinger and spin it around. It's a little organza bag, tied with a small ribbon, and inside it there's something that looks like, well, frankly, weed. Accompanied is a Ziplock bag with some flat, thin cookies baked in a swirly pattern. There's a small tag that says "for the munchies" on it.

It's nothing that I put on my desk myself, and that instantly has my hackles up. I don't like people in my office when I'm not there. Not just because there is documentation in here that I would rather people not be privy to without my presence, but my office is *my* space. And I don't want people in my space.

"It's from My-Linh—" Melissa starts.

"Bloody hell. Does she have no concept of privacy?" I growl and storm out of my office and down to the 11th floor, the little bag scrunched in my hand.

She's not at her desk when I get there so I stalk up and down the aisles until I see her. She's talking to someone with her back turned to me. Her long black hair is pulled into a side ponytail and draped over her left shoulder, showing off her neck, which has me momentarily distracted. But only for a moment.

"Miss Tran, what exactly is the meaning of this?" I shout, holding up the package she'd left on my desk.

She has a smile on her face when she turns around, although it looks like it's fading.

"Good morning, Mr. Baxter," she says.

“That’s not an answer to my question,” I grumble. “What is this and why was it on my desk? I don’t like people going into my office uninvited.”

Her smile drops. “Oh, um, I didn’t mean anything by it; it’s just...a little gift.”

“Weed and sad little cookies?” I roar. “If this is your hippie idea of appropriate professional behavior then I think we might need to revisit that deal.”

Her mouth drops open. “What? That’s not marijuana! It’s a willow herb tea! My family owns a tea store, and I just thought I’d make up some little thank you gifts for everyone for being so lovely to me this week. I chose a tea that I thought would suit everyone. And those sad little cookies, as you call them, are pig ear cookies; they’re a Vietnamese dessert.” She shakes her head. “It’s *not* weed,” she repeats, her eyes confused.

I blink and look at the offending bag in my hand, suddenly seeing it in a different light, one not clouded by annoyance. It’s a sweet little package and the tag is flipped over and now I see an extra little message I didn’t see before. “Thank you for taking a chance on me - ML.”

At that moment, Virginia Mathews, manager of Team A of the marketing team wanders out of the break room, nursing a cup in her hand. “Oh my god, My-Linh, this turmeric and lemon tea smells delicious. What did you say it was for again?”

My-Linh breaks her gaze with me and addresses her manager. “Oh, um, it’s for arthritis. You mentioned the other

day that your wrists were hurting a bit, and I thought this might help ease the soreness. Let me know either way, I might have some other idea of things you can try,” she says, with a gentle smile. Her eyes are sad though, and I think I’m the reason.

“I absolutely will; you are so thoughtful,” Virginia says. “Oh, Mr. Baxter, is there something you need from me?”

*Other than a hole to bury myself in, no, I think, but just shake my head.*

My-Linh bites her lip and tries to push past me. “Excuse me, I have...some more weed to deliver.”

And for the first time I notice she’s carrying a large wicker basket that must have another fifty little bags in it, each one individually labeled. She must’ve made one for everyone on this level if not more.

And I called her a hippie.

“Um...er, thank you,” I say, because there’s nothing else to say.

She doesn’t respond and just pushes past me.

“My-Linh,” I say, but she’s gone and isn’t coming back.

“Good going, boss,” I hear, and out of the corner of my eye I see Melissa standing there nibbling on one of My-Linh’s cookies. “Wow, these are delicious.”

“Oh, shush, are we going to work on these messages or not?” I snap and storm away.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Damien?” I say to myself, once I’ve returned to my office, inwardly banging my head on my desk.

I know I overreacted, and I don’t know why.

That’s a lie. I know exactly why. My-Linh Tran unnerves me, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I can’t regulate my behavior around her. So, it’s better just to not be around her.

But every time I open my drawer over the course of the day and see the little package, I catch myself smiling as I think about the sweet and sexy woman three floors down who just wants to spread joy.

And yet all I can think about is her spreading something else.



*My-Linh*

THE FIRST WEEK AT Baxter comes to an end before I know it, and I spend the weekend catching up on sleep and relaxing with my roommates. When Monday morning comes around, I’m excited to start the week feeling like I belong there and not a complete newbie.

Aside from a breathlessness (and also annoyance) that hits every time Damien Baxter is in the room, I’m enjoying my time at Baxter, loving the way it has put the things I’ve studied into practice, and greased the gears on my own ideas. I’ve

started speaking up with confidence about my opinions and am secretly tickled when they're met with enthusiasm. I've emailed back and forth with Jeremy a few times just to test the waters on a few ideas I've had, and they've been mostly met with encouragement, and he's included some particular points to think about.

"Hey, Raquel. My-Linh," Gregory, the bald guy from the other morning says, walking up to our cubicle.

"What do you want, Greg?" Raquel answers, impatiently rolling her eyes behind his back.

"I just wanted to introduce you to a new hire; he'll be joining my team."

I look past Greg to the figure lingering behind him.

And my blood runs cold.





# SEVEN

## *My-Linh*

“HI, I’M ADAM,” THE guy says, and holds out his hand to me. “Adam Dalbec.”

I try to breathe, but nothing enters my lungs. I use every ounce of my energy to push out a response. “Uh, I’m...I’m My-Linh,” I manage to squeak out, and take his hand, giving it a small shake before dropping it.

He smiles, as if I’m a complete stranger introducing myself. “Nice to meet you, My-Linh.” I want to retch at the sound of my name coming out of his mouth.

Raquel reaches over the partition, taking his hand. “Hi, Adam. I’m Raquel. My-Linh’s new here as well.”

“Oh really?” he says, the smile still plastered to his face, his eyes showing none of the turmoil churning inside me.

I want to run far, far away.

I was never supposed to find his sexts with The Blonde—that’s the first thing he said to me when I confronted him with

them.

“You weren’t supposed to read them. I knew they would hurt you.”

“They” as if words could spontaneously appear on my fiancé’s screen with the sole aim of causing me pain.

As if he’d had no hand in it, so to speak.

Oh, but his hand had been in it. And on it. And around it. So the blurry pictures that accompanied the cringely worded texts had shown.

I wish I could say I left him then and there, but I haven’t been accused of being overly optimistic my entire life for nothing. For months, I held on to every little word, little gesture as a sign he had changed, that everything we had gone through together wasn’t for nothing, and that the future we had dreamed of together was still within reach.

Adam had always been the one who’d called me too trusting. At the time I thought it was something he found endearing about me. It turned out it wasn’t endearing; it was just advantageous.

I left almost four months after I found the texts. And it took almost that long to just feel half-human in my own skin again. A skin that felt both too big and too small for me all at once. A skin that made me feel ugly, undesirable, unwanted. A skin I wanted to shed, and emerge from, anew.

A year on, I feel like I have almost completely washed him from that skin.

The chili in the Le Creuset pot night was just the start of my vow to never let a man be my be-all and end-all ever again.

Yet here he now stands, during my Months of My-Linh, doing what he has always done best—making everything about him.

“We should get a group together and all go out tonight, grab a drink to welcome our new members to the hell-hole,” Greg suggests, cutting into my thoughts.

“I’m in,” Adam says, his face a blank canvas, still pretending I’m no less a stranger to him than Raquel. How is he doing it? Why am I surprised though?

Not only have I heard his lies before. I believed them.

“I can’t. Busy,” I manage to squeak out.

“Oh, come on,” Adam says to me. “It’ll be f—”

“I *said* I can’t.” I glare at my ex-fiancé.

The awkwardness drops on us like a lead balloon and Raquel looks over at me, concerned.

“Well, ahem. We better continue the tour,” Greg says. “Maybe we can find someone else who wants to have fun with us tonight.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Raquel says as they leave.

They’re halfway down the hallway before she steps into my cubicle. “Hey, are you okay? That was a little weird, right?”

“Um. Yeah, I’m fine.” I force a bright smile onto my face. “Sorry about that. I was feeling a little bit too warm for a

moment” I stutter.

She frowns. “You do look a little red. You should go take a break, you’ve had a pretty hectic morning. I’ll cover for you. Have you had a chance to go to the outdoor garden area on the fifteenth floor yet?”

I shake my head. The idea does sound like exactly what I need though.

“You should go right now. It’ll be pretty quiet around now. It’s only for Baxter employees, so make sure to take your ID tag.” She pats me on the arm, and if I wasn’t so freaked out over seeing Adam, and the prospect of having to work with him for the next two months, it would have comforted me.

I give her a small smile to show my appreciation, grab my sunglasses, and head for the elevators, hoping I don’t run into anyone I don’t want to.

The midday sun is harsh when I step out onto the terrace that runs completely along the western side of the Baxter Building. Giant green elephant ear plants umbrella out of the lush garden beds that center the terrace, casting shadow over the wooden benches and picnic tables. The effect appears so calming, the perfect lunch or coffee break spot. Stools with bar tables dot along the edge of the terrace, where you can look out over the city.

I make my way to the railing, taking a deep breath and then exhaling, trying to push out the adrenaline coursing through my body.

It doesn't work, so I take another deep breath, and try again.

Still nothing.

The memory of how Adam had just shrugged his shoulders when I'd gathered up my boxes and told him I was leaving plays in mind, fresh as if it were happening in real time.

*“You leave, My-Linh, and you'll have to always live with the knowledge that you gave up on us.”*

And how I had lived with that shame, that humiliation, the guilt for so long.

Lived with the shame that I was the one who had given up, failed and not endured.

When it had been him who'd left long before I did, but just hadn't had the decency to admit it.

Been the one who'd made me question my worth every single day that he'd come home late, smelling of a fresh shower.

Been the one who'd told me I should spend more time shopping for lingerie than studying at the library.

Been the one who'd said it wasn't his fault if he wasn't attracted to me. That I was the one who'd changed, who'd 'let myself go'.

Instantly, I feel ugly in my own skin. Unwanted, again.

The renewed pain strikes through my breast, and the deep breaths I'm trying to take get stuck in my rib cage and I grasp at my chest.

“Breathe, My-Linh, breathe. You have to fucking breathe,” I yell at myself, my hand grasping at my chest.

It’s been so long since I’ve felt like this, I’ve almost forgotten the pain of the first few months getting over what had happened. Even the other night, seeing him, it had been a momentary shock, but then I’d been able to brush it off.

But now the prospect of having to see him every day, while he stands there with his fucking face pretending he didn’t break my spirit is too much to bear.

There’s a hot breeze and it washes over the tears streaming down my face.

I silently scream into the wind, “Fuck you, Adam.”

And struggle again to breathe.



*Damien*

THE WINDOW PANE IS cool as I press my hand against it.

The slight tint makes everything a little darker than it really is and normally I enjoy that. Today, though, the sun is like a golden orb in the cloudless Sydney sky, and something makes me want to see everything as bright as it’s meant to be.

“Damien, are you listening to me?” the slightly tinny voice reprimands me.

“Yes, I’m always listening to you, Kingsley. You make it hard not to with that grating fucking voice of yours,” I say to my brother, while still staring out the window.

My two other brothers cackle over the line.

Wednesday afternoons are our weekly meeting to do what our mediator calls “getting your frustration out”, and let’s just say that Kingsley, our eldest brother who heads up our European division, has had a lot of frustration post-Brexit.

My second eldest brother, Mathias jumps in. “What are you even doing in this meeting, Damien? What kind of frustrations do you have in Australia, spending half your time surfing and the other half washing sand out of your ass after fucking on the beach?”

I just grin, I had to fight hard to head up this region. Everyone had romanticized the Australia and Oceania market, thinking it was all beaches and blondes. And in doing so, they’d underestimated its potential as well. So I’d put together a proposal and plan for why I should head the region up and, not surprisingly, the board of directors voted for it. Not my fault they were all in London and Hong Kong and New York not remembering the last time they actually saw the sun.

Australians are an interesting breed, progressive but also doggedly nostalgic about so many things.

The acquisition of Wattle Foods, a mainstay in the Australia food market since the 1960’s, which was supposed to be the feather in the cap of my first few years of being in Australia, is presenting greater challenges than I had expected. Recent



campaign marketing for the same products but with more modern and, what I thought was, to-market branding had intensely backfired. But the changes—being it of the font, the brand color, even the shape of the container some of the products came in—have caused uproar after uproar and the Australian Division of Baxter Enterprises is feeling it in the stock market.

Not to mention the dissatisfied rumblings in the boardroom are getting louder, and less veiled.

Fuck them.

It's my birthright to head this division of this company and no one's going to take it away from me without a bloody fight.

“You hear about what's happening with Rupert Gottfried?” Kylian, my youngest brother, asks from his office in Hong Kong.

“What's that ugly fucker up to now? I thought he and his old man had settled all that bullshit and he was going to get the CFO position after all,” I say. Rupert Gottfried is a thorn in my side that just won't go away. Not content with inheriting his father's company, it's no secret that he has his eye on finding his way into the Baxter Enterprises. Last I'd heard though, he had been lured back into the family fold and was finally settling down. Maybe I had celebrated a little too soon.

“Nah, he's shady; you know he probably started those rumors himself,” Kylian says.

“Unlike the rumors we started about him having a tiny dick at Eton that time,” Kingsley laughs.

You wouldn’t know it to listen to us, but each of us manages budgets in the tens of billions. And we still laugh at tiny dick jokes.

“What’s up your ass today, Damo?” Mathias asks when I don’t join in with the laughter today. I should never have told him about the Australian tendency to give everyone nicknames by chopping names off at the first syllable and tacking on an “o” to the end of it.

“I’ve got the board meeting tomorrow,” I remind them. “Just making sure I’ve got everything sorted for that.”

“Kayleigh says she has it all under control,” Kylian points out.

“She always says that,” I scoff.

“Yeah, that’s because she knows what she’s doing. Let her make you look good,” Kingsley chimes in.

“He certainly needs it,” Mathias teases.

They dissolve into laughs again and I let their voices fade into the background as I look out over the city skyline. It’s modest compared to the other big cities I’ve lived in around the world. But it’s perfectly Australian. Understated, but brimming with all the potential in the world.

My eye catches on a small bird hovering just out of my window. For a moment our eyes lock and then it dips its head and tornadoes downward, almost free-falling, riding the wave

of a gust of wind. I can't help feeling a little envious of that freedom.

I follow the bird as it soars down the side of my building and lands on a bush on the terrace garden I had built three floors down. I'm about to turn back to my desk and the meeting when my eye falls on a figure dressed in black bracing against the railing.

There's no mistaking who it is by the way my body instantly responds.

My-Linh.

I lean closer against the glass, drawn closer to her, and squint through the glass. I feel a little stalkery, a little creepy, but something compels me to keep watching.

Suddenly, she clutches her chest and opens her mouth.

Three floors up, I can't hear the sound that comes out of her mouth but the way her face contorts conveys undeniable pain.

Oh my god! Is she okay?

I watch in horror as she grabs the railing with one hand and leans back, as if she's struggling for breath, the other still thumping against her chest.

My entire body ices over and it takes me a split second longer than it should to spring into action. My feet barely touch the ground as I race out of my office, the sound of my brothers' voices shouting after me.

"Mr. Baxter. Is everythin—"

I streak past Melissa's desk and towards the elevator.

"Come on, come on, hurry the fuck up!" I shout as I jab at the button. It's taking too long to arrive.

I make for the stairs, jumping them two steps at a time down the three floors.

My ID card doesn't read the first two times I swipe it, and the lock keeps blaring an angry red.

"Fucking hell! Work, you piece of shit!" I yell, frustrated.

The light finally flashes green the third time I swipe and I yank the door open and run towards the west side railing.

She's still there, both arms gripping the rail now, her face red, panicked, wet with tears.

"My-Linh! Are you okay?" I shout, prying her hands from the rail and spinning her towards me.

Her face freezes in surprise and she takes two short, sharp breaths as she stares at me, open-mouthed.

"Can you breathe??" I ask, trying not to shake the answer out of her.

She blinks, and tries to form some words in response. "Y-yes."

"What's going on? Are you okay?" I ask again, forcing myself to lower my panicked voice. She seems physically okay; her breaths are shallow but she's breathing.

"Y-yes..." she starts to say again, then her face crumbles, and her entire body shakes with sobs.

I pull her to me without even thinking.

My arm comes up to cradle her head against my chest, the other wrapping around her back. The air is cold against my back as I pivot her away from the wind, bracing against it to protect her.

The front of my shirt is bunched in her hand as she shakes, crying, murmuring indecipherably.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I whisper, even though I have no idea if it will be or not. “What’s going on? Can you tell me? Are you hurt? Did you get some bad news from your family?”

She sniffs, her sobs slowing, and I give her another minute to regain her breath before I ask again.

This time her head shakes and she stammers, “It’s...it’s nothing. I just...I ran into someone...from a past life.”

“Did they say something to upset you?” I ask, afraid of the answer. Because if I find out they did, I already know I’m going to want to kill them. No one should be the reason this woman isn’t smiling.

She shakes her head.

“Then what happened to make you so upset?” I urge.

She blinks, another fat tear streaking down her left cheek.

My hand cups her face, my thumb brushing the tear away, and I watch it glisten on my nail. There’s an inexplicable urge to suck it into my mouth, wanting to devour her pain. But I fight it.

“Tell me,” I say gently.

Her chin quivers for a moment, then she tries to pull away, but my hand on her back stops her.

“Tell me,” I say, this time firmer.

“I can’t. It doesn’t matter. I...I overreacted,” she says, running her hand over her face.

“It didn’t look like that to me.”

She glances at me for a moment and looks away. “You wouldn’t understand.”

My hand tightens against her back. “Try me.”

She just shakes her head, pushing her hands against my chest, and I let her go, only because I know I have to. She takes a step toward the railing again, her hands gripping the chipped white paint.

From behind, I watch as her shoulders slump and her head drops.

I step in behind her, my own hands reaching for the rail on either side of her, my body pressing up against hers.

“Tell me,” I whisper into her ear, leaning in, trying not to drown in her scent.

Suddenly she spins around and her face is mere inches from mine. I can see my face reflected in her pupils, my concern for her stark.

“Do you think I’m pretty?” she finally asks.

The question reverberates in my ears.

“What?”

Her jaw tightens and I’m afraid she’ll retreat back into her shell again, but she doesn’t. “If you...if you...didn’t know me and if I wasn’t working for you. If you just saw me in the street, would you...would you want to sleep with me?”

What?

What the fuck is going on? Is this conversation only happening in my head? Did I fall too deep in my daydream about her?

“My-Linh...” I start, my eyes locking on hers. There’s a pain in them that cuts at me and I’m not sure how to respond.

Her face crumples and she drops her chin, her eyes falling from mine. “You wouldn’t.”

“Wait. No.”

“No?” she echoes, with a small shake of her head and crack in her voice. “I-I have to go. I’m sorry I bothered you.” She tries to push my arms away.

“My-Linh. Stop.” My hands free from the railing but only to grip her shoulders, and she winces but I don’t let go. “Fuck. Just stop fucking talking for just one minute. Let me answer the question.” I take a deep breath. “Ask me again.”

“It’s fine, Mr. Bax—”

“Ask me the fucking question again,” I demand.

She grimaces but complies. “If you saw me on the street... would I be someone you’d want to have sex with?”

I grip her chin with one hand, forcing her to look at me. “No, My-Linh. I wouldn’t want to have sex with you.”

Her eyes fill with tears, and she fights against my hand on her chin, trying to look away. But I hold strong and lean in closer, so there’s barely a breath between my lips and hers.

“I wouldn’t want to have sex with you, because that’s the worst fucking way to describe what I’ve wanted to do to you from the first moment I saw you.” I ignore every voice in my brain that tells me I should stop talking. “I want to fuck you in every single way imaginable. And trust me, I’ve been imagining. I want to make you scream until you’re hoarse and yet you’ll keep screaming, screaming for mercy, as I make your body mine. Fuck you until you forget any man before me ever looked at you, touched you, kissed you. Fuck you until you forget your name while you scream mine, begging me for more while your pussy weeps for me to never stop.” I move my hand down to her neck, clutching it gently, and feel her breath catch in her throat. “Does that answer your question?”

She nods.

“Good. Anything else?” I ask.

She nods again. “So...so do it,” she chokes, each word humming against my palm. “Fuck me. Right now.” She swallows, her eyes pleading. “Please.” The word comes out husky and needy.

And it matches my own need.



My hand still on her throat, I pull her against me and crush my lips against hers.

She makes a tiny noise, but then pushes back against me just as hard.

Her hands slide up around my head as I back her up against the railing, my hand sliding from her throat down to clutch at her ass. I've wanted to bury my hands into the softness of her ass from the first moment I saw it. I don't think my cock has been fully soft since she'd yelled at me in my office and sashayed out of there. She must've known I've been watching her all this time. How could any man not stop everything he's doing to watch her?

Her lips taste like peppermint tea—sweet, minty—and I can't stop kissing her. I'm not sure how long my mouth is devouring hers when she pulls away.

“Damien,” she pants, her pupils wide, vulnerable. “Did you mean what you said? That you want to...to fuck me?”

I almost laugh. She can't be this clueless. I grab her hand and move it to my cock.

Her fingers instantly curl to cup my hardness and I let out a groan.

“Do you believe me now?”

She squeezes, almost shyly, and it thrills me. I wonder if she's ever cupped a man's cock in a public place before. I'm hoping that I'm her first. I'm going to be her first in so many other ways as well, I silently promise us both.

She looks back up at me, lids hooded, her eyes now flooded with arousal. “Show me more. Please.”

I press her hand harder against my stiff cock, feeling it harden even more. “I don’t play around, My-Linh. You sure you want this?”

She reaches behind her, taking my hand that’s still clutching against her ass, and slides it under her skirt, her legs spreading slightly. My fingers curl against her heat.

“Fuck me, Damien.”

I kiss her again.

My lips bruise hers as my fingertip traces against the silk of her panties. She moans against my mouth, and it’s everything I can do not to lift her legs around my hips and ram my cock into her right here and now.

“Come on,” I say when I can finally pull away, grabbing her wrist and dragging her to the terrace door.

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere I can show you that I wasn’t exaggerating about all the things I said. If anything, words can’t properly describe how much I want to fuck you. But I’d rather not do it here where everyone can see. Not this time, anyway.”

She doesn’t say anything. She just follows, each of my steps taking two of hers.

I fling upon the door to the staircase.

“Why don’t we take the elevator?” she asks, her voice small.

“Takes too fucking long,” I say, stopping just long enough to pull her against me and run my tongue along her lips, thinking about how I’m going to make her come doing the same thing to her clit.

“Okay,” she says when I pull away, panting up the stairs behind me.

The floor of my office is quiet when we arrive, and I lead her to my office.

“Hold all my calls. No interruptions,” I say to Melissa, dragging My-Linh behind me.

“Mr. Baxter—”

“No interruptions, Melissa!”

“Mr. Baxter!” she calls after me as I push my office door open.

And I freeze in my tracks.

“Damien. Good of you to finally join us. We’ve been waiting for you.”



# EIGHT

*My-Linh*

*DON'T THINK, JUST DON'T think*, that's the only thing rushing through my mind as I'm climbing the stairs, being dragged by Damien Baxter.

It's ironic because I can barely breathe, let alone think.

I want him

And he's telling me he wants me.

*Not just telling you, he showed you*, my mind insists.

*I want to fuck you in every way imaginable*. His words echo in my head as I'm practically running beside him as he leads me to his office.

"No interruptions!" he barks at Melissa, and I avoid her eyes as he pushes on his office door.

And then he freezes.

"Damien. Good of you to finally join us. We've been waiting for you."

There are two men in his office. One older version of Damien, maybe twenty years down the road. The other looks like neither of them: shorter, stout, shady.

Damien instantly drops my hand.

“What are you doing here?” he hisses.

He’s angry.

He switched from horny to furious in the space of split seconds. Even from behind the tension in him is palpable, his back is straight, rigid, when he was all fluid and sexiness on the terrace.

“We have a meeting with you, Damien. Did you forget?” Older Damien says. “Or did you double book, again?” he adds, eyeing me.

I open my mouth to explain, “I was just—”

“It’s none of your business what I do here,” Damien cuts me off. “And I certainly don’t appreciate you ambushing me. Especially with him in tow.” He tilts his head at the shorter man.

“Damien. Long time, buddy,” Short Guy says with a smirk.

“I’m not your buddy. Get out of my office,” Damien spits.

I take a step back, knowing I should probably leave. “Um, I’m just going to go...”

Damien holds his hand out, stopping me. “No. You stay, they will leave.”

Older Damien gives me a charming smile. “Actually, that would be best. Thank you, Miss—...”

“Tran. I work here.”

Older Damien clicks his tongue. “Oh, Damien, again?”

My blood runs cold.

“Shut the fuck up, Gerard. I’ll be right back. Don’t get comfortable. And make sure this slime bag doesn’t touch or look at anything,” he says, gesturing to Slime Bag/Short Guy before he takes my hand and drags me out of his office.

“It’s okay, I should—” I stop when he throws me a look as he pulls me into a nearby empty office.

“My-Linh, wait here. Don’t go anywhere, I’ll be five minute. Tops.” He kisses me hard and fast and I’m instantly breathless again. “And then we can finish what we started.”

He’s out the door before I can respond. I wait until I’m sure he’s back in his office before I get up, looking at my own reflection in the glass pane of the door.

I’m an utter hot mess. Eyes red, face blotchy, hair tousled, lipstick smeared.

What the fuck just happened? And what else almost happened? Did I practically beg Damien Baxter to fuck me? And did we almost just do it in his office?

Yes. And yes.

And I wanted to. I wanted to so much.

I'm almost weak remembering his body pressed against mine, pushing me against the railing, his hand around my throat, his voice dark and deep against my ear. I would've done anything he'd asked in the moment. I'm almost thankful he had the presence of mind to drag us back to his office, even if I felt a little like a cavewoman.

A horny cavewoman gagging for Damien Baxter.

Then the memory of Older Damien looking at me, saying "Again?" as if I'm just the last in a long line of office fucks, dumps a bucket of ice water all over me.

Fuck. I'm so stupid.

I run my hands over my hair, make sure everything is where it's supposed to be, and I rush back to my office.

Whatever happened is over, and it's probably best that it is.



*Damien*

"YOU'VE GOT TWO MINUTES to tell me what you're both doing here. Without an appointment," I say when I get back to my office.

My uncle opens his mouth first. "Damien—"

"I know my name, you're wasting time."

"We're just here for a friendly talk, Damien," Rupert Gottfried says.



“Gottfried, I suggest you let my uncle speak for the both of you. Because I’m not interested in a damn thing that’s going to come out of your mouth.”

My uncle sighs and steps closer to me. “Damien. You’re in over your head. And you’re taking all of Baxter under with you. You need help.”

I shove my hands into my pockets to stop them from wrapping around his throat. “I think you forget, Uncle. That’s not your decision to make.”

He shrugs. “You’re right. But I do have a vote on the board.”

“A decision I still think was wrong. You should’ve had that right stripped when you became interim CEO.” I emphasize the “interim” as if he doesn’t think about that every moment of every day.

“I’m just thinking about the company, Damien. You don’t know the Australia and Oceania market as well as—”

I wave a hand in Rupert’s direction. “Him? He couldn’t point to Australia on a map that only had Australia on it. What’s really going on here?”

“Just something to think about. Rupert has some really great ideas, and I just thought you could get together and talk about it and maybe learn from each other.”

I shake my head. Over my dead body is that ever going to happen. “How about if there’s anything I need to learn about Rupert, I’ll just talk to his father.”

Melissa buzzes on the intercom. “Your four-thirty is here, Mr. Baxter.”

“Thank you, Melissa. I’ll be just a minute,” I tell her before turning to my two uninvited guests. “Just in time. I think your two minutes are up.”

Rupert smirks and gives me a mock salute and leaves.

“What the hell are you doing with him?” I ask my uncle, genuinely shocked. “I get that you don’t want me here, but nothing good can come out of you getting into bed with that slimy dickwad.”

“Damien. You really need to think about what you’re doing here. It’s not just my name that’s going to be dragged under. It’s yours, it’s your brothers’. Your grandfather’s.” He pauses, then continues. “And whether you like it or not, your father’s.”

I snarl, “You keep my father’s name out of anything you’re saying.”

He holds his hands up. “Fine. Look, the annual general meeting is in December. I won’t do anything until then. But, respectfully, I can’t promise anything after that.”

“Respectfully, get the fuck out of my office, Uncle Gerry. And don’t ever come here without an appointment again.”

“I’m your boss, Damien,” he reminds me.

“We’ll see about that.”

The door is barely closed behind him when I launch the cognac glass on my desk at the door, watching it smash into a

hundred pieces onto the floor.

“Fuck!”

On his deathbed, my grandfather told us that he had the support of the Board of Directors to pass on control of his 65% stake in Baxter Enterprises to his only grandchildren, my three brothers and me. There was one condition, however—that my uncle would take on the position of the interim CEO until Kingsley turns forty. He was thirty-seven years old at the time and there’s about another year and a half until he takes over and we’re just holding our breaths that nothing happens until then.

Uncle Gerard might think Baxter Enterprises, or at least the Australian division, is going under on my watch, but I’d be surprised if the company lasted five years under him without our intervention, while he drained it for every last dime in the meantime.

“Sir? Just reminding you your next meeting is here,”  
Melissa reminds me.

Fuck. My-Linh.

“Melissa, can you seat them in meeting room two, please? I’ll be right there. Also can you send My-Linh in here? She’s in the empty office.”

“Oh, she left, sir.”

Dammit. “When?”

“She left as soon as you went back to your office.”

“Get her on the phone. Now.”

I clean up the broken glass as well as I can so that someone else doesn't get injured because of my temper.

“Mr. Baxter?” Melissa says over the intercom.

“Put her on,” I yell through the door.

“She's not answering.”

“Fuck,” I hiss as I press down too hard on a shard of glass and watch the blood pool on the finger.

*Fine. I'll deal with you later, My-Linh. But I'm going to make you pay for making me wait.*

And just the thought of all the things I'm going to do to punish her has the blood rushing to my cock.



*My-Linh*

WHEN I GET BACK to my desk, the last thing I have any intention of doing is hanging around in case I run into either my ex or my boss.

“Where have you been?” Raquel asks. “I went looking for you on the terrace when you didn't come back but you weren't there. I was worried sick.”

“I...I ran into Curtis,” I lie, mentioning one of the marketing managers. I wasn't going to tell her I was getting almost fingered by our boss's boss's boss's boss. “So I stopped

to ask him about some of the projects they're doing on Team B."

"You're not thinking of leaving our team, are you?" Raquel looks so genuinely sad that I can't help but laugh.

"Never. But even if I did, I'd take you with me."

"Kicking and screaming! I wouldn't join Team B if you forced me."

"Team A, all the way, baby," I say, holding up my hand for a high five.

Raquel giggles, looks around, and then slaps her hand against mine. "You're the only person I know who makes a high five endearing, My-Linh.

"In that case, how 'bout you high five what I'm going to say next. I've decided I do deserve a celebratory drink after all. But not with those losers. Come out with me and my roommates tonight. We'll go have a really nice dinner somewhere, my treat, and I can show you what I'm like when I don't have to watch my mouth. We'll just tell your husband you're working late."

She thinks about it for a moment, at the same time the phone on my desk rings. I don't need to glance at the caller ID to know where the call is coming from.

"Offer's time sensitive, Raquel!"

She grins and jumps to her feet and slaps her hand against mine so hard it rings all the way around the office. "I can see

you're going to be a bad influence on me, My-Linh Tran," she says as she grabs her bag.

"You have no idea."



IT'S A GOOD NIGHT and yet somehow I still manage to make it to bed a few minutes before midnight. There are over ten missed calls on my phone from a single number that I don't recognize. I might not know the number but that doesn't mean I can't hazard an educated guess who it might be.

Aside from the fact that I have no intention of speaking to Damien Baxter outside of work ever again, does he really think I'm going to answer an unknown number? Does he not live in the real world like the rest of us? For some reason the image of him living in a bubble hovering on the 20th floor looking over us like some grumpy overlord makes me burst out laughing.

"Go to sleep!" I hear Mandy sleepily shout from her bedroom.

That just makes me laugh even harder and I throw my pillow over my head, biting down hard. The laughter soon turns to groans though, when I remember the way I threw myself at him. What the hell was I thinking?

I was thinking...I needed to know if someone like him would ever give me a second look. All the insecurities I'd felt during my time with Adam had come flooding back, and I'd

needed to be yanked out of that mind frame, hard and fast. Damien Baxter was there at the right time, and I'd latched onto him. That's all that was.

But I have no business sleeping with the boss. I'm supposed to be learning from him. About business. Not how to fuck.

I groan into the pillow again, remembering the way I'd begged him to fuck me.

Fucking Adam. Making me feel so vulnerable.

I cringe at the name. I hadn't even thought about him again since running into Damien in the garden.

And if I'm honest, at this point, I'm not sure which one I prefer. At least with Adam, I know exactly what I'm getting.





# NINE

*My-Linh*

THE COFFEE MACHINE ISN'T even on yet when I get to work the next day. I pour an extra scoop into the brewer and lean against the bench as I wait for the earthy scent to waft.

Dressed in a tight red pencil skirt, I'm feeling sexy as it hugs me around the ass before flaring a little around my knees. I borrowed Mandy's silky white shirt, and under it I'm wearing a La Perla dusty pink bra that shows just the tiniest whisper of cleavage.

The effect makes me feel sexy. Confident. Just how I need to feel if I'm supposed to look Damien Baxter in the eye today and pretend that nothing happened between us. The skirt was one of the first pieces of clothing I bought after I emerged from the Adam break-up cocoon. Mandy had put me through a grueling session of getting rid of my old wardrobe, the clothes I'd thought I was supposed to wear while engaged. Over my time with Adam, my style had somehow evolved from casually eclectic but elegant to clothing I thought Adam would

prefer. Soon my closet had changed from vintage and timeless, thrifted pieces, to plain trousers and knitted cardigans.

No wonder he hadn't found me attractive by the end. How could he have when I hadn't found myself attractive in the least?

But never again.

That's why I'd made it one of two conditions when I started work here.

I'm not going to give up my choice on how I clothe my body ever again. I understand that it's a corporate environment, but if it's a place that takes offense to a small reminder to "bee kind" then this isn't a place that is going to teach me anything I want to learn.

Armed with a full cup of coffee, I wander back to my desk, enjoying the quiet. I suck on a stick of orange chocolate Pocky and close my eyes and lean back, basking in the soft buzz of the fluorescent lights overhead, thinking about the tasks of the day.

I have to admit, as much as I never imagined myself in this environment, there has been so much to learn, and to see all the things I've studied in books and journals put to practice has given me such a different perspective on some things. Most importantly, I am starting to understand what Jeremy means when he says "to think bigger".

I don't think there's much bigger than Baxter Enterprises.

“You’re not late,” a deep and familiar voice says, and I almost fall out of my chair in surprise.

It’s Damien. His hair is still wet and he’s dressed in a navy suit and my body instantly reacts.

*Stay cool*, I tell myself. “Oh, um, yeah, I wanted to get an early start to the day.”

He nods. “I called you last night.”

“Oh, you did? I didn’t know.”

He’s not convinced. “You didn’t get my missed calls?”

“I did. I didn’t know they were you.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You might’ve known if you’d picked up.”

“I was busy?” Somehow it comes out more as a question than a statement.

He takes a breath and steps further into my cubicle and leans against my desk. His aftershave is spicy and intoxicating. “You were supposed to be busy with me. I asked you to wait.”

I force myself to look away. Why are his eyes so hypnotic? They can’t be just normal eyes. There’s some sort of witchcraft going on there. “I didn’t...think it was a good idea,” I finally stammer.

He picks up my coffee mug and takes a sip before saying, “You weren’t exactly protesting before we got to my office.”

That’s the polite way of putting it.

“I...” *I don't know what to say* is what I'm trying to say. How do I tell him I don't think us having sex is a good idea, when it's obvious that it's the only thing I can think about now that he's here?

He pushes off my desk. “That's fine. No explanation necessary. Consider it forgotten.”

I want to scream “No!” but somehow, I don't.

“Have a good day, Miss Tran. Glad to see you managed to get here on time.” An iciness glazes over his eyes and he steps away without another word.

Fuck.

Why does he have this effect on me?

Have I made the biggest mistake of my life giving up the chance to experience what it's like to be with a man like him?



*Damien*

SHE'S TRYING TO KILL me.

If I thought that black skirt she wore the other day was tempting, the red skirt and white shirt she has on today is going to be my entire undoing.

I shouldn't have gone to see her, but I hadn't been able to stop myself.

As it is, I need to get away and fast.

Even as I'm walking away from her, I can feel my cock weeping, begging me to go back, spin her around, bend her over that chair, push her skirt up over those curvy hips, and fuck her until my cock begs me to stop.

*Keep walking, Damien. She doesn't want you.*

For some reason, that thought just makes me want her more, I didn't even think that was possible. I'm going to have to learn to focus knowing she's just four floors down or else I'm never going to get any work done.



*My-Linh*

SOMEHOW THE DAY IS so busy that I only have a chance to think about my missed opportunity with Damien Baxter ten or fifteen times.

At 9 p.m., the entire office is still there working on a proposal that Kayleigh and Damien want by the end of the day. I'd been wrong to think when I started this job that every day was going to end at 5 p.m. The end of the day is when the work is completed.

“Shit!” Raquel exclaims from the other side of the partition.

“What's up?” I ask, looking up from the page I'm proofreading on my computer screen. My eyes feel like they're about to pop out of my head. Damien is notoriously harsh on stupid typos and mistakes in any of the reports that

cross his desk. Apparently he's of the belief that if you can't even pick up on a mistyped word then how are you going to notice the mistakes in more important things.

I've reread the report on my screen about fifteen times over the course of the day and am currently cursing Dictator Damien for being a bloody pedant.

"My kid's got a fever and it won't go down," Raquel sighs.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Can your husband take him to the doctor?"

"He's working late tonight as well. The nanny's freaked."

I frown, checking the time. Raquel should've been on her way home over four hours ago. She was already wracked with guilt for coming out to dinner last night with me instead of going straight home.

"What else needs to be done?" I ask, hoping maybe there's a way I can help so she can get to her kids.

"I'm just waiting for Team B to send their finalized section of the report. That has to be proofread, added to our section and emailed to everyone. Mr. Baxter needs a physical copy though. He prefers to read it in print. It's easily another hour of work."

"Go," I tell her.

"What?"

"I can do it! You said yourself, you're not good at proofreading anyway. What will you be doing, just sitting there twiddling your thumbs waiting for me to finish? I've got

this. I'll compile everything and make sure it gets where it needs to go."

Her head pops up at me over the partition. "Oh my gosh? Are you sure?"

I laugh. "Yes."

"He—"

I hold up a hand. "I remember, if there's even one typo or word not aligned properly he'll smite us all with his Baxtery shaman powers."

She laughs, but her eyes flood with gratitude. "Thank you so much. I hate to have to ask this of you when you've only been here a little over a week."

"Don't worry about it. Go! And give your kid a hug from me. You know, from afar."

She nods. "Got it. Call me if you have any questions."

"I will. But I won't."

She quickly gathers her things and leaves.

There's a ding in my email and I open it up to see Team B's part of the report has arrived and I get lost in reading each word out loud to make sure everything is perfect.

I'm done by 9:48 p.m. and I call up to Damien's office as I wait for the report to print.

"Melissa. I have the marketing report on the Wattle Foods campaign. I was told I need to get a physical copy to Mr. Baxter?"

“Oh, no. He left early.”

The words make me inwardly hiss. So much for being the last to leave like the rest of us while Raquel was here until after 9 p.m.

“But I know he needs it,” she says, panicked. “He’s going to want to see the printed mock-ups for the campaign.”

“They’re pretty big, but I can find a tube to put them in.”

“Oh that would be great. Let me get you his address so you can get them to him ASAP.”

Wait. What did she say? “Excuse me?”

“Oh, I thought you were offering to deliver them to him. He should be at his city apartment.”

I shake my head. “Absolutely not.”

“Oh. I guess...I guess I can do it. I was just about to go home. I haven’t been feeling very well.”

Fuck. I already know I’m going to regret this. “Is it far from here? Mr. Baxter’s apartment?”

“No, just a few blocks. And if he’s not home, you don’t have to wait for him, he has a secure letter box you can leave it in. But absolutely do not leave it with anyone. All of our proposals need to be handed directly to him or put in his secure letter box.”

“Fine. I’ll take it to...him.” I resist calling him Dictator Damien to the person who works closest to him.



“Oh, thank you, My-Linh. I’ll call the car! You’ll be there and on the way home in no time.”

Five minutes later I’m in a company car being driven to Damien Baxter’s home. This is the opposite of avoiding him and I’d done such a good job of it today. Other than the run-in with him that morning, I only saw him when he dropped by the floor after the huddle to bark at the marketing managers before storming off.

He hadn’t even looked at me when he’d walked past my cubicle.

Not that I wanted him to.

Honestly.

Please let him still be out doing whatever Damien Baxter does on a Tuesday night so I can slip the report into his stupid letter box and be home and in bed watching Great British Bake-Off and eating a cup of ramen by 10:30 p.m.

The car stops before I can finish my thought. He really does live close to Baxter Enterprises; I could’ve just walked. I step out of the car to look up at the tallest building in Castlereagh. Why had I never noticed the name Baxter running along the side of the building?

Modest and understated.

Classic.

Much better than some of the garish building signs around Sydney.

I pat my hair, suddenly feeling self-conscious about my appearance and glad I'm dressed in a silk shirt and not one of my graphic tees.

"Go on, Miss. I'll be here waiting when you're ready," the driver tells me. "Just go inside and tell them you need to go to Mr. Baxter's apartment, and give your name. Mr. Baxter's assistant should have called ahead and they'll be expecting you."

I nod, I can do this. Just go into the most exclusive building in Sydney, dump the reports, and make a run for it.

"Mr. Baxter's apartment, please? I'm My-Linh Tran. I'm here to deliver a package."

The woman at the front desk gives me a look and points to a waiting elevator. "That'll take you up."

"Is he—" I ask, but she's already looking back down at her book.

The elevator is spacious and mirrored. How they make an elevator feel luxurious I don't know, but that's what it feels like. Money. I've been in apartments in Sydney smaller than this elevator. Mine. My apartment is smaller than this elevator.

The door closes and I'm moving upward. I count the floors as we whiz by and it finally stops. At the penthouse. Of course.

The doors open and there he is, standing, arms folded, leaning against the wall facing the elevator.

"Hello," he says, his face unreadable.

Instantly, I can see he's not the same Dictator Damien I saw this morning at the office, and it's unnerving me. He's still in his dark navy suit pants and white shirt, but his jacket is off, tie discarded. Every time I see him, I realize I've forgotten how devastatingly good-looking he is. How is it possible that a man looks like this? It seems almost criminal.

"Um, hi," I say, rooted to the spot.

"Are you going to come out of the elevator?"

"Why?" I ask, my brain short-circuiting.

"Why what?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Why do I ask if you're coming out of the elevator?" he asks, amused.

"Yes."

The doors start to close, and neither of us move until the last moment, when he reaches through the closing doors and grabs my hand and pulls me out of the elevator.

"That's why."

Color creeps up my cheeks and I suddenly remember why I'm here. "Here." I hold out the portfolio. "The proposal," I say, each word a struggle as my mouth completely dries up in his presence, the memory of his mouth against mine torturing me.

"Thank you. You didn't have to do that. Melissa could've brought it."

“I offered.” Why did I tell him that?

The corner of his mouth twitches, and his lips curl into an almost imperceptible smirk.

“She said she wasn’t feeling well,” I add, much, much too late.

“Would you like a drink?”

I shake my head. “No. The car’s waiting downstairs.”

“I already called down and told him to leave. Don’t worry, I’ll call for another one when you’re ready to go home. Come, I’ll get you a drink.”

I force myself to stand my ground. “I don’t want a drink.”

He shrugs. “I do. Come keep me company.” He takes the report from me and throws it on the table in the foyer and disappears around the corner.

I follow, partly out of pure curiosity and partly because it feels weird to be standing alone in any part of his apartment.

“Remy Martin or Hennessy,” he asks, pointing at two cognac canisters on a drink tray.

“Remy,” I answer.

He looks surprised but doesn’t say anything and pours me two fingers and hands me the crystal glass.

“Thank you,” I murmur and lift the glass to my mouth, taking a long sip. The burn of the liqueur down my throat roots me in reality, forcing me to believe this is actually happening. I look around the room. The apartment is sparse but

immaculately furnished in neutral tones. There's a long leather couch in the middle room around a dark oak coffee table. Both sit on a shaggy, cashmere rug that looks like a pristine cloud. I feel an urge to run my fingers through it.

The view is the true statement piece. From this height, the view of the bridge is almost unobstructed, curving over the harbor in all its majesty. "Your apartment is beautiful."

He smiles. "Thank you. I don't get to spend that much time here."

"You left work early tonight," I say, almost accusingly

"I had a dinner meeting in Bondi," he explains and it shuts me up.

I take another sip; the cognac slides down my throat like butter this time, and the warmth permeates through my body. Every cell of my body feels alive, and I look at him, wondering what's going through his mind right now.

"Why did you really come here?" he finally asks after a few silent moments of holding my gaze.

"I told you."

"I'm giving you a chance to change your mind. If there's another reason, you should admit it now so we can do something about it."

Smug son of a bitch.

I slam the glass down on the bench, the drink spilling out over the sides and onto my fingers. "I came here for one

reason. To deliver those reports to you because I'm the only one not totally burnt out after the way you have pushed all of your employees this week. And now I've done that. I can go. Have a good fucking night, Mr. Baxter." I push past him, fury coursing through my veins.

He grabs my hand as I pass and holds me in place.

"Stay." The way he says it is low, dark, firm, sexy.

"No."

"Stay. Let me thank you for making the delivery," he says, lifting my hand to his mouth and his tongue licks up the remnants of the drops of cognac splashed there.

I can't even move. "Are you going to tip me like you did last time?"

He frowns, falters. "What are you talking about?"

"You're never going to see me as anything but the delivery girl, are you?"

"What. Are. You. Talking. About?"

"A year ago I delivered a package to your office. And you tipped me a thousand dollars and then told me you'd have me for dessert. Do you have a courier fetish or something?" I say, ripping my arm out of his hold. "Well, I'm more than just a delivery girl, Damien."

"Oh my god," he says, staring at me. "That was you? I couldn't figure out why you seemed so familiar to me."

I glare at him. “Yeah, it was me. And somehow this time you’ve managed to make an even worse impression on me than last time. I’d say you should quit while you’re still only slightly behind.” I storm towards the elevator, muttering under my breath, “Fucking...”

Suddenly he’s behind me, his hands around my waist and pulling me hard against him.

“Stay,” he growls against my neck, and his breath is hot. “Stay, let me make it up to you, My-Linh.”

His hands come around, wrapping around my stomach as he holds me tight against him, his chest burning against my back.

“Damien...” I say, because it’s the only thought in my head.

“Yes, say my name. Say it again,” he rasps, and then he drags his tongue along my neck.

Fuck.

Not the neck. Not the fucking neck.

My legs almost buckle under me, but he’s holding me so tight against him, I’m safe.

“Damien.” It comes out in a soft moan this time.

His lips join his tongue as he nibbles on the bare skin of my neck, as his hand slides down past my knee and up and under my skirt.

I need to tell him to stop.

But I can’t.

I just can’t.

“Do you know how fucking sexy you are?” he whispers. “I was right, what I said to you yesterday. I *have* wanted to fuck you since the first time I saw you. I just didn’t realize it’s really been you who’s been tormenting me for over a year now.”

A year ago I’d only just come out of my relationship with Adam.

Looking, feeling my worst. And he’d even wanted me then?

“Say it again,” I gently plead. “Tell me you wanted me the first time you saw me.”

He pushes his hips against me, his cock hard against the dip of my ass.

“Do you feel how hard I am, My-Linh? Do you?”

All I can do is nod.

“That’s how hard I was when you stormed out of my office that day. And every day since. You don’t even know how many times I’ve imagined fucking you.”

As he says the words, he slides his hand up between my legs and runs a finger against the gap between my pussy lips.

“Oh...god...” I can’t help moaning.

“No. Not ‘god’. Damien. Say *my* name again,” he growls against my neck.

But I can’t. I can barely breathe as he pushes my panties aside and slides his finger deep inside me.



“So wet, already. So fucking wet. You came ready for me to fuck you, didn’t you?”

Maybe I had. Maybe I always knew what was going to happen if we were ever together again. I reach behind me, running my fingers through his hair, pushing his mouth harder against my neck. And say the very words I’ve been trying to hold back.

“Fuck me, Damien. Just fuck me.”



# TEN

## *Damien*

I ALMOST COME ON the spot when she says the words.

If only she knew how hard it has been for me to concentrate on anything but the memory of her begging me to fuck her yesterday. I've barely been able to have a conversation with anyone without wishing they were her, bent over, taking my cock.

I push her forward, and her arms come up to brace against the wall, her ass still hard against me. The things I'm going to do to that ass.

"Spread your legs, My-Linh. Spread your legs for me," I say as I pull her skirt up.

She complies, resting her head against her hands, groaning as I tear her panties down her legs.

With one hand, I unzip my pants, freeing my cock.

I'm so hard for her, it's aching.

But I need to do one thing first.

I need to hear her come.

I drop to my knees between her legs, and watch as my finger disappears into her sweet pussy from behind.

So tight. So wet. She's going to ruin my cock.

My thumb flicks over her clit, and she lets out a groan, and I'm drunk on the sound.

I turn and slide between her spread legs so she's almost straddling my face, and my tongue comes up to circle her sweet little button as my finger slides in and out of her.

“Oh god, Damien. Fuck. Fuck...”

Her breaths get shorter and shorter as I press my tongue harder against her clit, my finger crooking slightly as it grazes the wall of her pussy. I don't know how long I do it, just that I never want to stop. The sound of her moans circle my brain, echoing my own need.

“I'm going to come,” she finally chokes, her hips bucking back and forth.

I move my mouth to her pussy as my finger comes up to flick, fast and hard against her clit, and her entire body tenses as her breathing stops.

And I keep flicking, my tongue pressing deeper inside her until I hear her shout and my mouth is flooded with her sweetness.

God.

She tastes even better than I imagined. And I need it coating my cock.

I get up and pull out the condom I'd slipped into my pocket when I knew she was on her way. Tearing it open, I slide it down my cock, almost coming from the fleeting touch on the end of my shaft. I lean forward, nudging myself against the opening of her wetness.

"My-Linh," I growl into the back of her neck. "Are you ready for me?"

She answers with a push back of her hips and a soft, gentle purr that vibrates from her throat and all the way through my body.

"Sexy little kitten," I groan, as my cock presses against her, and I breathe her in.

Her scent intoxicates. How could I not have known it was her? That scent has been the fragrance of every single one of my desires for a year. And now I'm drowning in it as I bury my face in her hair, and with a single thrust forward, bury my cock into her cunt.

"Ohhh, fuck." The curse tumbles from her mouth and she turns her face, her lips searching for mine. I crush my mouth against her as I slowly retract myself, feeling her squeezing around me, trying to keep me inside her.

Then, as she slides her tongue into my mouth I push into her again, deeper, harder. She squeezes again, and pushes me over

the edge. I grab her hips, anchoring myself as I thrust in and out, each time running closer and closer to my orgasm.

I'm not going to last long.

How can I? Her pussy is swallowing my cock with each thrust.

Wet. Tight. Hungry.

“Damien,” she murmurs against my mouth, and my balls squeeze.

Did my name always sound like that?

“Take me, baby. Take my cock,” I rasp.

She doesn't answer, braces both hands against the wall again, grinding back against me, taking my cock deeper and deeper each time.

I reach around, fumbling for her clit. It's still swollen, plump and soft in my fingers as I flick it gently, in time with my thrusts.

Her breaths get shorter, higher.

“Come for me again,” I urge her.

Her next breath catches in her throat and I know she's close.

I ram into her and hold myself there as I whisper in her ear.

“You feel how hard my cock is? You did that, your body did that. Now come for me. Make me feel it on my cock.” I bite down on her neck as I pinch her clit and she explodes.

Her pussy constricts on me hard, I can hardly breathe, and it takes everything in me to wait until she stops writhing before I pump three more times into her and let my body give in to everything I've wanted since I watched her on the dance floor a few days ago.

To come.

I come so hard, my hands grabbing at her ass as my balls tighten and release as I'm buried deep inside her.

It's a whole minute before I realize I'm still gripping her ass, trying to catch my breath.

I step back and discard the condom, and gently turn her around.

There's a flush around the edges of her face, a gentle glow on her cheeks as she lift her hands to her face.

"Stop," I say, and she freezes.

I push her hands down to her sides and gently brush the hair back from her face with my hand and am rewarded with a gentle smile.

"You are so beautiful," I say to her as I gently back her against the wall. "Just incredible. Just as I knew you'd be. So fucking sexy."

There's a flash of white as she bites down on her bottom lip and turns her face away from me.

"Hey, you okay?" I say, reaching for her chin and turning her back to face me.

“I’m not...really used to being called sexy.”

I don’t think I’ve heard her correctly. Maybe she’s joking so I let a little chuckle out.

She instantly looks hurt.

“Oh, no. I thought you were kidding.”

She answers with a small shake of her head.

What the fuck kind of limp dickweeds has she been with? I want to tell her that I’ve been with a lot of women, and I can’t remember when I’ve wanted to ravage them just by looking at their ass in a tight skirt before. I’m not sure how she’d take that, but I should tell her anyway.

“I think I’ve proven just how sexy I think you are, My-Linh.”

“You’re sexy, too,” she says, shy.

This time I laugh and don’t hold back. “I haven’t had any complaints.”

This makes her roll her eyes.

“Ah, there’s the My-Linh I know.”

“And fucked?” she says, her voice gaining strength.

I nod. “And I’m not finished yet,” I say, meaning it.

“Damien.”

My cock twitches at my name and I take her hand and help her step out of her panties. We walk over to the window and I push her gently against it.



“Lean back for me, against the window,” I instruct.

She doesn't object, and stands, pressing her back against the glass.

Button by button, I open her silk shirt until it slides off her body and pools at her feet. I drop to my knees and bunch her skirt up to her hips. I nudge her ankles so that they take a step apart, and she's spread out in front of me. She moves as if to cover herself and I stop her, grabbing her wrists and lowering them back down again.

“Don't. I want to just look at you,” I whisper.

Her skin is almost translucent, ethereal in the moonlight.

“You're so beautiful, I can't even believe you're real,” I tell her and hope she believes me.

The edges of her pussy lips glisten and the urge to taste her again makes me lose all sense of decency and I bury my face into the darkness between her legs. The tip of my tongue flicks over her clit and she moans, her legs bending, and she grinds herself against my face. She tastes like sex. Pure liquid sex, and I'm parched.

My fingers dip into the soft, damp globes of her ass as I lap at her.

She's already come twice, so she takes her time, grinding her hips one way, then the other way, getting into a rhythm, losing herself in her pleasure from my mouth.

Somewhere in that time, I ease down onto the ground, lying on my back, and she follows, sinking down until there's one

knee on either side of my head as I lick up every drop of her sweetness, ready for the cascade.

Just as I think she can't take anymore, she lets out a cry and stops moving as I feel her muscles tense under my hands and her pussy quivers as I lick her over and over again, until her moans fade to whimpers and she falls back onto her heels.

"Do you know what you taste like?" I ask, sitting up, running my finger over my lips.

She shakes her head so I lean over and gently kiss her.

She's shy at first, her mouth closed.

Then her lips relax and her tongue flicks out, meeting mine, and soon she's devouring her own arousal from my lips.

So. Fucking. Sexy.

"Do you like what you taste?" I ask, my cock hard between my legs.

This time she nods. "Do you?" she asks, shyly.

I point to my hard cock. "That's your answer."

She giggles, "Can't you ever answer anything directly?"

I take her hand and pull her onto my lap, and she drops her face down to mine, surprising me with a kiss.

"I think I was pretty direct about wanting to fuck you, wasn't I?"

She doesn't say anything, just stands up and slides her skirt down her legs and unclasps her bra, throwing it to the side, finally completely and delectably naked in front of me.

My mind blanks. I want to come between those tits.

She walks back to me, lowering herself, taking my cock in her hand and stroking it.

“And now you’ve had me? Are you done?”

The little minx.

In one movement, I push her hand away from my cock and press her down onto her back on the floor, retrieving another condom from my discarded pants and unrolling it down my shaft.

“I’ll let you know when I’m done, Kitten,” I say, and drive my cock deep into her again.



*My-Linh*

I can’t remember when I’ve ever come so hard. And so often.

Three times.

And now he’s fucking me again.

My pussy is burning; his cock is thick, long. And he knows just how to use it.

The first time, he fucked me from behind and it was primal, like in the movies. But now he’s on top of me, his hands

pushing my knees apart as he thrusts inside me.

This time is different. This time it's just for him.

He's using my pussy for his own pleasure, and it makes me feel sexier than I ever have in my life.

His eyes drift between my tits and my face, his sweat dripping on me.

I reach up and pinch my nipples between my fingers and he roars, and I keep flicking them as he comes, his eyes never leaving me.

I'm sore so I can't come again just yet but I know my pussy is squeezing him as he climaxes.

"Jesus, baby," he gasps, collapsing down beside me, throwing his arm over his head.

I shiver, the warmth of his body gone now, and I'm suddenly cold.

"Hey, hey," he says and pulls me against him, cradling my head against his chest. His heart is thumping too fast to discern one beat from the next. "You okay?"

I nod. "*Now* are you done?" I tease him, drawing a circle against his stomach, my fingers running over the dips and hills of his abs.

"You wish," he says, but doesn't move. "Your pussy was made for my cock, Kitten" he says.

Something flutters in my stomach at the nickname he's given me. But I should know better than to believe anything he

says.

“If it wasn’t before, you’ve molded it to you now,” I say, giving in to the flirting, letting myself enjoy the aftermath while it lasts.

“And don’t you forget it.” He looks down at me and runs his thumb along my forehead. “You’re so fucking sexy. Don’t you even doubt it for a second.”

The flutter returns but I don’t respond. I’m not sure how long this is going to last, but I want to enjoy it for as long as it does.

It lasts less than five minutes.

Once our breaths return to normal, he moves aside and gets up, pulling on his pants but pulling his disheveled shirt off. He grabs the cognac glass I’d slammed down on the bench and hands it to me as I sit up, suddenly feeling very naked and very exposed.

I take the glass and take a sip to calm the nerves suddenly creeping up my spine. “Can you hand me my shirt, please?” I say, pointing to my clothing in a pile on the floor. I can’t believe I’d just whipped off my clothes and stood there in front of him. Another sip helps me push down the urge to hide my face.

“I’d rather not,” he says, winking, but still reaches for it.

Then he surprises me by burying his face into the fabric. “Damn, that scent. It’s haunted me for a year. What perfume is it?”

“It’s not a perfume. My family has a cherry tree in our front yard and every year my mother collects some of the blossoms and makes some oils with it. I use it to mix with some lotion. It’s always been my favorite. I like not smelling like anyone else,” I admit. It had never sounded vain until that moment.

A look of recognition spreads across his face. “That’s what it is. So now every time I smell cherry blossoms, I will think of the delivery girl who insulted me and then tried to break my penis off.”

“Tried, but didn’t succeed,” I joke.

“Night’s not over yet,” he says again, winking, before disappearing into another room.

How? How can he still want to have more sex? I’ve already come more times than I ever have in one night. I take advantage of his absence to get up and collect my skirt and panties, but I don’t put them on. It feels weird to be topless but have my bottom all dressed.

He’s back in a minute carrying a blanket that he drapes around my shoulders before refilling my glass.

“Did you mean what you said before?” he asks as he pours.

“Um, I can’t say I really remember much of anything that happened before.”

He laughs as he hands me the glass. “About never being told that you are sexy.”

I take a bigger gulp of the cognac than I mean to and it makes me cough. He waits, staring at me the whole time. The

man needs to wear glasses; those eyes of his aren't meant for prolonged exposure.

"Um, I guess." I shrug. "I've never thought of myself as a particularly sexy nor sexual person."

"Could've fooled me," he says and settles down on the couch next to me. "I don't think your hips got the memo."

I laugh. My hips. What a strange thing to say or fixate on.

"If you're waiting for me to return the compliment, don't hold your breath," I tease, the cognac obviously replenishing my confidence.

"Your three orgasms were complimentary enough, thank you," he says. And I wonder, honestly, if he's ever been slapped across the face because of his smugness before.

"They were okay." I shrug, even as the blood rushes to my face. I can't think when I've told such a bald-faced lie before.

"Liar," he says, grinning.

"Fine, I came so hard I thought I was going to black out," I admit.

"Night's not over yet."

"You keep saying that."

"I mean it. If sex is that good between us, why should we stop?"

I answer him with silence. I don't ask him what I want to ask, which is what next? What comes next with us? What does

this mean? I try to repress the questions but as someone who's never had so much as a one-night stand, what's the protocol?

When I look back up at him, he's watching me.

"My-Linh, I should tell you, I don't date."

Guess that answers my questions. "I didn't say anything."

He sighs. "I know the look. I'm just going to save us both a lot of time though and tell you, I don't date. And I'm not looking to date. I hope I didn't give you the wrong impression here."

I shake my head. "You didn't give me any impression, other than you were horny."

"I was. I am. I am still horny for you."

Somehow that concept still seems completely foreign to me. Am I just supposed to sit around and wait for a 'wyd' text from him? "So..."

He sits up, his thumb running along the rim of his glass. "So that's it. I'm a horny guy. I like to fuck. A lot. And as you've just found out, I really, really like to fuck you a lot. If you're up for that and only that, then it's there on the table. Your choice. Obviously, I hope you'll choose yes."

I blink, processing his words. "Sex."

"Yes."

"And?"

He shrugs. "And that's it."

"Just sex."



“Not *just* sex. Mind-blowing, change your life, make you want nothing else sex. And a lot of it. Anytime you want it in fact. As long as I’m in the country.” He smirks. “And hell, even if I wasn’t and you called me, it wouldn’t take me that long to come back.”

I wrap the blanket tighter around me. Not because I’m cold, but to give myself a moment to focus on his words. The fact is I’m not looking for anything more either. I’d spent the better part of my adult life knowing nothing but one man. One weak, selfish, a waste of my time and affections man. I haven’t missed the company, and I certainly wasn’t looking for anything serious from any other type of man now.

The Months of My-Linh are just that.

About me.

About my growth.

About my fun.

About my pleasure.

I can’t in good conscience say I’ve ever had pleasure as intense as I’ve just had.

Am I seriously considering this? Is this something I can actually do?

It’s hard to think when he’s sitting right there, like a giant billboard of all the reasons I should scream ‘yes!’.

“Um, would you mind if I took a bath?” I ask, getting to my feet.

“Not at all. Give me a minute, then go down the hall, second door on the left, okay?”

He leaves and I count sixty seconds under my breath, adding another ten just in case.

The bathtub is almost half full when I get there. And when I say bath, I mean two-person jacuzzi. He’s lit a few candles and there’s a jug with water on the side table. Soft instrumental music streams from some hidden speakers, and I feel like I’ve stepped into a luxury spa.

He appears behind me, and points to a towel and a pink silk robe hanging on a nearby hook. “You can use those when you’re done. Take your time. I’m just going to check into work a bit. Come out whenever you’re ready.”

He gently kisses my neck and is gone.

I soak until the tips of my fingers wrinkle. The jets ease the stiffness from a long day of sitting at a desk, and I gently run my finger over my sore pussy lips, shivering when my nail grazes my clit. In my mind’s eye, I get flashes of my own reflection in the glass window as I rode his face, and the way he looked when he fucked me, taking his pleasure from me.

Sex.

A lot of it.

Whenever I want it.

It. Not *me*. He’d said. Which was the entire point of the conversation.

It was always going to be about the sex and never about the man.

But isn't that what I want right now, anyway?

"Knock knock," he says and peeks his head in the door. "You okay in here?"

I shift and the water ripples around me. "Yes, sorry, how long have I been here?"

"Too long," he says, his voice taking on the low and dark tone it had when he'd told me to stay.

I watch as he unzips his pants and pulls them down his legs.

His cock is semi-hard, hanging confidently between his legs as he moves closer until he's within arm's reach.

"Stroke me."

I reach out, feeling him instantly grow to his full length and girth as he tears open a condom packet and hands it to me. I roll it over him and he steps over the edge of the tub and sinks into the jacuzzi, ignoring the water splashing over the sides.

He sits with his back against the tub and twirls his finger in the air.

"Turn around."

It's a command, not a suggestion, not a request.

I comply, my nipples already hard in response to his voice.

I turn and he grabs my hips and pulls me against him, his cock resting in the small of my back. I wriggle back, getting as

close to him as I can, my hand under the water running along his thighs.

“I could do nothing but kiss your neck for a week,” he whispers as he drags his lips against the spot under my ear, making me shiver. “Are you cold?” he asks, and reaches over, turning on the heated jets.

I shake my head and pull my hair to the side, exposing my neck to him, and he growls, biting down hard, grazing his teeth along my shoulder. His hand reaches around me under the water, searching for my pussy, and I bend my knees, opening myself up for him.

“Good, Kitten,” he murmurs as his finger slides inside me.

I feel my pussy suck him in. There’s no hiding how much my body wants him. I take his other hand and move it to my left breast and he growls, running his palm against my nipple, making my breath catch.

“Say it again,” he whispers in my ear. “Beg me to fuck you.”

I lean my head back, resting on his shoulder, and turn to his ear, dragging my tongue along his neck.

“Damien, I want you to fuck me.”

He shifts and suddenly his cock head is sliding between my legs.

“If you want me to fuck you, you have to show me you want it, My-Linh.”

He doesn't have to ask me twice.

I grind my ass down, and his cock slides easily into me.

Filling me.

Penetrating me.

Infiltrating me.

He lifts his hips in rhythm with me grinding down on him and we fuck.

We fuck until there's hardly any water left in the tub, until I've come twice from his fingers playing with my clit, until my pussy is raw from his cock.

Fuck until I can barely remember my own name, let alone his.

Fuck until he roars and crushes my breasts in his hands as his whole body jerks, emptying himself inside me.

I collapse back against him when we're done and he reaches over, turning the tap back on to fill the tub before wrapping his arms around me.

"Is that a yes?"

I take a moment to draw in a long deep breath and nod.

"Yes."

We sit in the tub long enough for him to run a sponge over every inch of my tired body, then he gets up and helps me out of the tub.

He wraps a warm towel around me and quickly dries himself off with another.

“Get comfy; I’ll go order some food,” he tells me.

“It’s got to be almost midnight.”

“So?”

“Where are you going to order from? Nowhere’s open.”

He just grins over his shoulder as he jogs out of the bathroom.

“Wow. Maybe he owns his own McDonald’s or something,” I murmur as I dry myself and slide my arms into the silk robe he left for me.

Holy crap.

It’s the most comfortable thing I’ve ever worn. It’s like wearing a sheath of the softest material, so light I don’t feel like I’m wearing anything, but also warm and cocooned all at once. I wonder if he’ll invoice me if I steal it in my bag and take it home.

It makes me laugh uncontrollably and it echoes in the giant bathroom, and I feel absolutely no inclination to hold it back.

“What’s so funny?” he asks as I step back out into the living area, still giggling.

He’s pulled on a pair of black boxer briefs and it makes me want to jump him all over again. It’s the first time I’ve really had a chance to look at him, mostly de-clothed, without the fog of arousal blurring my vision.

His torso is so toned, it looks chiseled. Almost comically so. Who actually looks like that? Maybe he has ab implants. The thought makes me laugh all over again.

“Me. I’m funny,” I answer as I sink down on the couch and let out a moan at how comfortable it is.

“I ordered a salad, hope that’s okay.”

I shrug. “Uh, sure. Although, I would’ve preferred a pizza,” I admit.

He grins. “Okay, good. Because the salad was just a side salad that comes with the pizza, and I told them we didn’t really need it. You’re a kitten, not a rabbit.”

“Damien Baxter, did you just make a joke?” I tease him.

“I can joke. Just not about certain things.” He hands me a glass of water and settles down on the couch next to me, pulling my feet into his lap.

“Like?” I prompt.

“Like...my business. My family. And sex,” he adds, tracing his fingers over my calf.

“That’s a short list.”

“Exactly. The rest of the time, I’m a laugh a minute,” he says, giving me a wink.

“What rest of the time though? When are you not working?”

His thumbs circle the underside of my foot. “I wasn’t working tonight.”

“I’m glad I didn’t feel like working.”

“Definitely not work,” he says and leans over, lightly running his tongue over my bottom lip.

My hands come up to hold his face and I stare into his eyes for a few seconds before he pulls away.

“How are you finding it at Baxter?” he asks.

“Back to work already?” I poke my tongue out at him. “Um, it’s good. Most people have been very nice. And I’m learning so much.”

“Great. I hope you’ll report back good things to Jeremy.”

“I thought you’d be the one doing that.”

He just zips his lips.

“What about you? How are you finding Sydney? How long have you been here?” I ask, realizing how little about him I know.

He leans back against the couch, scratching the side of his head. “Two years. It is not like any other place I’ve lived. I came here a lot as a child, but living here is different. It’s definitely a transition. But I like the challenge.”

Something tells me that whatever the challenge is, he’ll overcome it.. He doesn’t seem like the man to give up. I want to ask him more, but he doesn’t look like he’s inviting any more probing into his life and a buzz on the intercom saves him.

“Send ’im up,” Damien responds to the call, and grabs his wallet from his pants on the floor. I bite back a giggle as an



unopened condom falls out of the back pocket. Just how many does he carry around with him?

“Pizza!” he announces, coming back with a stack of flat boxes.

“That’s a lot of food!”

“Well, we worked up an appetite.”

He lays the boxes down on the coffee table and I slide to the floor in front of it, cross-legged on his shag rug that feels like heaven on my bare ass.

“Can you grab me a plate, please? I don’t want to get grease all over your furniture.”

He waves the handful of napkins and joins me on the floor. “These should be fine, and don’t worry about spilling. If you ruin my couch, I’ll just dock your pay.”

“Another joke, Mr. Baxter? Careful or else you’ll damage your cranky man reputation.”

He laughs and pulls a slice out of the top box and takes a big bite. “I don’t think I have too much to worry about. We’ll have to go back to the office, eventually.”

I busy myself taking a bite of the piping hot pizza.

Eventually we’ll have to go back to the office. Code for, I’m not going to be the man that I am here now.

And something about that makes me sad.

For me, for him, for everyone.

This is the man that everyone should get to know.



SOMEHOW, AND I'M STILL not sure how, he manages to ravage my body one more time before we both pass out on the rug next to an empty pizza box and two half-drunken sodas.

When I wake up, the sun is shining directly on my face. I'm covered by the blanket and he's nowhere to be seen.

"Damien?"

"Oh hi, you're awake. I was going to let you get a little more sleep," he says, coming out from his bedroom as he straightens his tie.

He's in a tailored charcoal suit, a double pinstripe fitted shirt, and matching tie that makes his eyes so vibrant they look like they're about to pop right out of his head.

"There's some coffee for you," he says, gesturing towards the kitchen.

"Mmm, I thought I smelled something delicious."

He doesn't respond and pulls on his jacket and tugs on the cuff of his shirt.

It's a simple gesture, but he makes it look so sexy.

Everything he does looks sexy.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"Just after 6:30. I have an important board meeting so I have to go to the office early."

I sit up. “Oh, I’ll be ready to leave—”

“No, it’s okay. My car’s already downstairs. Take your time. I’ll have a car waiting for you downstairs at 7:30 to take you to the office. Just take the elevator down when you’re ready.”

He takes a sip of the cup of coffee on the bench and drops it into the sink and leaves, coming back just to say, “Thanks for bringing the marketing proposal last night.”

And then he’s gone.

His body might not be in the office yet, but his mind definitely is.

I give myself a few minutes to wake up and then wander to the bathroom for a shower.

Fifteen minutes under the steaming hot water eases the soreness in my muscles. Last night my body did things it hadn’t for a long time. Who am I kidding? It did and felt things it’s never felt.

The spot between my legs tingles as I remember the way he’d lapped at my wetness like he couldn’t get enough. He really made me feel delectable, and I’m already addicted to the feeling.

Well, there are worse things to crave, I guess.

After about ten minutes of looking, I can’t find my shirt, which is probably a good thing as I might raise a few eyebrows if I wore it two days in a row.

I wander into his bedroom and step into his walk-in wardrobe.

“Wow...” I let out a slow sound of awe. If I thought the bathroom was big and luxurious, the wardrobe is like walking directly into an Armani showroom.

I find the rack of shirts and pull out a white poplin shirt and pull it on. It stretches slightly over my chest but otherwise fits and I tuck it into my red skirt. The mirror reflects back someone who looks like she has her shit together, even if she doesn't have any clean underwear. If an expensive designer shirt is all it takes, then I am going to get a few of these pieces.

I pour myself a coffee and check the time.

Almost 7:28.

I rinse out both of our cups and take one last look around his apartment.



# ELEVEN

*Damien*

I'VE READ OVER MY presentation almost ten times by the time Melissa comes in to tell me everyone has arrived and is waiting for me in the main meeting room. The numbers are not looking good for the first nine months after the Wattle Foods acquisition. The news of the somewhat less than friendly takeover hurt us right out of the gate, and it seems like it's been one misstep after another.

There's really nowhere to look for blame other than me.

It's the project that I nursed from even before I moved here, and what secured my position as director of the Australia and Oceanic division.

And now it's the thing that's sinking me.

While it's just a regular quarterly board meeting, the Wattle Foods numbers are going to be under scrutiny and I don't really have any answer for them other than, we are trying new things and we're going to need some time.

Not exactly the kind of things the board of a multibillion dollar company is going to want to hear.

“Well, I think we’re done for today,” Terry Masters, the board director, says after two hours. “Thank you to Damien and the A and O Region for their time. I think we have a clearer idea of what’s going on now. And we look forward to your updates in the coming weeks.”

Those dialing in electronically log out and the six Australian based members of the board are left sitting in silence.

“Well, I think we all need some food and a stiff hard drink, don’t you?” Uncle Gerard says. “Especially Damien here,” he adds, and pats me on the shoulder.

It takes everything I have not to flick his hand off me, but I don’t want to give the other board members more to mull over than they already do. The CEO of Baxter Enterprises and the Director of the A and O Region getting into a fistfight is not going to help my case.

“I have made a reservation at the Garden for noon. I hope you’ll all be able to make it,” I say, forcing a civilized tone. The last thing I actually feel like doing is sitting in a room for another moment with my uncle.

Everyone murmurs their agreement and gets up from their seats.

“You did well, Damien. With what you had to work with,” Gerard says as we lead everyone out of the meeting room.

“Is that why I feel like I just got a prostate biopsy without the anesthetic?”

He laughs, but it’s a hollow sound. “That’s the job of the board, Damien.”

“No, the board is meant to be impartial. And as interim CEO, you are anything but.”

“I’m just making sure our family’s legacy is safe, Damien. If you don’t understand that, then maybe you have the wrong idea about me.”

We reach the foyer and make some small talk as we wait for the elevator.

The doors finally open, and My-Linh steps out onto the floor, dressed in the red skirt, and what looks like one of my white shirts.

“Oh, hello, Mr. Baxter,” she says, and I can feel her eyes on me, even though I’m careful to stare at a spot at least six inches from her face.

“Shall we?” I turn to smile at the other board members and hold the elevator door open for them, completely ignoring her.

“That woman looks familiar,” Gerard says to me as we pile onto the elevator.

“Can’t imagine why. She’s just an intern here,” I respond, pressing the lobby button on the panel.

“Any good?” Gerard whispers.



“Nah. She’s just here because I’m doing one of her teachers a favor. She’ll be gone before the end of year,” I say, dismissively. “Everyone hungry? The cobb salad at the Garden is delicious.”

My-Linh doesn’t move and just stands there as we pile onto the elevator. Even as the doors close, I can still feel her on the other side.



### *My-Linh*

ADAM AND I WERE in the same honors program at Sydney University before I went on to do my Masters and he did a work based program.

To keep our relationship separate from our studies, he suggested that we pretend we were not dating. It would save us if we ever had to do any group projects together or needed to use each other for references, he’d argued. I’d agreed because that’s what I did back then; I agreed with everything he said or wanted, despite not really understanding why the need for the charade.

We did have to work together in a group session for our final project and he played the part of an indifferent group member to a tee. Such that one of the other girls in the group felt perfectly comfortable flirting with him in front of me, and

he reciprocated. It's what a normal guy would do, he told me when I brought up that it bothered me.

And so I went along with it.

But it's a unique feeling to be ignored by the person you're dating, spending most of your time with. It's a loneliness that is indescribable.

It's soul crushing.

And it's the same feeling I felt when Damien completely ignored me at the elevator.

I didn't expect him to take me in his arms and kiss me. But I did expect him to treat me with the civility and politeness that he would with any other employee.

That's what we'd agreed, wasn't it?

I had greeted him like I was an employee and he was my boss, and all he'd had to do was reply in kind. Instead, he went out of his way to act like I didn't even exist.

And it's a feeling I am never, ever going to return to.

No matter how sexy he was or how delectable he made me feel.

Never again.

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject: Plans.

What are you doing tonight?

The email hits my inbox around 2 p.m.

It takes me about half a second to decide that I'm not going to reply.

The follow up comes almost an hour later.

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject: Hello?

Did you get my previous email? I have a rare night off tonight. Do you have plans?

*Yes. I have plans not to see you, I think to myself.*

I don't have to wait as long for the next email.

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject: You ignoring me?

There's no message in the body of the email.

Which just makes it even easier to ignore.

I'm not really sure what he thinks is going to happen after what happened at the elevator, but Damien Baxter is harboring deep delusions if he thinks I have any interest in seeing him.

Raquel and I have been given the okay to take off a little earlier to make up for having worked so late the night before so by 4 p.m. we are stepping out of the building and waving goodbye to each other.

I take advantage of the extra free hour to take the train to Cabramatta to visit my family. After the usual number of

probing questions about where my life is going, if I'm eating properly, and if I had gone on any dates, I'm back on the train with a full heart and even fuller heart. My mother had even packed some extra left overs for my roommates. We are going to eat like royalty for a few days.

I ignore the beeps on my phone from the unknown number and go to sleep early to make up for the night before.



“MISS TRAN?” DAMIEN CALLS on me at the huddle the next day.

He's got to be kidding, right? Why is he calling on me when literally everyone else from the marketing department is there.

“Yes?”

“Can you tell me what happened at the focus group test yesterday?” he asks, his face giving nothing away.

I cannot. And he has to know that.

“Well, I believe Team B was running that. I wasn't present for it,” I tell him.

“Hmmm.” He turns to Raquel, who's standing next to me. “Mrs. Williams?”

She glances at me out of the corner of her eye. “Er, yes, Mr. Baxter?”

“Can *you* tell me what the focus group thought about the new packaging for the Berry Blast?”

She winces and mouths “sorry” to me before answering. “I only looked at the preliminary results but the most significant result was that 85% of the participants preferred prototype B to prototype A.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Williams. Miss Tran, we’re all one company here. You might be divided into two teams in the marketing department, but that’s to facilitate the streamlining of the work. You are *one* department. I suggest you start treating it that way.”

He stares at me for a moment, his face blank, then steps out of the room.

The Huddle is dismissed and I’m fuming as we walk back to our area.

“Twinkledick,” I mutter under my breath as I flop into my chair.

“What?” Raquel asks. She’s already apologized about eight times in the three minutes it took us to return to our desks. I’ve tried to reassure her that it isn’t her fault, but that Dictator Damien is sometimes just a dick. “He’s probably just having a rough day. He had that board meeting yesterday. And I heard it did not go well,” she’d tried to explain.

For a split second my heart wants to feel sympathy for him, but then I remember the way he’d said “she’s just here because I’m doing a favor for her teacher.”

Virginia pops her head into my cubicle. “Hey, do you have a minute?”

“I guess I have a minute for my boss. I mean I do have to go over the notes from the focus group yesterday,” I joke and she laughs.

“Right? Don’t worry about that, I’ve barely even had a chance to look at it,” she says, good-naturedly. “He just likes to rough us up now and then. But speaking of which, he, er, Mr. Baxter just called and asked me to send you up to him.”

Seriously? Why? “Why didn’t he just email me himself?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“He said he thought there might be something wrong with your email.”

I choke back a guffaw.

“Anyway, when you have a moment, do you mind running up there?” Virginia asks.

I nod. “Of course not. I’ll go right now. Don’t want to keep Dic—, er, Damien Baxter waiting.”

“Good luck,” Raquel whispers as I pass her cubicle on my way upstairs.

He wants to see me? He’s going to get more of me than that, and not in the way he probably expects.

“You wanted to see me, Mr. Baxter?”

He looks up from the desk and crooks his finger at me. Ugh, he’s going to be lucky to have that finger intact by the end of this meeting.

“Come in. And close the door, Miss Tran.”

I pull the door closed but stay standing right up against it.

“Why are you standing so far away?” he says from his desk.

I shrug. “You said you wanted to see me. Can’t you see me from there?”

“I can, but I’d like to see you closer.”

I take one singular step forward and then stop. He doesn’t say anything but I can see a twitching in his jaw.

“Did you get my email yesterday?” he asks, flicking the pen in his hand.

“Yes.”

“You didn’t respond.”

“No.”

“Is there a reason?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to tell me what that reason is?”

“No.”

“My-Linh.” He sounds exasperated. Good. “Where were you last night?”

“Cabramatta.” I say. Although if I could’ve answered with yes or no I would’ve.

“Who were you with?” he asks

“Family.”

“Anyone else?”

“Maybe.”

“Kitten,” he says, slightly exasperated.

Oh, so *now* it’s “Kitten”. That doesn’t even deserve a response.

“Come here,” he says, and luckily for him, he doesn’t crook his finger again. I consider turning around and walking out of his office but my feet move forward of their own volition. Traitors.

“All the way, My-Linh.”

I growl gently under my breath even as I walk right up to the edge of his desk. “Mr. Baxter, why did you call me to your office?”

“I want your pussy on my face,” he says, without a single change in his expression. “Now.”

I let out a tiny snort. “I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“No? And why is that? You seemed to like it when I tongue fucked you the other day.”

“I did,” I admit. “But I think I’ve had enough now.”

He smirks as he leans back in his chair.

I want to slap him so bad.

“I have to go back to work, Mr. Baxter. Earn the favor that you’re doing for Dr. Baker and all.”

His left eyebrow raises but he doesn’t reply, just presses a button on the side of his desk and there’s a soft clicking noise behind me.



“Okay, you can leave—”

I turn.

“—but you’re going to have to come over to my side of the desk to unlock that door.”

My eyes narrow. “I *could* scream,” I threaten.

“Go ahead. But Melissa’s just going to think that you’re getting exactly what I called you here for.”

Something inside me snaps, and I spin around and storm over to his side of the desk, lifting my hand, ready to slap across his face.

He catches it before it makes contact, his hand tight around my forearm.

“Easy, Kitten,” he says, and tugs on my arm hard so that I stumble and fall into his lap.

“I hate you,” I hiss, glaring up at him.

“That’s okay; hate can make for some really hot sex,” he says, and leans over and crushes his lips against mine.

I struggle and hiss through the kiss.

But it doesn’t stop him.

He keeps kissing me, pushing my mouth open, until the tip of his tongue touches mine. An electric spark fizzes all through my body, and a soft moan escapes, and for a moment I acquiesce, sucking his tongue into my mouth, missing the way he tastes.

He pulls away and grins.

“There she is,” he says, his eyes dark as he moves his hands so that they’re under my ass. In one movement, he lifts me so I’m sitting on the desk in front of him, one leg on either side of him.

“I didn’t have any dinner or breakfast and I’m fucking starving,” he growls as he pushes the white linen skirt I’m wearing up to my hips.

“I don’t believe I offered to be on the menu,” I snarl.

“You’re going to wish that you are always the house special after what I’m about to do to you,” he promises and buries his face against the lace of my panties.

I lean back and bite back a groan as his fingertip traces along where the seam of my panties meet my legs. My brain can’t even grasp what’s going on. All it knows is that my body wants to give in, give in completely to whatever he wants, whatever he’s doing.

He pulls away for a moment, lifting my legs in the air as he slides my panties off and tucks them into his pocket.

As he sits back down, he lifts my feet to brace on the arms of his chair so that I’m spread wide on his desk in front of him. Completely open, completely vulnerable. Completely submitting.

“Your pussy is so pretty, My-Linh. Pink and soft and delicious” he murmurs, his lips tickling against my clit.

“Dammit,” I groan, as he starts to lick. Lingering, uninterrupted, long hard licks from the bottom of my pussy to

the tip of my clit hood, sending shivers through every cell in my body.

His tongue changes from hard to soft without a pattern and I hold my breath waiting to see what I'm about to feel next. The soft pad of his fingertips trace the length of my inner thighs, as he gently murmurs words against my sex that I can't make out. He could be reciting the phone book for all I care.

Every lick takes me a little bit closer.

Closer, closer, closer.

My fingers find his hair and, without knowing it, I push him harder against me, wanting his tongue on me everywhere at once.

My legs come up to wrap around his shoulders and he chuckles, vibrating his tongue against my aching button.

"I'm close," I moan.

"To what?" he teases, pulling his mouth off me for a moment, blowing gently against my clit.

"Oh god, no...don't stop. Please, I'm so close."

"Close to what, My-Linh?"

"Damien!"

He rubs his bottom lip against my clit in a circle, making my mind go blank.

"Fuck!!" I hear myself shout.

"Say it, Kitten," he whispers, and plunges a finger inside me as his lips create a vacuum around my most sensitive spot.

“Oh fuck! Damien Baxter, you are such a fucking asshole,” I yell, as my climax starts to crash over me. “I’m coming, Damien.”

He doesn’t respond, just keeps fucking me with his finger, adding a second one, filling me, as his lips latch on as I writhe from my orgasm.

I’m not sure if I come again or if it’s just one long orgasm but I lose track of how long I feel like I’m just laying there, feeling my whole body tense and relax a thousand times as wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me.

Until finally, he gently slides his fingers out of me and pulls back, lifting the finger to his mouth, sucking on it as I watch him, half out of my mind.

“Fucking delicious,” he says, his voice husky.

I can barely respond as I lie there, legs trembling as he unbuckles his belt and drops his pants to the floor.

He sinks down into his chair and kisses my inner thighs, up one leg and down the other, skipping my pulsing pussy. I push myself up on my elbows as he starts to stroke his cock with one hand and presses his thumb into my pussy with the other.

“Is this sweet little cunt ready for my cock?” he asks.

All I can do is nod and he reaches into his desk for a condom, never taking his eyes off me as he tears it open and covers his cock with it.

“Fuck me, Kitten. Fuck me now,” he commands.

And it's all I can do to obey.

He inches to the edge of his chair as I slide down from the desk, positioning myself over the tip of his hard cock.

"You are a fucking asshole, Damien," I repeat, as I slide myself down his shaft, gasping at how deep he goes. "Wait," I rasp, "You're so big, I just need a moment,"

He waits, biting down on my neck as we feel my pussy slowly adjust around him.

"I can't wait much longer, baby. I've needed to fuck you since I left my apartment yesterday morning. You have no idea how many times I almost turned around just to bend you over my couch and take my pleasure from you," he says.

I respond by squeezing my pussy around him and he groans and lifts his hips, pushing himself deeper into me. I hold on to the back of his chair as I grind down on him.

"Damien, I can't get enough of fucking you," I moan.

"Good, because I can't get enough of you," he groans back, his teeth biting down hard on my neck, his hands on my ass, helping me bounce on his cock

We find a rhythm, and it's fast and hard. The chair creaks under us and I'm almost afraid it will break, but I couldn't care less.

All I want is for this feeling to never end.

At one point, he lets go of me completely and sits back, letting me fuck him, and I've never felt so sexy, so wanted, so

feminine.

I tear open my shirt and I'm braless underneath and he groans, reaching out to pinch my nipples as I circle my hips on him, his breath getting shorter and shallower.

The way I'm grinding on him, my clit grazes against his pubic bone, and I realize I'm fucking him to my own orgasm.

He catches on and sits back again.

“Yes, My-Linh, use me for your own pleasure. Show me how my cock is going to make you come,”

I bite my lip as I lock my eyes with his and I writhe until I'm seconds away from coming, then I reach down and rub my clit, pushing me over the edge.

He pulls me in close as he starts driving his cock up into me, gasping in my ear, “You are such a dirty girl, making me come so hard.” And then he slams one last time into me and grunts, his whole body tensing as his hips pump short and fast into me as he releases.

I wrap my arms around his neck until his breath slows and he collapses back into the chair, taking me with him.

I move to get off him but he grabs my shoulders and pushes me down.

“No, I want to stay inside you. You made me wait all yesterday. Now you can wait until I've had enough of being inside you.”

I bite my lip to stop myself from smiling behind his back. “You deserved it, you’re a fucking asshole,” I say, locking my hands around his neck and leaning back.

He leans forward and kisses me softly.

“So you’ve said, multiple times.”

“I don’t hear you arguing.”

“I don’t waste my time arguing the truth. I’d rather just show you why you should come when I call anyway.”

My chest rises with a deep breath, and I let myself relax against him.

We sit there for a minute before either of us speaks again.

“But really, why didn’t you answer my email and calls yesterday,” he asks, shifting under me to get comfortable.

“Because I heard what you said to those people in the elevator.”

He frowns, and rubs a hand over his forehead. “What did I say?”

“Damien. Are you seriously going to make me repeat it?”

“If you want me to address it, then yes. I have a lot of conversations on a lot of elevators.”

I snort. “No, you don’t! You’ve scared most people into never riding an elevator with you.”

He chuckles and shrugs. “Okay, you’ve got me there. But no, please remind me what you thought I said.”

I sigh, and try to move but he holds my legs in place, and I wriggle, still feeling him inside me.

“That man that was in your office that day we, um, that day on the terrace. He asked you why I look familiar and you said I was just an intern and am only here because you’re doing someone a favor. And this morning you humiliated me at the Huddle. I get you not wanting to give me any special attention, I don’t want that either. But did you really have to single me out?”

He nods and looks at me. “Ok, so, firstly, the thing at the elevator, let me ask you this. Was anything that I said, was any of it untrue?”

“I—”

“Aren’t you really just here to study the business? And didn’t I do it as a favor to Jeremy?”

“Yes but—”

“Okay, and this morning, at the Huddle, did I do anything I haven’t done to anyone else before?”

I glare at him.

“You’re the one who didn’t want anyone to know that you were getting any special favors, to be treated like any other employee and that was even before we had sex. I imagine that you probably feel that even more now.”

“It’s not the same thing Dic— er, Damien. Sure, call on me, but don’t put me on the spot with things I couldn’t be expected to know! I’ve been here for just over a week. I don’t want any



special favors; I just want to be treated with a basic level of respect.”

He sighs and leans back, running his fingers up and down my back. “Do you know who that man in the elevator was?”

I shake my head.

“That’s Gerard Baxter”

I frown. “The CEO of Baxter?”

“*Interim* CEO. He will be the CEO for about another two years until my eldest brother, Kingsley, turns forty. Then he will take over as CEO. Unless Gerard gets his way. I should also mention, he’s our uncle.”

“What does that mean?”

“Gerard’s been trying to get the board on his side so they change what they’d agreed to with my grandfather when he died three years ago. He wants it all. He wants to install his own people as the directors of all four regional divisions. People who will guarantee he stays on as CEO. That means getting rid of my three brothers and me. So he’s been sniffing around. And that means trying to find out more about the sexy, delicious, gorgeous temptress I had in my office the other day. So I was just trying to get his scent off your trail. You don’t want Gerard Baxter knowing that you exist on this planet. Trust me.”

I close my eyes, trying to take in what he’s saying. It’s all another world to me. Business board rooms and family intrigue.

But it's enough to dig a deep trench in Damien's forehead and seeing it irks me.

I lean against his chest.

"Are you really okay with us doing this?" he asks.

"This?"

"Well, this," he says, pointing to our groins where we're still connected.

"This"—I point to the same spot— "I don't have a problem with. It's the rest of you that frustrates me."

He smiles softly. "I can't...give you the rest of me. This is all I can offer you."

I nod. "I know. And yes, I'm okay with it. I just...I need a basic level of respect."

"You have it. I promise. I'll do better at showing it."

"Okay," I sigh.

"Okay? Okay what?"

"Okay, I accept your apology."

"I didn't apologize,"

"I know. You never do."

That shuts him up for a few seconds, then his hands rub up and down my back.

"Since you shared, I guess I will too. I didn't like it when you ignored me yesterday."

I look up at him. "I'm sorry. I was really hurt."

“So you’ll answer my emails and calls from now on?”

“Damien, I don’t have your number,” I say, shaking my head, chuckling softly.

“It’s the number I’ve been calling you on for days.”

“Yeah, but you never actually gave me that number. I don’t answer numbers I don’t recognize, do you?”

“Well,” he shrugs, “most of my calls go through Melissa.”

“Oh my god, you’re even more removed from reality than I thought.” I laugh and gently push on his shoulder. “I don’t know anyone who answers an unknown number. Give me your number properly or text me like a normal person, and I promise, the next time you call, I will answer.”

“Deal,” he says with a nod.

“What about you, are you going to answer my correspondence?”

He looks off into the distance for a moment and then holds up his hand, with his little finger extended. “Pinky swear!”

I laugh so hard I almost fall off him and onto the floor.

“I like the way you look when you laugh,” he says when I finally calm down.

“Then don’t make me frown, asshole,” I say with a poke of my tongue.

He traces his finger along my jawline and down my neck. “I like the way you look when you come as well.”

“Well, that you can repeat.”

And he does.



# TWELVE

*Damien*

From: 0491 571 491

To: 0491 579 455

Dear My-Linh Tran/Kitten. This is your Personal Orgasm Service Provider. It would please me greatly if you could save this number into your phone.

Sincerely,

Damien Baxter

From: 0491 579 455

To: P.O.S.

I have done as directed and saved your number under P.O.S. (Personal Orgasm Service). I hope you do not begrudge me for abbreviating the acronym, but I felt that sometimes when you are not available for

providing said service, then POS would still be an appropriate description for you.

From: P.O.S.

To: Kitten

Your saved name is self-explanatory.

From: Kitten

To: P.O.S.

Yes, it explains that you are crap at witty phone names.

From: P.O.S.

To: Kitten

I should take you over my knee right now.

And make you purr like the kitten I've dubbed you.

From: Kitten

To: P.O.S.

While that threat/promise sounds awfully tempting. I am having to work for my keep. Some of us have to do that.

From: P.O.S.

To: Kitten

Witch. Come to my office and I'll give you a raise if you give me one.

From: Kitten

To: P.O.S.

Didn't you tell me after I gave you a raise this morning that you have a meeting at 3 p.m.?

From: P.O.S.

To: Kitten

Shit.

Raincheck.

See you (naked) later, Kitten.

I CLOSE THE MESSAGING app and tuck my phone into my back pocket.

“What the hell is that on your ugly mug, bro?”

I spin around to see my youngest brother, Kylian, standing in my office doorway.

“What in all the hell? What are you doing here? Did you fly in from Hong Kong?” I shout as I clasp my hand in his and pull him in for a tight hug.

We've always been the closest of the Baxter brothers. Being the younger children will do that. While the older two were busy being groomed to take over the company, we were pretty much left to our own devices until it was too late to unlearn some of the behaviors we'd taken on. We were still keeping a



running tally of how many countries we had talked ourselves out of traffic tickets.

“I heard your board meeting sank like the Titanic, so I came to make room for you on my floating door,” he teases.

I roll my eyes. “I prefer to hear that if I jump, you jump.”

“I think you and I have broken enough bones between us that neither of us should be jumping anywhere anytime.”

I grin and pat him again on the back; it’s so good to see him in the flesh. It’s been almost three months since the last time, too long. It actually makes little sense considering he lives less than an eight-hour flight away and we both take regular trips to our main headquarters in London.

“How long are you here for?” I ask.

“However long it takes to get you on your feet again. Always the baby having to save you.”

“Get your ass back on the plane then; I’m doing just fine.”

He raises an eyebrow. He gets all of the company’s financials, and he knows that’s simply not the case. And even more so, he knows how much it must be weighing on me.

“Look, I’ve got a short meeting with the warehouse crew and then I’ll find a place to feed that giant gob of yours. You want to come with?”

“Lead the way, Mr. Baxter.”

“After you, Mr. Younger Baxter.”

I make quick work of the warehouse meeting and soon Kylian and I are sitting at the bar at Aria, enjoying a steak as the kitchen finishes their prep.

“Good,” Kylian says, nodding in appreciation and taking a sip of his wine.

“I might spend a little too much time here.”

“Getting special treatment?” he says as Matt Moran, the owner and head chef, peeks his head out of the kitchen to make sure we’re doing okay,

“I like to think of it as doing my bit for the economy, without actually having to dine with other people around,” I mumble through a mouthful of potato.

“Were you always such a snob?”

I nod. “Always.”

It’s true though, Kylian has always been the social butterfly to my wallflower.

“How’s it going with *Watch*?” I ask about the streaming service Baxter has just launched in South East Asia.

He sighs and rubs his temple. “Let’s just say, right now I’m considering throwing it all in to acquire and revamp a beloved food company.”

“Been there. Don’t recommend it.”

He clinks his wineglass against mine. “You’ll work it out.”

It’s a small thing, but those four words ease the tightness in my chest for a moment. The board might be losing faith in me,

but all I really need is the support of my brothers.

“So, anyway, what were you actually doing when I showed up before?” he asks, reaching across the table for the pepper. “You looked like you were...smiling.”

I snort. “I highly doubt that.”

“I know, it almost scared me all the way back to Kowloon as well.”

“She’s nobody,” I say. And feel a small streak of guilt considering the conversation My-Linh and I just had. But I want to keep her just to myself. I don’t need my brother giving me his overly sentimental notions about my sordid arrangement.

“She? Ah, I thought so.” He nudges me with his elbow.

“Fuck off. You did not. When has a ‘she’ ever been a reason for me to smile?”

“Cla—”

I wave my steak knife at him. “Stop. No. That was just a giant misunderstanding. Mistake. Call it whatever you want.”

“I’m surprised she hasn’t made you pay for that ‘misunderstanding’ yet.”

“She’s a rich, beautiful, and ambitious woman. She’s not going to waste her time on me.”

“Here’s hoping.”

I dab my mouth with the napkin and finish my wine.

“Where next, Ky? I’ve cleared the afternoon. It’s not every day my little brother comes to take me out to dinner”

“You said you were paying!”

“Oh my god, it’s giving me ‘Grandpa, Damien stole my lunch money’ all over again.”

“You know you took it out of my bag!”

I cackle as I pay the check and plan a night out with my brother to end all nights.



I’M EXHAUSTED.

The three years difference between Kylian and me makes itself known somewhere around midnight. I am collapsed, completely drained, on the couch in my booth at Montecristo, and he’s still on the dance floor, with his tie around his forehead, somehow finding himself in the middle of every dance circle that forms.

Not surprising though. It’s the reason he is the best one to head up the Asian market; he can party with the best of them. And his shock of blond hair and blue eyes makes him a favorite among the locals.

I shake my head as I watch him wave his arms in the air along with the crowd at the behest of the DJ.

I’ve missed him.

He’s always been the sunlight to my grump.

Where he gets the energy to be so happy all the time is beyond me. His life hasn't been any easier than mine. In fact, he was even younger than I was when everything went down.

But there he is, still spreading his energy wherever he is.

Among other things, I imagine.

I've never known him to say no to a woman or vice versa.

I sit back, nursing the brandy balloon in my hand, feeling the amber liquid warm before I take a sip.

The taste instantly reminds me of licking that drop of cognac dripping down My-Linh's hand when I'd stopped her from leaving my apartment the other night.

My cock tingles in remembrance.

*Down boy, there's no time for that right now,* I tell him. But he doesn't listen.

I look out into the crowd, trying to distract myself from the thoughts of her that I know will come flooding if I let them.

There's a woman in the crowd that looks a little like My-Linh, especially the way her hair is piled on top of her head, save for a few tendrils falling from her messy bun and clinging to the sweat on her neck.

Her body is covered by the others in the crowd, but I can just imagine the way My-Linh's tiny waist opens up to the curve of her hips and ass.

My cock is definitely not listening.

“Damien, can I get you another drink?” a female voice interrupts my thoughts.

I look up to see the waitress propping her knee up on the couch next to me. She hasn't left me alone all night. Taking her home the other day was a mistake.

“I'm fine.” I wave her away, wanting to be alone with my thoughts of My-Linh.

She leans anyway, her breasts blocking my vision.

“Are you sure I can't get you anything?” Her hand lays on my leg and it's everything I can do not to swat it away.

“I'm okay.”

“Are you sure? You look so lonely here”— her hand moves to cup my semi-hard cock— “I could help you with that, you know.”

I glance at her. “You need to leave. You're not the one making my cock hard so I'm going to need you to fucking leave.”

Her jaw drops open just as the spotlight washes over the crowd.

I ignore her and sit up.

The woman who looks like My-Linh has her arms around a man, his hands drifting down over her perfect hips as she laughs and leans in, whispering something into his ear.

Except she doesn't look like My-Linh.

She *is* her.



# THIRTEEN

*My-Linh*

MY BODY FEELS EVERY beat of the music like it's coming from my own heart. I'm drenched in sweat as I let my body move along to others on the dance floor.

Something has been alighted in me.

And Damien is the reason.

"Damn girl, you are on fire tonight," Mandy leans in and shouts to me.

I know it.

It usually takes a couple of drinks (and a couple more) for me to really feel uninhibited enough to dance like I really want to, but tonight I channel the My-Linh that was with Damien the other night. My hips twist and writhe like when I'm with him, and I close my eyes imagining him next to me, his body entwined with mine.

*Kill the thought, I tell my mind. That's not going to happen, he's never going to be dancing at a club with you. He's just*



*using you for sex, remember?*

Oh, I remember, and it actually thrills me. Something about Damien Baxter wanting me, me, that tickles me to the core.

“We better go,” Sandy shouts, joining me and his sister. “I have an early meeting tomorrow.”

“So, go!” I shout back. I don’t want to go. I just want to stay on this dance floor forever, the music penetrating every one of my cells and making me feel fluid, sexy, desired.

“Fine. Five more minutes,” he says for the third time, rolling his eyes.

I laugh and give him a big hug, and whisper into his ear, “You’re the best. I love you, Sandy Bear!”

The music kicks up and I yell with exhilaration, throwing my arms into the air, grinning at the tall, good-looking, blonde guy dancing next to us. There’s something so friendly and familiar about him that compels me to throw him a wink as well.

“Hey, sexy,” he yells over the music.

“Hey, right back at you, sexy,” I grin, feeling almost euphoric.

“Those are some lethal moves you have there,” he shouts.

“Right? You should be careful, you might get a flailing arm to the head,” I joke. He’s flirty but not creepy and I enjoy the attention.

“You sure? I bet I could hold you down and—woah!”

The guy is suddenly pulled away and someone takes his place.

“Damien! What are you doing here?”

“Stay away from her,” he says, glaring at the tall blonde. “And you too,” he shouts, pushing on Sandy’s arm.

Sandy grits his teeth and slaps Damien’s hand away. “Get your fucking hands off me!”

“Damien!” I shout at him, “what are you doing?”

“This.” He grabs my wrist and drags me off the dance floor.

I see Mandy join Sandy and they’re both madly waving at me. I wave back, trying to gesture that I’m okay.

“Damien! Let me go! Where are you taking me?” I shout, but my voice is drowned out by the music.

He doesn’t say a word as he drags me up the stairs and through a small door leading to a booth that overlooks the dance floor.

“Get out,” he shouts to a waitress standing in the room.

I recognize her; it’s the same one we saw him leave with the last time we were here. What the fuck is she doing alone in here with him?

“I said, get the fuck out,” he shouts to her again when she doesn’t move.

“Go to hell, Damien,” she shouts and I’m filled with jealousy at the way she uses his name. She slams the door behind her and it’s just him and me glaring at each other.

“Why did you drag me up here?” I throw my hands up in the air.

His clenches his teeth, his fists balled up on either side of him. “Because you were...”

“What?!”

“You were acting like a slut out there!”

My jaw drops open. “What did you just call me?”

“You heard me,” he hisses through gritted teeth.

I’m so angry, I can barely breathe. “I was being a slut just for dancing with my friends on the club dance floor?” He’s lost his fucking mind. “Anyway, you should talk.”

He takes a step towards me, his anger still bubbling. “What the hell does that mean? I’m not the one out there rubbing up against every man within a ten-foot radius.”

“Wow. You have lost your—”

The rest of my sentence is cut off by the door swinging open.

“Damien, what the hell was that abo—Oh.” The good-looking blonde from the dance floor is here and now I see why he looked somewhat familiar. He’s a Baxter through and through.

“Hi, I’m Kylian,” he says, holding his hand out to me.

“My-Linh,” I say, taking his hand, still stunned by what’s happening.

“Ah, you must be Text Girl,” Kylian says, smirking.

Who? “I’m sorry?”

“Let go of her,” Damien hisses, staring at our still locked hands.

I drop Kylian’s hand while he just laughs.

“You’ll have to excuse my brother, My-Linh. I think he’s having a bit of the case of the green-eyed monster.”

“Yeah, I highly doubt that,” I answer, unconvinced. Damien Baxter is not jealous of me dancing with his brother. Or with anyone for that matter. I’m just not sure what *is* going on with him.

“Get out of here, Kylian,” Damien shouts, pointing to the door.

His brother leans over and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “It was very nice to meet you, My-Linh. We should go dancing again sometime.”

I know what he’s doing so I go along with it. I give him my brightest smile. “I’d love that. Damien will give you my number.”

“The fuck I will!!!” Damien shouts as Kylian grins and leaves.

I spin back to face him, a finger in his face. “Are you seriously calling me a slut because I was dancing with *my* roommate and your *brother*?”

He opens his mouth, then shuts it; I don’t think I’ve ever seen him do that before.

“Well?”

His lips thin for a moment before he answers. “It looked a little...less innocent than that from here.”

I’m fuming. Where does he get off...“So what if it wasn’t innocent? How is it any of your business? You made it very clear that we’re not dating. So why do you care if I’m a slut every other night that you’re not the one using me for sex?”

He doesn’t have an answer.

“Good, now that that’s sorted, I’m going back to my friends, thanks. I have to go explain why a psycho just dragged me back to his lair. While he had another woman waiting there for him, by the way,” I remind him.

“She’s just a waitress, My-Linh.”

“Yeah? Was she ‘just a waitress’ when you had sex with her the other day?” I confront him.

“I didn’t fuck h—”

“Don’t you dare lie to me, Damien Baxter. I might not be your girlfriend but I’m not going to tolerate lying. I don’t care who the fuck you are or how good the orgasms you give me are. I deserve better than to be lied to.”

“I said I did not fuck her, My-Linh,” he says, his voice low, dangerous. I can feel the anger still simmering in his veins.

“Then what did you do?”

He shakes his head and reaches for a brandy balloon on the table. “You don’t want to know.”

“I already think you fucked her. How much worse can it be?”

He empties the glass into his mouth and slams it down. “Fine. Let’s go then.”

I frown. “Where are we going?”

“Just shut up and come with me.” He grabs me again by the wrist, leads me out of the club, and flags down a passing cab.

“Get in,” he barks and I obey. I get the feeling this isn’t one of those times I want to cross him.

He shouts the address of the Baxter Enterprises building and when we get there we ride the elevator in silence until we get to his floor. His hand still wrapped around my wrist, he drags me to his office and he pushes me to the guest chair by his desk.

“Sit there. Don’t move,” he commands.

I do exactly as he says.

And I watch.

Watch as he leans back against the desk in front of me, his hand unzipping his pants and he pulls his cock out.

The tip is already glistening and I feel my tongue slide along the length of my bottom lip. His eyes fix on my mouth; I see him flinch as he runs his fist over the tip, all the way up and down his cock.

“Damien,” I whisper, to break the eerie quiet.

“Quiet. You wanted to know what happened. This is what happened.”

His eyes never leave my face, not once.

Not even as he fists his cock, all the way from the base of his shaft to the very tip of his hardness.

Ten, fifteen times he does it.

Painfully slowly, I can almost count to five in the time it takes him to travel up the length of his dick.

And then he slides his fist back down again.

Finally, he stops right at the tip, squeezing his cock head in short pulses as his other hand moves down his balls, caressing them in his hands.

“Damien, what are you doing?” I ask, even though I’m watching, enraptured with each movement

“Silence,” he responds in a voice so low I can barely hear it.

He moves his fist back down over his shaft; I can tell from the way his knuckles turn white that he’s squeezing hard.

He’s jacking himself off. For me.

It’s so erotic, I can’t even breathe.

I want to be a part of what he’s doing.

I want to feel it with him.

I want to be the one doing it to him, be the one making his breath catch, the one to make him fill with want.

The one fisting his cock, the one who's going to make him come.

I move to stand up and he stops.

“Sit the fuck down, My-Linh. And don't get up again until I tell you you can move.”

I freeze.

He starts to stroke again, his eyes closing almost all the way as he groans.

I watch as his legs slacken and his knees bend, widening his stance as his strokes become faster, less regular. He runs his almost open palm over the top of his cock, and he grunts as his fingers meet in a fist back down his cock.

His chest heaves as he gasps for breath; he's close.

I know him enough to know he's close.

“Damien...” I say, because I know he likes to hear me say his name. “Damien,” I say, because I want to.

He takes in a deep breath, his hand pumping now, fast, short, pumps concentrating on the seam of his hardness, his eyes boring into mine.

“Fuck,” he moans.

And just as I think he's about to explode, he stops.

And then, for the first time in minutes, he looks away.

“Leave,” he says.

The air drains from my lungs.



“Leave,” he says again, louder, firmer.

I’m so shocked, I stand up and turn to the door. I don’t know what’s happening but I need oxygen and there isn’t any here. I take one step toward the door, my eyes burning with rejection.

“Stop.”

My feet obey even before I know whether I should or not. I don’t want him to see the tears in my eyes.

“Turn around.”

I can’t. I just can’t.

“Turn around. Look at me.” His voice is soft. Almost... pleading.

And then he’s behind me, his chest against my back, his face in the crook of my neck.

He breathes against my neck and it’s tinged with cognac.

“Turn around, Kitten.”

And I do.

“You wanted to know what happened? That’s what happened the night I left with her,” he says, his thumb coming up to wipe the drop collecting in the corner of my eye. “That’s exactly what happened. I didn’t fuck her. I didn’t even touch her. And she didn’t touch me. I saw you at the club that night. I watched you for hours dancing there. It was you I wanted to take home with me that night, but you didn’t even know I was there. I thought I could replace you, but I couldn’t. So I told

her to leave. I didn't orgasm again until that first night at my apartment with you. And I haven't come without you since."

I don't know what I'm hearing, I just know I want to hear more.

"Promise me you didn't fuck her," I whisper.

"I promise."

"And you weren't going to fuck her tonight."

The laugh he lets out is hollow, but I believe him.

Then I ask the question I've been too scared to ask. "Why did you freak out when I was on the dance floor?"

He looks at me and doesn't look away when he answers. "Because I didn't want anyone else touching you."

"You were jealous?"

"Yes."

I hadn't expected the admission. "I don't want to fuck anyone but you, Damien."

"Good." His hands move back to his cock.

"Good," I echo, before I fall to my knees in front of him. "Finish what you started, Damien."

His breath catches and he looks down at me for a second before his fist starts to move again, slow and deliberate.

I just kneel and watch him for a minute, watch as his cock gets fully hard again. Then I reach out a single finger, tracing it along the underside of his hardness. His moan thrills me and

I do what I've been wanting to do since the first time I touched his hard cock in the terrace garden.

I move my lips closer, so that his glistening tip is touching them.

He stops jacking and traces my mouth with his cock, and just as he readies for the second time around, my tongue darts out and licks the pooling drop on the tip.

“Fuck,” he moans, his voice hoarse.

“Fuck my mouth, Damien. Use my mouth to make you come.”

He doesn't need any further encouragement. Placing his hands on either side of my mouth, he instantly rams his cock all the way into my throat.

I swallow, pushing back the urge to fight it.

“Take it,” he rasps. “Take it, you dirty girl. Make me come with your mouth,” he growls.

I wrap my lips tight around his thick cock, choking off my air, and he pulls his hips back, dragging the underside of his cock over my tongue, leaving a trail of his precum. He pulls back enough for the tip of his cock to stay in my mouth, and I flick it with my tongue, and he groans as he rams his cock back in.

I breathe in time with his thrusts.

Tilting my head back, letting him go as deep as he needs to, as he stares down at my face.

“God, you are fucking amazing. You make my cock harder than it’s ever been. You deserve this, you deserve to be mouth fucked like this,” he almost incoherently babbles. “Take my cock, baby. Swallow it.”

And just as he starts to gasp in that special way again, I reach under and squeeze his balls.

He roars.

“Fuck, I’m going to come, Kitten.” He pumps one more time in my mouth and pulls out, pressing down on my chin with one hand while the other pumps his cock, emptying himself into my mouth.

I watch him the whole time.

Watch his eyes roll back into his head, and his face contort as he jerks, his cock shooting into my mouth.

Feeding me. Feeding my want for him.

“Dammit,” he sighs, as he pumps his cock a few more times, milking the last few drops, and running the tip of his cock over my lips as I swallow. “Good girl,” he says, smiling softly, and sinks to the floor, pulling me against his side.

His chest is hard and hot under my head as I look up at him.

“Was tonight better than it was that night?” I ask after a few moments.

With his eyes still closed, he chuckles. “I can’t really imagine a better night than one ending in me coming in your mouth, little kitten of mine.”

I let the word hover in the silence for a moment. “Of mine?”

He takes a deep breath, then lifts hand to rub against my cheek. “Did you or did you not say you didn’t want to fuck anyone else?”

I nod. “I did.”

“Does that mean you’re mine?”

I shrug. “You said you didn’t want to fuck anyone as well.”

It’s his turn to nod this time. “I did.”

“So you tell me what that means.”

He runs his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know.”

“You like me,” I tease him.

“I do.”

“Damien...”

He pushes himself up so he’s looking at me. “Don’t...don’t misunderstand. Of course I like you. I wouldn’t fuck you if I didn’t like you. But liking is not the same as dating.”

I shake my head. “Damien, what do you think dating is?”

He rolls his eyes and sighs. “You’ve been in a relationship before, yes?”

I give him a small nod.

“What do you expect of the person you’re in a relationship with? Monogamy? Being prioritized? A future?”

“I guess. Normal things.”

“I...can't give you those things, My-Linh. I never was cut out for it, and I never will be.”

“You're not cut out for being with someone you like? Putting someone else first? That's awfully selfish, Damien.”

“Not someone else, *anyone else*. One thing comes first and that's Baxter Enterprises. It's been that way for all of us, and I don't see it ever changing. It's just something that's in our blood. The way we were raised.”

I sigh and put a hand on his chest to reassure him. “I didn't ask you for anything more, Damien. I don't know why you're bringing this up.”

“Because I know it's coming. It always does.”

“You've never been with me before. And I can tell you right now, I'm not looking for anything serious. Far, far from it.”

That seems to momentarily comfort him.

“But just for conversation's sake. All three of those things are out of the question? You've only mentioned putting someone first.”

He exhales. “I can't talk about a future that isn't directly about Baxter. I will always drop everything to put my company first. It's not just my legacy, my livelihood on the line. It's the livelihoods and futures of thousands of employees who count on us as well. I don't know if you'll ever know what that kind of responsibility is like.”

I don't. And I'm not going to pretend I do. “That leaves monogamy.”

He lets out a little laugh, which surprises me. “I think tonight’s shown that I don’t want any other man touching you. I’m going to blame evolution.”

I don’t want to scare him away by telling him that the jealousy made me feel good.

“I meant it when I said I don’t want to fuck anyone else right now.” He leans over to kiss me as I try to ignore the “right now”.

“Okay, well, how about this. How about if we agree to let the other one know if we’re going to have sex with someone else?”

His eyes narrow. “Who are you thinking of having sex with?”

I just laugh.

“Better not be Kylian. I’ll fucking kill him.”

I pretend to look shocked, and then as if I’m pondering it. “I mean, he is *very* good-looking and dances like a total demon.”

“Shut up, you witch,” he says, pulling me back down onto the ground and sliding between my legs. He bunches my skirt up to my hips and pushes my panties to the side, gliding his tongue deep along my pussy lips. “I’m the only Baxter brother who’ll be tasting this sweet pussy.”

I groan and then say, “I don’t know. I haven’t seen the two older ones yet. Maybe they’ll be more to my taste.”

And then any other thoughts I might've had get lost in the way Damien devours me.





# FOURTEEN

*Damien*

“IS THAT ALL?” I ask, as soon as there’s a break in the presentation.

The two managers share a look and nod. “Um, I guess so, Mr. Baxter.”

“Great. Good work. Send me the presentation slides and I’ll have a closer look and get back to you with some notes.” I’m out of the meeting room before they can turn off their laser pointers. “I’m just going to stretch my legs for five minutes, Melissa. I’ll be right back for the meeting.”

“Are you okay, sir?” she asks, looking away at her computer screen for a moment. “Can I call the doctor or something?”

“I’m fine, why do you ask?”

“You don’t...usually...need air.”

“Oh, Melissa, we all need air.” I wink and get a frown for my troubles.

Huh, maybe My-Linh is onto something. Maybe I'm not coming across as the fun loving boss I thought I was. That makes me laugh as I walk over to the elevator where two other employees are waiting.

Once the elevator doors open I step inside. The other two don't move though.

For fuck's sake.

I poke my head out. "Guys. This is a communal elevator. Not a personal one for me. You can use it when I'm on it. In fact, I'd prefer it."

They blink and don't say anything, but gingerly step into the elevator, pressing themselves against the other side of it.

Hmm, I might need to work on my interpersonal skills.

"Have a good and productive day," I say to them when the elevator arrives on the marketing department floor and I notice them share a confused look as I leave.

I make my way to the marketing lab and there's so much noise no one even notices when I step into the room. There's a group of four people in the middle of the open area, one of them has a paper hat on and the others are crowded around, yelling instructions at him.

"Pretend you're a hippopotamus shaped blimp and some dipshit kid is trying to throw a dart at you," someone yells and I have to cover my mouth as I watch the guy in the paper hat puff his cheeks out trying to move his imaginary body around the room, ducking and weaving.

“Next!” Virginia yells. “ML, you’re up!” she says, pointing to My-Linh and my chest squeezes.

I lean against the back of the wall, hands in my pockets as My-Linh runs to the middle of the room and pulls a piece of paper out of the box Virginia is holding out to her.

The paper shakes in her hand and her entire face is engaged, excited as she unravels it and then punches the air, “Yeah, baby. I’ve got this. Team B, you are toast! Like burnt beyond salvation toast. No amount of scraping is going to save you burnt toast!”

“Just get to it, Tran!” someone in the other group yells.

She holds the piece of paper up and reads, “You’ve got thirty seconds to create a short pitch for a product...of the other team’s choosing!” she shouts, moaning at the last part.

Everyone bursts out laughing as they start yelling out ideas.

“A bikini for cats!”

“Band-aids that look like horrible scars!”

“An Albert Einstein chia pet!”

“Guys, I’ve got it!” a junior team member says and the rest of them crowd around her as she whispers to them and they all burst out laughing, giving each other high fives.

“Okay, My-Linh, we challenge you to pitch to Virginia... glow-in-the-dark toilet paper!”

“No!” My-Linh moans even though she’s bent over laughing.

“And your thirty seconds starts, now!”

My-Linh freezes, but I can see her mind working a billion miles an hour, her hands wringing as she thinks. She starts making movements with her fingers as if she’s preparing her presentation, her eyes blinking and moving back and forth.

“Time’s up!”

She does some last-minute notes against her hands and then straightens up, her face completely blank and suddenly lies flat down in the middle of the room, surprising everyone.

Everyone holds their breath as it’s completely silent for a moment before she suddenly sits straight up.

She rubs her eyes and says, “Have you ever woken up from the absolute, most epic dream you’ve ever had? You’re the king of an ancient Viking clan and you’re traveling across the Atlantic ocean to rescue your ancient Viking lady friend who has been kidnapped. The ocean swells are ferocious, washing over the bow, but land is just in sight. You and your Viking buddies jump into the shallow water and charge towards the evil Viking lady friend kidnapping European villagers.”

She jumps to her feet, lifting her arm over her head. ““Chaaaaarrrrgggge!” you yell to your Viking dudes and pillage your way through the village looking for your girlfriend. Finally, the chief of their village comes out, sword in hand. But you have a magical ax adorned by the eyeballs of those who have dared challenge you. You lift the ax into the air, ready to behead your challenger...only to be jerked awake by the annoying calls of nature.”

She steps forward, her eyes closed, wobbling on her feet. “So you have to stumble to the bathroom, squeezing your eyes shut to keep as much light out as possible so that you can return to your dream and rescue the precious Viking princess.”

She stumbles over to an empty chair and plops herself down on it before continuing, “You manage to make it there without too much trouble, only to realize...you forgot to replace the empty toilet roll! Curses!” she yells, shaking her fist in the air, her eyes still squeezed shut.

“What do you do? You can’t waste time fumbling in the dark looking for the TP and you can’t turn on the light in case you wake up too much and not be able to return to your waiting princess! Well never fear! Because here at Baxter we have come up with the perfect solution. We present to you, Baxter’s Bathroom Bright Light Bog Roll! The only glow-in-the-dark toilet paper roll on the market. For those moments when you don’t have a square...or moment, to spare.”

The entire room erupts into insane laughter and I can’t help but join them.

She’s crazy. Absolutely crazy.

“Mr. Baxter!” someone calls out and my cover is blown.

My-Linh jumps up from her makeshift toilet and sees me, her face blaring red.

I wave my hands in front of me, sorry to have interrupted. “No, no, please continue. I think you might’ve just come up with our brand-new best seller.”

“Is there something we can help you with?” Virginia asks.

I shake my head, “Not at all, I was just walking by and wanted to see who was having so much fun without me.”

“Not us, Mr. Baxter,” My-Linh says, her eyes twinkling. “Not without you.”

I bite back the urge to call her a minx in front of everyone. “Please, go back to it, I can’t wait to hear whatever other groundbreaking campaign you’re going to come up with for us.”

My-Linh pulls her chair back to the outer circle and someone from the other team gets called up.

“Oh, Miss Tran, can I see you out here for a second?” I ask.

“Oh sure,” she says, looking around the room nervously but everyone else is focused on the next challenge being pulled out of the hat.

I lead her into a nearby empty office, and as soon as the door is closed I push her back onto it and kiss her hard. Her hands are instantly in my hair pulling my head down closer. Her lips are so soft against mine and I suck on them gently, wanting to taste her sweetness. The little sounds in the back of her throat fog up my brain.

My lips nip against hers, then gently run along her neck before they return to her mouth, crushing her, breathing in her air.

Finally, when there’s no more oxygen left in my lungs, I pull away.

“Hi,” she says softly, giving me a gentle smile as she slides her hands down from my hair and onto my chest.

“Hey,” I whisper. “I’ve wanted to do that all morning. It’s torture knowing you’re three floors downstairs, looking the way you do, tasting the way you do, and not up there with me.”

She gives me a gentle kiss and sighs. “You look less cranky than usual today.”

“Apparently, you’re not the only one who thinks so. I even let someone ride the elevator with me.”

“Oh dear, this is unfortunate,” she says, looking serious.

“Why?”

“Well, I’ve only just discovered how good sex can be, and now the end of time is upon us,” she teases and scrunches up her nose in an adorable way that makes my heart jump.

“You are a very sexy witch,” I say, burying my face against her neck, inhaling deeply. I want to drown in her scent.

“And you are a very sexy boss man.”

I sigh, “I’m also a very busy boss man, I just came down to kiss you. I didn’t know I was going to get a little sneak peek into your innermost Viking desires.”

“What can I say everyone wants to—”

“—be a Viking princess?” I finish.

Her jaw drops open. “Lord, no! Everyone wants to *save* the Viking princess! That’s way more fun.”



I nuzzle against her neck, sighing when she giggles. “I would decapitate anyone that kept me from that body of yours.”

“Good to know.”

I kiss her again, like I’m starving and she’s a bowl of chicken soup. She tickles the back of my neck and pulls away only to press a soft kiss to my forehead as we pant for breath.

“Dammit, I have to go,” I say, finally. But I don’t move.

“I thought you had to go,” she whispers.

“I’m waiting,” I confess.

“What for?”

“For this to go down,” I say, moving her hand to my cock. It’s hard, it’s always hard when I’m with her, thinking of her.

“Oh, well, I can help with that,” she says and I hold my breath, thinking she’s going to stroke my cock.

Instead she steps out from under me and pushes me away from the door. Then, she lifts her shirt up revealing her bare breasts. God, they’re so perfect. Soft and round and I want to suck on those nipples so much, my mouth fills with drool. Before I can reach out for her, she pulls her shirt down and throws the door open.

“Have a good meeting, Mr. Baxter!” she calls over her shoulder and leaves.

“Witch,” I shout after her, and stand alone while I wait for the hard-on she’s cursed me with to go down.



From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
Subject: Unprofessional Behavior

Dear Miss Tran,

I would like to formally report you for behavior unbecoming of a Baxter Enterprises employee.

If you are going to show the Director your tits, you need to stay long enough so that he can suck on your nipples.

I expect a response on how you intend to rectify your mistake.

Sincerely,

Damien Baxter

Director of Hard Fucking Cock

From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Unprofessional Behavior

Dear DHFC,

I am sorry to hear about your predicament, however, I assumed as I am only here on a temporary basis, you would've appreciated me

spending my time sharing my marketing expertise with my other colleagues as much as I can. And I'm afraid, I'm not sure how much they will be learning if your mouth is permanently attached to my nipple throughout the workday.

I suggest you take it up with HR and come up with a satisfactory solution to the issue.

I look forward to your response to my response.

Sincerely,

My-Linh Tran

She of the Offending Nipple

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject: Re:Re:Unprofessional Behavior

Per your suggestion, I have conferred with the interested parties, and I would like to discuss the resulting disciplinary action at an evening meeting with you. Please respond with your earliest availability.

From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

To:D.Baxter@Baxter.com

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Unprofessional  
Behavior

I have to wash my hair tonight.

Tomorrow night I have to wash my  
roommate's hair

The night after that I have to wash  
my neighbor's dog's hair.

I'm afraid disciplining me will  
simply have to wait.

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject:

Re:Re:Re:Re:Unprofessional  
Behavior

I'll wash your hair for you.

My car will be outside your  
apartment building at 7:30 p.m.  
sharp.

Don't wear panties.

I HAVE TO CLOSE the email app or else my cock is going to rip through my pants and I'm not going to get any more work done today. The memory of how alive she looked while doing the glow-in-the-dark TP pitch dances in my brain, and I realize I'm not even thinking of her sexually, just marveling at the sheer, unadulterated life she has inside her.

All I want is to be near it.



## *My-Linh*

I CLOSE THE LAST email from him, trying to steady my breath, and try to forget that he's only three floors up, and I could go up there and straddle him right now.

"Hi, My-Linh," a familiar but unwelcome voice speaks up, instantly draining me of all the excitement I've been feeling through the email exchange.

I've been able to avoid Adam at work without too much effort and I answer him with a vacant look, focusing on a spot right between his eyes.

"Um, Curtis wants to know if you'd mind giving our report a quick proofread? Everyone knows you're the best," he says.

"Too right she is!" Raquel pipes up from her desk.

"Email it," I snap, and turn back to my desk.

"Um, okay. Great, thanks. Just email it back to me before the end of the day."

"I'll email it to Curtis," I respond, as rudely as I can.

"Oh. Okay, that works too, I guess."

I don't say another word and eventually he gets the message and leaves. Not a second too soon.

"Bloody hell," I mutter under my breath. It's bad enough knowing he's around just a few office doors away, but it feels

like he's constantly trying to find a way to talk to me. Why can't he just leave me alone? Doesn't he have any remorse over what happened? Why does he think I'd ever want to speak to him again?

"Problem?" Raquel's head pops up over the partition, but only enough for me to see her eyes and I laugh. We've joked about a million times about just cutting out a hole between our partitions considering the amount of times we pop our heads over each other's cubicles in a day.

"No. I just don't like him." No lie there.

"Really? He seems fine. Had some good ideas."

"Yeah, he's never lacking any ideas."

"Uh-oh. Are you doth protesting too much?" She wiggles her eyebrows at me.

I shudder. "Ew. I wouldn't touch him with a rusty nail covered two by four with three layers of gloves on."

"Wow. Specific."

"You have no idea. Anyway...I'm uh, kinda seeing someone."

Her head pops up completely over the partition. "Oooh, you are?! Why haven't you said anything? Who is it?"

"It's a super secret," I grin, enjoying talking about Damien, without actually talking about him.

"Is it serious?"

Yes, my head immediately says to my annoyance. “Um, no. And it’s not going to be! It’s just a ...physical thing.”

“Oh my god, I’m jealous.”

I let out a surprised laugh. “You have no idea,” I give her an exaggerated wink. “He is...just, he is the sexiest man I’ve ever met in my entire life.”

“Tell. Me. More.”

“There’s nothing to tell. Neither of us are interested in a relationship, but we’re both really interested in getting naked together.” Even as I say it, I can’t help but think that My-Linh of a year ago wouldn’t recognize me at all. And there’s something so wonderful about that.

Raquel pretends to look scandalized. “My-Linh! Where have you been hiding this little nympho?”

“Girl, I don’t know. But I think she’s here to stay.”

There’s a ding on my phone and I wave her away as I check it.

To: Kitten

From POS

You taste like juicy ripe cherries.

To: POS

From: Kitten

Is that a good thing?

To: Kitten

From: POS

Cherries are my favorite fruit.

To: POS

From: Kitten

How funny, bananas are my favorite  
fruit.

I bet Kylian has a good banana.

To: Kitten

From: POS

Witch.



THE END OF THE workday can't get here fast enough.

Something about knowing what's awaiting for me this evening makes my brain turn to absolute mush and at 4:50 p.m. I'm already packed up ready to leave.

"You've been especially productive this afternoon," Raquel jokes as she comes back from the printer, watching me spinning around on my computer chair.

"I've finished all my work, thank you very much. Including the other team's work."

The elevator dings and I look up just in time to see Damien step off it, his eyes already turned my way.

My insides turn to barely-set jello.



He smiles and gives me a sneaky wink as he walks towards me.

“Are you working hard, Miss Tran?”

“Oh, absolutely. Super hard, Mr. Baxter,” I say with a silly grin.

Behind me Raquel chokes back a laugh and I just beam even wider.

“Good to hear. I was just downstairs and they asked me to let you know there’s a package waiting for you at the front desk, Miss Tran.”

I frown. A package? Who would’ve sent me a package?

“Well, have a good evening, ladies,” he says, making sure to give Raquel a big smile as well.

“Oh, I intend on it, sir,” I say, pointedly. “And the same to you.”

He gives me a wink. “Oh, I have no doubt that it is going to be...out of this world.”

I back into my chair and it’s several minutes before my breathing is back to normal.

“He’s totally on my free list,” Raquel says, throwing her bag over her shoulder and gesturing for me to grab my stuff.

“Hmmm?”

“Baxter. He’s top of my hall pass. He looks like he’d know his way around a woman’s body.”

It takes everything I have not to emphatically confirm her suspicions complete with anecdotes. “You think?”

She grins. “Often.”

I laugh and swing my bag at her as we leave.



# FIFTEEN

*My-Linh*

I SPEND TWICE AS long in the shower as I usually do; every single inch of my body is washed, shaved, exfoliated, and then lotioned. As I sit on my bed, I run my fingers tips over my legs, checking for any rough spots and I feel so luxuriated. Why do we only do this for men?

“Mandy! Get in here!”

She comes in, glasses almost sliding off her nose, nibbling on a Pop Tart directly out of the wrapper, fingers covered in pen ink.

“Wow. That’s some look...” I say, taking in the scene.

“Thanks. I call it ‘Deadline chic’.”

I snort. “You pull it off well. Hey, stop for like fifteen minutes and go take a shower and then rub this all over your body.” I throw her the body butter tub I’d just used.

She plops down on my bed and turns it over in her hand. “My-Linh, this is like \$85 a tub.”

I nod, sifting through my outfit choices.

“Why are you using an \$85 body butter?”

“Why not? Sometimes you just have to treat yourself!” Or sometimes your billionaire booty call leaves it for you at the front desk. “Seriously. I don’t care what you’re doing. Stop and put that stuff on. It will fix whatever’s going on. Physically, mentally, emotionally.”

She opens the jar and takes a tentative sniff.

“It smells like you...but...”

“Richer?”

She nods and dips her finger into it and rubs a little bit into her hand. “Wow.”

“Told you.”

She lies back on my bed and watches as I wriggle into the strappy white leather dress I’ve picked. Mandy found it for me in a thrift store months ago and I haven’t had a chance to wear it yet.

Her low whistle gives me the reaction I’m looking for.

“Hey, Sandy! Get your hairy butt in here!” she calls out to her brother.

He wanders into my room, sucking on a spoon of peanut butter and wearing just his boxers and one sock.

“What in the...?” Mandy laughs. “You couldn’t put some clothes on?”

“You called, I came!” he said, flinging the peanut butter at his sister and jumping on the bed next to her. “Woah. Talk about putting some clothes on. Damn girl, where did you get that?”

“Mandy bought it for me,” I say, smoothing my hands down the front. “Do I look okay?”

“If what you had under that dress was the right model of the thing that got me hot, I would be so all over you,” Sandy shouts.

“Ew, gross,” Mandy groans and kicks him. “Just say she looks hot!”

“I thank you both,” I say, turning back to the mirror and running the red lipstick over my mouth.

“Where are you going looking all hot without us?” Sandy asks, slapping Mandy’s hand away as she tries to free him of his one sock.

“A sex date,” I say, proudly.

“Ha! Funny. No, really, where are you going?”

“I’m serious. With the guy at the club. The Caveman,” I say, calling him by the nickname we’ve dubbed him for dragging me away like a Neanderthal. They hadn’t actually gotten a good look at his face, which was fine by me. All the secrecy actually made it more exciting.

Mandy looks at her brother then back at me. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“I’m kidding a zero amount. I’m going to his apartment to have sex. And then I’m going to come home.”

They look at each other blinking.

“Who are you and what have you done with little My?”

“She’s in here. She’s just enjoying The Months of My-Linh.”

“Get it, girl!” Mandy shouts.

“Thanks. Don’t wait up.” I grin, slide on my black stilettos, and walk out, feeling sexier than I ever have in my whole life.



THE ELEVATOR DOORS OPEN to a silent apartment; there’s no Damien waiting in the foyer for me this time. The front desk shrew told me to go right up and that Mr. Baxter was expecting me, but he isn’t in the living area when I work up enough courage to walk in there.

“Damien?” I call out, but there’s no answer.

It’s dark, with only a soft light from the kitchen cabinets and the sunset filtering through the windows.

There’s the soft sound of running water coming from the bathroom and I follow it. Steam filters through the bathroom door and I push it open.

He’s in the shower, with his back to me, completely naked.

The water stream pounds against his back as his head rests against the tile wall in front of him.

Butterflies flutter in the pit of my stomach as I stand and watch for a moment, taking in the sight of him, the water cascading down his bare strong back, over the curve of his ass and down his strong, tan legs. There's an irrepressible urge to devour him; I've never felt this animalistic need to just fuck someone just by seeing them before.

But he is pure physical perfection, and that's just the view from behind.

I know what the view will be when he turns around.

I make the decision right then to be what he will see when he turns around.

The shower door opens silently and I step through his strewn clothes on the floor.

If he hears me, he doesn't make it known and just stands there, his arms braced over his head on the wall in front of him.

I shimmy out of the dress, and then, naked except for my stilettos, I step between him and the water stream and run my fingernails down his back as I slowly drop to my knees.

He turns, his cock already hard, and looks down at me.

His eyes are dark, flooded with want.

And I've never wanted to completely give myself to someone more.





*Damien*

SHE'S ON HER KNEES, her mouth slightly agape, when I turn around; a perfect picture of supplication.

My thumb runs along her cherry red stained bottom lip, and she bites down gently on it, making my already stiff cock twitch.

How does she do it? Embed so much sensuality into every single movement she makes.

She's walking sex.

And I want to lose myself in her.

I fist my cock with one hand and push her wet hair away from her face. She reaches her hands behind her back, clasping them, and I almost come on the spot.

She's submitting to me.

One hand gently anchoring her chin, my hips lean forward, and I feed her my cock.

She takes a deep breath and looks up at me as my dick stretches her red lips, and she relaxes her throat.

Fuck.

Just fuck.

With nothing but my hand on her chin, holding her steady, her hands still behind her back, I start to fuck her mouth.

Forcing myself to slow my movements, I pull my hips back, dragging my cock over her tongue, then slide back in.

Every inch is painfully pleasurable.

I groan each time she swallows, tightening her mouth and throat around my cock.

Her eyes never leave mine and every time I look back down, she's staring up at me.

My cock in her mouth, and my own arousal reflecting in her eyes.

I can't help but pump faster.

The tip of my cock sometimes slips out of her lips, and each time I push back in she flicks the tip with her tongue and I want to die.

I want to die a thousand orgasms mouth fucking this dirty angel.

I move to take her head in my hands and I lose all sense of time and space as I ravage her mouth. Thrust in and out with no rhythm, just led by the need to come and have her swallow every drop of my release.

She moans, her eyes watering as I stare down at her, watching her take everything I have to give.

And with one last pump, my balls constrict and explode and I ram my cock deep into her throat.

My come seeps from her lips as my cock keeps pulsing.

When I'm finally done, I pull my hips back and she swallows before running her tongue over my still aching cock tip, making my entire body jump.

I can barely breathe.

She's sucked the oxygen from me.

I pant, resting against the shower wall.

She holds out her hand and I help her to her feet.

Fucking hell.

The water cascades over every inch of her naked, delicious, voluptuous, perfect body.

My cock already wants her.

"Hi," she whispers, leaning in to kiss me, my wetness still on her lips.

I pull her hard against me, wanting to feel her mold that body against mine.

"Hi," I rasp as we kiss. Desperate. Needing. Like I haven't just come in her mouth.

"Hope you don't mind me joining you," she murmurs.

"I have never minded anything less. My meeting finished early so I went on a run before you came over so I thought I should take a shower. Maybe I should've saved my energy."

"No, I like the thought of you sweating," she answers and drags her tongue over my shoulder blade. "Did you...did you like what I did?" she asks, her voice suddenly shy.

My thumb comes up to brush the water from her eyes. "Do you doubt it?"

Her front teeth dig into her bottom lip, her eyes wide.

I smile. “Don’t. It was perfect. You are fucking perfect.”

She swallows and takes my hand and presses it against the valley between her legs. “I’m always wet for you, Damien. Always.”

I let a finger gently glide between her lips, feeling the blood rush back down to my penis. “I have wanted to do this all day,” I say, leaning over to take her nipple into my mouth.

She instantly moans, and runs her hand through my hair, arching her back.

I love how responsive her nipples are. How I can feel her orgasm build just from my tongue flicking over her hard, pink nipple, how it makes her moan, how it makes her want more, how it makes her almost unhinged.

My teeth come up to gently nibble on the tip of her breast, and she growls, clawing at my back.

“Easy,” I say

“Fuck easy,” she growls and reaches for my cock.

I pull my hips back and continue playing with one nipple between my lips while I pinch the other, and her breaths get shallow and fast.

“Are you ready for me, Kitten?” I whisper, my voice hoarse with lust against her ear, and she mewls. I pull away for just a moment to burn this image of her into my psyche, her eyes filled with begging, her lips bruised from my kisses, wearing nothing but her stilettos in my shower.

She reaches out for my cock again and this time I let her. Her fingers instantly curl around me and pump, hard, fast.

My lips find her neck and I breathe in her scent.

She wore the body butter I left her.

I wonder if she knows, if she knows how long I spent scouring the cosmetic section, inhaling every last cream I could find until I found one that reminds me of her.

If she knows I'd bought one for me as well, and that I'd jacked my cock with it until I was inches from coming.

If she knows I don't come without her anymore.

I want her there, when I come.

On her, in her, with her watching, with her helping.

She needs to be there.

"Oh, My-Linh," I moan as her thumb runs over my tip.

I'm ready.

I move closer, and slide my finger between her legs.

She's ready, too. So fucking ready. I'm careful not to slide my finger inside her. I want my cock to be in there first. Want to feel her tightness. Want to feel her take me. Every inch of me. Mold herself around me. Make her pussy perfect for my cock and only mine.

"Are you ready to be fucked, baby?"

She bites her lip and nods. "Please."

I stop, remembering my plan for tonight. “I’m not going to use a condom. You’re the only one I’m fucking. Do you trust me?”

She doesn’t even hesitate, just crushes my lips with hers, so hard I can taste the tinge of blood and I don’t know if it’s mine or hers but I don’t care. Her need fuels me, and I lift her up by the ass and her legs instantly come up around my hips and I push her up against the wall.

And my cock drives all the way into her, in to the hilt.

She screams into my ear, and I kiss her even harder, swallowing her need.

I hold us still as I feel her pussy tighten and relax as it adapts to my thickness.

I’m inside her. Completely inside. Me and nothing else. Her pussy wrapped around me, without anything between us. She makes a quiet choking noise as if she’s realizing the same thing and I pull away as she closes her eyes, her head against the wall.

“Feel my cock. Feel my cock inside you, baby.”

She just throws her head back, arching against me.

I pull my cock out and drive it back again.

She doesn’t scream this time.

This time she groans, and it comes from somewhere deep inside her, in her very core.

I've unlocked something inside her, and she looks at me through hooded eyes as she wraps her arms around my neck and grinds her hips to meet my thrusts.

Her pussy feels like nothing I've ever felt.

I bite down on her neck and this time I know I've broken her skin, but I can't stop.

My cock pumps into her over and over as she begs me for more.

And I'll give her everything I have.

Every inch of my cock. every ounce of my desire.

I fuck her until I feel her come on me, and still I keep fucking her.

"Baby girl, I never want my cock not inside you," I rasp, and she just nods, squeezing herself on me.

"I'm going to come inside you, is that okay?" I ask, not knowing how I'm going to be able to stop myself if she says no.

But all she does is bite my ear and whisper, "Come inside me. I want you to empty yourself deep inside my pussy that you've made yours and only yours."

Her words push me over the edge. I slam inside her, my cock contracts and then erupts, and I feel my seed soaking her. Stars burst in front of my eyes as I hold myself inside her, her legs wrapped tight around my hips, until I can't stand and I ease her onto the shower floor.

She lays out in front of me, exhausted, her legs falling open, and I crawl between them, dragging my tongue over her bruised but perfect little cunt, lapping at my own come. I spread it over her clit with my tongue until she cries my name and comes again, bucking her hips, smashing her pussy against my face until every last muscle of hers finally starts rippling.

I reach up, turning the water off, and I pull her against me and we lay there, silent in the aftermath, until I feel her skin cover with goose bumps.

She stops me before I get up, with her hand on my chest. “Where are you going?”

“You’re cold. Let me get you a towel.”

“I’m not cold,” she argues and pushes me back down to the ground, pouting.

“Naughty Kitten,” I chuckle and press a kiss to her head, a warm sense of tenderness filling my ribcage. “I’ll be right back. It’s just over there,” I say, pointing to the towel on the other side of the shower door as I push myself to my feet.

“Fine,” she pouts and rolls over onto her stomach.

“What?” I say, when I notice she’s staring at me,

“Do you just...walk around looking perfect all the time?” she asks and sits up when I come back, wrapping the towel around her. “Ooh, it’s warm,” she coos and wraps it even tighter around her.

“What are you talking about?” I say, pulling my robe on.



“You! All chiseled Greek statue like. Walking around, breaking hearts wherever you go.”

I snort. “I assure you. I am not breaking any hearts,” I say and hold my hand out to her.

She kicks her shoes off and stands up, and lets me dry her off as she keeps talking.

“You’re on Raquel’s Hall Pass. I bet you’re on half the lists of the women in the office.”

“Isn’t she married?” I ask, rubbing the towel over her inner thighs.

She slaps me gently on the back. “That’s what Hall Pass means, silly man! It means her husband has to let her sleep with you without getting mad.”

“That’s messed up!”

“Do you really have no idea what I’m talking about?”

I grin and she slaps me again.

“Bastard.”

“Your boob bounces when you slap me, you know.”

She grins. “I do.”

“Witch.”

She throws her head back and cackles, filling the bathroom and my entire apartment with her laugh as she skips through it, jumping on my bed and sliding between the sheets.

“You’ve had this giant bed this whole time and you keep fucking me on the floor or in the bathroom?”

“You invited yourself into the bathroom,” I remind her, pulling my robe off.

“I did. But you didn’t seem to mind.”

“Anything but,” I assure her, feeling like she might need it.

I slip into bed next to her and pull her into my arms. I want to be touching her, I just always want to be touching her.

A happy little noise escapes and she cocoons herself in the pile of my pillows.

“Where did you go running before?” she asks once she’s settled.

“Nowhere special, just around the Sydney Uni grounds.”

She makes a happy noise. “Oh, the campus is so pretty. Sometimes I just go there to have a picnic or something.”

“You’re not sick of it after all this time?”

“Not at all! The campus is actually why I chose to go there. I was accepted into the University of Canberra and Christchurch as well.”

“New Zealand? You applied there?”

She nods, and punches the pillow behind her head, fluffing it up more. “I did. I figured it wasn’t too far from home but still a new experience.”

I understand what she means.

She continues. “But I decided to stay in Sydney. It’s home and that’s what I wanted. At least for now.”

“Do you think you’ll ever move away?”

“I hope so. I don’t love the idea of being stuck in one place for the rest of my life, but I also don’t know how I’ll ever leave, so it’s a bit of a conundrum. What about you, where’s home for you?”

I’ve never had to consider that before. No one’s ever asked me and I’ve certainly never spent any time pondering it.

“Oh, well. I’ve lived all over. I was born in England but I’ve lived in Paris, New York, Tokyo...”

“Damien,” she says, like she’s a kindergarten teacher and I’m a naughty four-year-old who won’t go down for a nap. “You’re just listing cities.”

“I’m thinking,” I argue, laughing. “I, wow, I...don’t have an answer for you.”

She frowns and buries her face into my chest. “That’s sad.”

I pull her closer, running my fingertip down her bare back. “Is it?”

“Everyone needs a home.”

“I like this apartment.”

She sighs. “That’s not the same thing. If you’re anywhere in the world, is this the place you want to come home to?”

“I guess it’s okay.”

“Ugh,” she groans “We’re going to have to work on it.”

We sink into silence and I ponder what she's said. Where is the one place I crave to return to when I'm far from it? I chose to be based in Australia for an important reason, but it's not because it's home. The longer I'm here, though, it certainly feels like the place I'm most comfortable.

A loud rumbling echoes through the room and I'm startled out of my thoughts.

My-Linh's face burns red and she burrows under the blanket.

"What was that?!" I shout, barely able to hold back my laughter.

"I'm hungry, okay?! Someone took up so much of my time kissing and sexting with me, I didn't have a lunch break!"

"Oh, well, we better rectify that, or else you'll report me to HR and I might get a spanking."

She pokes her head out from under the blanket like an adorable little wombat, eyes sparkling. "Maybe I should report you anyway."

I throw the blanket off her, and slap her on the ass.

"Not a chance. I'll be the only one doing the spanking here. Now get up and get dressed and I'll take you out."

She scrunches her face up.

"You don't want to go?" I ask, surprised.

She shrugs. "I'm not really in the mood to sit in a restaurant."

“I can order something in? What do you feel like?”

She grins and flicks her eyes to my groin and I can't help laughing at her bravado. “Oh, don't worry, there will be another helping of that. I'm nowhere near done with you,” I half promise, half threaten, leaning over and kissing her deeply.

She releases a sigh. “Oh, I know!” She jumps up and runs into my walk-in wardrobe and comes out dressed in one of my shirts with a belt around her waist. “Get dressed, Mr. Baxter.”

“Where are we going?”

“You'll see,” she responds cryptically, and runs out of the room, the shirt billowing up to show me her ass.



# SIXTEEN

*My-Linh*

“WE COULD’VE ORDERED IN,” Damien says, eyeing the strange produce with a screwed up face.

“We could’ve but it won’t be as good. Trust me,” I say, digging deep down in the Styrofoam box.

He pokes the bag of frozen chopped lemongrass I’ve just thrown into the basket he’s carrying. “I’m not sure I should trust you.”

“Yo! Heads-up!”

He looks up just in time to catch the ginger root I’ve thrown at him. He gives it a sniff before dropping it into the basket. “Hmmm, this smells pretty good.”

“Glad you think so, your apartment is about to smell of it soon.”

He follows me dutifully around the Asian grocery store carrying the increasingly heavy basket. Occasionally I catch

him leaning over to look at the items on the shelf as I run around picking up the things I need for a meal.

“What’s that?” he asks, pointing to a long white vegetable.

“That’s daikon radish.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of that.”

I nod. “Yeah, you’ve probably had it shaved when you eat sashimi. Or pickled.”

“Oh yeah, that’s what it is. I like it.”

“Then we’ll have it! Pick one out!”

He eyes me and takes a big step back from the bucket of radishes. “How?”

I laugh. “Well, let’s start with instinct. What do you think looks good?”

“Um, that one?” He points to one sticking out.

“Why?”

“It’s the biggest!” he admits.

I laugh. “Works for me, we’ll take that monster cock one!”

“My-Linh!” he scolds, looking around.

“What?” I grab the radish and poke him in the stomach with it. The radish bounces back, jarring my arm. “Ow! Maybe cool it with those ab crunches. You’re going to hurt someone with it.”

He grabs the radish and pokes me back with it before putting it in the basket. “What are you going to make with it?”



“Not sure yet, maybe do a quick pickle and put some in the broth.”

He doesn't protest, just asks a few more questions about the other products in the store. We turn into the snacks aisle and his eyes almost bug out of his head.

“What. Is. All This?!” he exclaims, leaning right up close to the shelves covered in all sorts of multicolored bags and containers.

“Um, just literal heaven. It's all sorts of snacks! Do you like roasted seaweed?”

He blinks. “I don't know.”

“What about wasabi covered peanuts?”

More blinking. “I don't know.”

“Well, after tonight you won't be able to say that again.”

He murmurs something and points to a small cardboard box with a picture of some chocolate covered sticks on it. “What's that?”

I stare at him, then take out my phone and google something. “Is this right?” I ask, showing him the article on the screen.

*Damien Baxter, worth 12.9 billion dollars, takes over the Australia and Oceanic Division of Baxter Industries, the headline says.*

He rolls his eyes. “Give or take a few million depending on the hour. But it's about right.”

“You’re worth almost thirteen billion dollars and you haven’t had Pocky?”

He frowns. “What’s Pocky?”

“It’s that thing you’re pointing at.”

He looks back at the shelf with the Japanese chocolate covered pretzel sticks. “Oh, then no, I’ve never had them.”

I sigh and sweep my arm over the shelf, pushing all seven flavors they have into the basket. “You won’t be able to say that again tonight either.”

“It’s a big day for me. First I come in your mouth. Then your sweet little pussy,” he whispers. “And then I get to try Pokey.”

“Pocky. And trust me, it will make coming in my mouth a distant memory,” I say, even though I already feel a pulse in my pussy remembering it.

“Not a chance.” He drops the basket on the floor and pulls me in close, kissing me until I’m out of breath. “Okay, where to now?” he asks, picking up the basket.

I shake my head, trying to recover from the kiss. “I think I have everything. Let’s go. Hope you’re hungry!”



*Damien*

SHE WAS RIGHT.

My entire apartment smells like ginger now. I don't think it's ever smelled that way before and I'm wondering what else I've been missing. My usually immaculate tidy kitchen bench is strewn with all the bags from the Asian grocer and My-Linh's dancing in front of the stove to the music she had me put on, grabbing things out of the bags, opening them and then throwing them back onto the bench.

I have been relegated to music and drinks duty and been told, in no uncertain terms, that I am not to touch nor stir anything.

Something about too many billionaires spoiling the broth or something.

Apparently one billionaire is all it takes. One billionaire who doesn't know how to cook, anyway.

"Wine or cocktail?" I ask from my drinks trolley.

"Red for dinner, cocktail for pre-dinner cooking dance party," she calls out.

I shake my head. Can't accuse her of being someone who doesn't know what she wants.

Into a shaker, I pour a little Luxardo maraschino liqueur, some gin, squeeze some lime juice, and a tiny splash of rosewater. I give it a light shake and then pour it into a coupe glass, adding a curl of lime zest to the glass.

I wander over to the kitchen bench and she runs up, pointing the spatula at me.

"Halt! Who goes there!"

“He who owns it, ma’am! And I come bearing gifts!”

She thinks about it for a moment and lowers her weapon.

“I just brought you your cocktail,” I say, holding one of the glasses out to her.

“Oh! It looks delicious!” She flings the spatula down onto the bench and takes the glass from me. She gives it a little sniff and then tips a little into her mouth. “Oh my god, Damien, that’s delicious.”

I beam.

“What’s it called?” she asks, licking her lips.

“It’s a Kitten.”

She looks confused, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it.”

“I just made it up. This is what you taste like to me. Sweet and fresh. Complex. Sexy.”

She flushes but tries to hide it behind her glass.

“You taste like all these things and more,” I whisper and run my tongue over her lips.

I taste my cocktail on her, but there’s something more, something only she can add to the flavor. Something I’ve become addicted to.

I grab her around the waist to lift her onto the bench, ignoring her squeals about spilling the drink, and drop to my knees. She’s still wearing my shirt but completely naked underneath.

I gently part her pussy lips with the tip of my finger until she's open, spread, her clit pink and plump, ready to be sucked.

The tip of my tongue flicks over it and she moans.

"I never stop thinking about doing this, Kitten. Never. You need to know that."

And then I stop talking, getting lost in the way she sounds, the way she moves, the way she tastes.

I glide a finger as far as it will go inside her, and she writhes on the bench as my tongue circles her clit. Round and round and round. Slow and regular, over and over and over. Her breath is heavy but steady.

She's getting too comfortable.

I pull my finger out and add another, driving two fingers inside her, and she cries out, her legs pressing against each other, trapping my head, and I press my tongue hard against her pulsing clit.

"Fuck. Oh god, Fuck!" she shouts.

I mash my tongue against her, as hard as I can, as I pump my fingers in and out of her, wishing it was my cock.

*Later*, I promise myself. This is about her.

My fingers curls upward, grazing against the upper side of her pussy, and she lets out sounds I haven't heard before.

"I'm coming, Damien, I'm coming so fucking hard." she groans, and I surround her clit with my lips, my hands digging

into her ass as she writhes.

She comes. She comes for me, and my fingers are coated with her sweetness. I pull them out and suck on them as she watches, breathless.

“Fuck, Damien.”

“Later. You owe me dinner.”

She laughs and lays back on the bench. I lift her legs up onto the bench, bending them at the knee, and she falls open, her pussy exposed to me.

I haven't had enough.

I bend over and lick her, all the way along her pussy opening and up to her clit.

She whimpers each time my tongue makes contact with her little button. And it makes my cock so hard.

“I thought I owed you dinner,” she pants.

“This is my appetizer.”

Her clit is slippery under my fingertip as my tongue rims her sweet little cunt. God, she tastes so good.

I flick her clit as my tongue dips in and out of her.

“I could do this all day,” I rasp.

“I'm not complaining,” she pants. “Before you, I was...I was...never been eaten out like this before.”

I'm so surprised, I have to stop. “What do you mean?”

“I mean what I said. I mean, I experienced it a little but... nothing like the way you do it. I guess I never really felt comfortable completely letting go. Like I felt he was just doing it because he felt he had to.”

“But, baby, you have the most perfect little pussy I’ve ever had the pleasure of snacking on. How could any man not be spending every hour of his day between your legs?” I ask, genuinely confused about what I’m hearing.

She shrugs, her face sad. “I didn’t know. He was too busy being between someone else’s legs.”

I can’t be hearing her right. So I just tell her how I feel. “Kitten, I could lose myself between your legs for the rest of my life.”

The look she gives me tears at my heart and hardens my cock all at once.

“Make me come again, Damien. With your mouth. Please?”

The please comes out like a tortured whisper, and in that moment I have no other aim in life than to make her come again with my mouth. Worship her until she knows I mean every single word.

My fingers run up and down the skin of her upper thighs, they’re smooth like the softest, most luxurious silk I’ve felt and I kiss every inch of her inner thighs until they’re quivering under my lips and then, and only then, do I let my mouth wander back to her pussy. I lay a soft kiss against her glistening opening. And she makes a gentle begging sound.

“Please,” she begs me again. “Make me come again, Damien.”

The tip of my fingertip presses against her clit and her back immediately arches.

She needs more. And I’m going to give it to her. I’m going to give her everything.

I press a little hard against her clit, short little flicks, with just my fingertip, until her breath gets shallow and I pull away and plunge my tongue inside her.

“Oh my god!” Her screams echo around me and I lap at her pussy until I have to hold her down on the bench, my tongue coming up to lick fast and hard against her, pushing her closer and closer to the edge.

Just when I feel like she can’t take any more, I pull back, kissing the dip where her legs bend into the curve of her pussy lips.

“Damien...please...I can’t take any more...”

“Yes you can,” I tell her, “a little more.”

“No, god, please...oh fuck!” she yells, my tongue pressing flat against her clit again.

So close. And then I pull away again.

“Oh god...” she almost sobs.

“Easy, kitten, I don’t want to ever hear that you’ve never been eaten out properly again.”

“Just let me come.... please?”



“Where do you want to come, My-Linh? Tell me.”

“I don’t care,” she whimpers.

“Not the right answer, baby.”

She grunts and then screams, “On your face, Damien. Please, make me come on your face.”

Even if I want to, I can’t hold her off any longer, I need to hear her come.

I pump a finger into her sweet little hole and flick her clit as fast and as hard as I can with my tongue.

She screams and comes almost instantly. I pull my finger out and cram my tongue back inside, mashing my face against her.

*Come for me, baby,* I urge her in my head. *Give me everything you’ve got.*

She thrashes, grinding her pussy on my face, her sweetness flooding my mouth, and I suck her until there’s nothing left.

I drag my tongue up to her clit and she jerks, chokes on her breath.

Then I kiss her pussy until she’s quiet and still.

It’s a solid few minutes before she struggles up onto her elbows, looking down at me, my face shining with sweat and her cum.

“I think my food is burnt” she says and I laugh as she collapses back on the bench.



“CAN I HAVE SOME more of that, please?”

“Which one?” she asks, pointing to the picnic on the floor in front of us. “The chicken or the rice?”

“Yes,” I say, with a grin, holding out my bowl.

*Bowl, specifically, not plate.*

“No self-respecting Asian person would eat rice off a plate,” My-Linh scolded me when I “set” the picnic with forks and plates and sent me back to the kitchen to find some bowls.

I’d managed to scrounge up some disposable chopsticks from a take-out dinner from who-knows-when, but it had been enough to please her. I would eat any of the food in front of me with nothing but my hands though, it’s so delicious.

In the time it took me to mix a few cocktails, lay out a blanket and some cutlery and plates that wouldn’t be used, not to mention eat her out to within an inch of her life, she’s thrown together one of the most delicious meals I’ve ever eaten.

“Is there a single piece of kitchen equipment you don’t have?” she’d squealed as she’d pulled out tools I didn’t even know I had, let alone how to use. The previous tenant of the apartment had been a great cook. The most I ever use my kitchen for is to make coffee and heat up leftovers.

“Can I use this?” She’d waved something that looked like a medieval torture device.

“I don’t know what it is, but if you know how to use it, go for it. You can use anything you want,” I’d said as I’d popped the bottle of wine, a bottle of 2008 Ares, Two Hands’ flagship Shiraz. I’d pretty much cleaned out their cellar of the vintage when I’d been to the little boutique winery on my last trip to the Barossa Valley.

If there is any advantage of living in Australia, it’s the wine.

I refill her already empty glass as she fills my bowl with some more of the jasmine rice and chili lemongrass chicken stir-fry she’d made. There’s also a steaming bowl of pork rib broth filled with shredded daikon radish and spiced with impossibly thin matchsticks of ginger. A smattering of coriander and shallots pepper the surface, making it look as fragrant and fresh as it tastes.

In another bowl she has some pickled daikon radish and carrot she said to eat with the paper-thin slices of steamed pork belly.

“Or you can also dip it into the soy sauce,” she’d directed.

And I’d done it all.

“Why aren’t you a chef?” I say through another mouthful of food.

“What do you mean?” she asks as she takes a sip of the broth out of her bowl, unashamedly slurping and giving me a big grin.

“This food is magical.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “I don’t know any Vietnamese person who couldn’t throw together a meal like this. This is what we call ‘com bình dân’, peasant food in Vietnam. There are hundreds and thousands of stalls like this lining every street in Vietnamese cities.”

I shake my head. “Crazy. I bet Kylian would love this.”

“Where is he anyway?”

“Who knows. I haven’t seen him since I kicked him out of my booth at the club last night.”

She expertly picks up a single piece of pork belly from the plate and dips it in the sauce bowl. “He’s not staying here with you?”

“I mean, he can. He has a security key but I imagine he’s impressing some girl with the penthouse at the Baxter Hotel,” I say.

“Oh my god,” she groans and smacks her forehead.

“What?” I ask, trying to hide the fact that it’s taken me at least three tries to pick up some of the slippery pickle with my chopsticks.

“I just realized the Baxter Hotel is probably owned by you.”

I laugh. “Very astute of you.”

“I’m an idiot,” she sighs. “What else do you own?”

I give up trying with my chopsticks and pinch some of the pickle with my fingertips and pop it straight into my mouth,

which gets an approving grin from My-Linh. “Me personally or Baxter Enterprises?”

“Is there a difference?”

“Oh yeah. I personally own properties that tickle my fancy for reasons I can’t explain. Baxter Enterprises owns business and properties that tickle its fiscal fancy.”

She nods and pops a piece of the lemongrass chicken into her mouth and chews, thoughtful.

“What about you?” I ask.

“Er, well, where do I start? I own a scooter that works sometimes and six years’ worth of textbooks.”

“And your family? Your parents?” I ask, realizing how little about her I know other than she fucks and cooks like a demon.

“Mortgaged house, refinanced six years ago, and we rent the storefront of our tea store.”

I put down my bowl and reach for the wineglass. “Are they happy?”

“My family?”

I nod.

She smiles and her whole body relaxes into the expression. “Oh yeah, we’re happy. Yours?”

I grimace. “You’re not going to like this answer...I don’t know.”

She doesn’t argue or judge.

I quickly move on though, before she can dwell on it too much. “So, is that why you’re going into business, so can you establish the billion-dollar Tran Enterprises?”

She almost chokes on her wine. “God, no. That sounds like literal hell to me.”

I laugh. “Why? Isn’t that why people go into business, to become a captain of industry?”

“Damien, while I don’t judge anyone whatsoever for choosing that goal for their lives, that is the absolute last thing from my mind when I majored in Business.”

I’m intrigued. “Then why?”

She smiles again, and I know whatever she’s about to say is coming directly from her heart. “I hope to apply what I’ve learned to help non-government and not-for-profit organizations run in more efficient ways to increase their funds. It’s a very fine line to straddle between running a business and running an organization that needs money but that isn’t at the core of its mission.”

“What you’re saying is admirable, but I don’t know if it can be done. If you’re running any kind of business then the bottom line is the most important thing. Money rules everything.”

“That’s why these types of organizations need a more fiscal approach, without losing their soul. I’m not saying a charity is ever going to earn billions, but there are ways to make more money for their causes using established business models,

without the bottom line being the be-all and end-all of their operations.”

“I’m not sure that can be done,” I repeat.

She sits up, her back straight, her eyes defiant. “It can be. And ethically.”

“And how does that happen?”

“By installing ethical people to start off with,” she says, matter-of-factly.

I muse on it. “And you think you know who those people are.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I can see them with my heart,” she says with absolute confidence.

And I reply in kind. “I believe you, Kitten.”



*My-Linh*

WE FINISH OUR MEAL in a few minutes of silence. I can see my words have given him something to think about.

Finally, I put my bowl down and rub my full belly. “Ugh, I ate too much.”

He laughs. “You’ve said that after every meal we’ve had.”

“I mean it after every meal!”

He reaches for the bowl of broth, it only has about two mouthfuls left in it.

“Just drink it out of the bowl,” I say. “It will make you an honorary Vietnamese person for the day.”

He looks at me and then at the bowl and tips it into his mouth with a satisfying slurp and then slams the bowl down with an exaggerated “Aahhhh.”

I giggle. “See? Tastes better that way sometimes.”

He rubs his own belly and groans, “I ate too much.”

I shuffle over so that I’m pressed up against him, laying my head on his shoulder. “Then the cook is happy.”

He kisses my forehead and reaches for his wineglass.

“So, can I ask you a question?” I ask.

“Other than why haven’t I eaten Pokey?”

“It’s *Pocky*, Damien! You said your grandfather passed away a few years ago?”

“Almost three years now.”

“Were you close?”

He nods. “As close as any of us are to anyone, I guess. He pretty much raised us all for a while.”

“Why?”

He frowns and takes a sip of his wine, nursing it in his mouth before swallowing and responding. “My parents



divorced when I was ten.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” No wonder he’s been so coy about whether his family is happy or not.

“It’s okay. It was...a long time ago.”

I don’t want to push, but I wonder how much of what happened is why he is the way he is now.

“My mother left,” he continues. “My father didn’t take it very well.”

I’m afraid to ask. “Are they...?”

“Both still alive?” he finishes.

“Yes.”

He settles so his back is against the couch, then tells me about how his father had all but disappeared after their mother left. Disappeared from their lives, from the company, and their grandparents were really their only true constant during the whole time.

“And as much as we loved our grandparents, experiencing it from our perspective is something only the four of us know and understand. For example, Kingsley, who’s seven years older than me, experienced it so differently from me. I know he still carries around a lot of guilt. It was so rough on him.”

I shake my head. The things that parents do for and to their children.

“You said your brothers are the directors of the other regional divisions and—”

“Our uncle is the CEO. Well, interim.”

“Well, what about your father? And other grandchildren?”

“Over time the rest of the family sold their shares either to my grandfather or other shareholders. So my father, uncle and brothers and I were the main beneficiaries of my grandfather’s 65% stake. My uncle doesn’t have any children and well, my father doesn’t work for the company anymore.”

“Does that make you sad for him?”

“Not at all. He’s different from us.”

I wait for him to elaborate but he doesn’t, I know it’s already more than he would normally share. He looks out the window, in quiet thought, so I take the chance to stack our used bowls on top of each other and skip out to the kitchen to grab the bags of snacks.

“Chocolate, strawberries and cream, or matcha?” I say, holding up the options as I skip back to the couch.

He smiles and points to the box in the middle and watches me with quiet eyes as I tear open the bag and pull out the long thin plastic tray.

“This, Mr. Billionaire Damien Baxter, is Pocky.” I pick up one of the sticks covered in the pink colored chocolate and feed it to him.

He takes a bite of it and chews, and I watch as he tries to make sense of it, then his eyes light up. “Those are delicious!”

“Yes, Mr. Billionaire. They are. And now you know what causes fights in *my* family.”

He grabs the tray out of my hand and I respond by straddling over him and digging my fingers into his sides until he realizes he’s much stronger than me, and I’m the one on the floor in a pile of giggles.



### *Damien*

HER HEAD IS HEAVY on my chest as her breathing slows and deepens.

My fingers continue to draw little shapes over the silky smooth skin of her bare back, not wanting her to waken if I stop.

It’s past 3 a.m., and I’ve finally let her rest. Her body must be wrecked. The moonlight shines on her upturned face; she really looks like an angel. I drop a soft kiss onto her lips and she stirs.

“Damien,” she murmurs in her sleep.

“Shhh, just sleep, baby,” I whisper, pulling the blanket up over us both.

“Okay, thank you for a lovely evening,” she says sleepily and falls back to sleep.

“My pleasure, baby girl. My absolute pleasure,” I say as I feel my eyes also start to close.

And when I sleep, I dream of her.



*My-Linh*

“YOU CAN LET ME out here, please,” I say to Roger when the car is within two blocks of the Baxter Enterprises building.”

“Just go straight to the building, Roger.”

“Roger, I’m going to get out in ten seconds whether you stop the car or not. And then we can see who you’re really taking orders from,” I say, scowling.

“Yes, Miss Tran,” he says, looking at me in the rearview mirror and biting back a smile.

“My-Linh. It’s fine if you get out of the car with me,” Damien says.

“Shush,” I say, kissing him softly. “This is better. I’ll see you at the office.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re so bossy.”

“You can’t talk! You’re the bossiest person I know.”

“I *am* the boss,” he huffs.

“We’ll see about that. Have a good day. Roger, don’t let him boss you around too much. Let me know if he does.”

“Will do, ma’am.”

I climb out of the car and feel the breeze in my hair, and as I close the door I hear Damien say to Roger, “Oh, stop smiling and get me to the office, old man.”

From: POS

To: Kitten

You forgot something when you got out of the car.

From: Kitten

To: POS

What’s that?

From: POS

To: Kitten

A kiss.

From: Kitten

To: POS

Well, I didn’t want to be presumptuous but next time I see Roger I promise to give him two kisses to make up for today.

From: POS

To: Kitten

You really do need a spanking

From: Kitten  
To: POS  
From you or Roger?

From: POS  
To: Kitten  
You're fired.

From: POS  
To: Kitten  
I take it back.  
I miss you.

From: Kitten  
To: POS  
I miss you too.

From: POS  
To: Kitten  
Shit.

From: Kitten  
To: POS  
ROTFLMBO

From: POS  
To: Kitten  
Gesundheit.



# SEVENTEEN

*Damien*

“YOU’RE SMILING AGAIN,” KYLIAN says as he strolls into my office as I’m texting with My-Linh.

“Well, I’m a happy, cheerful guy. Unlike you, stranger.”

I’ve barely seen him in the last few days except for when he pops into the office for a few hours to get some work done. I’m not entirely convinced that I am the reason he came to Sydney in the first place.

He pulls Melissa’s office chair over and parks it next to me, staring at the screen.

“We started?” he says, referring to our weekly Wednesday vent session.

“Nope, they’re late as usual.”

“Do you even have anything to vent about?” he asks, popping a piece of chewing gum into his mouth.



“Of course.”

“Is it that your girlfriend’s legs don’t bend backwards all the way?”

I frown at him. “I don’t *have* a girlfriend.”

“Where were you last night?” he asks with his left eyebrow raised.

“At home.”

“With...?”

“My-Linh.”

“And the night before? And while we’re at it...the night before that as well?”

“I was at home, Kylian.”

“*With...?*”

I blink. “I sense that you’re trying to make some sort of point.”

The grin he gives me is the same cheeky one he’s had his whole life. “My point is that you, my dear brother, have a girlfriend.”

“Woah, what?” Mathias’s face appears on screen as he rubs his eyes and pats down his hair.

“Dude, you look like a mess!” I can’t help exclaiming.

He growls. “Don’t mind me, what’s this about you having a girlfriend?”

“Don’t listen to him. He’s talking shit out of his ass,” I scoff.

“That’s where shit comes out of it, douchebag,” Kylian shouts.

“So, who is she?” Kingsley asks, having popped in unannounced.

“Guys, relax. I don’t have a girlfriend. I’m just hanging out with a woman, okay? Nothing serious. She knows what the situation is.”

Mathias looks unsure. “You sure? They always say they know, but they don’t.”

“Trust me, she knows.”

Kylian glances at me and blurts out, “He’s been with her four nights in a row.”

“Fuck! Damien!” both of my other brothers yell.

I shrug it off. “What can I say? She can’t get enough of me, and I’m in no position to deny her.”

Kingsley leans in, looking serious. “I’m glad you have someone to distract you though. Things aren’t looking up for you, buddy boy.”

I frown. “What are you talking about?”

“I hear rumblings Gerard is up to something,” he explains.

I shake my head. “He told me he wasn’t going to do anything until the AGM in December.”

“Let’s hope you’re right.”

“Anyway, what can he do? We have most of the board wrapped up tight.”

“For now. December’s a long way away.”

Mathias nods in agreement. “Not to mention, there’s always that one loose cannon...”

“I’m hoping the one thing we can count on is that Terry Masters is going to put business ahead of family.”

Kingsley sighs. “Let’s hope so.”

Kylian tunes back into the conversation. “Anyway, back to Damien’s girlfriend. She’s super cute and sweet. Although I think she prefers me.”

The coffee mug I throw at his head only barely misses him.



*My-Linh*

I SPEND ALMOST EVERY spare second Damien has with him over the next few weeks.

One night he even has me come over when his brother is there and we enjoy a hotpot sitting on the floor of his apartment. There’s an array of seafood sourced from where he won’t tell me. But it comes in containers with the logo of a very prestigious Sydney Harbor restaurant on them.

“Let’s just say, I made it worth their while to share some of their secretly sourced products with me,” Kylian says with a wink.

“That’s his way of saying he threatened to raise the rent on their premises if they didn’t give him some of their scallops,” Damien explains.

“Is Kylian the most good-looking out of all your brothers?” I tease him later that night as he pulls me on top of him.

“He’s not even the most good-looking out of the two of us!” he growls and punishes me by biting down on my nipple.

I giggle and yelp at the same time. “I’m just kidding. I don’t see anyone else when I’m with you,” I moan, rocking my hips over his hardness as he reaches under and rubs my clit.

“Good. I only want you to have eyes for me.”

“Is that the only organ of mine that you want for your own?”

His pupils darken and widen, and I fall headlong into them.

He scoots back on the bed, so that he’s sitting up, his back against the headboard, his hands under my ass, taking me with him. His hand tangles in my hair as he pulls my head down to his as he kisses me.

“You tell me,” he growls as he slides into me.

There’s no question there’s no one else for me.

And I’m too scared to ask him if he feels the same way about me.



I'M MORE THAN HALFWAY through my two-month stint at Baxter, and I'm already starting to miss when I won't be here anymore. I still haven't told anyone why I'm really there, and every time Raquel talks about our futures at the company, I'm wracked with guilt.

"Do you think this Berry Blast campaign is any good?" she asks as we come back from the latest of a string of meetings about the new mascot and logo for Wattle Foods' range of berry fruit drinks.

"It's a good campaign for a new product," I say.

"But not necessarily for one that has been a staple in Australian homes for decades."

"Bingo."

"Was that part of our brief, though?"

"If it wasn't, shouldn't it have been?"

She snorts. "That's above my pay grade."

"Girl, then why are you asking me? Your pay grade couldn't even see mine with a high-grade microscope," I giggle.

"You'll be up on the higher floors before the end of the year. You have creative vision. I'm just good at the grunt work."

I frown and hug her around the shoulders. "Hey, that's not true."

Her smile is sad, defeated. It breaks my heart that she feels this way. Raquel has an instinctive feel for what makes an all-round effective campaign and universally liked, and while she might not be the one coming up with ideas, that's only part of the job.

“I hope this is just a today thing, and you don't really feel this way about your work.”

“I don't know, just lately, I've been questioning whether this is the right place for me. I mean, working for a conglomerate that's just slowly swallowing up companies like Wattle Foods? Is that what I've always wanted to do? Is it really the right example for my kids?”

I don't really have much to offer, having said the same thing myself to, not just anyone, one of the directors of the company.

“I'm just going to say this,” I say, squeezing her hand. “You need to go where you feel like your skills are valued. Whatever they are, and wherever that may be. And if it's not here, then I'll help you find where it is.”

“Huddle time, ladies,” Virginia says, knocking on the partition.

The meeting's fast and ends with Damien giving everyone a pep talk about the final stages of the Berry Blast campaign.

“I just want to thank the marketing department for all the extra hours they've put in lately. Let's put the finishing touches on this thing, and remind consumers why they spent

the better part of their childhood years squeezing every last drop out of this brand of juice boxes, shall we?”

There’s a cheer and I can’t help getting caught up in it all. It isn’t the campaign I’d run, but based on what was asked of us, I think we’ve done the best job we could’ve and I feel an enormous sense of pride and camaraderie with my coworkers.

“Oh, Miss Tran, I’d also like you to spend the rest of the week down on 8th please. They’re expecting you,” Damien says as he passes me on the way back to his office.

I frown. What’s on 8th?

I send him a confused look and he just gives me a smile.

From: Kitten

To: POS

What’s on 8th?

From: POS

To: Kitten

You’ll see. Don’t be late.

From: Kitten

To” POS:

Did I ever tell you that you’re really bossy?

From: POS

To: Kitten

You didn't seem to mind when I told  
you to get on your knees last night.

When I arrive, I'm surprised to find the 8th floor is dedicated to a department I didn't even realize existed at Baxter Enterprises—their community outreach program.

“We currently have founded or been part of over thirty outreach programs and community events in the last eighteen months,” Sarah Chapman, the manager of the outreach department, tells me. Her effervescence is immediately contagious as she talks at two-hundred miles an hour, her enormous mass of brown curls that she holds up with three pencils stuck in various parts of her messy bun bouncing as she walks. Motivational posters and community events plaster every inch of her walls and there's almost nowhere to stand, let alone sit. Not that she cares. She hasn't stopped walking and talking in the fifteen minutes that I've been down here, jogging from one room to another, files flying in all directions, her socked feet a blur under her.

I'm breathless just trying to keep up with her.

“What's your most successful program?” I ask, as I grab a stack of fliers fresh from the printer.

“Well, I'm not sure it's the most successful, but my favorite is the Horticulture program.”

I fold the fliers in thirds. “Oh, what's that?”



“We’ve coordinated a six-month course at the local homeless shelter for those who are interested in gardening. They come out of it with a certificate III in Landscaping and, together with Job Search Australia, we’ve found a lot of work for the graduates at a lot of businesses in the city. We actually hire six of those graduates right here.”

“Here?” I look around. How much work is it to water a few plants?

“Yeah, for the terrace garden. That was actually installed just after I got here, after the first group graduated from the landscaping program and Mr. Baxter decided we should put our money where our mouth is.”

“The terrace hasn’t always been there?”

She pulls a pen out of her buns and jots down some notes on her palm. “Oh no. Mr. Baxter, Damien Baxter that is, had it installed. He said he liked to have somewhere for the employees to spend their lunches if they didn’t want to leave the building or spend it downstairs at the restaurant. Have you been up there?”

I nod, flushing at the memory of the first time I was there, not to mention our tryst out there just last night after everyone in the office had left. “It’s beautiful. It looks like an award winning garden.”

“It *is* award winning. Just not in the way you think.” Sarah winks and points at a small plaque on her wall that reads “Best Community Outreach Program 2021, awarded to Baxter Enterprises for service to the community.”

I shake my head, shocked. “I had no idea.”

“Community outreach is very important to Mr. Baxter. And he tells me you feel the same way. He asked if I minded if you shadowed me today. I can always use some help. We’ve been trying to hire a few people for months. It hasn’t been easy finding people.”

I stuff the fliers into the addressed envelopes that Sarah hands me. “Really? Who wouldn’t want to work here?”

She laughs, and it’s warm and from the belly. “People who have a very different plan for the trajectory of their corporate career.”

That I understood. “Was this always your plan?”

She laughs again, this time so hard she lets out a big snort. “God no. I was just as much a money driven workaholic as the rest of them. But things happen and your perspectives change. Not everyone starts out where you already are.”

“Who knows! Maybe I’ll become money driven as well.”

“Not a chance. And I mean that in the best way.” She pats my hand and sinks to the floor, tying a rubber band around the finished envelopes. She picks up two files and waves them at me. “So, what next? You want to make some calls to find sponsors for the open mic day at the soup kitchen, or brainstorm ideas of what to do for the Autumn carnival in a few months?”

I grin and take both files from her.

“Someone order us some nachos, we’ve got a lot of work to do!” she yells and there are cheers all around the floor.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject: Re: Re: Thank you!

And did you know that Sarah actually worked for a year in a Sudanese orphanage? How cool is that?! Anyway, she loves the ideas that I came up with for the open mic night at the soup kitchen. We’re going to call it Soup and Songs! What do you think? Although, maybe we shouldn’t limit it to songs since people might want to do stand-up or something. What do you think? And did I tell you, she’s going to let me come with her to open the Youth Center in Redfern tomorrow! I’m so excited. I mean, if it’s okay with you. You said I was shadowing her this week, so I didn’t think it would matter that I won’t be in the marketing department.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Thank you!

Kitten?

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Thank you!  
Yes, Damien?

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Thank  
you!  
You are adorable.



*Damien*

I CAN'T STOP THINKING about her.

The only time I'm not thinking about her is when I'm thinking about not being able to think about her. It's not a good sign that I can't keep thoughts of her infiltrating every single fucking second of every day, but there's nothing I can do to stop it.

When I'm not with her, I'm thinking of the next time I can be with her.

And if I don't know when that is, I have to stop myself telling Melissa to clear my schedule so I know when I'm going

to see her, be with her, kiss her, hold her, make love to her next.

Fuck.

Damien!

“Make love to her?”

I’m fucked.

And there’s nothing I can do about it and I’m not sure I want to do anything about it.

I know, though, I know this is all going to end with me burning in an uncontrollable inferno.

If I don’t stop it, I’m going to be taking her with me.



“STOP WRIGGLING,” I TELL her, as she presses her cold feet against my shins. “We both have to be up in three hours. Are you going to make me show up to my meeting looking like some succubus has sucked the lifeblood right out of me?”

“That’s one way to describe what I did,” she giggles against my chest and the sound vibrates through my entire being.

I pull her in even tighter, but it’s like it’s never close enough. “I finish early tomorrow night.”

“You’ve been saying that a lot lately,” she says.

“Just lucky, I guess.”

Melissa wouldn't think so, considering she's the one who's having to juggle my schedule and for the first time ever being told that 7 p.m. meetings are too late.

"What do you want to do?" I ask her, running my fingers along her shoulder blade.

She gives my jaw a little nibble.

"Other than that, sheesh, you just want me for my body," I say, pretending to be offended.

"That's how you wanted it," she reminds me.

"I di—, I do. But, I didn't think you'd take to it so well."

She shrugs. "Well, I told you, not everyone's looking for a relationship. Right now, I'm happy just having some fun. I've done the engagement thing."

"What?" I pull away so I can look at her. She's been engaged?

"Well, yeah. I was engaged for about two years."

"When? To whom?"

Her face is scrunched up. "About a year ago. And it doesn't matter to who. He's not worth talking about."

"Is he the one...you meant when you said he was busy spending his time between other women's legs?"

The sigh that comes out of her is deep and long.

"I take that as a yes," I growl. The thought that she could be married right now instead of in my bed rattles me. How could she have given herself to someone so unworthy?

“What can I say? Not everyone likes their women’s ass to jiggle like you do. Well, he didn’t anyway. And he made that known.”

The blood rushes to my head and my ears ring. I’m going to kill him. I’m going to find out who he is and kill him.

I lift her chin so she’s looking at me. “You know I love your ass, right?”

She giggles. “Go to sleep, Mr. Baxter. I can already tell, I’m going to want breakfast in bed in the morning.”

She snuggles against me and is asleep within seconds.



“HERE’S GOOD, ROGER,” SHE says, her hand on the car door handle even before he can stop the car.

“My-Linh,” I say. But she’s not listening.

“I’m not changing my mind. Have a good day, Roger. Don’t forget to try those Vietnamese coffee covered peanuts I packed for you.”

“I won’t. Thank you, ma’am.”

She slams the door behind her, gives us a big smile and waves through the front window.

We wait until she’s skipping down the street towards the building before I tell Roger to pull back into traffic.

“She’s something, isn’t she?” I say to Roger.

“Yes, sir. Yes, sir, she is.”



To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
Subject: Do you...  
...have a passport?

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Do you...  
I do. I wouldn't show you the picture  
for all of your billions, though.

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Re: Do you...  
Good. Go home at lunchtime and get  
it. And pack a weekend bag.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Re: Re :Do you...  
What?!?!? Why?!

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Do you...



Because you're going to need it for  
where I'm taking you out to dinner.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Do you...  
Damien! Where are we going?

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Do  
you...  
Somewhere.  
Be ready at your desk by 5 p.m. I'll  
come get you.



“OH, AND THE PLANE will be ready at 6:30 p.m., sir. I’ve  
also asked Mr. Kylian’s assistant to book the table for you,”  
Melissa says as she gathers up her notes to return to her desk.

“Thank you, Melissa. And you’ll have the dress picked up?”

She nods. “Don’t worry, sir. Everything will be ready.”

If she has any thoughts about my plans, she keeps them to  
herself.

I’m not sure what the fuck I think I’m doing, whisking My-  
Linh away to Hong Kong for the weekend, but she’d  
mentioned a Yum Cha restaurant that she’d always wanted to

try there. And if watching her eat a simple Caesar salad and hearing her moan appreciatively about a crunchy crouton is enough to arouse me, then I can't imagine what eating a juicy dumpling is going to do to my libido.

*Nice try, you dick, stop trying to pretend this is just about sex. You just want to make her happy, my head tries to tell me. But I'm not listening.*

"Mr. Baxter?" Melissa saves me from any other offending truths. "Someone is here to see you. It's—"

The door opens before Melissa finishes and I look up as the woman walks in.

"Hello, Damien. I've missed you."

And my heart stops in my chest.



# EIGHTEEN

*My-Linh*

“BUT WHERE ARE YOU going?” Mandy asks for the fifteenth time over the phone.

“Stop asking! He didn’t say.”

“Are you going to tell me anything more about The Caveman?”

I laugh at the nickname and shake my head. “Nope.”

“But what if he turns out to be an ax murderer and True Crime wants to interview me? I’m going to look like a bad friend for not warning my friend that she might be flying off to her decapitation.”

I shudder as I wander out of the room. Not decapitation. Never decapitation.

“Hey!” she yells. “Where’d you go?! I’m trying to be good friends here.”

I run back, my jar of body butter in my hand. “Sorry. I put the phone down and walked away. Thanks for hiding the body butter by the way!”

“I wasn’t hiding it. I was just making sure that if an intruder broke in, they wouldn’t find the most valuable thing in our apartment.”

“I thought that was me,” I tease her.

“You’d be way less valuable without your head.”

“Noted. I’ll try to keep my head attached. I love you, I have to go. I’ll text you when I can.”

She grumbles and then says, “Hey. My-My?”

“Hmmm?”

“I don’t know what kind of magic that man has in his penis but...you’ve seemed really happy lately.”

I grin even though she can’t see me. “That’s because I am. Even if my head gets sawed off with a sharpened plastic fork, I’ll have spent the last few weeks of my life happy.”

“Ewwwwwwwwwwww!”



I THROW THE NIGHT bag under my desk and collapse in my chair, out of breath. I’ve been back in the marketing department for a few days now and I already miss the community outreach department. But seeing Raquel’s sweet

face every time I come back to my desk almost makes up for it.

“Hey, cutie,” she says, joining me in my cubicle. “What’s that for?” She points to my bag.

“Just a weekend getaway.”

She does a little clap. “Oooh, exciting. Where are you going?”

I shrug. “Somewhere.”

“That...is a very vague answer.”

“You’re telling me!” I practically shout.

She just laughs and returns to her own desk.

I can’t stop smiling, and I’m sure I look like a complete loon. But there’s nothing I can do about it. Not that I’ve been trying that hard. I’m not sure what’s happening with Damien; I just know that every moment I’m with him, I think of nothing and nobody else.

And I’m not sure what’s waiting for me at the end of all this, but it won’t be able to erase all the moments we’ve had together.

The Months of My-Linh have been very good to me indeed.

From: Kitten

To: POS

Whatever happens this weekend. I’m so happy. Just wanted you to know that.



5 P.M. TAKES FOREVER to arrive and I go to the bathroom about eight times in the last hour to check my hair and complete the absolute sum zero of work.

“Gotta get ready for date night with the hubster,” Raquel says when she leaves a rare fifteen minutes early. “Have an amazing weekend wherever you’re going, My-Linh.”

Being Friday afternoon, the office empties pretty quickly and there’s not much but the hum of the lights to keep me company as I wait.

The elevator dings and I jump up, excited to see his face.

I haven’t seen him since that morning, which is rare. We try to make any excuse to see each other, even if only in passing, during the course of the day.

But it’s not him.

I glance at the clock. 5:12 p.m. He’s not usually ever late. And if he is, he makes it a point to let me know.

He’s a busy man, but he’s never been so busy that he hasn’t sent me a quick text.

*It’s Friday, he’s probably got a lot of loose ends to tie up,* I tell myself. Even while my stomach tells me that there’s something not right about today.

From: Kitten

To: POS

I'm ready and just waiting at my desk. Whenever you're ready. No rush.

From: Kitten

To: POS

Is everything okay? Just wondering. Just at my desk. Let me know if you want me to meet you at your office.

From: Kitten

To: POS

Damien?

From: Kitten

To: POS

I hope everything's okay. Can you just send me a quick text to let me know you're okay?

From: Kitten

To: POS

I'm starting to get worried. Hope you're okay.

From: Kitten



To: POS

Okay, it's almost 7:30 now.

I'm coming up there. Just a heads-up.

I'm half-expecting/half-hoping he'll be waiting at the elevator for me when the doors open but nothing but an almost empty floor greets me. There's a rustling sound in the far end of the floor towards his office and I make my way there.

Melissa is stepping out of Damien's office when I get there.

"Oh, My-Linh. What are you still doing here?"

"Is Dam—, er, is Mr. Baxter in?"

She looks a little uncomfortable when she answers. "Um. No. He hasn't been in his office since about noon."

11:45 a.m. was the last email he sent me. I know because I've checked it about twenty times in the last two hours.

"Did he say when he'd be back?"

She squirms. "Um, not really."

"Didn't he have an afternoon of meetings?" I ask, not caring if it seems like I'm appearing too interested. I'm sure she knows there's something between us anyway.

She hesitates. "They...were canceled."

I frown. "Why?"

"You know I can't tell you that, My-Linh."

If there's anything I know, it's how much Damien trusts Melissa, and there's a reason for that. I'm not ready to put her

in a hard position. This is between me and him. I give her a small grateful smile. “Got it. Have a good weekend, Melissa.”

“You too, My-Linh.”

I try not to notice the pity in her eyes. She must’ve known about the trip. He couldn’t have planned it on his own and she must know why we’re both not going away right now.

But I’ll be damned if I don’t hear from Damien himself.

“Oh, Miss Tran, you’re only just leaving now?” Frank says, pulling the door open for me.

“Good night,” I say, giving the doorman a little shrug and soft smile. “Say, Frank, did you see Mr. Baxter when he left at lunchtime?”

He nods. “Oh yes.”

I only hesitate for a split second before asking, “Did anything seem strange about him at the time?”

He thinks about it and shakes his head. “No, not that I can think of. He nodded to me as usual, and then I held the door open for him and his lady companion. And then Roger drove them away.”

My heart sinks. “He was with a woman?”

“Yes, a very beautiful tall woman. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her before.”

I force myself to keep my voice steady. “Do you know where they went?”

“I don’t know, I think Roger said something about the roads to the airport being hell when he got back.”

And in that moment, I forget how to breathe.



SANDY JUMPS UP FROM the couch when I open the apartment door. “My-Linh! What are you doing home? Mandy said you’d be gone all weekend!”

I head straight for my room and drop onto my bed, not even bothering to close the door.

The tears come hard and fast.

How I managed to hold them in in the cab all the way home, I don’t know. I’m not even really sure if and when I paid the cab and how I made it to my apartment.

“Honey?” Sandy says, following me into the room. “Oh my god! Are you okay? What’s going on?”

I can’t answer him through the sobs wracking my body.

“Oh love, it’s okay; I’m here. Let me just go put a shirt on and grab the tub of peanut butter and you’re going to tell me all about it.”

But even through the gasps and tears, I know there’s nothing to tell.

Just that I fell in love without someone I shouldn’t have.

I played with fire

And it's no wonder I got burned.



# NINETEEN

*My-Linh*

To: POS

From: Kitten

You should've told me.

The deal was that we'd tell each other first.



“BUT I DON’T GET it, why did he ask her to go away with him if he wasn’t going to follow through with it?”

“Because men are shits, Mandy!”

“*You* are a man!”

“You don’t think I’ve been a shit?!”

I burrow my head into the pillow. The twins dragged me out of the room late Saturday when I hadn’t eaten or slept the entire night. The least they could’ve done was hide the mirror in the hallway. I almost jumped out of my skin when I saw the state of my...everything.

“I don’t think you’re helping, Mandy,” Sandy accuses his sister.

“Like you are? Not everyone fixes everything with peanut butter!” she shoots back at him.

“Well, maybe they should!” Sandy shouts back and flings a pillow at his sister. He misses and hits me on the head instead.

“Oh my god, My-Linh, I’m so sorry,” he says, sinking onto the floor next to me, his eyes filled with concern.

Mandy rolls her eyes and picks up the pillow. “Sure, pillow-whack her when she’s down. Great friend you are.”

“You’re the one who let her go away with a man who has a cocktail hot dog for a dick!”

“Guys,” I say, but they can’t hear me over the bickering.

To be honest, though, it’s a welcome distraction from the voices in my head.

The ones telling me how stupid I am to have let myself fall so hard for a man who’d made it very clear that whatever we had was only physical and temporary. All the orgasms must’ve shaken my brain loose and I let myself get hurt. Again.

Now he was jet setting off to fuck-knows-where with fuck-knows-who, not even remembering the one promise he’d made to me, that he’d at least give me a heads-up.

“I’m sorry about Sandy, Linh-Linh. He can’t help being an emotional klutz. He should’ve just split the ova with me and shared my DNA but no, he had to go and grab a Y

chromosome spermatozoid and now we're stuck with living with a shit man.”

I let out a tired chuckle. “I love you guys. Thanks for being such idiots and trying to cheer me up.”

Mandy rubs my back. “I mean, we could be bigger idiots.”

“Speak for yourself!” Sandy protests. “What can I get you, babe, some Pocky?” he offers.

My heart breaks all over again, and I run into my room, slamming the door behind me, hidden away with my memories and the feel of Damien’s chest rising and falling under my head.

“Look at what you did!” Mandy yells.

“What did I do? All I did was offer her some Pocky! That’s her version of peanut butter!”



~~From: Kitten~~

~~To: POS~~

~~I hate you.~~

~~From: Kitten~~

~~To: POS~~

~~I miss you.~~

From: Kitten

To: POS



I hope you're happy. Not in a  
sarcastic way. I mean, I really hope  
that wherever you are, you're happy.



*Damien*

~~From: POS~~

~~To: Kitten.~~

~~I miss you.~~

~~From: POS~~

~~To: Kitten.~~

~~Please don't hate me.~~

~~From: POS~~

~~To: Kitten.~~

~~I'm sorry.~~



*My-Linh*

MONDAY MORNING ARRIVES AND I've never felt  
more like giving up everything in my life to go live on a  
commune on a farm where all I have to do all day is churn  
butter and go to bed when the sun sets. But, as my friends have  
told me multiple times over the last few days, I don't like

getting up early. Or hard physical labor. Or going to bed. Or not having internet. Pretty much nothing about the scenario except not having to go to work at Baxter.

“How was your weekend?” Raquel asks, already at her desk when I get there.

“Er, it was great,” I lie.

Apparently not quite convincingly though, because Raquel frowns and asks, “Are you feeling okay?”

“Just post-weekend away blues,” I tell her.

I spend the first hour at the office thinking up an excuse not to be at the Huddle, and come up with nothing. I wait until the last minute to walk over to the meeting room and stand in the back as everyone fills the room. Being at work reminds me I actually like it here though. I only have a month left of my time here, and I’m going to make the most of it. And try to avoid Damien the Dick Baxter as much as possible.

I needn’t have bothered, though, he doesn’t show up at the Huddle.

He’s not there the next day either.

“Um, kind of weird Mr. Baxter wasn’t at the huddle the last few days, right?” I ask Raquel, once I feel like I can say his name without wanting to cry.

“Hmm, not really. He never used to show up much, maybe once or twice a month at most. Then he just started showing up every day. Don’t really know why.”

A few days ago, I would've fancied that I knew why. But now I'm just as in the dark as she is.

Not a single text.

Not even an email.

And I'm sure if something was wrong, the company would know about it.

No, he just decided he was done with me, and that was that.

Maybe one day he could teach me what it's like to just walk away from someone like that.

As much as Adam destroyed me, even after he took every shred of my self-dignity and worth, when it was over, at least I knew why.

But this not knowing is a level of torture I've never felt before.

Damien should've known what this would've done to me,

And he did it anyway.

Fuck him.

"Hey, do you mind running these mock-ups up to 15th for me?" Virginia asks after we come back from lunch.

I nod, even though it's the last place I want to go.

But he's not there when I drop off the files, and I'm both disappointed and relieved.

"Hey, Melissa," I say as I pass her desk on the way back to the elevator.

She gives me a small smile and nod of her head and before I can stop myself, I open my stupid mouth.

“Did Mr. Baxter have a good weekend on his trip?” And then I hate myself for it. It sounds both needy and petty. It’s especially awkward because I’m convinced Melissa knows everything that’s been going on between us.

But she just shrugs. “Oh, I don’t know. I imagine he’s still just holed up in his apartment. Mr. Baxter said he’s still pretty under the weather when I spoke to him this morning.”

I frown. What does she mean? “Oh, how bad did he sound when you spoke to him?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I meant I spoke to Mr. Kylian. He told me to clear Mr. Baxter’s, er, Mr. Damien’s schedule for the next two days.”

Fuck. That does not sound good. What’s wrong with him?

“Where is he?” I ask, resisting the urge to sound too panicked.

“He’s been working from home all weekend but—”

I don’t hear the rest of her sentence as I run to the elevators.

Something’s not right.

The thought of him being so unwell he’s missing days of work drives the bile up my esophagus and I have to forcibly swallow it down.

*What are you doing, My-Linh? He doesn’t want to see you. If he did, he would’ve gotten in contact with you.*

I don't care.

I need to see he's okay for myself.

Nothing would keep the Damien Baxter that I know from coming into work for days.

And *I* certainly wouldn't be the reason he wouldn't come. He'd just walk by without throwing a second look in my direction.

Something is wrong.

I run into his apartment building, slamming my hands down on the front desk.

"I'm here to see Mr. Baxter."

The shrew checks her book and shakes her head. "I'm sorry, he's not expecting you."

"I don't care. Buzz me up," I shout.

"I'm sorry, Miss. I can't," she insists.

I slam my hand again on the desk. "Just. Buzz. Me. In. Right. Now," I shout.

"Miss—"

"I swear to God, I'm going to reach over and beat you senseless without that book until the words are permanently tattooed on your ass if you don't buzz me up RIGHT NOW!"

"Is everything okay here?"

I turn at the sound of the familiar voice.

“My-Linh? Are you okay?” Kylian asks, surprise in his voice.

I’m flooded with relief. “Kylian! What are you doing here? I thought you went back to Hong Kong last week.”

He swallows and lowers his voice. “Er, yeah, I did. I came back last night.”

“Why? Is he okay?” I make no effort to keep from sounding panicked now Kylian is here.

He winces and takes me by the elbow to the side. “My-Linh, why are you here?”

“I-I, erm w-we were”—I take a breath, trying to calm myself—“I haven’t heard from him since Friday and I just wanted to make sure he’s okay.”

He runs his hands through his hair and says, “Come on. Follow me. There’s something you need to know about Damien.”



# TWENTY

*My-Linh*

“WHAT HAS DAMIEN TOLD you about our family?”  
Kylian asks after the server has taken our order.

I ordered a hot tea just to get rid of her. Kylian hasn't said another word since he led me to the coffee shop a few doors down from the apartment building and I'm almost sick with worry. He's acting very out of character.

“Um, not much. Just that he has three brothers. You guys run the company with your uncle Gerard as the interim CEO. Your grandfather passed away a few years ago.” I don't mention anything about him not being sure if they were happy or not. I feel like that's something I should keep between us.

Kylian tears a sugar sachet and pours it onto the table.  
“And, what about our parents?”

I watch him scrape the sugar granules back and forth against the table's wood grain pattern. “He said they're still alive, but divorced. It didn't seem like a friendly divorce.”



He lets out a little sound of derision. “Their divorce makes Kim Kardashian and Kanye’s look like kiddy play time. And cheap.”

I cringe. I can’t imagine having had to witness that as a kid. “He said you all dealt with it a little differently. That Kingsley probably had it the worst and still carries a bit of guilt. Maybe because he’s the eldest?”

Kylian’s eyebrow twitches. “Damien said that?”

I nod.

He jabs his finger right in the middle of his little sugar mountain. “Just shows you can have all the money in the world and still not have a fucking clue,” he says, almost to himself.

“What do you mean?” I ask, really wanting to shake it out of him.

“Look, I don’t know who *took* it the hardest. I was the youngest and I don’t remember as much of it as the others, but Damien *had* it the hardest.”

“What’s the difference?” I ask just as the server brings us our drinks.

Kylian waits until she’s gone before he answers. “What I mean is that Damien was always our mother’s favorite. He looks just like her. I mean, we all look like Baxters, but he has the most of her in him. Physically. All curly blond hair, high cheekbones and deep, blue eyes. She spoiled him and so he doted on her. Followed her around like a puppy dog. When

they divorced, she fell from a very very high pedestal for him.”

My heart breaks for young Damien. “What happened after the divorce?”

“Well, she cheated. Dad found out. They tried for a while after, but it didn’t get better. She left. And Damien never really recovered.” His spoon clangs against the sides of the coffee cup.

“You guys didn’t see her after the divorce?”

“Oh, we did. Usually when she wanted to manipulate Dad into doing something. She used Damien like her very own messenger more than her child. Getting him to relay messages to Dad, or using him to charm whoever her flavor of the month was. And if she didn’t get the results she wanted, she’d blame him. One time, one of her prospective husbands left her saying he didn’t want some other man’s children and she didn’t talk to Damien for six months. Not the rest of us. Just him. He was only twelve years old. He only recently told us that she’d told him it was his fault, that he chased the guy away because he seemed too needy.”

“God.” My heart twists so tight, I can barely breathe. How could someone do that to their child? “Why are you telling me all this?”

Kylian sighs and takes a sip of his coffee. “Because on Friday, our darling mother showed up, out of the blue.”

“Oh my god!” I gasp.

“As far as I know, Damien hasn’t seen her in over five years. After he told her to take a hike after he’d finally had enough of her shit.”

I shake my head. Poor Damien, “What did she want?”

“She’s getting married. Again. She wanted to introduce him to her new stepkids, who apparently adore her. And she wanted him to give her away.”



“JUST...BE PREPARED. HE IS probably not the Damien that you’re used to. I haven’t seen him this way in a long time. I mean, I’m here from Hong Kong, so that should tell you something. And Kingsley is trying to sort out his shit so he can come over from London as well,” Kylian warns as he holds the elevator doors for me to get on.

I nod. “Wait, before I go. You didn’t tell me—how are *you*?” I ask him. “This can’t be easy for you either.”

He looks a little surprised at my question, then his face relaxes. “I’m doing much better knowing that Damien has you in his life. Especially right now. He’s never had someone like you before. And...I don’t think he knows what to do about it.”

“If it helps at all, most people don’t know how to react to having me in their life,” I answer wryly.

I take his laugh with me as I ride the elevator alone to the penthouse.

The apartment is deathly quiet when I arrive.

Kylian had mentioned that Damien would probably be on the couch when I get there, that he hasn't really left it since Friday evening. I try to ignore the thought that when he finally checks his phone, there are going to be a thousand frantic, needy messages from me.

I take a step into the dark living room, and see him sitting on the floor, half-slumped on the seat of the leather love seat. One hand barely holds a brandy balloon; it's almost empty, some of its contents spilled on the floor in front of him.

I feel like someone has speared completely through me with a dagger.

Kylian was right, this is not the Damien I've ever seen. It's a Damien I wish I never had to see, a Damien that never had to exist this way.

I tiptoe over to him. His head is resting on his arm, eyes closed.

His breathing is at least steady.

"Oh, Damien. Sweetheart," I sigh and settle down next to him on the floor. I pry the glass out of his hands and gently place it on the coffee table. His arm is limp as I pull him over and against me. "I'm here, baby. I'm here," I whisper gently, trying to hold back my tears.

He stirs and quietly moans; his forehead is hot and clammy against my skin.

"Hmthatfeelsnice," he mumbles, as I press my cool palm against his face for a moment.

Dammit, he's burning up. I jump up to go to the bathroom to get a cool cloth, and his forehead crinkles, eyes still closed.

"No, don't go. Please."

"I'm just going to the bathroom. I'll be right back," I promise him.

When I return, he's slumped again, facedown on the couch cushion. With my back braced against the love seat, I struggle to pull him to lean against me, his back against my chest.

"There, does that feel better?" I ask, gently placing the damp washcloth against his forehead.

"Mmmm," he moans and then quietens.

"Okay, good. Just rest, Damien. I'm here. Just get some sleep."

"My-Linh," he murmurs.

"Shhhh, I'm here."

"My-Linh is so mad at me," he moans.

"No, I'm not," I say, my voice cracking. "I'm right here, I wouldn't be here if I was mad at you."

He shakes his head, side to side. "No, I need to call her. She's so mad at me. I fucked everything up."

"Shhhh. No, you didn't. But we can call her later, okay? Get some rest and we'll call her later," I coo gently, moving the cloth against the back of his neck.

"Okay, I have to call her. I have to tell her...I have to tell her..." His voice fades into nothing.

“I know. Just get some sleep, sweetheart. Just sleep.”

I stroke his hair until his head falls heavily back against my shoulder and I press a soft kiss against his damp forehead.

“I’m not going to leave, Damien. I’m here to stay.”



“I THINK I MIGHT be sick,” he says a little later, suddenly sitting up.

I jump up. “Okay, let me grab a bowl. I’ll be right back.”

I return just in time, rubbing his back as he heaves. Heaves until there’s nothing left inside, then he collapses to the side, falling asleep again.

“What did she do to you?” I sigh, settling down next to him, rubbing his trembling back. What kind of mother would do this to her child?

He sleeps fitfully.

Sometimes calling out for his mother.

Sometimes slinging slurs and curses at her.

Sometimes begging for her forgiveness.

After each bout, he cries the same thing, “Why couldn’t you just love me for me?”

And each time, my heart breaks into a million pieces.

“Come on, sweetheart, drink some water,” I coax after another fit of retching.

“Don’t wanna,” he argues, pushing the glass away.

“Please. You need some water.” I lift the glass to his mouth, and pour some onto his lips to convince him to swallow.

He shakes his head, knocking the glass out of my hand. It shatters on the ground and splatters all over us.

He gasps. “Don’t tell Mom. She’ll be mad at me. ‘Don’t make a mess, Damien. You’re always making a mess, Damien,’” he blubbers.

“Shhh, it’s okay, sweetheart. It’s just water. No harm done.”

“I have to clean it up!” he insists, crawling over to the shattered glass.

“Damien. I’ll do it later. Just sleep now,” I tell him.

But he doesn’t hear me. “I have to clean it up. Before Mom comes home.”

He reaches out for the largest shard before I can stop him.

“Ow!” he whimpers, retracting his hand, already dripping blood. He runs to the bathroom, gripping his hand.

“Damien!” I chase after him.

He’s already in the shower when I get there, struggling with the shower knobs.

“I got blood on my shirt. Mom’s going to be so mad. ‘Can’t take you anywhere, Damien. How am I supposed to find another husband with you looking like that?’”

I pull him to me, holding his face in my hands. “No. You listen to me. Listen to me, Damien. You look beautiful. You

are so beautiful. You have no idea, sweetheart. You have no idea.”

His jaw quivers and he slips to the floor, his body shaking with sobs. I sink down next to him, pulling him to me, letting the water fall over us.

And all I can hope is that it washes away the pain in his mind.





# TWENTY-ONE

*Damien*

I'M WET.

And cold.

Now I'm warm again.

I'm swimming.

Or drowning.

I try to paddle, try to kick, but something, someone stops me.

“Stop it. You're okay. I'm here. You can sleep.”

The water is gone, and something warm wraps itself around me.

I let it.

And sleep.



MY HEAD FEELS LIKE a bowling ball filled with molten lava.

“Chop. My. Head. Off,” I say out loud, even though my mouth it tears itself open to do so.

“No. This is a decapitation free zone. No discussion.”

I force my eyes open at the voice.

It sounds like My-Linh, but it can't be. I'm pretty sure that wherever she is, she's cursing my name and throwing my likeness into a dumpster fire. That actually might explain the headache.

“Here drink this,” the voice says again.

It *is* her. And she's right here, handing me something that looks like the primordial soup. And now I know why that first organism tried to crawl out of it. It smells like death.

“Yeah, I'm going to pass,” I say, wrinkling my nose.

“You're going to drink it and you're going to enjoy it. And when it's all gone, you're going to smile and say, ‘Thank you, My-Linh, that was super tasty and I'd like another, please.’”

My dehydrated face threatens to crack apart when I try to scrunch it up at her words, and she takes the pause as acquiescence and shoves the cup into my hand.

It actually smells worse than death. Death smells like Giorgio Armani's Si compared to this.

“You must really fucking hate me,” I say, referring to the sludge she's given me.

“I don’t. I mean, I’m hurt and pissed as hell. But I don’t hate you. Yet. But that’s going to depend on how our next conversation goes.”

Just in case, I keep my mouth shut, and not just so I don’t have to drink the liquid tar.

“Drink. It.” She sits down on the couch opposite me, glaring.

I pinch my nose. “I feel like...we should make some sort of deal before I do.”

“Like what?”

“Like, for every mouthful I take, I get some sort of reward?”

She nods. “Fine. Deal.”

I take a deep breath and squeeze my eyes shut and take a sip.

It’s chunky. Or chewy. And thick. And salty and sweet and bitter. And a combination of all things that no one should be putting in their mouth ever. Why are hangover remedies always worse than the hangover itself? Maybe that’s actually how their magic works, they make you feel like the hangover isn’t that bad after all.

“Swallow it, Damien,” she barks.

“I’m trying!”

Somehow, after a few tries, my throat relaxes and lets the concoction slide down.

“Show me.”

“My-Li—”

“I said. Show. Me.”

I open my mouth.

“Tongue.”

“I feel like...we should talk first. But definitely later.”

She gives me a withering look and I open my mouth again and lift my tongue up.

“Okay, I took a sip. What’s my reward?”

She sighs and comes over to me, leaning in, staring into my eyes.

I breathe in deep.

Cherry blossoms.

Always cherry blossom.

I take another deep breath, glad that I might be drowning inside, but some things never change.

“Your reward...is another sip!” she says, a little too gleefully.

“No!”

“Sucker! We made a deal! Drink up!”

I pout. “I didn’t agree to that.”

“Verbal agreement and all. Not my fault you didn’t have your lawyer look over the fine print.”

I hiss, looking down at the glass. I shake it a little, I think it's actually congealed over a little. "I was right. You do hate me."

"You deserve it," she says with a shrug.

She's right, I deserve whatever punishment she wants to dole out. Nuclear waste included. I take another sip without argument, swallow, then put the glass down on the coffee table, shuddering.

"What are you doing here?" I finally ask, once my stomach stops lurching.

"I talked to Melissa. She said you weren't feeling well. I came to make sure you weren't actually dead. Imagine my pleasure at finding you weren't far off."

It's an exaggeration, but I know I must've looked completely pitiful. Kylian had said so himself and that was before I'd downed an extra half bottle of Hennessy. I would probably have drunken the other half by now if My-Linh wasn't sitting there watching me like a hawk.

"Well, as you can see. I'm actually fine. You don't have to stay."

"You are *not* fine, Damien."

"I will be."

"Maybe. Maybe not. We'll see."

I get to my feet and walk to the kitchen, avoiding my reflection. I don't want to see what she's seeing. "My-Linh.

I'm serious. I'm fine. What time is it?"

"About 6 p.m...Wednesday."

I want to ask what happened to Tuesday, but that seems counterproductive in terms of convincing her that I'm fine. "You should go home, get some rest."

"Pretty sure you're not going to be telling me what to do for a while," she replies.

She's right. I don't know if I've done anything or said anything since she's been here but I know what I *didn't* do. And I can't imagine how she must've felt, sitting and waiting for me all the time.

Waiting, waiting, waiting. For nothing.

My hand tangles in my hair.

I need a shower. My nose is feeling a little clearer and other than cherry blossoms, I can smell something bad. And I'm fairly certain that it's me.

"I'm going to take a shower."

She shrugs. "Okay."

"No arguments?"

"Does it look like I'm arguing?"

"For once—no." I walk towards the bathroom. "Are you—, er, are you, um..."

"I'll be here when you get out," she says.

I don't know why, but I respond with, "Thank you."

The shower floor is wet when I get in there, and there's a pile of wet clothes in the corner. Both hers and mine; I can't help wondering what happened. I guess the only way I'm going to find out is by asking. And I'm not sure if I'm ready for that yet.

I turn every nozzle in the shower on. Four hard, scalding sprays over my head, torso, and back.

The ache recedes in my muscles.

But the pain in my mind builds.

The last thing I ever wanted was for her to see me this way.

No, the last thing I ever wanted was to *be* this way.

Again.

I'd locked my mother out of my life for a reason.

She wasn't supposed to be a part of my life, not here. I moved here because I thought this was the last place she'd come.

But I was complacent. I didn't think she'd come all this way just to rub her new life in my face, like she hadn't hurt me every day of my teenage years.

She can walk her own damn self down the aisle, and all the way to hell, for all I care. I'm not going to be paraded in front of her new stepkids and act like they are lucky to have her in their lives. I can't believe she thinks I'd do anything but yell "run for your lives!".



I bang my head against the tile wall and a streak of lightning-white pain cracks through my skull.

“Ah! Fuck!” I yell, grabbing my head.

“Are you okay?” My-Linh instantly calls out from the other side of the door. She’s been there the whole time.

“I’m...er, yeah. I’m okay. Temporary lapse in judgment. I’m almost done. I’ll be right out.”

“Okay. No rush.”

She doesn’t say it but the message hangs in the air that she’ll be there when I get out.

“Fuck you, Mom. Fuck you to hell if you’ve fucked this up for me,” I whisper under my breath and turn the water off.

There are two bowls of steaming hot soup on the coffee table when I get out. The noxious substance has disappeared and in its place there’s a teapot and two little porcelain cups with orchids painted on their sides. Where did they even come from?

“I got them delivered,” she explains when she sees me looking. “Don’t worry. I charged them to your credit card. Also, don’t be surprised if you find some other random purchases. It seemed like you needed some new shoes. And handbags. And make up.”

I throw the towel I’m using to dry my hair over the back of the breakfast barstool and pad over to the couch, the smell of the food making my stomach react.

There's a little rumble, but not little enough that she doesn't hear it.

"Is that a want food 'in' or 'out' rumble?" she asks.

"I'm not sure."

"Well, I guess we're about to find out. Try some."

She hands me a bowl and porcelain soup spoon, and even though I still feel like my entire body is coming out the business end of a paper shredder, my mouth fills with saliva.

I give the soup a little mix; it's mostly a clear broth but there are a few small pieces of food in it.

"It's a chicken, lemon zest, and ginger broth. It should help settle your stomach, hopefully you'll be able to keep it down."

I take a little sip, and it warms my whole body.

"Wow." I let out a hoarse sigh. "It's delicious. Thank you."

She rewards me with a big smile and settles onto the couch with her own bowl.

We sit in silence except for the soup slurps for a bit. I almost finish the whole bowl before I stop.

"I'll have some more later; I just...probably should take it easy."

She nods and points to the small cup. "It's chamomile and green tea. It'll help rehydrate you."

I cradle the cup in my hands and drink the whole cup. It's calming and fragrant and I feel instantly better.

She watches me as I pour myself another cup from the teapot.

“Are you ready to talk to me now?” she asks when I lean back against the couch.

“Do I have a choice?”

“You do. You can talk to me now. Or never again.”



# TWENTY-TWO

*Damien*

“I TALKED TO KYLIAN,” she says when I don’t say anything for a few moments.

I’m surprised to hear it. “When?”

“I ran into him downstairs when I was trying to break into your apartment,” she says like it’s nothing.

I let out a small chuckle. “I wish I’d seen that.”

“No, you don’t. I think everyone downstairs is scared of me now. Not to mention at the coffee shop next door.”

“I’ll give them a big tip.”

“Your tips are what got me into this mess to begin with.” She grimaces.

I don’t have a response for that. “What did Kylian tell you?” I ask instead.

“He told me your mother came to visit.”

I choke. “Yeah. *Visit*. That’s one way to put it.”

A flash of pity crosses her face. “He told me what happened with their divorce. And how hard it was on you.”

“Kylian was chatty.”

“One of you had to be,” she says, with a hint of hurt.

The pounding in my head has eased but for a second it flares and I rub my temples, noticing for the first time the band-aid on my finger.

“What...?”

“You cut your finger,” she explains, her face blank.

I don’t remember it happening. “On what?”

“On the broken glass. You threw a water glass.”

Fuck. I sit up, looking at her. “Oh my god. My-Linh, were you...here?”

“I’m the idiot who gave you the water glass.”

I feel the panic rise. “Did I hurt you?”

She puts her tea cup down and scoots to the edge of the couch, and touches me gently on the arm. “Only when you didn’t tell me what was going on.”

I shake my head.

It’s worse than I thought; I could’ve hurt My-Linh. I couldn’t live with that.

“Tell me what happened, Damien. What did your mother want?”

The band-aid is curling on the side and I fidget with it, not sure how I'm supposed to answer her questions.

“Kylian said she's getting married?” she presses.

“Yeah.”

“And she wants you at the wedding?”

“She wants us all at the wedding. She wants me in particular to give her away,” I say, trying to hold back the bitterness in my voice.

“What did you tell her?”

“I said there's nothing I want less. Then I put her on the company plane and told her to never call me again.”

“Oh, Damien,” My-Linh says. There's no judgment in her voice, just sadness.

“Don't, don't say that she's my mother and I only have one mother.”

“I wasn't going to—”

“You don't know. you don't know what she put us through, My-Linh.” I jump to my feet, the blood already rushing to my head, the anger rising. I don't want her here, in this place I've built without her. “You don't know. Nobody knows. From the outside she was all sweetness and loving. But it was all for a show. We were nothing but museum pieces to her. Value added. Fucking trophy kids she would bring out to make her look like she wasn't the gold digging whore that she was.”

My-Linh flinches at the world, but doesn't say anything.

I don't apologize for my language. "She *was* a whore of the worst kind. I couldn't give a fuck if she gave it out to every man on the block. But it's in the *way* she used it to lure man after man, wrung them dry, using us to make her look good. And when she was done with them, she discarded them, just as she did with us." I shake my head of the memories of how my world would completely darken when she'd withdraw her love like a weapon. "Do you know why she's asking me to give her away?"

"Kylian said you were her favorite...?"

I sneer. "Please. She never had a favorite. It's because she's already used her two eldest sons for her last two failed marriages. My turn. Kylian's next. Guess when she's done with him, she'll cycle back."

I pace the room, my hands running through my hair. "She was never there for anything. Not for birthdays, not for graduations. Do you know how many graduations there have been between the four of us? High school. College. We all have our Masters degrees. Mathias has his PhD. Kylian was valedictorian not only of his high school but his Bachelor's class as well. She had her assistant send him a bunch of generic flowers, not even with a note."

"She's been trying to call me for months, but I won't take her calls. So, now she has the fucking nerve to walk into my office, after I told her I never wanted to see her again, and just say 'I'm getting married, Damien. And his children are so amazing, I can't wait for you to meet them. I've told them all



about you! I really want you by my side when I start my new life.”

“New life, please,” I spit. “For how long? She changes her personality like taking off a wig.”

My-Linh rubs the side of her head and looks up at me. “Is she why you don’t date?”

I focus on her for the first time since I began my rant. “I don’t know. I just know what happened to my father when she left. He didn’t care about anything after that. He didn’t care about us. He didn’t care about the business. Nothing. He left it all behind. All of it. Me. I mean, he and I are better now. Good, even. But for almost a decade, we didn’t have a mother or a father. I’m not ever going to do that to anyone. I...just can’t. If that is what love does to you...I don’t want any part of it.”

“Damien.” She says my name, but I barely hear her.

“I can’t lose myself in someone and when they’re gone, retain no sense of reason or judgment.”

“Damien.”

“And even worse, I can’t do that to someone else. I can’t be the reason for someone to feel that. Because one day, if I have to make the choice, I’m not going to be like my Dad. I’m going to choose the company. I owe it to my grandfather.”

“Damien. Love is worth it,” she says, without a touch of irony.

I scoff. “You don’t know.”

She stands up, her voice firm. “I do know. And I know what it’s like to have my heart broken. And I know that you move on.”

I frown at the reminder of her past. “Your engagement?”

“It was a farce. Only I didn’t know it. Not until I was the one left holding the broken pieces of my own heart. But I survived and moved on.”

I hate hearing her talk about him. Hate that he hurt her. Hate that I’ve hurt her too. “And how do you feel about him now?”

“He can drown in a vat of my hangover cure for all I care,” she jokes but it makes me wince.

“Exactly. I don’t ever want to be the reason you feel that much hate, My-Linh. I couldn’t bear it. But...it’s inevitable. I’m not...I’m not made to be anything more,” I tell her, even though it almost kills me to admit it.

She pales. “Your mother, what she did to you, it isn’t normal. How your father reacted, it doesn’t always have to be that way. You can change. You can decide to be different.”

I hear the words, but they have no meaning to me. She’s talking about an existence that I’ve never experienced, choices that I’ve never considered options for me. She says you can recover from heartbreak? I’ve always sworn that I’d never put myself in a position where I’ll have to find out either way.

“My-Linh, the things you’ve been led to believe, aren’t the same as the ones I have.”

She swallows and takes a step backward.

And I can see in her face that whatever she's about to say is going to change things forever.



*My-Linh*

HIS WORDS BURY THEMSELVES into my brain; I can't shake the truth of them.

Whether it's our pasts, or just the people who are, we are different. So different that the roads that we've chosen for ourself at this juncture don't converge.

I know I have no choice.

"If that's really how you feel, then we have to end this, Damien. I can't pretend that I can be with you if you're always going to have one foot out the door. I've pretended before, and it did nothing but eat away at me, one ounce of belief in myself at a time."

"When we met, I told you..."

"Yes. You did. And when we were just having sex and having fun, and I thought either of us could walk away at any time, I thought I could do it."

He breathes. "But now?"

"But now it's more than that and I can't pretend it's not," I admit to him. "And neither can you."

He's silent. And then surprises me by dropping his chin, just once. "You're right. You're so much more to me than that. I care about you. I care about you so much, My-Linh, and you deserve to be treated that way. But I just don't know how." He shakes his head, lost. "I'm going to hurt you."

My heart cracks. "Or you could just not..."

"I don't know how not to. I don't know how not to be selfish. I don't know how to keep from making the decisions that will one day, inevitably hurt you." Our eyes lock and the truth in them is undeniable.

"We could learn together, Damien," I say, the hope already draining from my voice. I know him. I haven't known him long, but I know him. I know he doesn't believe he can do this. Not yet. But I can't wait any longer.

He steps over to the window, resting his head against the glass, staring out into the darkened sky. "I don't know if I can, My-Linh. I don't know that I can ever change what I've believed for so long."

In that moment, I know I have to leave.

Unless he stops making excuses for himself then I will always be waiting for the other shoe to drop, never quite taking a full breath, never quite sleeping without one eye open.

*Walk out, My-Linh. You have to walk out now.*

The revelation feels like biting into a cyanide pill, the burn instant, unbearable. And I can't let him see it.

I walk over to him, laying a hand on his chest.

“I have to go.”

His jaw hardens, but his eyes stay locked on mine.

“And, Damien, I truly hope one day you’ll have the courage to have the life and love you deserve. And not the life your mother led you to believe you should have.”

He breathes, his torso rising with his filling lungs.

“And I hope one day, you realize you deserve what we could’ve had. But not unless you’d had the courage to try.”

I lean over and press a kiss to the back of his neck.

And walk away, promising myself I won’t turn back.



# TWENTY-THREE

*My-Linh*

I CAN BARELY SEE the elevator call button, the tears are so thick and hot as they stream down my cheek. I'm leaving my heart behind in this apartment, and I don't know if I'll ever recover from this.

The elevator arrives and my feet are rooted to the floor. But if I don't leave it, I never will.

I take a breath and try to step forward.

Except I can't.

His hand is gripping my wrist.

He spins me around to face him. And the tears in his eyes match mine.

"Let me go, Damien."

He doesn't, just breathes in time with me, the tears teetering on the rims of his eyelids. "You're really leaving me?"

I bite down so hard on my lip, a metallic twang fills my mouth. “Damien, I have to.”

“Why?” he asks, his face filled with hurt.

“Because, I can’t stay with someone who doesn’t need me, Damien. I can’t stay with someone who won’t try to change to keep me in their lives.”

“Is that the only reason you’re leaving?”

I drop my head. “Yes.”

“Then you have no reason to go.”

“Damien...”

“Because I do, I do need you,” he chokes, gripping me so tight I can see my hand turning purple.

I want to believe him. I want to believe him so much. “What do you need me for, Damien? You have everything...”

He pulls my hand to his chest. His heart is drumming like a marching band. “I need you for this. For my heart to beat.”

I shake my head, trying to pull away. “You just said...”

He shakes his head so hard his hair whips across his eyes. “I was wrong. Whatever I said, I was wrong. If I can’t handle watching you walk ten feet away, how am I supposed to live the rest of my life without you? I didn’t know. I didn’t know what this was...”

The breath sticks in my chest. “Damien...You said it yourself. You’re going to hurt me. I’m supposed to just let you?”



“Stay. Show me how to do this. Please. Please help me try.”  
His eyes beg me, stark, raw.

“Damien...” I say, feeling my resolve dissolve with my own need for him.

He pulls me close, his body warm, enveloping me, his arms sliding up my back. “Stay. Aren’t I worth it to you? Who’s too scared to try now?” he pleads.

“You’re going to break my heart, Damien,” I say, with a sob.

“You’re already breaking mine.”

Then his lips are on mine, soft, with the gentlest suck. He tastes of honey and ginger.

Of desperation.

Of sadness and of joy.

He tastes like everything I need.

He tugs on my hand, pulls me against him.

“Stay. Please. Stay,” he whispers again, his lips against my neck.

“I can’t.”

He doesn’t respond, just continues kissing me, his fingers digging into my ass as his lips suckle mine. Gentle but persistent.

“Don’t go. Just stay,” he whispers again, his breath against my ear, and my legs buckle under me.

Before I can regain my balance he's caught me and swung me into his arms. My arms instinctively come up to circle his neck.

"I've got you. You're safe with me," he says, his pupils mere inches from mine.

And I lose it.

Lose all reason and will.

He senses the collapse of my fight and sweeps his arms under my legs and carries me back into the apartment.

The bed is cool and firm under me when he gently lays me on top of it.

He follows, settling his body between my legs, his lips never leaving mine.

"I missed kissing you, baby," he breathes against me between kisses. "I missed these lips so much."

I run my hands through his hair and hold his head close to me. I don't think I can bear the thought of him pulling himself away right now. We kiss for what feels like hours, his lips never leaving mine for longer than a breath, or to whisper how much he's missed me.

Finally he rolls slightly to the side, and unbuttons the shirt of his I'm wearing, button by button. Until the sides of the shirt fall open and he drags his eyes slowly over every inch of my body, finally coming up to meet my gaze.

“Do you have any idea how fucking beautiful you are, My-Linh?” he drawls, his mouth breathing hot over my chest before circling his tongue around my nipple, but never actually touching it.

“So. Fucking. Sexy,” he murmurs as his mouth nibbles on the curve of my breast.

I hold my breath, silently begging him to stop torturing me.

He drags his tongue so close, and then pulls away.

“No...please,” I choke.

“Easy, Kitten. Good things come to those who wait.”

I whimper.

“I know, baby girl. I know.”

Then, before I can respond, he roughly grabs my breast and flicks the tip of his tongue right over the peak of my hard nipple.

“Fuck!” I yell, arching my back. There’s a direct line between my nipple and my clit and my whole body comes instantly alive in that moment, like he’s struck a match, and I’m lit up like a runway.

And it’s pointing to my cunt. *Here. I want you here*, it’s saying.

His tongue is wet and sharp as it flicks across my nipple over and over.

“God...Don’t stop.”

“I have absolutely no intention of stopping. Not until you give me everything.” He resumes his tongue action as his other hand traces along my inner thigh, trickling in between my legs, softly over the lips of my sex.

My body has missed him, has missed the way he touches me, the way he makes the air around me hot and dark and damp and sexual, the way he makes me want to please him back.

My legs bend up at the knee, spreading myself, and his finger slides closer to my open core, grazing my clit.

“Fuck, Damien...”

Something about the way I say his name makes him look up and his eyes are crystalline, dark, deep pools of ocean water. I want to dive into them and trust that he will save me if I drown.

“Say my name again, babygirl.”

I touch his face, his perfect, heartbreakingly, devastatingly, beautiful face.

“Damien. My sweetheart. My sexy, brilliant, infuriating, owner of my heart and body, Damien.”

“Fuck.” His eyes flutter closed and he crawls down my body, kissing all the way until his face is level with my pussy.

Without warning, he plunges his tongue inside me.

I cry out, over and over, my voice only catching when his finger comes up to swipe against my clit. “Goddammit,

Damien!”

How have I never felt like this before? Not even with him.

How have I gone this long and never known what it was like to feel completely and utterly worshiped like this?

“Damien, nobody has ever touched me like you.”

He grunts. “And no one ever will, Kitten. Now shut up and let me get to work.”

Even through my moans I have to laugh.

He brings me to the edge, so so close.

One more flick of his tongue and I’m going to come.

Then he pulls away, switching places. And his finger...no, two fingers ram inside me and his tongue smashes flat against my clit and I come harder than I ever have in my life.

More than all the other times before him, and more than every time with him.

My legs come up, clamping his head, as my body is wracked by waves after wave of almost painful pleasure. My clit pulses and pulses, sending the aftermath of shakes through my body, pushing me close to orgasm again and he doesn’t stop.

Just keeps rubbing his tongue over my clit, rough and without rhythm as I grind down, riding his fingers.

If the My-Linh of a year ago could see me now she’d think I’ve fucking lost my mind. No inhibitions, no holding back.

Just letting myself enjoy everything this gorgeous man has to give me.

He finally pulls back and my legs fall back against the bed, open, and he licks one long line from my pussy up over my stomach, between my breasts. Up along the line of my neck until his mouth traces my bottom lip and then over my top lip.

“Sweet. Fucking. Dirty. Kitten. You’re the only drink I’ll ever want again.”

And he kisses me.

Deep. Passionate. Desperate.

We pull away only long enough to pull his T-shirt over his head and he pushes his boxers off his legs.

“My body ached for yours. The whole time. It ached for you,” he utters, low, hoarse.

And then he reaches between us, runs the tip of his cock against my aching clit twice and positions himself against my wetness.

“Take my cock, Kitten. Take it. It’s yours.”

His lips find my neck, sucking hard as I lift my hips at the same time he slams his down, driving his hardness all the way inside me

It stings, burns. And I want more.

“Fuck me, Damien,” I beg him, my back arching

His hand comes up to rest against my throat as his teeth graze against my collar bone.

“Your pussy destroys me, baby. I’m so fucking addicted to making love to you.”

My entire body shivers at the words “making love” and I wrap my legs around him and we fuck to a rhythm that only exists between the two of us. I struggle for breath, gasping each time his cock stretches me, each time reaching further inside me.

“Look at me,” he commands, his voice suddenly strong, clear. “Open your eyes and look at me.”

I swallow and force my eyes open, trying to keep my hips moving to meet his.

“Do you feel my cock inside you, baby?”

I nod.

“Say it. Say you feel it.”

“I feel your cock inside me, Damien.”

“Good. Because no one is every going to fuck this pussy again. It’s mine. Mine and only mine.”

I gasp.

“Say it, Kitten. Who does this sweet cunt belong to?”

I struggle to say the one word, my eyes almost rolling up into my head from the pleasure. But I manage to whimper, “You.”

“Say my name.”

“My pussy belongs to you and only you, Damien,” I gasp.

“Good girl,” he answers.

And his hips start moving faster, and the way his shaft grazes my clit throws me over the cliff.

“I’m coming,” I moan. “I’m coming for you, Damien.” And there are nothing but stars in my eyes.

He doesn’t answer, just keeps thrusting. “God dammit, My-Linh, your pussy is like a vise. You’re destroying me.”

My nails come up to scratch down his chest and he roars.

He grips my hips and fucks me harder and deeper than he ever has.

My pussy bruises with each thrust and it’s driving me wild.

He was made to fuck. He was made to fuck me.

He is a sexual, primal animal and I am his.

And he is mine.

“Take my cock, Kitten. It is yours. My fucking cock is yours,” he shouts and finally, finally he comes.

Convulsing as he tries to hold himself inside me, I feel every pulse, every convulsion, as he empties himself, giving himself completely to me.

Like he never has before.

My hands flatten against his chest, soothing the scratches I’ve embedded into his skin as he breathes, and then collapses against me.



“I’m yours, My-Linh,” he whispers with the last of everything he has.

“Yes, you’re mine, Damien. And I will always be yours.”

And nothing in the world is ever the same again.



# TWENTY-FOUR

## *Damien*

“I’M HUNGRY,” SHE SAYS, and her stomach reiterates the point by rumbling loudly.

I pull my head up from her chest. “That was unnervingly loud, baby.”

“Shush,” she says, her foot nudging against my shin. “I was busy all day yesterday taking care of someone.”

I lay my head back down on her chest. “I’m sure he was very appreciative.”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t said thank you. He’s not very good with that phrase. Or ‘I’m sorry’ for that matter.”

I bite my tongue. I’m definitely guilty of the latter.

“What do you want to eat?” I regret the question as soon as it leaves my lips. It’s never a good question to ask her. Because I know I’m never going to get a short answer.

Nothing is different this time either.

She describes about five different dishes in the following forty-five seconds, each one wildly different from the last. And it ends with the sound of her smacking her lips and sighing, her stomach rumbling right along.

“Somehow you managed to give me way too much information and not answer the question at the same time,” I laugh, tickling her ear with my tongue.

“I’m multiskilled.”

“I’ll say.” I crawl up the bed and pull her against me. “Sweet, sexy, multiskilled vixen.”

“That part’s your fault. I was an innocent little mouse wearing her shirt buttoned up to her chin before.”

“I shall admit all blame and take the punishment.”

Her eyes get serious and she traces her fingertips along the red, angry lines down my chest. “I think I got a bit carried away with that part.”

“Not at all. I like being branded by you. I should have them tattooed on me. Then anyone who sees my chest will know who it belongs to.”

She narrows her eyes. “Who is looking at your chest?”

I play dumb. “You know, like at the gym, and doctor’s and stuff. Oh, and at those topless billionaire bachelor nights at the strip club”

“What?”

I laugh and quiet her with a kiss. “Shush.”

“Don’t shush me.”

“You shush me all the time!”

“You deserve it.”

I adopt a look of remorse. “Yes, Miss Tran.”

She doesn’t say anything but there’s a hint of white as she bites her bottom lip.

“Hey,” I say, softly, and pull her into my arms. “I meant what I said. I’m yours.”

“Okay,” she answers, her voice small and unsure.

I pledge to myself that I’ll do all I can to make sure she never questions it again.



“DOES THIS MEET THE brief?”

She doesn’t reply, just gives me a smile and shoves another crab cake into her already full mouth. I follow suit. The food really is exceptional, and even if it hadn’t been what she’d specifically asked for, it was hitting all the right spots.

As was the location, Jaxon Sinclair’s new restaurant, Marrow, right in the center of the Darling Harbor precinct. My friend Kaine Ashley had introduced me to Jax about five years ago on a trip to NYC. Jax was a tenant of one of his buildings and had just won the James Beard Award for Best Emerging Chef. It hadn’t taken him that long to convince him to open a

restaurant in Sydney, and already only three months in, there were whispers of him winning every restaurant award possible.

A quick text to Jax had secured my usual table on the rooftop, and here I was, watching My-Linh make the same sounds over the food that she had from my tongue only an hour ago.

“I’m getting kind of jealous of those oysters, baby.”

“You should be. I want to take them home and make love to them,” she says barely breaking her stride as she sucks down another plump Coffin Bay oyster.

“As long as it’s not the person who prepared the oysters that you want to take home.” I grab one off the tray and slurp it down. Delicious. The lemon verbena vinaigrette Jax has served is exquisite. “What is it that they say oysters are good for?”

“Right,” she says, rolling her eyes at me. “Like you don’t know.”

I adopt an innocent expression. “Can’t say I’ve ever had to use them before.”

The eye roll quickly becomes a glare and I chuckle, leaning over and kissing her bare shoulder.

She changes tacks and says, thoughtfully, “That’s okay. If you use the moves on someone else, then maybe I could take Jax home instead.”

Turnabout's a fucking green-eyed monster and I growl and bite down hard on her shoulder, making her squeal.

"Don't even joke about that," I growl, and pull her across the cushioned bench and onto my lap. "You are mine. And don't you forget it."

She purrs and buries her face against my neck. "I won't. And you don't either."

My mouth presses gently against hers. "You don't ever have to worry about that."



THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THE lights of the Sydney Harbor Bridge tonight, or maybe it's the air around it. Everything seems clearer. Brighter. We lay in my bed with the blinds open, and my face is buried in the crook of her neck as I hold her from behind. Her skin is still slightly damp from making love, and her eyes are slowly drooping.

"Thank you for coming to take care of me," I whisper, realizing I haven't actually said the word out loud. "I don't know where I'd be if you hadn't come."

"Kylian and your brothers would've taken care of you."

"Not the same way."

Her giggles shake her whole body. "I would hope not."

"Dirty lil perv. I'm serious. I've...fallen down that hole before. But it was worse this time. I don't know if I could've

been pulled out of it by anyone but you.”

Her voice is ponderous as she says, “Do you think she’s changed this time? Maybe your Mom’s actually met someone who makes her happy. Maybe that could change your relationship.”

I swallow. There’s no way to tell My-Linh that sometimes parents are just as fucked up as the rest of us without breaking her heart. So I don’t. I just say, “I don’t know. But when I asked her if she loved him, do you know what she said? She said, ‘There are things about him that I love very much,’. And when I said ‘Money?’ All she did was smile. She hasn’t changed. She never will. As much as I want her to. I have to stop hoping.”

My-Linh sighs, long and sad. “I’m sad for her. I wish she could find happiness. Surely everyone deserves that.”

I don’t know how to tell her that, at this point, I no longer know if I believe that’s true.



“EW. YOU’RE NUDE. YOU’RE both noooooood!”

I jolt awake at the shouting voice to see two of my brothers standing at the foot of the bed and, what I can only describe as, ogling a very nude My-Linh.

“Get the fuck out, you fucking degenerates!” I yell, throwing the pillow behind my head at them.



“Kylian called and said I had to come quickly and help you. I’m just doing my brotherly duty!” Kingsley laughs and hugs the pillow to his chest.

My-Linh sits up in the bed, pulling the sheet up barely covering her breasts and grins. “You must be Kingsley.”

He bows, a smirk on his face. “Yes, how did you know?”

“Just from your description.” She shrugs and looks thoughtful. “I guess your brothers weren’t kidding when they said you’re the most good-looking,” she schmoozes him.

My eldest brother grins and walks over to her side of the bed and holds his hand out. “I feel like we should be properly introduced. I like you!”

“I SAID GET THE FUCK OUT!” I yell, jumping out of bed and dragging them both by their elbows out of my room while My-Linh and they laugh their heads off as I slam the door behind them.

“And you. You’re going to be punished for that!” I jump back into bed and pull her by her legs into the middle of the bed and crawl on top of her.

“They’ll hear everything!” she protests.

“Consider that their reward for being such good brothers,” I growl, pulling her legs around my waist.

Freshly showered and freshly fucked half an hour later, we emerge into the living room to see my brothers eating breakfast and watching the different news channels on the three split screen TVs I have mounted on the living room wall.

“Orange juice?” I say to My-Linh as we make our way to the kitchen bench. She’s looking at the array of food that has seemingly appeared out of nowhere, eyes sparkling.

“Yes, please.”

“Croissant or English muffin?”

“Yes!”

My brothers snort and I throw them a glare. The last thing I want is for My-Linh ever to feel like she can’t be totally and completely her food obsessed self around me. If she’s going to be around me, she’s going to also be around my brothers a lot. We come as a package deal.

But I needn’t have worried about her being offended.

“What? You’ve never seen a woman with her mouth full before?” she asks them, picking up a croissant off the tray and shoving it into her mouth. “I mean, I thought filling a woman’s mouth was a Baxter family trait, but maybe this is where Damien’s got you beat.”

“Oooh! She’s got you there, Kylian,” Kingsley guffaws.

“Fuck you. She obviously meant you, Teeny-Peeny!” Kylian shoots back at Kingsley, using the childhood nickname our nanny had for him.

She grins at me, giving me a wink, and downs half her glass of orange juice. “Are you embarrassed by me?”

“You? I couldn’t even imagine that ever happening. Them? Pretty much every day of our lives.”

She giggles and fills her plate up and squeezes herself in between my brothers and starts firing off questions about what I was like as a child.

As I sip my coffee, I realize, for the first time in as long as I can remember, there's not a damn thing I could want in the entire world.



*My-Linh*

“ROGER? WHY AREN'T YOU stopping?” I ask, as he zooms by the corner where he usually lets me out.

He doesn't answer, but gives me a nervous look in the rearview mirror.

“Roger!” I yell, and try to move out of my seat.

Unfortunately for me, I'm flanked by Damien and Kingsley on either side, and on the seat in front of me Kylian's spread his long body all over the seat.

There's no getting out.

“Guys! You have to let me out. I don't want to show up at Baxter with you.”

“Why not? Are you embarrassed by us?” Kingsley asks.

“Yes! No one wants to show up with the boss! That's so lame. Plus, they'll talk.”

Damien nuzzles against my neck, “I could really give them something to talk about.”

The glare I give him makes no difference and the limo just keeps zooming down Pitt Street and stops in front of the Baxter building.

Roger opens the door and Kylian jumps out, followed by Kingsley.

“After you,” Damien says.

“You’re a little stinker.” I pout at him, and just get a soft kiss for my trouble.

It’s everything I can do not to melt into a puddle of My-Linh. I climb out of the car and mumble “traitor” at Roger under my breath. He gives me an apologetic shrug and closes the door behind Damien. I storm past the three of them and into the building, hearing them call my name from behind.

They are crazy.

The three of them are like day and night and whatever the third option is.

Based on what they’ve told me about Mathias, he’s about as different to them as they are from each other, and I can’t wait to meet him, but I have to remind myself to take it slow. Damien is about as skittish as a baby deer, and the last thing I want to do is scare him off. I might’ve been able to lie to myself that I could’ve lived without him but now that I know what it’s like to have him in my life, and call him mine, I don’t

think I can go back to a time when that wasn't the case anymore.

“Hi, Frank!” I wave and am gone before he can reply.

“Yo, Frank! Looking good, man,” I hear Kylian greet the doorman behind me as I make a run for the elevator.

I wasn't kidding about not wanting to be seen with Damien, let alone the two other Baxter brothers. No one likes a teacher's pet and I've been at Baxter Enterprises long enough to know that being the director's pet would not go down any better.

The elevator door opens and I jump onto it, quick to press on the “close door” button.

“Wait up!” An arm shoots through the door, and Kylian pushes it open. He and Kingsley pile onto the elevator followed by Damien, his face a picture of amusement.

“This isn't funny,” I whisper-hiss to him as he pushes himself to the back of the elevator to stand next to me.

“What? I can't ride the elevator? It's not nice to try to hog the elevator to yourself, you know. Someone told me that once.”

“Oh hush,” I say, and a giggle slips out before I can stop it.

I get to my floor and the door opens.

“Have a good day, Miss Tran!” the three of them yell in unison as I step off, my face blaring so red I could light the entire Baxter Enterprises building.

As I walk to my desk, head down, I see Adam stand up in his cubicle, giving me a strange look. Damn him and his damn face, ruining my good mood.

“What was that?” Raquel asks as I slink to my desk, throwing my bag down.

“Ugh, nothing.”

“It didn’t sound like nothing. And it certainly didn’t look like nothing. Was that another of the Baxters?”

“Yeah. Two more of them; they were getting in when I arrived. Guess the other two don’t mind sharing an elevator as much as the Baxter that we got.”

“Phew,” she says, fanning herself. “I think I just had a mini-gasm. I wouldn’t mind getting stuck in an elevator with the three of them for a few minutes.”

I have to pretend to answer a call just to stop myself from spilling all the details of my last few days.

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

Subject: Lunch?

Want to join us for lunch? Kylian wants to go down to the restaurant. It’s Taco Day and he’s been making taco jokes all morning.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject: Re: Lunch

Not even a little bit. I wasn't kidding about not wanting to be seen with you! Anyway, I have to make up for some of the work I missed yesterday because someone decided to take a shower with all their clothes on.

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

Subject: Re: Re: Lunch?

Is it because Kingsley's breath stinks? We've tried to talk to him about it before. How 'bout just you and me in my office then? I can order in.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Lunch

You don't take NO for an answer well, do you?

But again, no. I really do have a lot of work to do. I wouldn't want to be accused of coasting :p

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Lunch?

You never forget anything, do you? I guess I deserved that for the elevator thing this morning.

Are you sure about lunch?

I promise to not even ravish you. Unless you ask nicely, of course.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject: Re: Lunch

You make it very hard to ever say no to you. I'm going to have to take a rain check though. Which is too bad. The tacos are so delicious.

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Lunch?

I'll bring you some.

Any excuse to see you.

By the way, have I ever told you that seeing your name in my inbox is the absolute best part of my day?

I bite down so hard on the inside of my cheek I yelp.

Damien Baxter sure does know how to make a girl feel good.





“I SERIOUSLY THOUGHT THAT meeting was never going to end,” Raquel moans as we get back to our desks around 1 p.m. after a tedious and interminable meeting.

“I’m pretty sure I snored at some point,” I add.

Raquel snorts. “That was you? I thought it was me.”

“As long as we were doing it in harmony, hopefully nobody noticed.”

“We noticed!” Curtis yells out as he passes our cubicles on his way to his office.

There’s a container on my desk with a single “D” written on it. Without even opening it, I know there are tacos inside it, and my stomach flutters.

“Oh. You brought your lunch?” Raquel says, peeking into my cubicle. “I did too,” she says, waving a sandwich at me.

“Um, yeah. I guess I knew we were probably going to be working through lunch,” I say, feeling a flurry of both excitement and guilt about having the director of our company bring me lunch.

We eat our lunch in silence and I open my email to thank him, only to find an email already waiting there for me.

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

Subject: Tacos for my...

Taco? No, that doesn't work. I should've brought you something sweet like a cupcake. Sorry I missed you. Was hoping to get a glimpse of you.

Enjoy your lunch, baby.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Tacos for my...  
It was delicious. Thank you.  
You spoil me.

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Re: Tacos for my...  
That's the point.  
Meetings all afternoon so won't be around much.  
Miss you.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Tacos for my...  
MY2

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com  
From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Tacos for

my...

MY2? Like 2 x My's? I could into that.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Tacos for my..

\*\*facepalm\*\*

MY2 = Miss You Too.

You really are the cutest clueless billionaire ever.

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

Subject: MY3

Our frantic but unproductive emailing is interrupted by my phone buzzing on my desk. And for a moment I even harbor the hope that it's him texting me even though we're emailing.

The Damien Baxter obsession has taken a hard hold of me.

From: Mom

To: My-Linh

Can you come home tonight?

Everyone is okay, but there's something we need to talk to you about.

From: My-Linh

To: Mom

Of course, Mom. I'll be home around  
6:30. Hope everything's okay.

I pout as I press send, knowing I probably won't be seeing  
Damien for dinner either.

I miss him already.



*Damien*

“YOU SEE WHAT WAS on page three this morning?”  
Kingsley asks as he stretches out on my leather couch, his  
ankles crossing on the arms, arms crossed behind his head.

“You saw what I was doing this morning. At what point  
would you think I would've had a chance to read the  
newspaper?”

“Got it.”

I stare at the messages Melissa is sending through to me on  
the screen, most of them labeled ‘Urgent’. I wasn't kidding  
when I told My-Linh I was going to be slammed with  
meetings. As it is, the only reason I have a spare moment is  
because my next appointment is late.

“Why don't you give me the Cliff notes?”

“Looks like that Gottfried/Maxim deal fell through.”

That makes me look up from my computer. “Really?”

Kingsley nods.

Rupert Gottfried has been chipping away at Maxim for the last two years. And with Maxim losing the government's City Beautification contract they were in a precarious position. Gottfried's buyout was almost a last resort, and with that deal falling through, it was only a matter of time before Maxim was going to fold or be at the mercy of the vultures. There was a lot of potential there but Baxter didn't want to bother with going head-to-head with Gottfried.

"Wonder what happened? Rupert and Vanessa Maxim are two peas in a pod. I thought he was actually doing her a favor," I muse.

"Your guess is as good as mine. But it does look like with that falling through, Rupert's position at Gottfried is as precarious as ever."

We both hiss at the same time.

"Fucking snake," I spit. I can't believe that my uncle, even in all his ambition, would even think about getting into bed with Rupert Gottfried. A man whose own father didn't trust him.

"Just watch your back," Kingsley warns. "This is your turf and I'm not going to tell you what to do, you know what's going on here better than me. But I'm just saying, watch your back." He pushes up off the couch. "Okay, I'm off. Enjoy your next meeting."

"Where are you off to?"

“Off to find me some of what you had this morning,” he says with a cheeky grin.

“Good luck. I already found the best.”

Kingsley gives me an exaggerated eye roll, but then winks and saunters out of my office just in time for Melissa to buzz through my next appointment. He can eye roll all he likes, I know they both like My-Linh, and that’s probably the first time I’ve ever been able to say that about a woman I’ve been linked to.



# TWENTY-FIVE

*My-Linh*

MY FINGER DIGS AT the brown burn mark on the kitchen table in my family's small apartment above our tea shop. When I was eleven years old, I'd put the stock pot directly down on the table without a pot holder. It had immediately hissed and my mom had yelled at me to lift the pot but there was already a semicircle burned into the laminate. I'd cried into my rice bowl all through dinner and the acrid smell had wafted throughout the house, into my bedroom and into my dreams that night.

The shame I'd felt that night is flooding me again right now as I try to process the bad news that my parents have just told me.

"And there's nothing we can do?" I ask, looking up at my parents' serious faces.

They shake their heads.



“It’s just preposterous! They can’t just raise our rent by 60%! They just raised it 30% last year. If they want to kick us out they should just say so. It can’t be legal.”

My mom reaches out and pats my hand and I feel instantly guilty. She shouldn’t be trying to make me feel better, I’m supposed to be doing that for her.

I just can’t believe the landlord of this building that we’ve been in for almost twenty years is getting greedier and greedier. Rent in Sydney is already almost criminal, and in the last three years alone the rent on our little store has almost doubled. Even if we have a line of customers out the door from open to close, we will still only barely be able to cover the expenses. When I made the decision to move out and live with Adam, I wasn’t able to contribute as much to the family expenses having my own apartment’s rent and utilities. I know it had put a strain on my parents’ finances, but they’d insisted they were going to be okay, telling me it was more important to them that I live my own life than to make those decisions based on them.

But with this sudden increase in rent, effective immediately, I know there’s almost no way they’re going to be able to cover it. It’s not like they have a large amount of savings. Most of their extra money is sent to Vietnam to help our family members there.

And the fact that they have called me means they can no longer do it alone.

Nor should they.

“I’m so sorry.” I look up, trying to stop the quiver of my chin. “I...I shouldn’t have moved out.”

“Im,” my mother says, telling me to be quiet in Vietnamese. “We’re only telling you so that we can decide together what we should do. There will be no silly tears or blame. We all made the decision that you would move out. What were you going to do otherwise? Sit on the train for two hours every day? For what? Waste of your youth!” She takes a drink from her tea cup, and her hand shakes a little. This time it’s my turn to reach out and take her hand in mine.

“Okay, Mom. Okay,” I say gently. The speech wasn’t easy for her. But she’s always done everything she could to make sure that my happiness came first. And even in this time of difficulty nothing has changed.

“Do you...have enough for the next month?”

My father blinks and then shrugs, “Maybe. The problem is that we have a large shipment coming in. And it’s a COD order. It’s almost \$7000. And we could leave it at the dock, but then we’ll have to pay the extra \$250 a day storage fee.”

I know that leaving this location, as part of the strip of stores in Cabramatta’s Vietnamese district, at least in the short term, is not a viable solution. The store does not have an online presence. It’s just a neighborhood tea shop where second generation customers know just what they’re looking for and what they’re getting when they stop in here on their weekly grocery shop. The moment we leave here is when we will lose most of our business. And our landlord knows that.

I do some quick math in my head, and not for the first time I'm thanking Dr. Jeremy Baker under my breath. Aside from the extracurricular activities, the time at Baxter has temporarily increased my income. It's not a permanent solution but it does mean I have an extra few hundred dollars. It isn't nearly enough but it's a start and I know where I'm going to be able to get some more money. At least to keep our head above water for the next month before I find a more permanent solution.

I get up and wrap my arms around my mother from behind, kissing her gently on her soft cheek.

"Don't worry about a thing, Mom. You just don't worry about a thing."

I feel her shoulders lift from a deep breath, her back still tense, and my heart aches. Silently I make her a promise that she won't ever have to worry this much again.

"What's for dinner?" I ask, standing up, and both my parents break out in laughter.



*Damien*

SHE'S A FUCKING TEASE.

She stares at me the entire time I'm talking during the Huddle; I can barely make sense of my own words coming out of my mouth. The black V-neck T-shirt she's wearing plunges

so deep, I'm having to swallow twice as often as I imagine my mouth sucking on the milky white skin of her breast. The fire engine red pencil skirt she's wearing has buttons that run up the back seam and hug the curve of her ass. It's so provocative for its modest length, cutting just at her knees. The knees that have clamped hard around my head as I've made her scream my name with my tongue in her pussy.

"Damien?" Kayleigh says, and I realize I might've stopped talking. My-Linh smirks and I'm already thinking of ways to punish her for it.

"Um, yes, so that's all for today. I just wanted to remind you that we're going to prioritize the Wattle Foods campaign and get some preliminary numbers in from some of our rural markets on Friday at the latest."

Kayleigh raises her eyebrows in a question, and I nod and she takes it as a sign to end the meeting. I move to follow My-Linh out of the room, but I'm stopped by a group of the legal team needing to ask me questions and by the time I look up, she's gone and Melissa is buzzing me back to the office for my next appointment.

And for the first and only time ever, I wish I wasn't a Baxter and all the responsibility that comes with it.

From: POS

To: Kitten

You're going to be punished for wearing that outfit and then leaving before I can tell you what I want to

do to you while wearing it.

From: Kitten

To: POS

You told me I could wear whatever I want as long as it was clean and tidy.

I complied.

From: POS

To: Kitten

Then when can I see you so that I can tell you what a good girl you are.

From: Kitten

To: POS

I have a few things to do after work, but I'll be free after 7-ish.

From: POS

To: Kitten

Expect an interoffice package in about five minutes.

I suggest you don't open it with other people around.

Or do...



*My-Linh*

FOUR AND A HALF minutes after I've read his message, Larry, the mail office guy knocks on my cubicle.

"Got this for you, My-Linh."

"Thanks, Larry!" I say and wait until he's gone before I tear open the envelope.

Inside is a flat black card with faint gold B printed on the front.

I shake the envelope and a slip of paper falls out.

It's on Damien's letterhead, and in his loopy handwriting he's written " 7:15 p.m. My place. Let yourself in with the keycard. I might be a few minutes late. But when I get there, I want to see you wearing nothing but that skirt, those shoes, bent over my kitchen bench. And I'm going to show you just what a good girl you are."

I'm instantly breathless, and I'm glad I'm sitting or else my legs would've buckled under me.

I didn't get home until almost 11 p.m. last night, and after sending him a good night message I'd fallen into a deep asleep, exhausted from the last few days and the emotional night with my parents.

And this morning, I'd started taking a few early deliveries, to help raise some extra money.

But I've missed him the whole time.

And as much as I'd wanted to stay to talk to him after the huddle, I didn't want to seem like a lovesick puppy and I

forced myself to follow Raquel back to our desks.

And now, I'm going to be waiting all day for 7:15 p.m.

I'm a sucker for Damien Baxter.



MY LAST DELIVERY IS only a block from Damien's apartment building, so I arrive there early. I let myself into the elevator, showing the security card at the front desk shrew as she chases after me. I give her a big smile and a quick wave as the elevator doors close as her jaw drops.

With each floor the butterflies I feel the stress of the day fade away.

Something has shifted in our relationship, and I'm no longer feeling like I'm the guest, the one night stand, the booty call. Now I know he truly wants me here.

Me and only me.

And I want him and only him.

It's not even 7 p.m. yet when I let myself into his apartment, and I decide to take a quick shower to wash off the sweat from riding around the city. I run a razor quickly up and between my legs and then enjoy the way his thick, luxuriant towels dry my body off. There's a jar of the same body butter he'd bought me on the bathroom bench and I quickly slather myself all over before slipping my feet into my stilettos and wriggling back into the pencil skirt. I catch my reflection in the foggy

mirror as I step out of the bathroom, my breasts bare and pink from the hot shower.

I can barely recognize myself.

He's rebirthed me; taken the broken parts of my heart and confidence and rebuilt me from the inside out.

And so, I am his.

Mind. Body. Soul.

I step out into the kitchen, position myself so that I'm the first thing he'll see when he steps into his apartment, brace my hands against the bench, bent at the waist, legs spread, skirt bunched up around my hips.

And wait.





# TWENTY-SIX

*Damien*

“FASTER, ROGER. FUCK.”

The car has barely moved in the last five minutes, inches at best.

It’s almost 7:45 p.m.; the meeting ran way longer than I’d expected. We’d had a lot to talk about considering who what had happened. Terry Masters was the last person I’d expected to run into, let alone, with my uncle and two other board members at the club. What was he even doing in Australia? Just a few weeks ago he’d said that he was going to be stuck in London for a few weeks. And I certainly didn’t buy the bullshit that they were talking about their alma mater’s reunion.

They were talking about the Baxter Boys, as they called my brothers and me, which is why they looked like the cat with the milk when I’d walked in with the head of our legal department.

“You should join us, Damien,” Uncle Gerald had said, “if you’re not too busy running one of the largest companies in Australia, of course.”

I’d have smashed my fist into his face if I wasn’t hanging onto my position by the skin of my teeth. But one day, one day, I was going to break his fucking nose, and it was going to feel so good.

“I’m good, just thought I’d just send over a round of Hennessy and wish you all a good evening. Let me know if you need a table somewhere for dinner. My assistant can set it up. There’s not a restaurant she won’t be able not to get you into.” Code for if you’re going to do anything in Sydney, my city, I’m going to know about it. Don’t think I won’t.

I’d left fuming, restless, agitated.

I need to see My-Linh, feel her near me, smell her, hear her voice.

“Traffic’s jammed, sir,” Roger tells me, pointing to the gridlock around us.

I check the clock; she’s already been waiting for over half an hour.

Maybe, or maybe she got bored.

My groin tightens at the thought of what was supposed to be waiting for me, if she’d taken my note seriously. Something tells me she would’ve. But I wouldn’t blame her if she’d gotten sick of waiting and left.

I look up and see the top of my apartment building only a few blocks in the distance.

I kick the car door open. “I’m going to walk it, Roger. And I’m in for the night, so take the rest of the night off, if you ever get out of here.”

I’m hitting the pavement even before I hear his reply, pushing my way through the hordes of people who’ve decided to crowd Sydney on this night for some reason.

So much noise, chaos, so many hot bodies, steam from the idling cars, bus horns and shouts from tired, impatient pedestrians.

I want to get away from it all and be in her arms. Be in her.

I dial her number even as I run.

*Wait for me, Kitten, I will into the twilight air around me.  
Wait for me, I need you.*

The Baxter apartment building looms as I turn a corner, my penthouse is lowly lit but enough to light it up like a beacon against the darkening sky.

There’s the slightest of easing of the pressure building up in my chest, with every step I’m closer to her.

The building’s door is held open for me even before I reach it. I rush past the lobby staff and jump onto a waiting elevator.

*Please be there, my lips mouth.* I’m filled with so much anticipation, I forget to be scared. Scared to be feeling this way, so strongly for another person.

The elevator jerks to a stop, and for a moment I hesitate to step off it, not wanting to see if she's gone, or worse, her disappointment at making her wait.

But the need to know overtakes it and I turn from the foyer and into my kitchen.

There is she, bent over, arms braced against the kitchen island, legs spread, skirt pushed up to expose her ass that glistens with a sheen of perspiration.

It's all I can do not to instantly drop to my knees and lick the single bead of sweat dripping between the perfect, milky globes of her ass.

Hearing me, she slides a finger between her legs, without uttering a word and gently spreads the lips of her sex.

Inviting me.

Begging me.

Giving herself to me,

My cock is so hard, it's straining hard against my pants.

I kick off my shoes as I unbuckle my belt, approaching her, watching as her finger rounds her clit, avoiding her pussy.

She's not going to touch it, I know she's not.

She knows what's supposed to happen

The first thing that's going to touch her, enter her, is my cock.

I don't know how we both know, but we do.

She knows it's what I need; I know it's what she wants.

I step out of my pants, and fist my cock.

Bending over, I drag my tongue down the dip of her spine, she's sweet and salty, tasting like her signature cherry blossom.

By the hem, I bunch the skirt completely up over her ass, grabbing handfuls of her fleshy ass with her hands.

Desperately, I position behind her, my arms gripping her hips as she widens her stance.

Then in one deep thrust, I slam my cock inside her.

"Ohhhhh," she moans. The first noise she's made since I arrived.

Her pussy is like a vacuum, impossible tight.

But ready. Wet.

I pull all the way out, looking down at the cock, already slick with her sweetness.

My tip presses against her opening again and she rocks back just in time for me to thrust inside her, all the way to the hilt.

I can't go slow any longer.

I ground myself grabbing her waist as I start to piston in and out of her.

The silent apartment fills with the sound of my cock sliding in and out of her slick little hole as I fuck her.

Fucking away all the frustration out of my day, fucking away all the anticipation, all the missing.

I picture the smug son of a bitches at the club and my blood boils and I ram my cock deeper into her, harder, faster, my nails digging into her, leaving crescent shapes on her skin.

She groans, her hands white knuckled as she grabs the kitchen bench

Taking me.

Taking it.

Taking everything I'm giving her.

"Yes, Damien. More," she rasps.

She knows I need this.

Need to use her for my release.

Need her to fuck the day right out of me.

I focus on nothing but the feeling of my cock driving in and out of her. In and out, my orgasm building as she squeezes around me,

"God dammit, Kitten. Your pussy is like crack," I groan, barely breathing, my climax is so close.

"More, Damien, more" she just keeps whispering.

And I give her all I've got, slamming my body against her, my cock driving deeper than ever.

"I'm going to come in you, baby. Take my fucking come, you dirty lil girl," I grunt.

My body tenses, every single muscle and I hear a far away shout as I feel the come shoot from my cock and fill her.

“Oh god.” My cock convulses again and again. Over and over, deep inside her.

I step away once there’s nothing left, and spin her around and push her to her knees and feed her my still pulsing cock.

She runs the tip over her lips, making them shine, her tongue running over the head making my body jerk.

And she slowly wraps her lips around the softening head.

“Fuck. You are such a good girl, aren’t you?” I pant, when I finally take a breath.

And she gives me a soft little smile as her tongue traces the lines of come on her lip.

I pull her to her feet and then sweep my arm under her legs.

“Damien!” She squeals, “what are you doing?”

“Me Damien. Me drag my kitten back to my cave.”

She bangs on my chest for a moment, then wraps her arms around my neck letting me carry her to the bed.

When I lay her down onto it, her legs fall open.

And she knows.

It’s her turn.





SHE'S SOFT, LIMP, LIKE a ragdoll in my arms. Her shallow, fast breaths finally steadying, and I lean over to kiss her swollen lips.

“I know I was late. I had a work...issue.”

She makes a little unintelligible noise, and snuggles in closer to my side.

“Had you been waiting long?”

“Since 7:15 p.m. when you said.”

“I tried to get home as soon as I could.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

She opens her eyes, and in the dark, her pupils are like giant bottomless velvet brown pools. I've had my share of women, women who would sell their soul to fuck me, but none that have looked at me with eyes so trusting.

“Of course. You're a busy man. I knew you would have called if you could've.”

“I tried to call. Once. But it was already late by then,” I admit.

“I didn't have my phone on me. There weren't any pockets in that skirt,” she giggles against my shoulder and the vibration emanates all through my body, like ball bearings humming with contentment.

“Funny girl,” I whisper, burying my face in her hair, breathing her in, like I've been stuck in an oxygen-less room

for a decade and have finally been let outside.

Her eyelids droop, and her head fellows suit, back down onto my chest.

“My legs are going to sore tomorrow though. Are you going to pay for me to have a massage?”

“No! I’m not paying for someone else to touch you! I’ll do it myself. Whenever you need, I’ll come out of whatever meeting I’m in, I’ll leave it to come and rub you.”

“My *legs*.”

“Yes, I’ll rub them too.”

A giggle bubbles out of her mouth and she drapes her arm over my bare chest.

“Did I hurt you?” I ask, almost afraid of the answer.

She shakes her head.

“Okay. I...might’ve been a little rough. I had a difficult evening.”

The mattress dips as she suddenly lifts her head, alert and frowning.

“What happened?”

I tuck a curl behind her ear, running my thumb along her flushed cheek. “It’s nothing. Work. You don’t want to hear about it.”

“Try me.”

I tell her about running into my uncle, Terry Masters and the others.

“So I don’t know what’s going on, but I can’t imagine that it’s anything good. For me anyway. Who knows, it might be great from Baxter.”

Her frown gets deeper and she jabs her finger into my chest. “You. Are. What’s. Good. For. Baxter.”

“Ow.” I take her finger and drop a kiss on the tip. “I’m not so sure. Nothing’s gone right since I took over.”

“You want me to name all over the changes in directorships that went on to record highs after rocky beginnings?”

“No, ma’am. But I still shouldn’t have taken it out on you. I-I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Hey. You didn’t.” She frowns again “You’ve never really been in a proper relationship, have you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, most relationships involve two people. At least two, anyway. But never just one. That means there’s one person to give and another to take at any given time. It’s not always the same person. You take turns. Today you took, and I gave. And I will do it whenever you need me. And you know what?”

“What?”

“I know you’ll give when I need to take.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you already have. You let me in, and I know how hard that is for you. That’s your version of giving.”

I gently guide her head back down to my chest. “I didn’t like the alternative. Not having you at all.” I let her words sink in for a moment. I know me, I take a lot. And I don’t want her to one day wake up and realize she’s got nothing left to give. “You promise to let me know when I’m too much?”

She replies with a soft nod.

“Good,” I whisper. “And I don’t always want to be the rough to your gentle.”

She smiles and points to a fading red scratch on my chest from her fingernails from the other night.

“You’re not, Damien. It’s just that no one’s ever shown you just how gentle you can be.”



# TWENTY-SEVEN

*Damien*

THERE'S BARELY A MONTH and a half left before we launch the new Wattle Foods campaign and I've never felt so nervous about any project in my entire professional life. Not even when I had first put together the proposal for the acquisition that had spearheaded and then cemented my position as the director of the Australia and Oceanic division. I was jumping into the unknown at that point. Now I was trying to put into practice the ideas I had.

And they weren't going well.

Retracting the first campaign had been an important but costly decision and the faster we fill the empty space that we have made, the better.

Wattle Foods was hemorrhaging and I needed to stop the bleeding, fast.

"Mr. Baxter, you have a call on line 1. It's—"

I pick up the phone before she finishes, thinking she's going to say My-Linh. She'd left the apartment early this morning and I already missed her. There was something I felt was time I said to her, and I was looking forward to dinner tonight so I could.

“— your mother,” Melissa finishes.

I drop the phone.

My mother.

Apparently she hadn't gotten the message from our short meeting last week. I, on the other hand, have had enough of her to last me another decade.

“Tell her I'm busy and I'll call her back.” When I'm dead.

Melissa pauses. “She said it's important.”

“And I'm telling you to tell her that I'm busy.”

She doesn't argue, but there's a small sigh. The last thing I need is for my employees witnessing me having another breakdown because my mommy called.

I pull the phone out of my pocket and do the only thing that gives me peace during the workday these days.

From: POS

To: Kitten

What are you wearing? (what was that you called me? Sex-crazed and sleazy? Guilty as charged)

When she doesn't reply I send another one.

From: POS

To: Kitten

I hope it's a little more than what you were wearing when I came home last night.

I shove the phone back in my pocket before I send yet another one before she can reply and appear like the smitten fucker I admittedly am right now.

She's not at the Huddle. I go down early just in case I can catch her in a moment alone at her desk, but she's not there, and she doesn't slip in later after.

A series of meetings draws my focus away and it's past lunch before I realize I haven't heard back from her.

To: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

From: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

Is your phone working? Haven't heard from you all morning.

MY (does it work when it's just Miss You?)

Melissa corners me and forces me to sign a stack of papers two feet high but I keep an ear out for any notification on my phone or email for a reply from her.

But there is none.

"Melissa, who sits next to My-Linh in Marketing?" I ask once I'm down to the last signature.

"I think it's Raquel Williams, Mr. Baxter."



“Call her, please.”

She nods and patches the call through.

“Erm, hello, this is Raquel,” she says, her voice nervous.

“Raquel, this is Damien Baxter.”

“Oh. What can I do for you, sir?”

I cut to the chase. “Is My-Linh at work today?”

“No,” she answers quickly.

Instantly, I know something is very wrong.

“Did she call in sick or...?”

“No, sir. She just didn’t show up. I called her and messaged her but she hasn’t replied.”

Shit. If she hadn’t replied to just me, it might’ve just been something I said or did. But the My-Linh I know wouldn’t just ignore her friend like that.

“Um. Okay. If...if you hear from her, can you let me know?”

“Of course.”

“Let me give you my direct number,” I say, rattling off my number before hanging up.

Where is she?



IT’S ALMOST 6:00 P.M. and I’ve been standing outside her building for almost an hour. No sign of her, or her roommates.

At almost 6:30 p.m the people I saw with her at the club walk down the street towards the building. I almost hope she's with them, but she's not.

“Are you Mandy?” I ask the woman, as the guy eyes me.

“Yes...” she says, hesitantly.

“I'm Damien Baxter.”

“We know.”

“Have you heard from My-Linh today?”

They frown and look at each other then back at me.

“Why?”

I take a deep breath. I don't know how much she's told them about us and I don't want to be sharing anything that she might not be ready to yet.

“Because she wasn't at work.”

“What?”

Without a word, the guy pushes past us and goes into the building.

“She didn't call in either,” I tell Mandy.

“That's not like her. Is she...in trouble?”

I'd laugh if I wasn't almost throwing up from worry. “Not in the slightest, just...I'm a little worried.”

She frowns but doesn't say anything.

“She's not up there,” the guy says as comes back down, addressing only Mandy. “I wonder where she is. She didn't

come home last night either.”

That I knew; she was sleeping in my arms.

“If you hear from her, please let me know,” I say, handing them my business card.

“So you can yell at her for taking a day off? No, I don’t think so,” he says. And the bitterness I tasted when I saw him dancing with My-Linh that night at the club rises again. And I want to punch him.

“No, Sandy,” Mandy says, laying her hand on him. “I don’t...I don’t think that’s what’s going on.”

She’s caught on.

“You’re the Caveman,” she adds.

“I...am not sure what you mean, but I’m really worried,” I say and it sounds so redundant.

Mandy gives me a small smile and nods, taking the business card from me and tucking it into her pocket. “I’ll let you know.”

“Mandy!” Sandy yells and she shushes him.

Right then, her phone buzzes and she answers it, instantly turning white. “Yes. Thank you. We’ll be right there.” She hangs up the phone and takes a deep breath before saying, “It’s My-Linh. She was in a car accident this morning. She’s in surgery. It’s serious.”



# TWENTY-EIGHT

## *Damien*

THE NEXT HOUR IS a complete blur.

I don't know how we get to the hospital, but we do.

I don't know how we manage to tell the nurses who we're looking for, but we do.

I don't know how I make it without punching a hole through every door and wall until I can see her, but I do.

I must have come close though, because when I finally come to, we're being herded into a waiting room and being told to sit down and wait there until the doctor comes back with news.

"I'm going to go get an update and be back. Please just sit down, Mr. Baxter," an orderly in scrubs says.

There's a tug on my arm and Mandy pulls me into a chair and pushes me into it.

"Damien. Please sit down. Try to relax."

Fuck that. I jump back up to my feet, my heart still thumping in the back of my throat. There will be no sitting, no relaxing until I see for myself that she is alive and okay.

All they've told us is that earlier that morning, she was hit while riding her scooter. The collision had been hard and her helmet had a miniscule crack in it, but the main damage appears to have been to her torso. She has a few cracked ribs and she had to be taken into surgery for some internal bleeding.

Each of those words stabs into my brain like a dagger, and my entire body feels like it's covered in ants.

Every breath is so shallow that it provides me no relief.

"Where is the doctor already?" I growl, pacing the waiting room.

"They'll be back," Mandy says.

I'm envious of how she can be so calm. I know she's worried, I can see it in her face but she's managed not to let it turn her into a savage.

I am having no such luck.

"Fuck!" I yell and grab a magazine off the table and fling it across the room. "What the fuck is going on?! When are we going to get to see her?"

They say nothing. I feel like the right thing would be to apologize but no part of me allows it. The hot tar searing the bottom of my stomach is the only thing stopping me from retching from worry.

“Damien. Would you like to sit down?” Mandy suggests after another five minutes of me pacing like a lion.

“No, I would fucking not!” I yell. And her jaw quivers and the guilt stabs at me.

“Hey, easy,” Sandy says. “We’re all worried. No need to be a dick.”

And it’s the only thing that quiets me. For all of five minutes.

I’m up and prowling again when a nurse comes in.

“Is she okay?” I practically yell before she’s had a chance to say a word, running my hand through my hair, afraid of what she’s about to say.

“Mr. Baxter, please,” she says, kindly but firmly.

I take a step back.

“My-Linh is out of surgery. It went well. They had to take her into surgery because of some internal bleeding that didn’t really become evident until she’d been here for a few hours. It was a small liver laceration but the doctor has fixed it. She also has a few cracked ribs. And is going to need a lot of rest.”

“But she’s okay?” I press.

“With some rest, yes— “

“Fuck. Thank god.” I sigh before she can finish, sinking into a chair with relief. “When can we see her?”

“She’s in recovery right now, they’ll take her into a room soon. But she’ll be sleeping.”

“In her own room?”

“Er, that will depend on her private insurance. Medicare will cover he—”

I grab the nurse’s arm and pull her out into the hallway, pointing at the name of the ward.

“See that name? Baxter? That’s my name. So the answer is yes, she will have the best room you have available. And if there isn’t a good room available, then I will find one in another hospital city, and give them my money!”

“Mr. Baxter, that’s for her family to decide.”

“With all due respect, I *am* her family. She’s the woman I love, and that makes me her fucking family.”



IT TAKES ALMOST TWO hours, but finally we are taken up to her room, a large, private room.

She’s sleeping when we get there. Mandy gasps when we see her; she’s still hooked up to oxygen and there are tubes coming out of her arms, and countless cords attached to her chest.

I try to remind myself that it’s all there to help her get better, but I have to physically shove my hands into my pockets to stop myself from ripping them all off her and pulling her into my arms.

Whatever’s wrong with her surely I can fix?



“Only two at a time, got it? And she needs her rest. Don’t wake her up,” the ward nurse tells us, looking directly at me.

As long as I can see the beeping on the heart monitor and her chest rise and fall, I’ll obey. I pull a chair next to the bed, letting my eyes wash over every inch of her, taking in every little scratch and bruise. What the fuck happened? Why was she riding her scooter when she could have just gone to work with me?

Mandy leaves for a moment to let her brother come in. That’s between the two of them, I’m not leaving her side.

Sandy comes in and doesn’t say anything, just touches her gently on the hand. I want to swipe it off, yell at him not to touch her, she’s mine and mine only. But even in my deranged state, I know that these are her closest friends and they have a right to be there.

“My-Linh?” There’s a soft voice at the door, and we both look up to see two older Asian people standing there, looking as scared as we had.

“They’re her parents,” Sandy whispers.

I spring up from the chair as Sandy follows me to the door, stepping into the hallway.

“My-Linh?” her mother says again, a crack in her voice.

“She’s going to be okay,” I say, trying to convince myself as well as them. “Mr and Mrs Tran, I’m Damien Baxter. I’m a friend of My-Linh’s...and her boss. I’m so sorry for what’s happened.”

Her father gives me a small head nod and I leave to give them a moment with their daughter.

And me a moment to sort out what I'm going to say to them, and if there's any way I'm ever going to get over the guilt.

After a few minutes sitting in the hallway in silence, I speak to Sandy directly for the first time. "Do you know why was she riding her scooter?"

"What?"

"They said she was hit while she was riding her scooter. Why was she riding her scooter?"

"Probably to get to work. After you yelled at her for riding the train and being late, she'd been using alternative means," he says in an accusing tone.

"Yeah, *I* was the alternative means. She was with me last night *and* this morning. I would've taken her to work like I have almost every morning for the last few weeks."

He thinks for a moment. "Then she was probably doing some deliveries."

"Deliveries? Where, what for?"

"Well, she was a courier—"

I click my tongue impatiently. "I know that, but she works at Baxter now..."

"She's been picking up some delivery jobs before and after work."

What? “Why?”

He swallows. “Did you mean what you said before?” he asks, seemingly off topic.

“What?”

“About loving her.”

This hadn’t been the way I’d wanted to talk about my feelings, but since he asked, I answer. With a nod.

He takes a deep breath. “Her parents’ tea shop rent got jacked up. Like way up. They needed a lot of money fast or else they were going to lose the location. And, well, their location is everything. So she’s been trying to earn some more money. She didn’t tell you?”

Now I really feel like throwing up.

She needed money?! Of all the things in the world, she’d needed money? And she hadn’t come to me, and now she was lying in a hospital bed?

Fuck.

I tug at my hair, trying to make sense of what I’ve just heard.

And what I can do about it.



# TWENTY-NINE

*My-Linh*

EVERYTHING HURTS.

Like, everything.

I didn't think the space between my toes or the tips of my ears could hurt, but they do.

I don't even think they were injured, just that my entire body has decided, "well, this bit hurts, and that bit hurts... Oh, what the hell, let's just turn the pain dial way up."

To make things worse, now my butt itches.

I lean to the side and try to reach it, but my body's not cooperating.

"Ughhh." I let out a frustrated moan and try to wriggle against the bed rail to create some friction to relieve myself of the itch.

"What are you doing?"

“Huh?” I open my eyes and see Damien standing by my bed, looking at me, amused.

“None of your business,” I say, my voice hoarse. “When did you get back?” I ask, and stop wriggling.

“A while ago,” he answers, his eyes never leaving mine. It’s the first time we’ve been alone together since I woke up yesterday. And as far as I know, Damien has only left my side for about thirty minutes when he went into an empty room to take a shower. Mandy had stayed with me and regaled me with gossip instead. Including one particular tidbit that I don’t quite believe.

“Are you thirsty?” he asks, and reaches for the beige plastic cup of water with a bendy straw sticking out of it.

“No, I’m good, thank you.” I could use a butt cheek scratch. But he hasn’t offered and it seems a little forward to ask.

“You sure? Are you hungry?”

“No, but I could use a shower like...yesterday.”

“I think they said something about a sponge bath sometime today.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Wow, really? I could get used to this.”

“No, fucking hell you’re not,” he growls and leans over and lays a gentle kiss on my lips.

Through the pain, the butterflies take flight. And I wonder if I’ll ever feel normal when he kisses me, or if it’ll always feel like the earth is shaking under my feet.

“Hey,” he says, staying close, his face inches from mine.

“Hey,” I say back. I wish I could reach up to touch his face, but I’ve learned the hard way that my ribs aren’t into that right now. So I just lean my forehead forward and he lays his against mine.

“How are you feeling?” he asks.

“A bit better.”

“You scared the fuck out of me,” he says, pulling away, but still, still his eyes are on mine.

“I’m sorry.”

He nods, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down his throat. “It’s okay. That’s not what you should be apologizing for.”

I frown.

“My-Linh, why, god, *why* did you not tell me about your parent’s business needing help?”

“Damien...”

“I could’ve helped! I would’ve helped.”

“I didn’t need help, Damien.”

“You’re in a hospital bed, My-Linh. A fucking car accidentally hit you while you were on that stupid fucking scooter! I should’ve put it in the compactor when I had a chance.”

“Damien, you just said it, it was an accident. It could’ve happened to anyone.”

He turns away, rubbing both of his hands over his face, and when he finally looks at me again. His eyes are red.

“You could’ve....you could’ve died, My-Linh. Do you...do you have any idea what that would’ve done to me?”

Ignoring the pain, I reach out with my hand, trying to push back the wince. “Hey. Hey. Damien.”

He takes my hand, and gently presses it against his chest. “Have you forgotten what I said? I can’t breathe without you, My-Linh.”

“I remember.”

He shakes his head gently and presses a kiss to my palm. “I was going to tell you this at dinner, but you had to go get yourself squished by a fucking Kia Rio but...My-Linh, I love you.”

The butterflies stop fluttering and take full flight, soaring through every cell in my being.

“Say it again,” I say.

He leans in, kisses me, his lips soft, minty, gentle. “I love you.”

“I love you, Damien,” I whisper back.

And know I have never meant anything more in my life.

He looks at me with such intensity that it knocks the air out of my lungs.

“I have to go,” he says abruptly.



I blink. “Wow, already? Those are some strong commitment issues you have.”

He scrunches up his face at my joke. “I have something I need to take care of. Mandy just texted to say she’s on her way.”

I give him a little smile, glad that he feels I’m well enough that he can leave my side.

“I won’t be long,” he whispers, brushing his lips by my ear. “Is there anything I can do for you before I go?”

I almost shake my head, then I remember. I roll two inches to my side and point to my butt. “Actually, there is something you can do.”



*My-Linh*

“I HAVE LEGS.” I pout as Damien helps me into the wheelchair.

“Yeah? And how have they been holding up lately?” Mandy asks.

I poke my tongue out at her. “I don’t know! No one will let me use them.”

“It’s for your own good. If you walk the same way you ride that scooter, I’m surprised you actually have any limbs left,” Sandy teases.

Damien snorts and I see him nudge Sandy with his elbow. It gives me a warm feeling in my stomach. Mandy told me their first official meeting hadn't gone well, but over the last week they've built a friendly rapport, bonding over food and bad boy teenager escapades.

I'm dying to know the kind of things that teen Damien got up to, but then I remember that most of them were probably done to spite his mother, and it makes them seem a little less fun.

I push the thought of her out of my head. She doesn't deserve any real estate in the landscape of our relationship—other than being the catalyst that triggered the change in our commitment to each other. Damien's mother is getting no credit when it comes to us, and even more importantly, him. He is everything he is today *in spite* of her and I am never going to let him forget that for a second.

“Come on, Limpy,” he says, a smile in his voice. He drops a kiss on top of my head and then whispers in my ear, “I'm going to take you for the ride of your life.”

I stifle a giggle. I have no doubt that he has plans for getting me into bed, but anything more rigorous than an enthusiastic tucking in is still a few days off yet. Still, I play along. I want to keep this joviality in his voice for every second that we're together.

“Giddy up, cowboy!” I say, miming a cracking of the whip. For a second. his eyes darken and deepen, and my insides liquefy.

Damn, he's sexy.

“You ready?” my mother asks, laying a soft hand on my head. She looks tired and I can only imagine the worry she's been experiencing since the accident. My father was going to close the store so that he could be here when I was discharged but I threatened that if they closed the store for another minute because of me I would ride the scooter home all the way. They gave me the dignity of pretending that I could follow through with the threat.

“Never been more ready for anything!” I tell her. After almost a week in the hospital bed, I am ready to go home. I had to promise the doctor that I would take it easy, and not exert myself too much. The cracked ribs were going to help me stick to that promise. I have only just started taking full breaths without feeling like I've taken an ice pick to my left boob.

“Then let's go,” Damien says. His hands are tight on the handles of the wheelchair. No one but he is going to be pushing me and he hasn't had to say a word to make that clear.

I wave to the nurses on shift as Damien pushes me past, and I try not to laugh at the way they try to steal glances at him. He's a damn sight in a royal blue polo shirt that makes his eyes pop out like two giant sapphires and his hair slick from the shower he took in the adjoining hospital room. I sneak my own look at him through the corner of my eye and he's looking back at me. Every time I steal another look, there he

is, his eyes already on me. He only glances away to make sure he's not steering me into a wall.

He's barely left my side for the entire time and I'm almost scared to ask how that's affected his work. As selfish as I know it is, I have neither complained nor told him to leave. In the few minutes and hours that he is gone, I find myself counting the minutes until his return. When he does, the relief on his face mirrors mine, and I know that whatever danger is waiting ahead for us, it's going to burn us both equally.

"Bye, Mrs. Montana!" I wave to my ward neighbor as she takes her morning walk down the hallway. I make a mental note to come back as soon as I can to bring her some books and snacks. *On a Tuesday*, I remind myself, Tuesdays are the days all her kids are too busy to come.

"Home?" I say to Mandy as Damien pushes me out the exit.

She grins at me and winks at Damien.

"Not quite yet," he says, the sparkle in his eyes reflecting hers.



*Damien*

"SIT STILL!" I TELL her for the fifteenth time in as many minutes.

"But I want to know where we're going!"

“Does it matter? We’re not at the hospital anymore. I thought you told me you didn’t care where you went, as long as you could leave the hospital!”

“Damien!” She grabs my arm and shakes it, then winces from pain.

“Easy, Kitten,” I say.

Something about the use of her nickname sends shivers through me and my mind temporarily gets lost in the memory of the things I’m usually doing to her when I use it.

But it doesn’t last long.

Soon the car turns into Sydney Kingsport Airport, and her face is pressed against the window.

“That’s a plane,” she says. In case it’s not clear what she’s talking about, she points at the small plane waiting for us on the tarmac.

“I’m glad the injuries were isolated only to your bones and internal organs,” I tease.

My joke goes unnoticed. “Why is there a plane here?”

“Okay, maybe the doctor actually needs to do more tests...”

“Damien!” she yells.

“My-Linh, what do planes do?”

“They...fly...?”

“Once more, with confidence.”

Her jaw drops open. “Where are we flying to?”

I get out and open her car door. She takes my hand, letting me help her out of the car. I slide my arm around her waist, pulling her to me tight.

My entire body relaxes against her; I haven't been able to hold her like this since before the accident. "Stop wriggling," I growl into her ear as she struggles against me, trying to turn to look at the plane. "Just let me hold you for a moment."

She beams and lets me wrap her in my arms.

She feels like, *smells like*, her again. I finally start to feel some of the fear ease out of my cells after the last five days of living an endless loop of worry about her, despite how many times the doctor had reassured me that she should quickly recover.

My face buries in her hair and I breathe her in.

*My girl*, I sigh to myself.

"Okay, enough creepy sniffing, where are we going?"

I just smile and take her hand.



"OH MY GOD, IT'S so beautiful, Damien," My-Linh gasps as I maneuver the car up the driveway of the winery. "BB Wine Estate," she reads. "Oh, I love their wine."

"I'll be sure to tell the owners," I say, and squeeze her hand. I've barely let it go since we left Sydney. I'd held it during the entire flight to the Barossa Valley, Australia's premier wine

country, home to some of the best wine in the world. I'd felt every squeeze of her excitement as we'd soared into the air and landed into a veritable dream landscape of rolling hills covered in grapevines.

"You know the owners?" she asks as I pull the car right up to the door of the small villa situated in the back of the property, set apart from the cellar door and public areas.

"Yup. There are four of them. They're brothers. They bought an old, non-functioning winery about ten years ago and founded BB wines," I say, jumping out of the convertible and running to her side before she can open the door.

"Oh that's so cool. Hey, you and your brothers should do that too. Baxter Brothers wines...wait." Her entire face lights up as it all becomes clear to her.

I chuckle, giving her my hand to help her out. She gives it a little playful slap instead.

"You stinker! Why didn't you just tell me you owned it?" She finally takes my hand and steps out of the car, and I try not to react when I hear a little gasp of pain. The doctor said that would be normal for a while during her recovery.

"I wanted your honest opinion."

"And when have I ever given you anything but?" she shoots back.

"Come on, I'll give you the tour," I say. "If you think the view from here is good, you should see it from the back porch."

I lead her around the wraparound porch to the back, and I feel her entire body shiver at the sight.

“Oh, Damien. It’s so beautiful,” she whispers under her breath.

I have to agree. The view is what had clinched the deal for me. Part of me almost wished my brothers hadn’t been so intent on us taking on the venture as a side passion project for the four of us. I would’ve happily kept this little piece of heaven all to myself.

From the porch, the vineyard dips and soars over two overlapping hills, creating a stunning wave effect as far as the eye can see. The sun, dead center in the sky, illuminates every single leaf. But sunset is when the magic truly happens, and I can’t wait for her to see it.

“I never want to leave,” she sighs and lays her head against my shoulder. I know at this moment that I made the right choice to bring her here rather than anywhere else in the world. I hadn’t wanted to take her too far from home but far enough so she could rest for a few days in peace.

“Are you hungry?” I ask after a few minutes of us enjoying the view in silence.

She grabs the front of my shirt. “So hungry. But only for anything but unseasoned hospital food!”

I laugh, remembering her family and friends trying to snuggle all sorts of food into her hospital room for her. “Come on, it’s my time to cook for you.”



The look on her face makes me laugh all over again.



# THIRTY

*My-Linh*

I HAVE SEEN A lot of funny things in my life—granted a lot of them are centered around me and my clumsiness—but what I was witnessing was one of the funniest things I’ll ever see.

“I don’t get it. Why are they sold in packs of eight buns but ten hot dogs?” Damien asks, holding the two packets in his hands, staring at them in complete confusion.

“It’s one of life’s true mysteries, babe.”

He drops them both into the shopping cart. “Ridiculous. We should do something about that.”

“‘We’, as in you and me or ‘we’ as in Baxter?”

“Baxter! And if not, then definitely you and me.”

“Yeah, you don’t want to do that.”

He frowns as he grabs the mustard off the shelf. “Why?”

“Because I’m pretty sure it’s a marketing ploy—you’ll always have an extra bun or hot dog, so you’ll keep buying more and more,” I say, keeping my face neutral.

His jaw drops open. “That’s brilliant. Why didn’t I think of that?”

I break, holding onto the shopping cart as I laugh.

“What?” he demands. “Why are you laughing?”

“That’s not why they sell them in those denominations. It’s because of how they bake the buns and the weight of the hotdogs. But I’m glad to see that having 12.9 billion dollars doesn’t make you any less gullible.”

“You’re mean.” He pouts and wanders down the aisle.

I laugh again, ramming him in the butt with the cart. “Don’t feel bad, you’ve never had to buy your own hot dog buns before, have you?”

He flushes. “Fine. What other brilliant revelations have you got for me?”

I hesitate. After everything we’ve been through, I’m still not sure I know where the line is between My-Linh and Damien, the couple, and My-Linh and Damien, boss and employee.

“What is it? You’re always honest, remember?” he asks.

“It’s about the Wattle Foods campaign,” I say and then immediately regret it when his face turns serious.

“Okay. What about it?”

“I’m just not sure...that we’re going in the right direction.”

His jaw twitches, but he doesn't say anything, just waits for me to continue.

"I think the campaign itself as a practice in marketing is great but..."

"But...?"

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to find the right way to say what I need to say without overstepping my place. Then I think, fuck it, I love him, and I want the best for him. And the best for him is what works best for Baxter.

"Come here," I say gently and take his hand, pulling him over to the drinks aisle.

Luckily, just as we get there, I see a woman standing in front of the shelf, reaching for a six-pack of orange juice boxes.

"Um, hello," I say to her, "I'm sorry to bother you but I'm...er, I'm babysitting my niece, and I was wondering which of these juices are the best?"

The woman looks up and smiles. "Oh, well, do you know what flavor she likes the best?"

"Um, no. I didn't get a chance to ask her. But I think she likes berry flavors. What kind do you have there?"

"This one's by Ocean Spray."

"Do you always buy those?"

She pauses and then says, "Not really. I've been trying different ones lately."

“Oh, may I ask why?”

“Just for something different. I used to buy those.” She points to Wattle Foods’ Berry Blast.

“But you don’t anymore?”

“Well, those are the ones I had as a child. They were always my favorite. But I think they’ve changed recently?”

“Oh? I didn’t realize that.”

“Well, their packaging has changed. I couldn’t even find it for a few weeks. Anyway, I think the flavor has changed as well. Maybe they’ve changed the recipe.”

“No, it’s the sa—” Damien starts, but I take his hand to shush him and he frowns but shuts his mouth.

I continue with the woman. “The packaging made you think that?”

She just shrugs. “I guess so. Maybe that’s silly.”

I give her a big smile and shake my head. “Not silly at all. I love the Berry Blasts as well. I drank them growing up too. I think I might grab them and tell my niece how I grew up drinking them as well. She might like that, even if it’s not the brand she’s used to. She copies me with everything.”

She thinks for a moment and nods and pulls a six-pack of the Berry Blast off the shelf too. “I might give them another try as well.”

“Thank you for your help,” I say as she pushes her cart down the aisle.

Damien's already deep in thought when I turn back to him, and I leave him to it.

"Let's go home. We have some hot dogs and burgers to grill."



"HOW DID YOU KNOW what to say to that woman? In the store?" Damien says half an hour later as I sit on the swing on the porch while he lights the grill.

I wish I could say I was enjoying the vineyard view, but I'm really just staring at him. In his olive green polo shirt and black long shorts, he looks like he walked right out of an Abercrombie and Fitch ad. And I want to just devour him.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, about the nostalgia...and then telling your niece about how you grew up with the same drinks."

"You don't need me to tell you anything when it comes to business, Damien."

"I think you might."

"Well, you know as well as I do there are only a few things that will convince someone to buy one brand over another; one is price, two is quality, and in both of these areas, the Berry Blast is comparable to most of the other brands."

"And the third?"

“An emotional connection. The berry mascot that Wattle Foods used since the sixties isn’t on the packaging anymore. There is nothing to tie the consumer to the product above any other.”

“The focus groups liked the new branding.”

I nod. “I know. But did they like it more than the old packaging? Or were they asked if it would affect their decision to buy a Wattle Foods product?”

He frowns.

“I’m not saying the customers won’t turn back to Berry Blast after they’ve tried other things, but there’s no nostalgic reason to anymore.”

Damien runs his fingers along the tongs, giving them a test click. “The old mascot was a badly drawn raspberry with googly eyes on it.”

I fight back the urge to laugh. He’s not wrong, but that’s human psychology for you.

“Do you really think that’s why our first Wattle Foods campaign tanked?”

I take a deep breath. “Honestly? Yes. I think...the change was too much, too soon. And you need to give these consumers who have been buying Wattle Foods products for fifty years a reason to come back. I mean, that’s really what you paid for, right? The set customer base.”

He nods and then smiles, leaning over to give me a soft kiss. “You’re a clever cookie. Thanks for the real person



perspective.”

“No problem. But while we’re on that...I have a question for you.”

“Ye-es?”

“The day when I delivered that package to your office...?”

He looks guarded. “Ri-ight?”

“Had you ever signed for a package before?”

“Oh look,” he says, pointing out into the horizon. “It’s a kangaroo!” he shouts. And every time I bring up the topic again, he finds a way to change the subject.



HIS LIPS ARE CARESSING the inside of my thighs, and I can’t be sure if I’m awake or still dreaming.

“Damien...” I murmur, sleepily, and he replies by moving his mouth up until his lips are a breath away from the dip between my legs.

“Good morning, baby,” he whispers. “Did you have a good sleep?”

He doesn’t give me a chance to reply before I feel his fingertips gently spread me open, and the tip of his tongue flicks ever so delicately over my clit.

A flutter travels up my spine.

“Fuck,” I sigh.

“Gentle,” he reminds me, as his tongue finds its way to my core.

My hands find his hair and he growls his contentment.

And I give in to all the tenderness he has to give and more.

“Do we have to leave tomorrow?” I ask once we’re both drained, and his heartbeat is still racing under my hand.

“No,” he says.

“Okay. Deal,” I say, even though I know it’s not the truth.

Sometimes you just have to let yourself believe.

“I love you, My-Linh,” he murmurs as his breath slows.

“I love you right back, Damien,” I tell him, wishing he could know just how much.



*Damien*

“READY?” I SAY, FLINGING our bags into the backseat, as she settles into the passenger seat.

“Never.”

I kiss her, feeling every ounce of her reticence.

Our few days here have done nothing but deepen the bond between us, and there hasn’t been a moment that I haven’t

pondered what my life would look like if this was what I woke up to every day.

“We’ll come back soon, I promise.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” she warns, pouting.

And I’m about to tell her how silly she’s being when my phone lights up. I’ve had it turned off for the time we’ve been here and now that I’ve turned it on for the GPS, the notifications are pouring in.

I skim them, until there’s a red alert in the group chat with my brothers that I can’t ignore.

“Where the fuck have you been? You need to come back to Sydney. Now.”



# THIRTY-ONE

*Damien*

ALL THREE OF MY brothers are waiting for me when I arrive at the Baxter Enterprises building. I spent the last three hours trying to pretend everything was okay as My-Linh and I flew back to Sydney, and made sure she was home, settled and safe before making my way back to headquarters. All the while knowing that whatever awaited me there was serious enough for my brothers to have put out a red alert.

“I’m here. What the fuck is going on?” I say, as I push on my office door to see them all standing there.

“Jesus Christ, Damien. About fucking time!” Kingsley shouts. He’s sitting in my chair, his hands running through his hair.

“What? What is going on?!”

The three of them share a look and Kylian takes a step forward.

That means it is bad; they wouldn't have the baby break the news to me if it wasn't serious.

I clear my throat. "Mom?" I ask.

Kylian shakes his head.

"No. It's not Mom."

I try not to let the relief flood me.

"Then what is it?"

"It's Clarissa Masters," he says.

"What about her?"

"She's engaged. To Rupert Gottfried."



### *One Year Ago*

CLARISSA'S NOT TAKING MY decision as well as I thought she would. Why is she acting as though this is a surprise to her? Hadn't we agreed that we'd give it a go and if it wasn't working out, we'd go our separate ways?

"You've got to be fucking kidding me, Damien. The venue is booked, the dress has been paid for. Every single member of my family is coming."

"I'll pay for it all. You know that."

She jumps out of the chair, nostrils flaring. "You're a fucking piece of work. If this is one of your pranks, it's not

funny.”

The fact that she thinks this is something I’d joke about proves to me I’m making the right decision.

“I’m sorry, Clarissa. I just can’t go through with it. I tried, and there’s just nothing between us.”

“Yeah? You weren’t saying that when your dick was in my mouth last week.”

True. I hadn’t been saying that. That would’ve required me actually even being aware of her presence that night. We both know that she’d taken advantage of me coming home late after a night out with my brothers to try to seduce me as a last resort.

We should never have tried to be anything but friends. Having grown up together since we could barely walk, we’ve always been good friends, maybe even the best of friends. But she’d always had her eye on more.

I thought, coming from the same background, she’d understand the company was always going to come first. I thought she’d make a good companion for the lifetime of parties and events, but behind the scenes we’d have an amiable but loveless marriage. But she’d kept pushing for more. But I had nothing more to give her.

Nothing more to give anyone.

Having grown up with me, she should’ve known that.

“So what now?” She throws her hands up, exasperated.

“Well, we can release a statement. Mutual decision. You know how it goes.”

“There’s nothing mutual about this, Damien!”

“Then fine, blame it all on me. Whatever you want. But I told you, Clarissa, when this all began, that I didn’t want it. But everyone kept pressuring us. And I thought...maybe it was the easy way out. But there’s nothing between us.”

She leans over the table, her beautiful eyes glistening. “What’s wrong with me, Damien?”

“Nothing. You’re a beautiful, intelligent, savvy woman. And you’re going to make some other guy an incredible wife.”

Her face slides into an ugly mask. “You’re a fucking asshole, Damien. I love you. And I know you love me too.”

“No. I don’t love you, Clarissa. I never have and I never will. And the sooner you realize that, the better it’s going to be for you.”

It’s best to be as cruel and cold with her as possible. I’ve made the initial cut, it’s time to break it off completely. “It’s probably best that we aren’t seen with each other from this moment on. Starting right now.” I look down at the report on my desk to show her I’m done with the conversation.

“You can go to hell, you arrogant, sonofabitch. I never want to see your smug, smirking, soul-sucking, douchebag, fucking face again!”





*Present Day*

“HOW DID YOU HEAR about this?” I ask my brothers once I’ve confirmed that I heard it right.

Mathias cuts his eyes to Kingsley, who gestures for him to talk.

“Mom called me. She said she’d been trying to call you since...”

“Since she announced that she’s Mother of the Year to her new suckers’ kids?”

Mathias nods. “Something like that. She said she’d had lunch with Clarissa and her mother when she was in Australia, and they couldn’t stop gushing about Rupert proposing to her.”

I let out a sound of disgust. “This is complete bullshit.”

“What does she see in that mole rat?” Kylian ponders.

“Business.”

“Money.”

“Revenge,” I cut in. “This is about nothing but pure revenge.”

Kylian shakes his head. “She can’t possibly think you care about her marrying Rupert. You weren’t madly in love or anything.”

“I didn’t say *jealousy*. I said revenge. She knows the business is the most important thing to me.” I try to push back

the image of My-Linh that instantly pops up into my mind.  
“And Rupert is the biggest threat to my business.”

“Even Clarissa wouldn’t marry Rupert just to get back at you,” Mathias offers.

They’re wrong. They don’t know her like I do.

I walk over to the drinks trolley and pour four glasses of cognac. “Regardless of the reason, Gerard is behind this. With Terry, the Board Director’s daughter now marrying Rupert, he’s going to do everything he can to angle Rupert’s way in. And like it or not, my position is the best for that.”

Kylian hisses. “The board won’t vote against Grandfather’s will.”

“Just watch them.” I tell them about the numerous goings-on with Gerard and Terry cozying up to the other board members over the last few weeks.

Kingsley curses. “This is as bad as we thought.”

“Worse,” Mathias throws in.

“So what now?”

I grimace. “Now, I talk to Clarissa.”

“And what are you going to say?” Kylian asks, already knowing the answer.

“Whatever I have to.”



*My-Linh*

I'M BORED SITTING AT home waiting for Damien to come home from work. He seemed a little preoccupied on the flight and drive back from the Barossa Valley, but that was pretty much to be expected considering he's been completely focused on me since the accident.

He didn't turn his phone on the entire time we were in the Barossa Valley, no matter how many times I told him it was okay to check into work if he needed to. Each and every time, he just kissed me and told me he was doing exactly what he wanted to, with whom he wanted to do it with.

I call Mandy into my room and she comes in, a look of concern on her face.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing!” I roll my eyes at her overprotectiveness. “I have an idea for a surprise for Damien. You in?”

Her grin is all I need as a response.



# THIRTY-TWO

*Damien*

IF I KNOW ANYTHING about Clarissa it's that she's going to show up at least ten minutes late to our meeting place. If there's another thing I know about her, it's that she'll have actually arrived early, but waiting in her car, just so she can plan the perfect time to appear. So I show up ten minutes early and scan the cars parked nearby until I see one that I'm sure is hers and wave, a signal to her that she's dealing with someone who knows her better than most.

I'm seated at my table at Jaxon's restaurant and on my second cognac when she finally walks onto the roof's dining room.

I don't even need to look up to know she's arrived.

Clarissa Masters knows how to make an entrance.

There's a perceptible change in the air as men stop talking mid-sentence as she walks past in her knee-length gold satin

dress, her auburn hair swept to one side and held with a single diamond clip that probably costs more than most of the other diners' Sydney monthly rent.

The server leads her to my table and she waits and smiles at him until he gets the message and pulls the chair out for her and she settles into it as if she's the Queen of England.

"Hello, Damien," she says, reaching out to touch my hand on the table.

I snap my hand back. "Clarissa. You look well," I say because she does. Revenge sits well on her.

"Well, you know. I'm in love. That's a radiance you can't buy in a jar. Trust me, I've tried," she attempts at a joke. "You look tired. Has something been keeping you up?"

"Cut the crap, Clarissa. You don't want to go ahead with this marriage."

She puts on the look of innocence I have seen her use for decades, on everyone from her parents to house staff to foreign diplomats.

"Whyever not? I'm happy, Damien. I know we're not on great terms but I never thought you'd begrudge me that."

"I *do* want you to be happy, Clar. That's why I didn't marry you. And that's why I'm telling you not to do this to spite me."

She snickers. "You've got some nerve suggesting this has anything to do with you."

“You despise that sewer scum as much as I do. But I imagine the only person you hate more than him right now is me.”

She sits back, clasping her hands in front of her, the diamonds on her wrist almost blinding me. “I’ve changed. Rupert...fulfills me.”

“He fulfills your need to get back at me.”

She laughs, and to the untrained ear it’d sound like crystals clinking. I hear nothing but bitterness. “Fuck you, Damien. I told you you’d regret breaking it off, didn’t I?”

I nod, glad the pretense is over. “You’re better than this, Clarissa. Tell me what you want, and I’ll make it happen. Don’t pimp yourself out to him just to get back at me. You deserve better than this.”

She leans in, her immaculate face a steel cold mask. “You don’t get to tell me anything. Do you have any idea what it’s been like for me this last year? Being Damien Baxter’s castoff? You think that stink doesn’t follow me around everywhere? *You* get to just dust your hands of our engagement and everyone just puts it down to men being bloody men. But me? I’m rejected goods.”

“I told you that you could have blamed it all on me, didn’t I?”

“And have me say what? That you cheated on me? That’s no better,” she hisses.

I sigh. “So what now?”

“That all depends on Daddy. He’s very taken with Rupert and his ideas for Baxter’s Australia and Oceanic Division. Daddy thinks he has real vision.”

It’s my turn to hiss. “He’s a hack. He’ll run the entire division to the ground.”

“Not like you’re not doing that yourself,” she taunts.

Ouch. “Clarissa. It’s not like you to be this cruel.” Even as I say it, I know we both know better.

“Do not act as if you have any idea who I am, and what I can do.”

“We were friends, Clarissa.”

“No, Damien, we were *best* friends. And where did that get me?”

“There are other options.”

She holds her hand up in front of her face, admiring her engagement ring. “Rupey actually has a wonderful plan to start shedding some of the loss markets. Maybe even get rid of some of the local warehouses. Move them to lower labor cost regions.”

“He can’t do that.”

“As the director of the Australia and Oceanic division he can. Daddy seems awfully impressed with his plans. As are some of Daddy’s best friends.” She proceeds to name a bunch of members of the board. She has this all tied up and she knows it.



My heart thumps hard in my chest. I'm cornered. "I'm a Baxter. It's my birthright to head this division, Clarissa."

"Name means nothing when it comes to business, Damien. Weren't you always the one who told me that business comes first? Isn't that the excuse you gave me for why you could never really give us a shot? Because you didn't have room for love?"

Yes, it had been my excuse and now she was using it against me. "What do you want, Clarissa?"

She smiles. "I already have it. Revenge."

"What *else* do you want?"

She sits back, a smirk sliding over the cold mask.

"You know."

I shake my head. "I can't give you that. What else?"

"I don't want anything else. You have the only thing I want. The only thing you can barter with." She lifts the water glass to her lips and takes a sip. "I want you."



*My-Linh*

"I just have to pick up one last thing and then we'll go over to his apartment and set up. He's probably exhausted catching

up on all that work,” I tell Mandy.

“Got it. It’s going to be amazing. But I still think you’ve done too much. You’re supposed to be resting.”

“I’m fine.” I don’t want to tell her I’m a little out of breath, and my torso feels a little sore, or else she’ll make me sit down.

“Oh, here it is,” I say, pushing on the door.

She looks up at the sign. “Ooh, Marrow! I’ve always wanted to come here. It’s impossible to get a reservation though.”

The hostess greets me before I have a chance to tell her it’s easier if you know a part-owner.

“Hi, I’m here to pick up an order?” I say to the hostess.

“My-Linh?” someone says my name.

It’s Damien.

“Hi! What are you doing here?” I ask, taking a step over to him, my heart singing to see him.

“I’m...er, I was just grabbing a drink.”

“Oh, who with?”

A woman steps out from behind him. “Me. He was meeting me.” She looks familiar but I can’t quite place her.

“Hello. I’m My-Linh.”

She holds out her hand to me. “Nice to meet you, My-Linh. I’m Clarissa. Damien’s fiancée.”



# THIRTY-THREE

*Damien*

MY-LINH LOOKS AT ME as if I've stabbed her in the heart.

I guess in a way, I have.

“My-Linh...” I say, but I don't know what else there is to say.

“Damien?” she says, like she's hoping she's heard wrong. But she hasn't. “Did she say... ‘fiancée’?”

“My-Linh, wait.” Blood feels like it's flooding my brain and I can't think.

“Damien, did she or did she not say she's your fiancé?”

I can only nod, mute.

“Oh my god,” she gasps, her hand coming up to her chest in a gesture I've seen before.

“Wait. My-Linh, I can explain.”

Clarissa smirks and says, “Well, I'll leave you two to sort this all out.” She leans in and tries to kiss me, but I push her

away. Hard. She just chuckles. “Call me about the arrangements, *sweetheart*. The sooner the news that you proposed gets out the better. You know. In case someone else swoops in.” She looks at My-Linh. “Cute T-shirt. You must tell me where you go thrifting. It’s such a lost art.” Then she spins and waves her hand and a car pulls out from the curb to collect her.

“Damien!” My-Linh yells, pulling on my arm.

I can’t look at her. I just can’t. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. I needed time to figure out how to break it to her. I’ve barely had time to process it myself.

She wasn’t supposed to find out this way.

“My-Linh. God. I-I...” Both of my hands grab at my head, desperate for the right words. But I know they don’t exist.

She looks at me with eyes filled with betrayal. “Have you been engaged to her this entire time?”

“No!” I yell. “You...you were there that day we broke up, remember? You heard us fighting...that day you delivered...”

All the blood drains from her face. “That was her? Oh my god. It was. I remember now. Damien. She...I thought she hated you.”

It would’ve been better if she did.

There’s a crowd starting to build in front of the restaurant. “Can we go somewhere and talk about this?” I say, reaching for her wrist.

“She’s not going anywhere with you until you explain to her what’s going on,” Mandy says, stepping closer to her friend, her face a storm.

I drag my hand through my hair, there’s nothing to do but tell her the truth. The whole, heartbreaking truth.

“My-Linh. You need to understand, I didn’t have any other choice.”

Her eyes search mine for more meaning, but there isn’t any.

“She...she was threatening the company. She has it all tied up. Her father’s Chairman of the Board, they’ll vote me out of my position. I would’ve...I would’ve lost everything I’ve worked for.”

Tears instantly fill her eyes and she mouths the word “everything”, her hand clutching at her side.

“What did she want?”

I grimace, almost unable to say the words. “She wants us to do what we were supposed to do - get married. It’s that or she’ll marry Rupert Gottfried...and I’m out. I can’t...I can’t let them do what they have planned for Baxter. I’ll lose everything.”

A sob gurgles out of her chest, her cheeks saturated with the evidence of her pain. “No, Damien. Whatever she threatened, you wouldn’t have lost me, Damien.” She shakes her head and turns to walk away.

“No, My-Linh, wait!” I run after her. Her wrist is in mine and I pull her to me. “Please. Please understand, I had no

choice. This isn't just about me. This is about my grandfather's legacy. He was the only thing we had growing up. Him and this company."

She struggles out of my hold and whips around, her face stained with betrayal. And worse, disappointment.

"When were you going to tell me, Damien?"

"Tonight. I was going to tell you tonight. It just...it only just happened."

"Really? After one last fuck? Wasn't this what this was all about anyway? A convenient fuck? And now you've got the perfect excuse to get out?"

Every one of her words stabs at me.

She shakes her head, her hair wild as it whips across her face.

"I should've...I should've listened to you. I should've listened to you the one time you were telling me the truth. That this was always the way it was going to be. I was an idiot to think otherwise."

I feel like she's ripping open my chest with her words. "She gave me no choice, My-Linh. I tried, I offered her everything. Money, shares, property. She only wanted—"

"You."

The air between us stills.

Dies.

She looks at me with eyes drenched in hurt. “You gave her the only thing that you promised me. The only thing that was mine. I never asked you for anything, never wanted anything from you but you.”

“I know. God, I know, baby.” I swallow the burn of the terror of losing her, but know this is just the start.

“Have a good life, Damien.” She pushes past me.

I grab her hand again and pull it to my chest, pulling her to me, burying my face in her hair. “My-Linh,” I beg her. “Please understand. Tell me you understand. I love you. I love you so much. I don’t have any other way. Don’t leave this way.”

She lets me hold her for one last second, before her sobs wrack through our bodies.

“I do understand, Damien. That’s the sad thing. I’m sad but I’m not surprised. I’m not surprised you’re too fucked up to know what it’s like to fight for the so-called love you claim we have. You’ve taken the easy way out. I understand completely.”

“I tried.”

She looks into my eyes one last time. “Not hard enough, Damien. You didn’t try hard enough.”

“Come on, My-Linh. I’ve got a cab,” Mandy says, pulling her friend away.

Her hand slips out of mine.

“No. My-Linh!” I shout, grabbing at air.



Mandy blocks me from stepping closer. “Don’t.”

And I watch, as the only person I’ve ever loved climbs into a cab and drives away from me forever.



*My-Linh*

THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING.

This just can not be happening.

Mandy's hand is squeezing mine tight and she's saying something to me in soft, comforting tones, but I can't make out the words. There's nothing but fog in my brain. And everything is blurry.

He's gone.

Damien is engaged to someone else.

Someone not me.

And he's not mine anymore.

Maybe he never was.

That's the only thing I can think of.

And then everything turns black.



# THIRTY-FOUR

*Damien*

I FILL UP MY glass to the brim and carry the whole decanter back to my desk with me.

“There’s got to be another way,” Kylian says from the couch for the hundredth time in the last hour.

I sit back in my desk chair, downing half the glass in one gulp.

“Surely we can come up with something. There’s got to be something she wants other than you. What’s so good about you?”

I just let his words wash over me as I take another sip. I’m becoming numb. But not numb enough. Never enough.

“How did My-Linh take it?” he asks.

“Exactly as you’d expect her to.”

“Fuck. Poor thing.”

I try to forget the last thing she said to me. Was she right? Had I really taken the easy way out? Was I too much of a coward to choose any other way? No. She just doesn't understand what it means to be a Baxter and have to be responsible for so much more than just my own happiness.

Anyway, she was right. I had told her it was always going to be this way. I'd fucked us both over when I thought, even for a minute, that things were ever going to really change.

"So, what now?" Kylian asks once he realizes I'm not going to be taken down the topic of My-Linh.

I sigh and lift my legs onto my desk. "I guess I'm going to need a best man."



I BRACE MYSELF FOR the next morning's Huddle. My-Linh was supposed to return to work even though I'd told her it was too soon. I doubt there's any way she's listening to me now.

Kylian and I enter the meeting room after the Huddle has started and scan the room for her.

She's not here.

After the meeting is dismissed we walk over to her cubicle, her things are as she left them.

"Mr. Baxter? Is there something I can help you with?" Raquel asks when she sees us lingering.

“Er, yeah, I heard that My-Linh was supposed to return to work today after her accident. I just wanted to see how she was doing. But I didn’t see her in the Huddle.”

“Oh. You didn’t hear?”

The skin on the back of my neck tingles. “Hear?”

“She had to go back to the hospital. She’s been in there for the last few days.”

“What? No.” I choke.

Kylian instantly grabs my arm and holds me tight. “You can’t go,” he whispers.

“Let go of me, Kylian. I swear to god, you better let go of me right now.”

He sighs and releases my arm and I run to the elevator with him on my heels.

“Where is she?” I shout when I arrive at the hospital ward.

“Get. Out.” Mandy says, running out into the hallway.

“You have to let me see her, Mandy.”

“You are the absolute last person she wants to see.”

“Fuck! Mandy!” I try to push past her but she slams her hands against my chest.

“Leave! You’re the reason she’s back in here!”

The blood drains from my body and that truth dawns on me.

“Damien,” Kylian says, his hand on my shoulder. “Go sit down. Let me talk to her.”

I swallow and nod.

He pulls Mandy to the side and I'm not sure what he says but she finally sighs, glares at me, and goes back into the hospital room.

I jump up and run to my brother. "What? What? Is she going to let me see her?"

"Er, no, she's giving you two minutes to leave the floor before she calls security."

"Fuck!"

He grabs my shoulder. "Wait. But she's going to let me stay. I can give you updates. But you...you can't be here."

I drag my hands through my hair. "Are you serious? I just... ten seconds, I can't see her for ten seconds?"

He shakes his head.

I sink into the chair and for the first time since I watched her walk away, I let the tears fall. Hot, streaming, thick tears down my face, blurring everything in sight. "What the fuck is my life, Kylian? How did I get here?"

He sits down on the chair next to me. "I don't know, Damien. I just...I don't know."

He lets me sob until Mandy pokes out the door, and I know I need to leave.

"Tell her...just...tell her...Tell her, if I had any choice, she's the one I'd choose every single time."



*My-Linh*

“CAN I HAVE SOME water, please?” I say when I open my eyes, not even really sure there’s anyone there with me.

“Sure,” a soft male voice says and a face appears in my blurry vision.

I know it’s not him. But...it’s so close.

“Damien?” I say, just because I’ve missed saying his name.

The voice chuckles. “How insulting. No, it’s me, the good-looking Baxter brother.”

I squint. “Kylian? What are you doing here?”

“I’m not supposed to be, but Mandy went to grab some lunch. She’d cut my throat if she knew I was talking to you.”

“She’s a little overprotective.”

“Mama bears are overprotective. She’s like a one-woman army.”

I giggle and instantly regret it. “Ouch.”

“You okay?”

“Yes. I must’ve overdone it a bit...The doctor says I tore my internal stitches and my ribs need to be given time to heal.”

He sobers and he lays his hand gently on mine. “Damien said to say he’s sorry.”

I scoff. “No he didn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“You could’ve pretty much said anything else, but ‘Damien said he’s sorry’ is not a sentence I’ll ever believe.”

Kylian lets out a little laugh. “Okay, you’ve got me there. He might not have said the words but I know he feels it. He’s not doing well, My-Linh. If there had been any other way.”

I shake my head, I don’t want to hear it.

I’ve spent every last ounce of energy in the last few days trying to not cry over Damien Baxter. The last thing I need is to be reminded of him.

I wave away his words. “You can stay until Mandy comes back and kicks your ass. But you can’t bring up your brother.”

He scrunches up his face, looking conflicted. But then he pulls up the chair and sits down on it. “Fine. No Damien talk. Tell me about you? What’s the first thing you’re going to eat when you get out of this place?”

I laugh and push myself up onto my pillows and let him ask me questions. And try not to die with every second I sit and look at his face that is so like Damien’s but isn’t.





To: j.baker@sydney.edu.au

From: ml.tran@sydney.edu.au

Subject: PhD Proposal

Dear Dr. Jeremy Baker,

In light of some recent incidents, I am writing to inform you that my time at Baxter Enterprises has come to an end, and I will no longer be pursuing a PhD candidacy at Sydney University.

I thank you for all your guidance in the last few years. I couldn't have gone this far without you.

Sincerely,

My-Linh Tran



# THIRTY-FIVE

*Damien*

“LILIES ARE IN SEASON but it’s so early 2010’s, don’t you think? The native Australian bouquets are unique but not very elegant. More of something if I was having a wedding in a barn. Which, thankfully, I am not. Damien? Are you listening to me?”

“No, Clarissa. I’m not listening to you. Not even a little bit.”

“I need help with the—”

I cut her off. “No, you don’t. This is your thing. I will show up. I will pose for photos and say ‘I do’. But that’s it.”

“Come on, Damien. Don’t make this unpleasant.”

I snicker. “I think we’re way past unpleasantness, Clarissa. And I think it’s safe to say who is responsible for it.”

She shrugs and holds up another swatch and lays it on my leather couch.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m looking at swatches for the couch.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t like the color of this one.”

“You’re not touching a goddamn thing in here. You have your own apartment to play with.”

“Damien. Be reasonable. We’re going to be married. We have to have a home together. Or else people will talk.”

“Let them,” I shout. “Let them talk, Clarissa! When did you become so concerned about what people think about you? This is not the girl I grew up with who did whatever the fuck she wanted.”

“Yeah, well, look what that got her.”

“Do whatever you want. But don’t even think about touching anything in this apartment. We’ll get another one and you can do whatever the fuck you want with it. But you’re not to touch or change a thing here.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Is this about that girl you were seeing?”

I storm over to her and slam my hand down on the coffee table. “Don’t talk about her. Don’t you ever talk about her with me.”

“Take it easy, Damien. The sooner you forget about her, the better it’s going to be for you. And we can move on with our life together.”

I sink onto the couch. I know she's right. There's no point in holding onto the past. This is my life now.

"I can be an asset to you, you know," she twitters.

I sit up, picking up my glass, taking a long sip. "Fine, if you want to help. Do you remember the Wattle Foods acquisition?"

"Of course. I was with you when you put it together, remember?"

I nod. She was. She'd been vehemently against it.

"What should I do about it?"

She looks up, surprised I've asked her a question. "I think... you let it go. Sell it off. Cut your losses. You should be raising Baxter's portfolio with more luxury brands, not some lame fruit cup and cereal company. Maybe look into a Maxim merger, now that the Campbell Group dropped it. There's potential there. But Rupert dropped out of the running. Now it's open...for you maybe."

It suddenly becomes clear, she's been working on this for a long time. "I'm guessing that was your doing?"

"What can I say? I think ahead."

I was too. And the prospect doesn't look bright.



*My-Linh*

MY RECOVERY THIS TIME feels interminable.

The stay in the hospital is on its fifth day and even though I know I get to go home tomorrow, I feel no excitement. There's no Damien whisking me away on a romantic mystery getaway. No internship to return to.

Just a blank slate, and I'm sitting here without any drawing implements.

"My-Linh?"

I look up from the bed to see Jeremy poke his head through the door. And even though I can guess why he's here, I'm glad to see him.

"Oh my gosh, Jeremy. It's so nice to see you."

"I hope it's okay for me to visit."

"More than okay. You're saving me from going completely bonkers from boredom."

He smiles and settles down on the chair by the bed.

He asks how I'm doing and about my recovery, then there's a short comfortable silence.

"My-Linh," he starts.

"Here we go," I tease him with a wink. "I'm not coming back, Jeremy"

He nods. "Okay. But I practiced my speech and I left the comfort of my office, so can you at least let me deliver it? I practiced it on one of my other students and everything."

I giggle and gesture for him to continue.

“I see a lot of students. Students of all kinds who want to study for all different reasons. And I would never discredit any of those reasons. But in the last twenty years of teaching business, there are two kinds of people that I think belong in this field: those who are tenacious and ambitious about making money, and a lot of it. And those who are adamant not to.”

“Those sound like—”

“Two completely different types of people?”

“Yes.”

“They’re not. In fact they’re very much the same. They *see* things in the business models and financial reports and workplaces that others don’t. Their difference is in the decisions that they will ultimately make.”

I pick at the blanket and wonder where he’s going with this.

“We both know you’re in the second group,” he points out.

“You picked up on that, huh?”

He laughs. “You may have mentioned it one or fifty times in the multitude of assignments and papers you’ve written for me over the years. You have a natural talent, My-Linh. You come at this business from the heart. And that is a true gift. You can achieve so much of what you’ve dreamed, to do good. But education lies at the center of that. The more you know, the more you’re going to be able to do. The two go hand in hand. I’m not saying you have to go ahead with the PhD candidacy but you owe it to yourself to apply. Your ideas over the last

few weeks have been great. Integrate those with what you had before and you've really got something."

I sniff, looking down at my fingers. "I don't know..."

"...if you can?"

My chin drops.

"Then I'm here to tell you that you can."

I look up at him, tears in my eyes.

"I just don't know...Jeremy."

He sighs. "Does this have anything to do with something that happened at Baxter Enterprises?"

I blink away the tears.

"I sent you there to learn about the business. And even more so, about yourself. Did that happen?"

How do I tell him that happened and so much more?

The chair screeches as he stands up, patting my hand gently.

"Don't do it for anyone else, My-Linh. I learned a long time ago that sometimes you have to do things for you and only you."

He leaves me with my thoughts, and not for the first time I wonder how lucky I was to have met him



*Damien*



HER DESK IS CLEARED. The troll doll is gone, as is the daily desk calendar with the 365 must-try restaurants around the world. The keyboard has been wiped down, the chair pushed under the table, and the scent, the cherry blossom scent that lingered for days, has now been replaced by the faint smell of Lysol.

She is gone.

I'm not sure why I ever thought she'd come back, even after she was feeling better, and if I'm honest with myself, I guess I never actually did think that.

I just *wanted* to think that.

Or worse, I *hoped*.

I would never have had such a hope before meeting her; there are a lot of things I never did until she came into my life.

And I'm not just talking about Pocky.

The smile that passes my lips is fleeting, then I hear the elevator ding and I know it's not going to be her stepping off it.

"Good morning, Mr. Baxter."

It's Adam, one of the relatively new recruits.

"Mr. Dalbec," I say, giving him a nod.

He peers over the partition and sees the empty desk.

"My-Linh has actually left?" he asks.

"It appears so."

There's a small shake of his head, "That's too bad. She was a good asset for Baxter."

"I wouldn't necessarily use that word, but yes, she is definitely going to be missed."

"Easy on the eyes too, huh?" he says and nudges me with his elbow.

Why he thinks that's an appropriate comment is beyond me, but I'm used to my employees saying awkward things around me. Apparently, I'm intimidating. Or so a certain someone told me once. Not that she was ever intimidated by me.

I let the comment go and just silently hope he'll go away so I can stare at her cubicle in peace.

"She definitely had a glow up in the last year. I barely recognized her when I saw her here," he adds.

I almost don't register what he said, then the words penetrate. "You knew My-Linh before she worked here?" I ask, feeling my heart twist at just saying her name.

"Oh yeah, we actually dated for a while."

"When? When did you date?" I face him directly, and he's surprised at the force of my question.

"About a year ago? A little over a year ago."

The timeline clicks in my head.

"You were engaged." It's a statement, not a question. I already know it's him.

He nods.

Even though I already figured it out, his confirmation makes something inside me snap.

It's him. He's the reason. He's the reason it took her so long to believe she's the enticing, beautiful, sensual woman that she is. He's the one who broke her. Made her lose all confidence in herself. Made her question her worth. Made her question her right to ask for what she was owed by the man who claimed he loved her.

Before I can stop myself, I pull my arm back and release it, swinging my fist square into his face.

The contact is brutal, bloody.

He staggers back, his hands coming up to shield his face.

"You fucking asshole," I yell. "Do you have any idea what you did to her? Do you have any idea what it took to fix what you did? You worthless piece of shit!" I step towards him, my fist raised, ready to strike again.

"Mr. Baxter!" Someone grabs me from behind. Or maybe two someones. They're strong, just enough to hold me back.

"Mr. Baxter!" Virginia yells, coming out from her office. "What is going on?"

I shake myself loose but don't move closer to him. "This subterranean lowlife has five minutes to gather his things and get the fuck out of my building. Call security."

"But..." Virginia starts.

"Do it!"

“Damien!” a female voice shouts.

We all turn to see Clarissa joining the fray. I’d forgotten she’d wanted to come to work with me today.

“What are you doing?” she hisses.

“I’m getting rid of the trash,” I say. “Five minutes,” I snarl at him. “And I never want to see your face again, or else the next time you look in the mirror, you won’t even recognize yourself.”

I storm over to the elevator with Clarissa behind me.

She waits until we’re inside before she yells, “What was that about?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Does it have anything to do with that girl? You can’t go around punching people because they fucked your ex.”

“I told you to never speak to me about her,” I warn her.

“Damien, I’m about to be your wife! How is this going to look?”

“You knew what this was going into it.”

“You have to stop looking at me as the bad guy. I’m the person who’s giving you a way out.”

She grabs my hand, looking at my knuckles. “You’re hurt.”

I snatch it back. “Good.”

And I mean it.

Because everything I said about him hurting her, I'd really meant about myself.



My head is pounding.

Thump thump thump.

Then it stops.

Thump Thump thump.

Nope, there it goes again.

“Damien.”

Great, now it's talking to me.

“Damien, wake up.”

“No,” I murmur and squeeze my eyes shut. I'm not taking orders from anyone, let alone the voice in my head.

“He's in bad shape,” the voice says.

“Rude,” I growl.

“What did you say?” the voice says.

“I said ‘rude’.” Great. Now I'm arguing with the voice in my head.

This has got to be a new low.

“Wake up, son.”

Wait.

The voice in my head sometimes calls me “dickhead”, sometimes “motherfucker”, but “son” is a new one.

“Wake up, Damien. Dad’s here.”

That voice is definitely not in my head. It’s Kylian’s.

I force my eyes open and two faces are staring at me.

“Go away,” I growl.

“You should’ve drowned him at birth,” Kylian says.

“We tried leaving him at the fire station but they tracked us down.”

“Left him in the jungle then. Bear food.”

“He was all skin and bone. Not like you. You were a little chubster.”

“I think you’re forgetting which of your sons you’re trying to insult, Dad.”

My father chuckles.

“Arghhh, for the love of god, do you ever shut up, Kylian?”  
I drag myself into a sitting position and glare at him.

“I’m just here to say goodbye. I’ve gotta get home. I’ve got my own region to fuck up.”

He comes over and pulls me in a hug. “You’re going to be okay, bro. I’m just a zoom call away.”

“Remind me to tell Melissa to cancel my zoom subscription.”

I wait until I hear the elevator door open and then close before I open my eyes. “What are you doing here, Dad?”

“It’s technically my apartment.”

“You haven’t been here the whole time I’ve been here.”

“Because it’s your home, not mine.”

I grimace at the word “home”.

“What happened, son?”

“What do you mean?”

“With My-Linh.”

“Who told you about that?”

“You’re my son. I know everything.”

I grab the water glass by the bed. “What do you want me to say? I fucked up. I made an enemy I shouldn’t have and now I’m fixing it.”

“This isn’t the way to do it, Damien.”

“With respect, Dad, I’m not going to take advice about how to run the business from you.”

“Deserved. But what about love? Will you listen to me about that?”

I almost choke on the water. “You loved Mom. And she fucked with your heart so bad you could barely function! You left us. All of us. Kylian was only five years old, Dad. And you left the company. Grandpa held on by the skin of his teeth. And you think I’ll take advice about love from you?”

He sighs and shakes his head. “This is why I should’ve told you what happened sooner.”

“I don’t want to talk about the past, Dad. It’s done. I was right when I chose not to ever let myself get in the position you were in. I never wanted what happened to you to happen to me,”

“But you are. You’re in exactly the same position, Damien. It’s like watching history repeat itself. Right down to the drinking at 3 p.m. on a Tuesday afternoon. That’s why I should’ve been honest with you. I just...I just didn’t want you to hate your mother. You loved her so much.”

What is he talking about? What should he have told me?

“Son. Your mother and I were never in love. It was a business marriage. We tried to make it work but we were never in love. Never not for a single moment.”

He’s lying. “I don’t believe you. Then why did you... completely break down after the divorce?”

“I didn’t. I just left. I couldn’t be a part of the Baxter world. I lost my soul for the company. It had to be a clean cut. So I left, completely. It was the only way.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. “You...you didn’t love her?”

“No, son.”

“But you married her...?”



“At the time I thought it was the best thing for the company. Baxter acquired her father’s company, and me marrying her made the transition smoother. Or so we thought. We should never have been together even a day. Other than you kids, everything we touched turned to garbage.”

“But Dad...” Nothing is making sense to me right now. “S-She broke your heart.”

“Your mother is flawed. I know. And you loved her so much. But she didn’t break my heart. She never had my heart. Not like My-Linh has yours.”

What have I believed all this time?

“Don’t make the mistakes I made, son. You don’t have to be with My-Linh, but don’t marry Clarissa for the company. Don’t do it.”

I get to my feet, trying to process everything I’ve learned. “You don’t get to tell me what to do to keep my company, Dad!”

“It’s my company too, son. I might not work for Baxter, but I care about it too.”

“No. You left!”

“I left because I realized what was truly important.”

“We are responsible for thousands, *thousands* of employees, Dad. Shareholders, people who trust us with their hard-earned money. Are you forgetting that? Did you not think of that when you left?”

“Yes. All those people. And you should feel responsible. That makes you a good director and a good Baxter. But there’s one person who needs you above all others. Yourself. You want to know what I learned? *That’s* what I learned.”

“I’ll lose the company.”

He shakes his head. “You’ll lose yourself first. And you know what?”

“What?”

“Your grandfather wouldn’t have wanted that. You know what he said when I told him I was leaving? He said, ‘it’s about time’.”

The air gets knocked out of my lungs and I sit down.

My father squeezes my shoulder. “Think about it, son. If you can’t think of how to keep this company without pimping yourself out, maybe you’re not the business mastermind your grandfather thought you were when he gave you a quarter of this company.”

I look up at him, the weight of all the things he said crushing my chest. “She’s gone, Dad.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But you’ll never know unless you give her a reason to come back. Be the kind of man who deserves her. That’s the best thing you can do for the both of you.”



# THIRTY-SIX

*Damien*

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

From: ML.Tran@Baxter.com

Subject: I miss you.

My life has no meaning without you.

I just wanted you to know that.

I'm nothing without you.

To: D.Baxter@Baxter.com

From: MAILER-  
DAEMON@Baxter.com

Subject: Undelivered Mail Returned  
to Sender

I'm sorry to have to inform you that  
your message could not be delivered  
to ML.Tran@Baxter.com.



“MELISSA? WHAT IS THIS?” I shout through the closed door, waving a hand addressed envelope in the air.

My assistant shuffles into the room, glasses askew on her face, squinting at what I’m waving.

“Oh,” her face relaxes into a smile. “Just a letter I thought you’d like to read.”

“Isn’t that what I pay you for?” I scowl.

“No, you pay me to go through your mail and tell you what you should read. And to put up with your moods,” she mumbles.

I pretend not to hear here and slap the letter back on the desk until I’m sure she’s settled back at her desk before picking it up and opening the envelope.

There’s a clipped news article and a hand written letter.

A quick scan of the clipping tells me about a local primary school student winning a science competition for designing a non-intrusive and fashionable security device for children to wear around their necks or wrists or ankles. She called it the Bling-Home. With the help of a benefactor, she was able to test more prototypes and designs and had been granted a small loan to produce her device.

It’s an interesting story but I can’t see why someone would send it to me.

I unfold the letter and read.

Dear Mr. Damien Baxter,  
My name is Caitlan Melia and I am writing this letter to thank you for the donation you gave to my GoFundMe. When I set it up, I didn't think anyone was going to give me anything, and I was right, nobody did, except you. And with the money you donated, over the last year, I was able to test a lot more designs and perfect my prototype. And now my security to device is going to be available to buy soon! I hope it helps lots of people.

Anyway, thank you again for the \$1000 you donated. I just wanted you to know that I used every cent of it on my experiment. It didn't go to waste.

Sincerely,  
Caitlan Melia  
CEO of Bling-Home.

I frown.

I don't remember having donated any money to anyone called Caitlan Melia, and certainly nothing called the Bling-Home.

I reread the letter, taking note of a few details.

\$1000. A year ago.

A year ago...\$1000.

Only one thing that match those two details sticks out to me.

My-Linh.

The mystery delivery woman who took my \$1000 for dinner and left.

She hadn't spent it after all. She'd donated it...under my name.

My-Linh hasn't' changed at all. Because there's never been any need.

Me.

I'm the one who had to evolve.

"Melissa!" I shout. "Call Roger to bring the car around. There's something I need to do."



THE TRAN FAMILY TEA shop is the last storefront on the strip of phở restaurants and meat markets in the main shopping precinct of the city of Cabramatta. There's a little ding when I push the door open, letting the cool breeze and waft of earthy herbs wash over me.

It's a cramped and cluttered, but tidy little store. Everything, and there are a lot of things, in its place.

I turn to the counter; My-Linh's father eyes me over the rim of his glasses. He neither look happy nor surprised to see me there.

“Hello, Mr. Tran.”

“Mr. Baxter.”

“Sir, there's something I would like to talk to you about.”

Half an hour later I leave with a canister of green tea under my arm, and a signed contract in my hand.

Their initial response to my telling them that I had bought their building was shock and...fear. They must've known that My-Linh and I were no longer together, and I wouldn't have blamed them if they'd thought I'd bought the building out of spite, and was there to deliver the eviction news myself.

It was the exact opposite, I wanted to gift the building to them.

And in turn, I was the one shocked.

Their refusal of the gift was swift and strong, and I was told in no uncertain terms, that I had insulted them.

“We don't take things we have not earned, Mr. Baxter. Don't get us wrong, we don't believe everything must be a financial transaction, but there must be give and take. And we can not take this from you,” My-Linh's father had insisted, in a tone I recognized well.

“Mr. Tran, with all the respect in the world, you, your family has given me so much, please let me do this one thing



for you. I...I've failed in other ways. And there are things I just can't fix right now, but this I can. Let me at least ease your mind that your store will be safe and...er, and that nobody needs to put themselves in danger just to ensure the rent gets paid," I'd bargained.

But I'd quickly learned where My-Linh gets her tenacity.

In the end though, they agreed to continue paying the rent they'd paid before the recent atrocious rate hike.

And that it would stay a secret between us.

Now, if nothing else, despite everything else, at least I can sleep at night, no matter who it is sleeping beside me.



# THIRTY-SEVEN

One Month Later

*My-Linh*

I NEVER THOUGHT I would miss being a courier, but after almost two months working in an office building, albeit one where I loved the people (some a little too much) and enjoyed my work, there's something fun about zipping down Elizabeth Street, with the wind against my face. I'd bought a small moped with my savings from Baxter and now feel a thousand times safer than I had on my rickety old scooter. Without the pressure of having to make a certain amount to help pay for my parents' rent, I can take or leave whichever job I choose. It won't be forever, just something to tide me over until I present my PhD research proposal next month.

There's a ding on my phone. A job.

I stop by the pickup address and ten minutes later drop the parcel off at the One Sydney Harbor tower, the first of three

luxury residential towers being built. As I'm getting back on my moped, I get a picture message from Mandy. It's a selfie of her and a pint of beer with the caption, "Deadline Chic paid off! Got the new job! Just quit old one."

I laugh and know my workday is over. I make my way over to The Glass and, not for the first time, thank the universe for a job where I can take off at 3:30 p.m. on a Wednesday to celebrate my friend's achievement.

"Miss Tran, let me get that for you! It's a big one today!"

"You are a doll, Harold, but I've got it! Don't want to get those white gloves of yours dirty." I carry the box to the elevator as Harold, the doorman of One Sydney Harbor, holds it open for me. I've been back almost every day for two weeks and have gotten to know him well. The packages I've delivered keep piling up in the foyer of the apartment they're addressed to though, and we have spent a good few minutes coming up with theories of what might be going on.

So far, we agree that my theory of someone dumping body parts is both the most gruesome and interesting.

The elevator doors open and I drop the box next to the pile of other parcels that haven't been touched. I look around to make sure no one is there and take a step deeper into the apartment.

The view is absolutely stunning.

The sun sparkling off the water gives off an effect like scattered diamonds and it immediately reminds me of the view

from Damien's apartment. Out of nowhere, I feel like an ax has split my chest open.

I allow myself ten minutes a day to think about him, to give into the what ifs and the remember whens, and the I love him but hate him but love him so fucking much. Ten minutes, then I wash my face and get on with my day.

But there's always a moment in every day when something hits me out of nowhere, and this is today's. This space, it feels like him. It feels like a place we could be together, laugh together, love together. There's a stinging in the back of my eyes, and I force myself to take three deep breaths as I get back on the elevator.

I miss him.

I miss him so much it physically hurts to think of him.

But it hurts even more to pretend he never existed because then the person I was when I was with him never existed either. If I let myself, I have to admit that I liked her and I don't know if she'll ever be back.

The elevator doors open and I force a smile on my face.

"See you tomorrow, Harold! Hopefully it'll just be a finger tomorrow, something a little bit lighter!" I joke. Harold gifts me a giant belly laugh as he holds the door open for me and wishes me a good day.



MY SHIRT IS DRENCHED when I step out of the interview room after presenting my PhD proposal to the panel. Sweat drips from every single pore. I run a tissue over my face, and it comes away saturated as well.

“I must look like a drowned rat,” I say to myself, and chuckle a little bit.

“You look pretty good to me.”

I freeze.

I haven't heard that voice in over two months, but the effect on me is instantaneous.

I'm almost too afraid to turn around, not prepared for what I'll feel when I see his face.

“I heard your proposal. It's a winner. There's no way you won't get the PhD position,” he says to my back.

I spin on my heels and face him.

He looks just like he always has. Perfect.

“Hey,” he says when I finally look him in the eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was in the area. Going for a jog around the campus.”

I eye him in his suit and tie. “Liar.”

He just lets out a little laugh. “Maybe just a little bit.”

“I...I have to go.”

He reaches out but pulls back before he touches me. “No. Don't. Please. Just let me...just let me look at you for a

moment.”

“What would your fiancée say about that?” I say, before I can stop myself. I’ve imagined running into him a million times, and each time I’ve managed not to let my bitterness get the better of me. In reality, it isn’t as easy.

He doesn’t respond and just hands me an envelope.

I just stare at it, but don’t move. “I don’t want anything from you, Damien.”

“I know. But please, just...just take this. You don’t owe me anything, but, please. If anything we had meant anything, just take this.”

He slides it into my hand and I don’t stop.

Then our eyes lock for a moment before he leans over and brushes his lips against my cheek.

“I’ve missed you so much, My-Linh.”

And then he’s gone, like he was never there.

I press the envelope to my chest, contemplating throwing it away and never knowing what the contents hold.

But I can’t.

I gingerly slide my finger under the flap, and peek inside.

There are only two things inside, a black rectangular security tag and a slip of paper with an address in his handwriting.

“One Sydney Harbor.”

Once again, Damien Baxter has made the world come crashing down around me.



“AH, MISS TRAN,” HAROLD says, when I get there, as if he’s been expecting me.

“What’s going on, Harold?” I ask, waving the security tag at him.

“I believe you use that in the elevator, so you don’t need the front desk to buzz you up.”

“But what is going on?”

He just smiles and calls the elevator down for me. “I think we’re about to solve the mystery of what’s in those boxes, Miss.” The elevator dings and he holds it open for me. “Good luck, Miss Tran,” he wishes me, with a wink.

When the doors open into the apartment, I expect to see the pile of boxes that I’ve delivered over the last month. And they’re there, still unopened, but laid out in a circle in the middle of the empty apartment.

On the closest box, there’s a boxcutter and a slip of paper that says “start here”.

“What the hell is going on?” I say, but no one answers.

Out of sheer morbid curiosity I cut open the box, and inside is a single box of Pocky and a Post-it note. The Pocky is the strawberry and cream flavor, the same one Damien had tried



that night. On the note is written “I’d give my 12.9 billion to have you feed me my first taste of Pocky again.”

What in the world?

How ridiculous.

I move on to the next box.

I slide the knife along the tape holding it closed, then I pull open the flaps.

Inside is a take-out menu from the Moroccan restaurant we had ordered from multiple times. And a Post-it that reads, “I would give my 12.9 billion to eat Moroccan food with you in bed with my hands, every night for the rest of my life.”

So, so ridiculous.

The third box has a torn movie ticket stub from the night we’d stumbled across the old theater playing *Steel Magnolias* and I’d made him watch it, and gave him the definitive rankings of each character while he shoved popcorn into my face to get me to stop talking.

This note says “I would give my 12.9 billion to watch horrible chick movies with you while you spoil the endings for me and get sick on stale movie theatre popcorn.”

I can’t help but snort at that one.

I jump over to the fourth box, stomach tingling at what I’ll find inside. It’s the big one from about two weeks ago.

I tear open the box to find a giant ten gallon stock pot.

“I would give my 12.9 billion to watch you cook a giant pot of phở in our kitchen, listen to you rant about the importance of skimming the scum and letting it simmer (lid off for clarity) while I wash all the dirty dishes that you generate.”

A smile stretches itself across my face, remembering how I’d spent an entire afternoon giving him an in-depth lesson/rant on what makes Vietnam’s national dish, and all the intricacies of the authentic broth. I’d thought he’d just been humoring me the entire time. But he’d been listening.

I have no idea what’s going on.

But I need to know what’s in each and every one of those boxes.

And I do.

Thirty minutes later, I’m exhausted.

One by one, I’ve unraveled a story that makes no sense to me yet.

Each box has some sort of memento or reference to things that happened or things we talked about during our time together. Things I don’t even remember, but somehow he has. Things that had made us...us. Restaurant business cards, and magazines from places we mentioned that we’d want to visit and more. And on each Post-it note, he pledges his fortune, to share these things with me again.

And now, there’s only one box left.

The last box is small, it almost fits in my hand, and I hug it to my chest.

I don't know what's supposed to happen after all this, but during the last thirty minutes I've felt like he's been with me again. Mine again. And after two months of dreading facing every day knowing I may never see him again, I've treasured it. It could all be over once this last box is open and I'm not sure if I'm ready to give him up yet.

"Now or never, My-Linh," I say to myself.

I take a deep breath and cut it open.

Inside is a ring box.

A red velvet ring box.

I turn it over in my hand, almost scared to open it.

Before I even have a chance to, there's a noise, and I turn around to see him walk into the room.

"Don't open it. Don't open it yet until you hear what I have to say," he says.

All I can do is nod.

He starts walking toward me, slow, deliberate.

"There are so many things that I should've said to you in our time together. So many things. So many things about me, my life, my dreams. So many things about how you made me feel, how you changed my life. So many things I should've told you so that you could have understood me better. But I just never felt I needed to because you always understood me better than I understood myself and I felt they could go unsaid. But one thing I never said and I should've said was this: I'm

sorry, My-Linh. I am so sorry about so many things. I'm sorry about the way we met and how I treated you in the beginning. I'm sorry I ever made you think that all I would ever want you for is your body, when it's your mind and heart that I wanted more than anything. I'm sorry I ever made you feel like you weren't as important to me as the company, and that I could give you up, when nothing could've been further from the truth. I'm sorry that it's taken me so long to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry that you went even a second thinking that I could live without you. I'm sorry that I broke my promise to you, that I would try harder, for us. And I'm sorry that I hurt you. I'm so so sorry that I hurt you. And I'm sorry that you may never know that that hurt me more than anything else. I'm sorry, My-Linh." He stops in front of me, tears in his ears.

"And I'm sorry we had to spend all this time apart when I never want to be away from you for a single moment. Ask me the question again, My-Linh."

I can barely speak, my mind blank. "What question?"

"Ask me where my home is."

My chin trembles as I try to voice the words. "Where... where is your home, Damien?"

He smiles, and it floods into every facet of his blue eyes. "You are my home, My-Linh. You. Wherever you go, that's where I'm always going to want to be."

I swallow the urge to cry and just look at him.

“I bought this apartment for you, My-Linh. I was hoping you’d let me share it with you, but if not, it’s yours. You deserve to live in this beautiful place, overlooking this beautiful city, while you go into it making it your own, making it better. This place is yours. Make it into a home for yourself.”

What did he just say?

I spin around, the view suddenly taking on a whole new meaning to me. It’s stunning, but I couldn’t live here. I couldn’t live here with him. He’s not mine to share a home with.

“What about your wedding? I saw in the paper...”

He shakes his head. “It’s over. It...it was never supposed to happen. And I’m sorry about that too. You were right. I was weak. I chose what I thought was the hard decision, but it wasn’t.”

“You...you’re not engaged?”

“No. Not to her.”

I’m not sure what he means by that and I’m too scared to ask.

I turn the ring box over in my hand.

“Open it,” he says, with a smile on his face.

I hold my breath and flip the top open.



# THIRTY-EIGHT

*Damien*

I WATCH HER AS she opens the ring box; her surprise is immediate.

“What...?” she says, peering closer. “What is that?”

I grin and take her hand. “Come on.”

“But, Damien. What is this?”

“It’s a token.”

“A token to what?”

“You’ll see.”

The ride down the elevator and in the car is silent. I know she wants to ask a million questions, but I don’t want to answer any of them. Not until we get to where we’re going.

“Just up here, Roger,” I say finally, and he nods, pulling the car to a stop.

I jump out of the car and get the door for her. The ring box is still gripped in her hand, her forehead furrowed into a question mark.

“Damien! Are you going to tell me where we are and what we’re doing here or not?”

I just grin. I’ve waited a long time for this. She can wait a little longer.

“Come on!” I say and take her hand.

She follows, like she did that day on the terrace, running to keep up with me. All the memories come flooding back. What I would do to go back to that time and tell her that from that moment on, she was mine and I was hers, and I would let nothing come between us.

But I didn’t.

But I am going to make up for it now.

“Where are we, Damien?”

“We’re at the Sydney Olympic Park.”

“And...what are we doing here?”

“This.”

I pull her around the corner, and let her take in the view.

She gasps as soon as she sees it. Sees the giant fair spread out in front of us, with rides and game stalls and food trucks, kids running around laughing and playing, while their parents watch. There’s a stage set up to the left and a ball pit to the right.



Overhead the giant banner reads “Baxter’s Inaugural Autumn Carnival.” Underneath the subheading reads “All proceeds going to the Foundation for Children’s Medical Research.”

“Damien! It’s...”

I grin and nod. “It’s your idea.”

“But...Oh my god, look!”

We turn just in time to see a banana, a raspberry and an orange—human sized—dance in a line onto the stage.

“It’s the Wattle Foods mascots!” she squeals.

“Kinda. They’ve been revamped a little. Given some Botox and Photoshop. But yes, they’re essentially the old mascots.”

“What...” she says, her face confused.

“You were right. All along. About everything. We scrapped the campaign and decided to work with what was already working. We brought the old mascots back. There’s new packaging but it’s recognizable. And it’s all because of you. The fair, the branding...you were right. And we partnered with the Children’s Medical Research Foundation to help them raise double what they did last year. You were right. There’s a way to do all of this...”

“From the heart.”

I nod. “From the heart. The board loved it. Well, most of them. It wasn’t easy. But we eventually got almost all of them on board.”

“Damien. What changed your mind?”

I take her hand. “Someone cleared something up for me, that what I believed, wasn’t true. And you, you did. I just...I wasn’t listening.”

“And now?”

“I want nothing more than to hear everything that goes on in your mind.”

She grasps my hand, squealing as the children run over and plop themselves down in front of the stage. “They love it!”

I laugh. “They do. And My-Linh, I love you.”

Her face softens but then, for a split second, I see the doubt flash across her face.

“Damien. I...I don’t know what this means. Did you do all this for me?”

I bite my lip, I have to tell her the truth. “In some ways, yes. But others, no. I did it for me. For my own growth. For my own happiness. I thought...that’s what you’d want me to do.”

The doubt is gone and she nods. “Days of Damien.”

I laugh. “It wasn’t easy. And there’s still one last thing to do.”

I pull another ring box out of my hand and turn it around to face her, flipping it open.

“It took me a long time to get here, My-Linh. And I couldn’t have done it without you. Will you be my home for the rest of our lives?”

She gasps, and tears fill her eyes. But I never doubt. I never doubt for a moment.

“Yes,” she says.

And I would give my 12.9 billion dollars to relive this moment again for eternity.



# EPILOGUE

*My-Linh*

“I WANT TO GO again!” I yell once the Ferris wheel stops.

“I think you’re supposed to give the other children a turn!”  
Damien laughs.

“Screw it, I still have this token you gave me!” I whip out  
the first ring box.

“Let’s grab a hot dog and then you can have another ride.”

“Fine,” I grumble, climbing down from the ride.

“Hello, My-Linh,” a friendly voice says.

“Jeremy!” I squeal. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to deliver some good news.”

My stomach does a somersault and I grab Damien’s hand.  
He gives it a squeeze but doesn’t say anything.

“Congratulations, you are now officially a PhD candidate!”  
Jeremy announces.

“Oh my god!” I yell and everyone within earshot turns to stare. “Please don’t tell me you’re kidding.”

He laughs. “I wouldn’t dare. You worked hard for this. You deserve it.”

“Thank you so much!” I shout and throw my arms around him.

“You’re very welcome, My-Linh. It’s not going to be easy, but if anyone can do it, I know it’s you.”

I grin and Damien pulls me into a hug. “Congratulations, Kitten. I told you, didn’t I?”

I just beam at him.

“I understand congratulations are also in order to you, too, Damien, and some pending nuptials with the newly minted PhD student here,” Jeremy says to him.

Damien nods and holds out his hand and they shake.

“Thank you. I’m...I could not be happier.”

“I’m so thrilled for the both of you.”

I look at them, at Damien first, then at Jeremy,

“Wait...how does he...How?”

Jeremy laughs. “You want to tell her or do you want me to?”

“Tell me what?” I shout, confused.

Damien laughs. “Do you know what Baxter Enterprises started out as?”

I shake my head.

“Almost a hundred years ago, before all the casinos and the hotels and real estate, my great, great, great grandfather started out with a tiny, little bakery. He was a baker.”

I frown. “A baker...?”

They nod.

I shake my head, trying to connect the dots and make sense of what they’re saying.

“Wait. As in...Dr...Jeremy...Baker?”

Jeremy grins. “I think she’s got it.”

It can’t be.

“You changed your name?” I ask Jeremy.

“When I left the family business, I didn’t want to be plagued with questions, so yes, I changed it. But I didn’t want to stray too far.”

“You’re Damien’s father?!”

They laugh and I almost want to slap myself for not noticing the resemblance sooner.

“Am I supposed to call you Dad now?” I ask, my brain exhausted from everything I’ve learned today.

“You can call me whatever you want. Just be in my office first thing Monday morning, ready to work.”

He slaps Damien on the back and wanders over to the drinks stand.

“Are you mad?” Damien asks.

“No, I get it.”

“He wanted to tell you, but...then everything blew up and we thought you might not go ahead with your proposal if you knew. He’s the reason I moved here. It was important to me to try to rebuild my relationship with my Dad, considering I didn’t have much of a mother.”

“You made the right decision.”

He pulls me into his arms and kisses me hard, his lips fitting mine perfectly, the way they always have.

I sigh and rest my head against his chest.

And I know I’ve made the right decision too.

“How did you do all this? The gifts, the fare? Why didn’t you tell me about it? Why didn’t you tell me...that things had changed?”

He brushes a hair out of my face. “I could’ve. But I’d said so many things, it was time I showed you. Someone told me one, it doesn’t matter what you say, in the end, it only matters what you do.”



THIS IS THE END of Damien and My-Linh's story. We should leave them to go christen their new apartment with whatever ungodly acts they have in mind.

But never fear, Kylian, that gorgeous, horny dancing devil's story is just beginning...

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

First thing you should know about the author, is that she really, really hates writing these About The Author things. Who came up with these things? Cursed marketing people, that's who! Damn you marketing people!

The second thing you should know about the Author is that she has an MBA...specialising in marketing.

The irony is not lost on her, even when many other things are...like going to bed at a reasonable hour or how the economy works.

The Author, other than laughing right now at referring to herself in the third person, currently lives in Maine, USA, although she identifies as Vietnamese, who lived most of her life in Australia, and was born in France. I'm...I mean, she is a veritable one woman international food court.

She likes wining and dining, and whining when she's not being wined and dined.

Is a dog person, and professed not cat person, even though there is a cat currently sitting on her lap right now.

She wants to thank you for reading this book.

Writing is all she's ever wanted to do in life.

Happy Reading.

Also, sorry about the swear words. Her parents told her to write that. No, no they did not, they're the ones who taught her those naughty words, guttermouthed, heathens!

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Just thank you to everyone in my life.

It's been a long time since I had so much writing a book.

IT'S THE END OF the book now, what are you still doing here?

Are you hiding from your kids/husband/laundry?

I guess I can sit with you for another minute.

.

.

.

.

Okay, go away now, I'm trying to write another smutty scene in my new book for you to read!

:p :p

WAIT!

Come back!

I'm bored.

Have you got any gossip for me?

.

.

.

Ugh okay fine.

I'm going.

Bring wine next time, and tell me why the neighbour's husband keeps sneaking out after midnight and comes back with only half his shirt tucked in!