



**MR.**  
*Irresistible*

**JODIE LARSON**

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*Mr. Irresistible*

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## *Prologue*

### ***Maysen***

I should have known better than to think he could change.

He's still the same arrogant asshole from high school, letting things fall into his lap without trying.

And yet, I can't mask the hurt dwelling within my heart.

I thought being ignored was horrible.

No, I was wrong.

This is way worse.



# CHAPTER

## *One*

### *Maysen*

*Don't be nervous. It's only a job interview.*

Yeah, right. The words sound stupid even in my head. After my asshat ex-boyfriend unceremoniously kicked me to the curb, this is my last lifeline to make it on my own before crawling back home like a twenty-eight-year-old loser.

Not on my watch.

Glancing at my competition, the nervous little flutters in my stomach dissipate. Not that I should judge a book by its cover, but something tells me the blonde woman sitting by the window doesn't have a college degree in anything as she twirls some gum around her index finger while giggling at something on her phone. Probably some ridiculous TikTok video.

"So, are you here for the job too?" The young girl beside me smacks her lips as she checks out her makeup in a compact.

What kind of dumbass question is that? “Nope, I just enjoy sitting in waiting rooms so I can meet new people.”

She snaps the mirror shut and turns in her seat with a wide smile. “Oh, my god, me too!”

Fuck my life. Seriously?

When her name gets called, she packs up her purse, adjusts her boobs and skirt to show off as much skin as possible, and disappears behind the conference room door.

Between the blonde ditz by the window and the Victoria’s Secret mannequin getting interviewed now, I should be a shoo-in for the position.

Personal executive assistant wasn’t exactly something I wanted, considering I have a business finance degree with a minor in administration. It was the only thing I found on one of those job websites remotely close to what I wanted for a career. My endgame has always been to be the CEO of my own company. Rather than following the business plan everyone suggested, I decided to jump feet first into uncharted waters and was eaten by the sharks who were more than willing to take advantage of my lack of experience.

Lesson learned—time to start from the bottom up. And everything I’ve read about the Madison Development Group has been glowing, especially the individual growth of their employees.

The clock’s loud ticking on the wall distracts me while trying to stop my leg from bouncing. *There’s no need to be nervous. You’ve got this.*

If only I showed this confidence on the outside.

The VS model returns within a few minutes, sporting a wide smile. “Good luck,” she whispers before leaving the waiting room.

Huh, she was barely in there. That can’t be good.

The blonde girl gets called next with the same result. Barely five minutes before emerging with a similar smile. My worst fear is getting passed up for being overqualified or not



dressed slutty enough since that seems to be the theme with the other girls.

“Ms. James? We’re ready for you.”

With a deep breath and genuine smile, I grab my briefcase and stride confidently into the boardroom.

This job is mine.

If the amount of time spent during this interview is any indication, I should be the obvious choice. The half-hour blazed in a blink, leaving me feeling good as I shook everyone’s hands.

“It was very nice meeting you, Maysen. We’ll be in touch shortly,” Denise Caldwell, the HR rep, says.

“I look forward to it.”

My heart soars as I exit the room, completely lost in my thoughts.

Not one to jinx anything, but I take my time heading to the elevators, getting a layout of the land as I pass multiple cubicles and offices on the way to the bathroom.

I wonder if the people are friendly and accommodating? Which cube would be mine? They never mentioned who I would be assisting, and I didn’t think to ask because it didn’t matter.

As soon as the door shuts, I smile at my reflection, seeing the person I’ve missed over the last few months. Between Zack’s cheating and my temporary job, I hardly recognized myself. But this person, the one with bright hazel eyes and rosy cheeks, I’ve missed.

It’s taken a lot to regain some of my missing pieces over the last few years—pieces that have been chipped away or stolen due to my naivete thinking I could walk into any situation and rule the world. One blow after another, I soon stood a bit shorter and unsure of myself.

Today, I know things are going to change.

I quickly leave the restroom with a final check while digging around for my phone that had fallen somewhere in my briefcase.

“Oof,” a deep, masculine voice grumbles as my shoulder collides with his arm.

“Oh, gosh, I’m so sorry.”

I look up, ready to formally apologize when the words die on my lips.

No, it can’t be. What are the odds?

Sure, it’s been ten years since I’ve seen him, but he looks the same, only a little older and more mature. Still the ruggedly handsome man I pined over for years, praying he’d see me.

Yet, some things don’t change as he barely acknowledges my existence.

Mr. Irresistible himself, Tyler Cannon: high school jock, most popular person on campus with everything always falling into his lap, bringing two state titles in football and hockey, and every girl’s fantasy—most of them achieving it since he was also the biggest manwhore.

“Sure,” he grunts before disappearing down the hall toward a corner office.

And just as before, he doesn’t see me.

I stand there with my jaw slack for a few moments, staring at his retreating form. Even though it seems he’s still an enormous tool, he fills out a suit nicely and has kept his athletic physique. Broad shoulders, narrow waist, hardly a lick of fat on him—or so I assume. But all the good looks in the world don’t make up for being an asshole.

Tyler Cannon won’t ruin my good mood. Not that he would know he did in the first place.

Without another look, I quickly reach the elevator and step out the front doors. It’s a nice enough day to walk around, especially since I don’t have anything going on. A slight breeze and the sun on my face lighten my mood again as I

head straight to my favorite spot, The Cask & Barrel—an upscale whiskey bar boasting over a hundred fifty different brands from around the world. The absolute best in the state.

Before I open the door, my phone vibrates in the front pocket of my briefcase, showing the number I hoped to see. Tiny palpitations stir in my chest as I shakily hit the small green button.

“Hello?”

“Ms. James, it’s Denise Caldwell. Is this a bad time?”

I bite my lower lip to suppress the smile coming forth, keeping my voice as level as possible. “Not at all. What can I do for you?”

“On behalf of the Madison Development Group, we’d like to welcome you to the team.”

Holy shit. It’s mine.

After making a few arrangements to start Monday morning, I end the call and fist pump the air shamelessly.

Now it’s time to celebrate.

I walk to the bar, taking my usual spot, and call my best friend, Jenna, who groggily answers the phone. “Yeah?”

“Catch you at a bad time?”

She yawns and grumbles something under her breath. “Other than my nap, no.”

It must be nice to sleep in, though I wouldn’t trade my day job for her night one. Getting home when most people are asleep is not a good time. But if I were a high-end adult entertainer working three nights a week making her kind of money, I’d probably put up with it. Well, except for the whole getting naked thing.

“Get dressed and meet me downtown. It’s time to celebrate.”

Sheets rustle in the background, muffling her voice for a second. “No shit?”

I nod as if she could see me. “You better believe it! Hurry up and get down here.” Not that I have to say where I am. She already knows.

After ending the call, I flag down Jaryd—my favorite bartender, who also happens to be the owner. “Hey, girl. Getting an early start to your day?” he asks, sliding my usual drink in front of me. I don’t know if he pays this close attention to all his customers or if I come here too often. Hopefully, it’s the first option.

“Is there such a thing as too early in the day to start drinking?”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “Brandon says the same thing. It’s no wonder you two get along so well.”

I adore Jaryd’s new boyfriend. So much better than the last guy he was dating. Nothing says horrible break-up like needing a restraining order to keep his crazy, stalking ass away from you. “Besides, it’s after two o’clock. Close enough to five.” I toss him a wink for good measure. “I received some exciting news today, which is why I’m here.”

“You got the job?” Poor Jaryd has been listening about my woes for too long, knowing more about me than anyone else. Except for Jenna, who’s one of my oldest friends and knows all my secrets.

“You bet your hot booty I did.”

Jaryd laughs and grabs a bottle off the top shelf. “This is a cause for celebration.” He generously pours two glasses with the amber liquid and slides one my way. It must be nice being the owner—you can give away the top shelf, I-don’t-want-to-know-how-expensive-this-drink-is liquor without worrying about the overhead or cost. Being friends with the owner while spending a decent amount of time here helps also.

“To new beginnings.” We clink our glasses together and take a healthy sip, letting the alcohol burn down my throat. Slightly smoky with a smooth finish, exactly how I like it.

He asks about the interview, and I spare no details, starting with my competition and the irrational fear I carried.

“I told you,” he says, making me another old-fashioned.

“I know, I know.”

Jenna bursts through the door, clearly making her presence known. Not that anyone cares. It’s me, Jaryd, and the two regulars sitting at the end of the bar, nursing their drinks with no time in the world.

“Wassup bitches!”

Jaryd rolls his eyes and pours a heavy-wristed shot of Glenlivet over a ball of ice. “Always so classy.”

“Hey, I am the epitome of class,” she says while adjusting her pants to stop catching on her navel piercing.

“Sure, whatever you say.”

Honestly, I don’t know what I’d do without her. She’s my rock, the person I lean on most because she’s been through so much at such a young age. Her parents died in a car accident, which was tragic enough. Then she was sent to live with her grandma, who had health issues no one knew about, throwing a whole new snag into the mix. At least she made it until graduation. After her grandma died, working in the adult entertainment industry with no money and no job prospects was all Jenna could do to make ends meet. Luckily, she didn’t have to perform in seedy places for too long, working her way up to the big leagues with better clientele, better hours, and less scandalous after-hour events.

And I’m always the first to chew someone a new asshole if they look down on her profession. They don’t know her or her story.

The empty glasses pile up on the bar, leaving us nice and toasty as business picks up.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” I say, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Guess who I ran into at the office?”

Jenna taps her chin, pretending to think. “Chris Evans.”

“Ha! Right. If I did, I’d still be there with him.” I shake my head while chewing on my lip. “No, I ran into *him*.”

She draws her brows together. “Who?”

“*Him*,” I say more forcefully. “You know.” Still a blank stare. Fuck, maybe I should quit drinking so I can form a coherent thought.

“Just say his name, for fuck’s sake.”

“Fine.” I blow out a quick breath and ignore the thumping in my chest. “*Mr. Irresistible*.”

Almost like we were in a cartoon, her eyes widen inhumanly as her jaw practically hits the floor. “No way. Mr. Hometown Hero himself? I thought he moved away years ago.”

I shrug and try to drain every last drop of alcohol clinging to the ice ball in my glass. “Nope. And let me tell you, things haven’t changed.”

“What did he say?”

I flag Jaryd down for another round before closing out the tab. “Nothing. I bumped into him, and he barely acknowledged my existence.”

“So, same old Tyler.” She picks up the fresh drink and leans back in the chair. “You’d think he would have grown up by now. High school is over. No one cares about his dumb accomplishments.”

“Exactly.” Only I can’t get my brain to focus on anything else. I thought I had buried those feelings long ago, chalked them up to never going to happen. Yet, ten years later, I’m still harboring a secret crush on him.

Jenna can’t know about this.

“Fuck the losers who can’t move on from their high school glory days. Fuck them right in their asses,” she loudly proclaims, drawing a few concerned stares.

I slap my hand over her mouth and give an apologetic smile. “She doesn’t get out much.”

That seems to appease the onlookers as we giggle like teenagers.

Jenna checks her watch and quickly slams her drink. “Gotta go. The pole waits for nobody.”

“That’s what she said.”

We break into another fit of giggles before hugging goodbye. “See you at home.”

Today was a good day, celebrating a new job with a promising future. Who could ask for more?

Suddenly, images of Tyler filter to the front of my brain, looking all sexy in his suit, only this time holding on to me rather than turning away.

I shake my head, needing to work this out of my system. My trusty teal friend is coming out of hiding once I get home, and I’m just tipsy enough to hopefully not call out his name at the end.

Almost.



# CHAPTER

## *Two*

### *Maysen*

“Here’s your ID badge, insurance packet, and security codes for signing into the system.”

I take the items from Denise and stare at the photo on my badge. I’ve never been so happy to have a good hair day in my life.

“Is there a training day or anything like that?” It was probably a question I should have asked on Friday, but I was so excited about getting this job that it slipped my mind.

Denise smiles and shakes her head. “With your resume, we figured you would like to jump in feet first.”

She’s not wrong. I prefer to learn hands-on rather than sit in some lecture and get told what to do.

“I would have to agree.”

Her smiling face eases the lingering worries fluttering in my stomach from the first day jitters.



“Wonderful. Shall we find your cubicle?”

I wasn't sure how much stuff I should bring, considering I hadn't seen my workspace yet. For all I knew, I'd be stuck in a broom closet or given a folding table with a laptop, making my desk anywhere I could find a spot.

We leave her office and head down the maze of halls. It's funny how large the interior of the office is. From the outside, you'd think it's a shoebox with maybe a hallway or two—not the labyrinth of offices, cubes, conference rooms, and hallways.

She points out several bathrooms, the break room/kitchen area, copy room, and mailroom. The worried flutters return as we turn down a familiar hallway. A cold sweat threatens to break across my neck as we get closer to the corner office.

“And here is your desk.” She points to a spacious cube with a U-shaped desk containing a computer with two monitors and a leather high-back chair. Behind me is a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing the gorgeous skyline of Minneapolis. A girl could get used to a view like that.

“This is perfect,” I say, testing my new chair. Oh, yeah. Soft yet firm with enough support that my back already feels better.

Denise chuckles to herself. “I'm glad you like everything.”

I nod and stand again. “It's perfect.” Time to bite the bullet. “So, who do I report to?”

“Ah, yes. That would be Mr. Cannon.” An ungodly ache forms inside me. Like I swallowed asphalt, sitting like lead in my stomach. Somehow I knew it'd be him. “Have you been introduced yet?”

“Not yet.” I'm not about to divulge that we've known each other for years, only because he didn't recognize me after our run-in the other day, or he honestly doesn't know me.

She turns to his door and hums. “Well, we may want to wait for a moment. Usually, when his door is closed, he's in a meeting with someone. Best not to interrupt. But I'll check back in a bit and make the formal introductions. You can

utilize this downtime by filling out the forms and getting acquainted with the computer system.”

I nod, thankful to have this brief reprieve. “Absolutely.”

Once she’s gone, I reclaim my seat and start booting up the computer, adjusting the monitors to the correct height and distance while searching for my login name and password.

I’m halfway through reading the intro packet when a petite woman pops into my cube with a friendly smile.

“Hey, you must be the new PA.”

I turn in my chair and grin. “I am. Maysen James.”

“Holly Sutter.” She makes herself comfortable on the edge of my desk after giving me a quick handshake. “So, you must be working with Mr. Cannon?”

Mr. Cannon? Are we not allowed to call him by his first name? Is he that arrogant? “It appears so.”

“Awesome. Then we’ll be cube neighbors. I’m Corrin Breamer’s assistant, so if you need any help, I’m here for you.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

Holly crosses her legs at the ankles. “Have you met him yet?”

I shake my head. “Denise was going to introduce us but said it’d be better to wait since he’s in a meeting.”

Pink tinges her cheeks as she begins to snicker. “Uh, if banging the office slut is called a meeting, then yes.”

“Seriously?” I widen my eyes and try not to let my jaw drop. “That’s what he’s doing?”

She nods. “It’s well-known that Chrissy and Tyler have a ‘casual’ thing going. She pops in about five minutes after he gets here on Monday mornings and his door stays shut for at least a half-hour with her adjusting her clothes and makeup on the way out. It doesn’t leave much to the imagination about what’s happening inside.”

I'm not sure why I'm so surprised. It fits the MO. Major player to whoever was willing to participate. "How is that tolerated?"

Holly shrugs and checks her nails. "Who's going to say no to the boss?"

"Even HR?"

"Like anyone would complain," she confirms. "He's hot, rich, and satisfying their needs. Anyway, I love your outfit," she says, pointing to my modest dress. I wasn't sure how fancy I should get on the first day, so I opted for something simple yet upscale—getting labeled as the office suck-up or the one who takes business casual a little too far is the last thing I need. But this flowy pink dress and cream cardigan was a good compromise.

"Thanks. It's one of my favorites."

Judging by her gray pencil skirt and loose white blouse, I guessed right. Mid-range business casual seems to be the theme. "I'm assuming Denise took you around the floor?"

I nod. "I got the five-cent tour, though I'm sure I'll still get lost." I pull open a few drawers and frown. "Any chance you can tell me where to get pens and paper?"

With a laugh, she wraps her tiny hand around my forearm and drags me down the hall. "This way."

After a few more twists and turns, pausing every once in a while to introduce a few others who work in the office, I grab everything I need from the supply room and head back to my area, ready to tackle the next task while Holly runs straight for Ms. Breamer's office.

I let out a relieved sigh as Tyler's door was still closed. Delaying the inevitable would be nice, though not feasible. I know we'll come face-to-face at some point, but I'd like a game plan together for either scenario. One, he remembers who I am and doesn't care. Or two, he doesn't remember who I am and still ignores me.

The soft click of his office door turns my curious eye toward the hallway. Just as Holly said, the blonde woman fixes

her hair and runs a fingertip around her lips to catch any smudges. She reminds me of the women I sat with during the interview. Someone vetted them with a particular type of taste. I'm guessing it wasn't Denise.

Before I wheel my chair back to its position, a tall, masculine figure steps out the door while adjusting his suit coat.

Just like last week, my breath hitches as I take a good look at this fine specimen of a man. There's no denying that he aged well since high school. He may be impossibly more handsome than before, though I don't know how. Back then, he was a walking legend—a god among mortals. Nothing has changed. Instead of wearing football jerseys and well-worn jeans, he's dressed in suits and ties, looking polished and refined.

On the outside, that is. Not so refined having office sex to start your day.

Tyler turns his head slightly, catching my gaze. Shit. I quickly scoot my chair back to the desk and grab some papers to appear busy, not like I was creepily eyeing him up.

I close my eyes, praying he didn't notice until a shadow looms over me, freezing my movements. "You must be my new assistant."

Everything inside my chest constricts, sending my system into overtime to regulate my heart and lungs before having some attack or passing out—stupid hormonal reaction.

Someone needs to give my brain a memo, reminding the supposed smart organ that this man is a player and not interested in us.

Okay, here goes nothing. Slowly, I turn in my chair, waiting to see Tyler's reaction.

For half a second, a glimmer of recognition flashes in his eyes as they dilate slightly, causing his nostrils to flare and the corner of his mouth to twitch. It disappears just as quickly, giving way to the business façade I imagine he puts forth to everyone.

“I am.” Should I extend my hand or wait to see if he says anything? The long, awkward pause is almost unbearable as we have a silent stand-off of wills. Tyler inspects me from head to toe, slowly drawing his gaze like a caress. No wonder he never had any issues getting women into his bed. One look from him is nearly enough to send you flying into his arms without thought.

Luckily, Denise rounds the corner with a smile.

“Oh, good. I see you’ve met Ms. James.” She looks between the two of us for confirmation.

Tyler cracks first. “A pleasure.” He extends his hand, which I take, ignoring the little thrill it sends up my arm.

“Please, call me Maysen.”

Again, I hoped my name would spark some memory. It’s not typical by any account. I can only think of a handful of people who share my name, none from around here. Yet he stands there, stoic, giving absolutely nothing away.

Denise looks between us, clearly pleased with herself. “Looks like you two will get along swimmingly.” She turns her attention to me. “Is there anything you need help with?”

I shake my head. “No, everything is fine. I should have the forms back to you by this afternoon.”

“Excellent. Then I’ll leave you to it.” She walks away without a backward glance, filling the small space with awkwardness.

Do I call him out and make him look like an ass? Remind him that we’ve spent years of our lives together in the same school, have the same friends, but never talked to one another?

“Let’s get started,” he says, shoving his hands in his pockets.

*Don’t look at his crotch. Don’t look at his crotch.* Unfortunately, my eyes have a will of their own, drawn to an area I’d rather not think about. Tyler chuckles to himself, almost like he can read my thoughts. “Grab a notepad and meet me in my office.”

Business it is. I follow behind and sit in one of the plush chairs in front of the massive mahogany desk, sporting the same view from behind my little cube.

Tyler folds his hands on his desk. “So, Macy.”

“Sen.”

He tilts his head slightly. “Huh?”

“Maysen,” I say, trying to hold back my annoyance.

“Right, sorry.” He’s not as a little smirk plays on his lips. “I’m not sure what you’ve heard, but I do things differently around here. Being my assistant is more than a nine-to-five job. You’re basically at my beck and call since my schedule is fluid and continually moving. Where I am, you are, no matter what.”

Huh, that wasn’t in the job description. “Okay.” Now the larger salary makes sense. I was expecting base pay or an hourly wage.

Tyler turns on the charm, leaning forward slightly. “Your workday will depend on mine. Some days you won’t need to be in the office immediately, while others require extra hours. Will that be a problem?”

And there goes my social life. Why do I feel like I’m stuck in some Sandra Bullock movie, only without the hilarious happy ending?

“No problem,” I say, clasping my hands over the notepad I have yet to write on.

He eyes me up again, leaving me trembling under the weight of his expectations. This job may be more demanding than I anticipated, but I’m not one to back down from a challenge. Only I wish it was nerves making me a mess rather than irritation at the fact he still hasn’t acknowledged our past.

As much as I hate to admit it, perhaps I was invisible to him—a nobody.

It’s okay, probably for the best—no sense in letting what didn’t happen get in the way of our professional relationship.

“Unless you hear otherwise, you’ll need to be here fifteen minutes early every day. I enjoy black coffee, and my calendar opened to the tasks for the day.”

“Absolutely.”

Before adding another thing to the extensive list, his desk phone starts ringing. And ringing.

He stares at me with a cocked brow. “I don’t answer my phone unless you transfer it to me.”

Is he serious? “Okay.” I set my notepad down and reach over to pick up the receiver. “Mr. Cannon’s office.” The gentleman on the line talks at an inhuman speed as I scramble to figure out what he’s saying. “Your meeting at three o’clock?” I look at Tyler, typing away on his computer, completely ignoring my stretched-out body across his desk. “Let me check. Can I put you on hold for a moment?”

Finally, Tyler acknowledges my existence. “Is that Mr. Gundy?”

I nod. “He’s confirming your appointment this afternoon.”

“Yes, we’re still on schedule.” Tyler takes my notepad and scribbles something down on it. “Give him this address.”

I press the blinking light and relay the message.

After hanging up, I set his desk straight again. “Is there anything else?”

Tyler looks up and shakes his head. “I’ll message you if I need you.” He goes back to his task, effectively dismissing me.

Wonderful.

I grab my stuff and head back to my cube but stop at Holly’s first. “Hey, question for you.”

“Shoot,” she says, turning in her chair.

“What happened to Ty—er, Mr. Cannon’s previous assistant?”

Holly frowns, giving me the answer without needing to say it. “It was too much for her. Not to mention I think she fell for him and couldn’t take the rejection when he refused her.”

“Wait,” I say, moving closer so no one else can hear. “He didn’t sleep with her?”

She shakes her head. “He has a policy about dating within the office.”

I raise a brow. “A little hypocritical, considering his morning sex routine?”

“Sex isn’t dating, according to him.” Holly shrugs. “No one cares because it’s Chrissy. She’s after one thing—money. But she’ll be thoroughly disappointed when she realizes things won’t change. A booty call is sometimes only that.”

Huh, who knew a playboy had standards?

“Interesting. Anyway, I was just curious.” A ping sounds in my cube.

Holly flashes a knowing smirk. “And so it begins.”

I rush back to my desk and shake the mouse to wake up my computer. Sure enough, a pop-up message fills one of the screens.

**TC: I need you to schedule a meeting with the Blandin Corporation head next week.**

**MJ: Is there a specific date that would work best?**

**TC: You have my calendar.**

Right. I click on Tyler’s shared calendar and practically fall out of my seat. Holy shit, how am I supposed to schedule a time for a meeting when he’s booked solid?

I do a quick online search and find the number, praying I don’t sound as stupid as I think I do while stuttering through my request.

Fate decided to shine down as I managed to negotiate a small window of time that worked for both of us. After quickly entering it into the calendar and setting a reminder



with the color-coded system he has set up, I breathe a sigh of relief.

**MJ: Next Thursday at 1:00.**

**TC: Fine. I need three copies of the document I emailed you.**

I chew on my bottom lip as I download the file and send it to the large copier down the hall. He must want them immediately, so I stride into his office and place them on the corner of his desk.

Tyler pins the phone against his shoulder, intently staring as I step back.

“James, let me put you on hold for a moment.” He presses a button and swings his emerald eyes my way. “Are these double-sided and stapled?”

“Um, yes?” Ugh, I wish I had more confidence in my voice instead of sounding like a church mouse.

He pinches the bridge of his nose with a heavy sigh. “Do it over.” He starts back with his phone call without another word, leaving me to gather up the papers and try again.

Since he didn’t leave me any direction on fixing my apparent egregious mistake, I made the copies single-sided and used paper clips instead.

Nope. Still wrong.

After the third attempt, I keep the smile plastered on my face as I set them on his desk, hoping it’s satisfactory.

No comment or papers shoved back in my face, so they must be right. I take the win back to my desk and close my eyes for a quick meditation.

*Ping.*

I glance at the clock and cringe. It’s going to be a long day.



## CHAPTER *Three*

### *Maysen*

I clutch the coffee mug to my chest, trying to leach the warmth directly into my body. Day three of hell doesn't look much different than day two or day one. The four a.m. phone call was unnecessary, considering he could have texted the message rather than disrupted the pleasant dream I was having. One that didn't include this office or the tyrant who runs it.

Seriously, he needs a life.

Holly walks into the break area, looking refreshed and chipper. "Hey, girl. How's it going?" She rakes her gaze from head to toe with a smirk. "Never mind. I figured it out."

"What?" I place the mug on the counter and fidget with my hair and shirt. Are they both messed up? Did I miss a button on my blouse? Maybe my concealer failed, showing the dark circles and suitcases—not bags—under my eyes. Then again, only getting three hours of sleep will do that to a person.

She laughs, pushing me aside to access the coffee. “Let me guess, early morning phone call?”

I do my best not to look like a fish out of water but fail miserably. “How’d you know?”

Holly taps her head. “Previous knowledge.”

Of course. I’m not Tyler’s first assistant and probably won’t be the last.

“Right.” I pick up my mug and flinch as the liquid burns the spot behind my front teeth. Great. Now I’ll favor that area for the rest of the day.

Tyler walks by before I ask Holly about the others before me, only to slow down as he catches my eye. “Did you get those reports printed yet?”

Fuck me. “I’m working on it right now.”

He raises a perfectly arched brow. “Is it in your coffee?”

*Don’t be sarcastic. Don’t be sarcastic.* “No, sir.”

His nostrils flare in frustration. “I expect them on my desk within the next ten minutes.” He leaves Holly and me to stare at his retreating profile without another word.

“Well, then,” I say, giving Holly a knowing look. “I best get to it.”

She raises her mug in the air. “May the force be with you.”

Even Yoda and Obi-Wan wouldn’t have the patience for this man.

“No, no, no. Shit!” Now is not the time for a paper jam. Even with the on-screen instructions, I don’t know what in the hell the machine is talking about. Nothing’s stuck in the gears or any glaring reason not to function correctly. I’m about two seconds away from going full-on *Office Space* on this thing.

“Please, oh please, copier gods. Make this machine work.”

By some miracle, I find the tiniest scrap of paper caught between two drums, turning my hands black as I fish it out with my fingernail. Like magic, the machine does what it’s

supposed to, leaving me seconds to spare as I sprint to Tyler's office, trying not to smudge the fresh copies with my toner-covered fingers.

The moment I step through the door, Tyler quirks a brow, daring me to give some explanation as to why he doesn't have these yet.

I set them on the corner of his desk, keeping my hands visible. "There was an issue with the machine."

He doesn't notice the black marks on me, only those on the first and last pieces of paper. "Sloppy. Redo these immediately." Tossing them into my waiting hands, he dismisses me by returning to his computer, typing away as if I had interrupted him.

I won't show my emotions, even though all I want to do is scream right now. "Right away," I reply, turning sharply on my heel, tossing the soiled copies in the shredding pile before heading to a sink to wash my hands.

With the second set in my clutches, I wait for his approval as he goes through every page. "There are a few more files I sent you. Please have them prepped and ready for my meetings this afternoon. Try not to screw them up this time."

I plaster a fake smile, hoping to pass it off as believable rather than psychotic. "Of course."

I don't know what his game is; if he's trying to break me or push me to quit. All I know is I won't give him the satisfaction of either. That's what the bar is for after hours, drowning my misery in the largest glass of alcohol possible.

By two o'clock, I've set out the different folders on the conference room table, making sure there are at least two carafes of coffee and a selection of pastries I quickly picked up from the bakery down the street. Thank god Holly walked me through everything. Was she his assistant at one point? Or do all the executives operate the same way?

Tyler strides into the room, flanked by several businessmen and women, chit-chatting with idle small talk and

anecdotes. I stand off to the side with a friendly smile, proud at the pleased nods and murmurs with the setup before them.

“Cannon, your new assistant has outdone herself,” one of the older men says.

He swings his gaze over to me, showing no emotion. “We’re still in the training process, but things are looking up.”

They chuckle at his slight jab before taking their seats. God, he’s such an asshole. Heaven forbid I get a compliment or acknowledge I’m doing something right.

Grabbing my notepad, I sit next to Tyler, waiting for his signal. He never really explained what my role was during these meetings. I assume it’s to write down key points and highlights. Why else would you have an assistant with you?

I’m beyond thankful I learned shorthand in school since the woman presenting is trying to break the world record for the fastest speech ever. As fast as I’m writing, I’m surprised that the paper hasn’t caught on fire from friction. I catch Tyler stealing little glances from the corner of my eye. There’s even a moment where I thought I saw his lip curl up in the corner when I adjusted my legs, crossing one over the other and letting my skirt inadvertently ride up a little more. The minute I turned my head to confirm my suspicions, I was back to being invisible.

An hour later, the deal seems to be in the bag. They delivered a brilliant PowerPoint presentation with every figure we would need to form a joint venture.

“We’ll get back to you within a day. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,” Tyler says, ending the meeting. I stay behind to clean up the mess while everyone vacates the room. I wonder if making them sweat it out before signing on the dotted line is typical. From everything I’ve read, Madison Development Group is one of the city’s most coveted firms. To be aligned with us is like striking gold. Then again, I can see it from this side of the fence. You don’t want to get into bed with everyone who comes knocking. If their reputation is questionable, it will tarnish yours as well.

I head to my cube with everything back in order, stopping briefly to peek into Holly's. "Thanks again for your help."

She spins in her chair with a smile. "We assistants need to look out for each other. Besides, I couldn't let the shark eat you on your first week here."

I smile, but it's short-lived as the tiny hairs rise on the back of my neck.

"Yes, thank you, Holly." His deep voice sends a chill down my spine. Not menacingly, though. It's the same reaction I've had for years when he's around.

Holly doesn't miss a beat, coming to my defense. "It was all Maysen. I only offered a few suggestions."

Tyler nods, not giving anything away. "Ms. James, my office."

No please or pleasantries. At least he didn't say right now. I give Holly a mocking glance before following behind the sexy asshole, taking a seat while trying not to drool as he unbuttons his suit coat to sit. I wish I'd stop having this reaction.

"Macy."

"*Sen*," I say, barely hiding my irritation. Fuck, how hard is it to learn your assistant's name? Let's not even discuss the fact he's known me for years. I swear he's doing it now only to annoy me.

He smirks. "Right. Good job today for the meeting. You handled that extremely well for not knowing what you were doing."

I blink several times, unsure how to react. Do I take it as a back-handed compliment or at face value where he's trying to appear human?

"Thank you." The high road it is. "Is there any follow-up you need me to do? Type up the meeting notes?"

I try to control the hitch in my breath as he runs a hand over the slight stubble across his jawline. It's enough to look sexy and professional and not like a frat boy who hasn't

bothered to shave in days due to a bender. He returns his gaze to mine with a few taps of his mouse. “I’ve sent you the preliminary contract. Please fill in all the necessary information, double-check for errors, then send it back so I can review it before giving it to legal.”

Whoa, he’s giving me some direction rather than making me figure it out on my own? For a moment, I see the boy I knew all those years ago, who picked me up off the playground when we were seven after getting shoved by the school bully because I wouldn’t lift my dress for him. Fast forward a few years when he picked up my books after the same bully knocked them onto the floor in the middle of the hallway, leaving me practically in tears. Of course, things took a drastic turn once we got to junior high where his image and popularity took precedence over everything else. I became another face in the crowd.

“I’ll get right on it,” I say, shaking away the nostalgia clinging to my thoughts.

Tyler nods and scribbles something on a piece of paper. “Before you start, run and grab me a sandwich from the deli down the street. Make sure they don’t put mayo on it this time. I hate wasting food. Can you handle that?”

And just as quickly, the asshole is back.

“Yes, sir.”

“Ms. James?” His voice gives me pause at the door. “You didn’t have anything planned for the evening, did you?”

I shake my head. “Not really.”

The devil himself would be wary of Tyler’s smirk. “It’s imperative that those documents get finished tonight, no matter the time.”

Great. It looks like another night chained to my desk.

I nod and head back to my cube to grab my purse. At least I can get myself something to eat since Tyler wasn’t the only one to skip lunch.

“Ugh, finally.” I walk through the apartment door and toss my keys on the counter before flinging my heels across the room. Whoever invented those damn things should be shot. Even if a person sits all day, they still kill your feet. Jenna walks out of her room, adjusting her pink wig along the way. “Late one, huh?”

I don’t even bother grabbing a wineglass from the cabinet as I pull out the cork and take a hearty swig from the bottle. “My brain hurts.”

She laughs and takes a seat next to me on the couch. “Come on. It couldn’t have been that bad.”

I don’t care how unladylike it is to chug from the bottle. This is happening. Hopefully, the alcohol will go straight to my head, letting me forget the last few hours of my life that I’ll never get back. “Have you ever written, read, and proofed a fifty-page contract? There are so many details and legal jargon that I didn’t quite understand, forcing me to pull up other finalized contracts to make sure everything was on the level.”

Jenna grabs the bottle from my hands, taking a quick drink. “Didn’t you do all that shit before at your other jobs?”

I wince as I chug the wine too fast, giving me a brain freeze. “Probably the reason why I had so many failed business attempts.”

“Think of all the practice you’re getting. Soon you’ll have an assistant to torment one day with this crap.”

“Only I’ll be a much better boss than *him*.”

Her perfectly waxed brow arches in curiosity. “Oh? And what has Mr. Irresistible done now?”

“Besides not give me any instruction on how to assist him?” I won’t even mention that I had to run to three different delis this afternoon because his favorite one was closed, and the other didn’t have what he wanted. The only option left was ten blocks away, already putting me behind schedule. He didn’t even thank me as I put the bag on his desk. He just shooed me out like a fly annoying him.



I frown as the last drop of wine falls onto my tongue. I need more, but the thought of walking to the fridge sounds horrendous.

Jenna pats my leg. “You want to come and hang out with me tonight? Bet I can sneak you on stage. It’s amazing how clear your mind is when you’re naked in front of strangers.”

God, I love her. “Tempting, but I’ll pass. If things keep up this way, there’s a chance I’ll come work with you since this whole business thing is failing.”

I lean against her shoulder as she slings her arm across mine. “I’ll never let that happen. You’re too smart and too good for this. Besides, your itty bitty titties won’t get you anywhere.”

“Hey,” I say, smacking her leg. “They’re not that small.”

“They’re not big, either.” Jenna checks her watch before sitting me upright. “Sorry, sweets. Gotta go ride the pole.”

“Do me a favor?” She pauses at the edge of the living room. “Grab me another bottle of wine, please.”

I only pray the impending hangover stays away, since tomorrow will be another torture day.



# CHAPTER

## *Four*

### *Maysen*

*Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.*

“No, make the bad man stop,” I mutter into my pillow, tempted to throw my phone across the room to make it shut up.

It’s been eerily quiet on the work front over the last few days. Usually, I’d chalk it up to the weekend, but I’ve quickly discovered that Tyler doesn’t know its meaning. Over the last two weeks, I’ve found myself at the office during those coveted days off, doing things that absolutely could have waited until Monday but were *urgently* needed.

“I swear to God, Maysen. If you don’t shut that alarm off...” Jenna’s veiled threat moves me into action, promptly shutting off the alarm before tossing the blanket over the back of the couch. She’s been home for about two hours, making me feel horrible that I have to get up early. Once I get another month’s worth of paychecks, I should have enough to get an apartment, giving Jenna back her freedom and space.

The office is quiet and mostly dark; only the morning custodian roams the halls.

“Hey, Jerry,” I say, handing over the coffee I pick up every morning for him.

He tips his hat and smiles, showcasing the wrinkles decorating his face. “Morning, Maysen. You’re an angel.”

“I know.” We laugh as I head to my cube, taking a healthy swig of my coffee. Four espresso shots might be overkill, but I’m extra tired today. Not to mention I have this feeling gnawing at the pit of my stomach that something’s going to happen.

I check my emails, even though I’ve done it all weekend to make sure nothing popped up unexpectedly, and print off Tyler’s calendar for the week. A tip I picked up from Holly. Sure, his schedule fluctuates from minute to minute, but the red bolded items will never change, allowing more prep time before the priority meetings.

I put my AirPods in and hit play, allowing my brain to warm up. I barely notice the time before a tap comes on my shoulder, practically scaring me out of my skin.

Holly laughs as I take the earbuds out. “How much coffee have you had today?”

“Not enough,” I say, praying my heart rate slows down to normal. “What time is it?”

“A little after eight.”

“Oh, good. So I have some time.” She moves aside as I push my chair to the opening. Sure enough, Tyler’s closed door and drawn blinds indicate one thing.

Chrissy.

Holly smirks before patting my shoulder. “You better get some food in your stomach, or you’ll have an ulcer in no time.”

Right. Tossing the empty paper cup into the trash, I walk to the break room, glancing at Tyler’s door as I pass. Either he

soundproofed his office, or they have the quietest sex life in the history of the world.

Good thing there's always a fresh supply of muffins and donuts readily available as my stomach rumbles with anticipation. I grab two crullers and a carafe of coffee for Tyler, knowing he'll be expecting it the minute his door opens. I hum with delight as I bite into the flakey pastry, brushing away the pieces of crumbling glaze from my blouse. As packed as our day is, I can't afford to look like a slob.

With both hands full, I make my way back to my cube to set down my breakfast and verify in the mirror that I don't have any leftover food stuck in my lipstick. I step into the aisle but stop suddenly, drawing my brows together as I look at the still-closed door. Huh, they should have finished by now. Maybe Chrissy didn't show this morning but wanted to keep up the appearance?

Before I can knock, the door swings open with my fist in mid-air, ready to strike. I catch myself as Chrissy's smug face appears, smiling like the cat who ate the canary.

"Oh, sorry," she says, licking the corner of her mouth. "He was just finishing."

I stand stunned as she brushes past me with a wink, clearly proud of herself. An unknown ache forms in my chest, burning a trail straight to my stomach. Maybe all that coffee wasn't a good idea because I think it's given me heartburn. What other explanation could there be?

Ignoring the feeling, I step into Tyler's office, guilt set in his eyes as he adjusts his suit. Once again, women fall into his lap—literally—without him ever lifting a finger.

I swallow the bitterness and grab a new coffee mug from the bar area against the wall.

"Thanks, Maysen." Wow, he got my name right. And all it took was me almost catching him with his pants around his ankles.

What a pig.

“All your meetings are confirmed today, except for Klandstone. They rescheduled for Tuesday.”

It may have taken a couple of weeks to get the routine down, but now I’m a robot spitting out data every morning like I was on autopilot. I’ve learned what he wants to know versus what he wants to hear, especially on a Monday. My best guess is he needs time to gather his wits after getting it all sucked out of him.

The guilt still sits heavy in his eyes, but he quickly brushes it away, turning on the powerful professional the world sees. “Everything ready?”

I nod. “Folders have been organized and placed in the conference room.”

“Good. Let me know when everyone arrives. I won’t need you for this first meeting.”

Thank god I get a reprieve from the awkwardness of sitting in a meeting where I have no idea what’s going on. Sometimes I feel like a piece of eye candy for the older gentlemen. They’re more focused on what’s down my blouse than the papers in front of them.

Without another word, I leave him alone and sit in my chair, letting my head fall back against the headrest while closing my eyes. If only I could erase the image of those two from my memories, that’d be great. Better yet, get rid of the wandering thoughts of what they were doing.

It’s none of my business. I’m not a teenager feeding a childhood crush anymore. Being an adult means making adult choices. Tyler’s made his. And as his subordinate, I’ll turn a blind eye and pretend the tiny fissures in my heart aren’t there.



## *Tyler*

Fuck, that was embarrassing. After a few weeks of being here, you’d think Maysen would learn to stay away when my door is

closed. What I do in my office is my business.

I hate breaking in new people, especially ones who come highly recommended from HR and don't seem to know their ass from their head. Maybe that's a bit harsh. She quickly picked up the routine after working through most of the kinks and curveballs I threw at her the first week.

People call me a hardass—the office tyrant—yet they don't know why. Anything less than perfection isn't worth the time. Something dear ol' dad taught me at a young age. *Be the best in everything you do. Mistakes are for the weak. If you do everything right, things will fall into your lap.*

He wasn't wrong about the last part, though it's taken hard work every step of the way. In high school, it was easy. A snap of my fingers and chicks would be at my side, begging for whatever attention I thought they deserved. All the guys wanted to be me. College wasn't much different, only slightly higher stakes. Now I'm a senior partner, bringing in all the large clients to make us number one in our field—the gold standard.

Yet, I can't help falling back into my old ways even with all this success. Chrissy's weekly visits send the whole office ablaze with gossip. Not that I care. People will talk regardless of whether they know the truth. Everyone knows she'll do *anything* for some good dick. It's the only reason she's still around. According to Richard, she's a shit assistant, but the pussy is so good he can't get rid of her.

Borderline sexual harassment? Probably. Though she'll never complain to HR. She gets to keep her job, and the bosses stay satisfied. It's a win-win for everyone.

I groan and run a hand over my jaw. Shit. My tension was supposed to be gone. Now it's come back tenfold as I try not to walk on eggshells around Maysen.

I can't quite put my finger on it, but there's something different about her. Maybe because she's not actively trying to get into my pants like my last few assistants, although she has way more to offer than those girls. Why would someone with her knowledge and schooling take this position?

Perhaps she's not as bright as I thought.

*Focus.*

Right. I grab the file for my first meeting and prep. Based on everything I've read, I'm ready to sign the deal, but I won't yet. I need to make them sweat it out a little first.

"Did you catch the game this weekend?" Bill Halverson asks as we emerge from the conference room.

"Our pitcher isn't worth a shit. They need to think about trading his ass for someone better."

His round belly jiggles up and down as he laughs. "One day, we'll return to our former glory."

"Don't hold your breath," I say, hitting the elevator button for him. "Pleasure doing business with you, Bill. My assistant will be in touch soon."

Another multi-million dollar deal secured. I should thank Maysen for her preparation. She even included the finance charts into the packet without asking.

With my mood significantly lifted, I seek her out, hoping she's forgotten the events from the morning.

A laugh stops me dead in my tracks as I pass the kitchen area. "You're so bad," the female voice says.

What the...?

Like a creepy stalker, I stand at the doorway and see Maysen leaning against the counter with her body turned toward Ian Dunkirk, the entry-level executive down the hall. He was a mercy hire—not someone I would have picked—but since his uncle was a valued employee for many years, he was all but guaranteed a job.

"What? You're saying you never partied like that before?"

Her smile lights up her face. "Never. Don't get me wrong, I went to a few frat parties in college, but I was a good girl."

"I bet you are." As he runs his gaze from head to toe, his predatory stare sends my blood boiling while making my pressure rise with each stolen glance. What is that popping

sound? I glance down where the noise comes from, only to find my white knuckles tightly gripping the door handle.

This is stupid. Why do I care if Maysen flirts with Ian? Still, there's a nagging feeling picking at the bottom of my stomach. I'm not prone to jealousy or envy because that would mean you want something you can't have. And I get *everything* I want.

She rests a hand on his arm, and something snaps inside me. Enough is enough. I walk through the door, breaking up this tender moment. "Dunkirk. Did you secure the McMillen account yet?"

Ian turns to me, the smile slipping from his face when he takes in my irritation. "Almost."

I raise a challenging brow. "Perhaps social hour should wait until after you finish the job."

He nods and gives a parting smile to Maysen, who blushes in response. "I'll see you around."

The minute he's out the door, tension thickly fills the space, leaving us standing in place, unable to move.

"I wasn't aware you had finished your meeting," she says quietly, staring into her mug as if it was telling her what to say.

I huff a breath through my nose. "Flirt on your own time. Our next meeting is in a half-hour. This time you're joining me."

Maysen swings her shocked gaze to mine. But my eyes wander to her lower lip as she nervously drags it through her teeth. Something stirs to life in my pants, forcing me to step back.

"Get back to work."

I can't get away fast enough, leaving her standing in the room with her jaw dropped and probably her head spinning at my strange reaction. Fuck, I wish I had an answer myself.

Between her rosy cheeks and perfume swirling around us, my brain stuttered and misfired, unable to think straight. I need some distance between us. Then why on earth did I insist



that she join the next meeting? It's not like she needs to be there.

Sitting behind my desk, I pour another cup of coffee and almost debate slipping some whiskey in it from my secret stash. Why does Maysen get underneath my skin so quickly? Sure, she's beautiful in a very simplistic way—unlike the others before her, trying to channel their inner porn star or high school days with too much makeup and skin-tight clothes.

There's something familiar about her, but I can't figure out why for the life of me.

Okay, enough of this. I page through the folder, thankful to get my thoughts back on track and away from the woman sitting outside my office.



As much as I hate to admit it, Maysen knows what she's doing. Hell, she even had a few ideas in the last meeting that no one else on my team had thought to bring up. Maybe being overqualified is a good thing.

I knew today would be a marathon, which doesn't typically faze me, but I can't keep my thoughts straight for whatever reason. Keeping Maysen at my side is more of a distraction than anticipated. Every time she adjusts in her seat or tucks some hair behind her ears, I can't help but steal little glances. And don't think I've missed the smug look on her face when she catches me from the corner of her eye. Sometimes I think she's doing it on purpose to get a reaction from me.

I can finally have some downtime with our next meeting in an hour. Maysen knocks on my door, leaning on the jamb so only her head and shoulders poke through. "We're all set. Is there anything you need at the moment?"

My stomach decides to voice its opinion. "Yes, grab some lunch for us."

Us? Where in the fuck did that come from?

She's as taken aback by my comment as I am. "Oh, um, okay. What did you have in mind?"

Again with the chewing of her bottom lip. I turn to my computer and pretend to type an email. "Sushi, but from the good place, not the one down the street."

She nods her head before disappearing from the doorway. What is wrong with me?

The pretend email turned into a real one, drowning my thoughts in work. My stomach rumbles again as I glance at the clock. It's been a half-hour. Where in the fuck did she go?

I'm about to press her number when I hear her laugh filter down the hall, followed by a male voice. Again, the foreign feeling passes through me as they get closer. I keep my eyes focused on the task at hand as Maysen slides through the door, placing the plastic bag on my desk.

"You never specified what you'd like, so I ordered lobster rolls, spicy tuna, and a California roll."

How much does she think I will eat, especially before a big presentation for a prospective client? I take back everything I thought earlier.

"Are we ready to go at four?"

Maysen adjusts her stance, suddenly weary as she continues to stare at me. "Yes."

"Good." She doesn't move a muscle, drawing my attention away from the screen. "You can go now."

It almost looks like she wants to say something but changes her mind at the last minute, giving a slight nod. She leaves without a word as I dig through the bag to satisfy my stomach.

Now I feel like an ass. Maysen didn't order three separate meals. Instead, she opted for the sampler platter I usually get. She even splurged to get my favorite pork dumplings.

I approach her cube with the apology on my lips until I spy Ian leaning against her desk, drawing her smiles and laughter with ease.

“Fucker,” I growl before turning around, abandoning all thoughts and pleasantries to Maysen. My lousy mood continues to the meeting as she fidgets next to me, barely letting me concentrate on the details we need to lock down to make this deal happen.

Fortunately, my stoic demeanor and business reputation won out, though it took longer than usual. Most of the office has cleared out when we emerge from the conference room, leaving only the two of us in the quiet space.

“Is there anything else you need?” she asks, putting on the forced smile I’ve come to know. After seeing her interactions with Ian, I can now tell the difference between the two.

I glance at my watch. It is late, but seeing Maysen flirting with Ian all day plays on a loop in my head.

“Yes, I need all the reports typed up from today’s meetings and any contracts that need to be signed tomorrow.”

Maysen’s eyes widen. I don’t think she expected that answer when she tried to be polite before leaving. “I-uh, really?”

I cock a brow at her little show of defiance. “Did you have something more important to do? Maybe meeting a coworker somewhere?” Yeah, I overheard her conversation before our meeting as Ian asked her out for drinks.

Her face pales for a moment before regaining her composure. “N-no.”

“Good.” I smile in triumph. “Get started.”

For a moment, I almost feel bad. But this is part of the job; catering to my baseless, possibly needless, whims is why she gets paid what she does. I head back to my office to shut everything down for the night.

Before I lock my door, Maysen’s timid voice breaks the silence. “I’m so sorry about this. Can we do a raincheck? Yeah, I know. Tell me about it. That works for me. Thanks for understanding, Ian. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

I don't miss the slight waver in her voice or the sigh as she ends the call. My phone vibrates in my pocket as I read the message from my best friend on the lock screen.

**Brandon: Pete had another fight with Gwen and is on a bender. We need help.**

Great. Any thought of relaxing is gone for the night. Pete's messy love life is almost a second job at this point.

I quickly type my reply and head to the elevator, noticing that Maysen's desk light is the only thing illuminating the area.

As I said, I'm an asshole.



## CHAPTER *Five*

### *Tyler*

“Morning, Jerry.”

The older man tips his hat in greeting while buffing the floors to a brilliant shine. After a restless night’s sleep, I figured it’d be best to come straight to the office and start work early. No one will be here for another hour or so, leaving me alone to get a head start on my day.

I turn the corner and pause when I spy the little desk light still illuminated amid the darkness. Did Maysen forget to turn it off before leaving, wasting the company’s money and energy? In a few strides, I stop dead in my tracks in front of her cubicle, the scolding tirade ready to fall from my lips.

Only, they disappear into the air.

Maysen’s asleep with her head lying on her folded arms, still wearing the clothes from yesterday. A thin layer of papers covers the entirety of her desk, with a smattering of folders

and pens filling in the space. The computer monitors are in sleep mode from lack of use, just like her.

For the second time in just as many days, guilt seeps into my chest. I had hoped she would have enough sense to go home when tired or realize my ridiculous request. Perhaps even think I was still hazing her.

Even for me, this was taking it too far.

I step inside her space, setting my briefcase down before resting a hand on her tiny shoulder. A little zap shoots up my arm, drawing my brows together. There must be some static electricity in the air from the small heater still running beneath her desk, which will be a discussion for another day about the potential fire hazard.

She looks like an angel, even with her smudged makeup and hair falling around her peaceful face. I almost don't have the heart to wake her.

"Maysen," I whisper, shaking her shoulder.

No sign of life. Shit, did I kill her?

A low moan sneaks past her lips. Something so innocent yet coupled with her plump lips parting slightly, my thoughts turn wayward, imagining her in a completely different position making that same noise.

Fuck. Now is not the time or place to think of Maysen that way.

Or ever.

Employee.

Subordinate.

No relationship.

"Maysen," I say a little more forcefully.

She stirs again, blinking away the lingering sleep from her eyes. She straightens in her chair to her full height to stretch with slow, calculated movements, arching her back in the process. My gaze instantly drifts to her modest chest and the tiny sliver of skin peeking out from behind a gap in the buttons

—nothing showy, flashy, or fake from my observation. They almost appear to be a perfect size, enough for a handful without overflowing.

*Stop.*

“Huh?” Her sleep-laden voice isn’t helping matters in my pants. If I don’t get out of here quickly, a particular wardrobe malfunction will lead to a very awkward conversation.

“Did you stay here all night?” I’m not sure why I’m asking the obvious. It was the only thing that popped into my head, anything to drag my gaze away from her chest.

Maysen looks around the confined space, which seems smaller than usual with the two of us here and no one around. As if all the pieces fit together at once, she abruptly stands, sending her chair sailing backward, straight into my legs—her eyes wide as saucers and a look of sheer panic etched across her face.

“Shit! Fuck! Oh, my god, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what happened.”

I do my best not to chuckle at her dilemma, cute as it may be. “It’s okay, Maysen. Go home, get some rest, maybe a shower, and restart the day.” I check my watch. “Be back by eleven, if possible.”

All the color drains from her face, causing her to wobble slightly on her feet. Oh shit, she’s going to pass out. I grab her arms, steadying her until the moment passes and her glossy eyes return to normal.

“Whoa, that was rough. Guess I stood up too fast.”

I frown, knowing there’s another reason for it. “When did you eat last?” Her blank expression is all I need. “That’s it. Change of plans.”

I didn’t think it was possible for her face to pale even more. “What? No. I-I’m fine.” Not enough to convince me.

“You don’t have a choice.” With a firm grasp on Maysen’s arm, she barely has time to figure out what’s happening as I drag her into my office, forcing her onto the couch.

“Really. This is ridiculous,” Maysen says through a yawn, though her face tells a different tale, still giving that spaced-out, starry-eyed stare.

“This is not up for debate.”

Maysen’s eyes struggle to stay open as I put in an order from one of my favorite restaurants not far from here. The sooner I get something into her, the better she’ll feel. At least, I hope so.

She hasn’t said much—not that I would expect her to with everything considered. I’ve put her through the wringer the last few weeks, making everything harder than needed, testing her abilities and problem-solving capabilities. She passed with flying colors through it all, proving she was the right choice for the position.

“Would you like to lay down for a moment?” I take my seat behind the massive desk, keeping a watchful eye as she fidgets with the cushion, still perched on the edge of the couch.

“I’m fine, thank you.” I want her to look me in the eyes and let me know she’s okay. The overwhelming guilt still weighs heavy on my conscience, knowing I’m the reason she’s so out of sorts.

Thankfully, the wait for food wasn’t too long as my phone dinged with the notification. “Stay right here. Don’t move.”

Before she has the chance to object, I rush to the lobby to meet the delivery driver, leaving him a generous tip for the prompt and early service.

When I return to my office, Maysen has her head laid back on the couch, eyes closed, and her chest moves up and down with each soft breath. And just like that, my thoughts turn indecent again. What would it be like to feel their weight in my hands? To have her moan my name beneath me.

Fucking hell. Maybe I need to go home and get more sleep.

If reheated breakfast food didn’t taste like shit, I wouldn’t bother waking her up. But in her current condition, she needs



to eat.

“Maysen.” Her eyelids flutter open at my voice. “The food is here.”

She looks almost green, thickly swallowing while trying to get her bearings. “Oh, it smells delicious.”

The Coppertop Diner never disappoints. Everything’s made from scratch, putting that extra touch into their food.

I take out each box, propping them open on the small table in front of her while pouring two cups of coffee from the to-go container. Maysen’s fully alert now, practically salivating at the spread before her. Pancakes, scrambled eggs coated in cheese and bacon, French toast with powdered sugar and strawberries, a Denver omelet, hash browns and breakfast potatoes, assorted muffins, and several slices of whole-wheat toast.

“I wasn’t sure what you’d like, so I ordered several selections from the menu.”

For the first time all morning, she turns her eyes my way and smiles. The tiny golden rings surrounding her pupils that fade into a beautiful emerald green almost sparkle with delight as she grabs a little bit of everything, loading up her paper plate until there isn’t any more room. I chuckle, watching her pour some syrup from the small plastic container over everything.

“You’re going to be in a sugar coma later,” I say, grabbing some food while still there and taking a seat in the chair across from the couch.

Maysen hums in delight, hovering a hand over her mouth while she chews. “This is amazing. I can’t remember the last time I’ve had food this good.”

“Best kept secret in town,” I say, taking a sip of coffee. “I found this place years ago after a few drunken nights of partying in college.”

“Oh?” Maysen pushes some food around the plate. “You went to school around here?”

I nod. “U of M. What about you?”

She stiffens for a second but relaxes as she shoves a forkful of pancakes into her mouth. “Northwestern.”

“Wow, that’s a great school.” Part of me wishes I had seen her resume. These are the simple things a boss should maybe know about his staff. Or is it? Did I know much about my previous assistants? Did I ever take the time to get to know them?

The answer to that question is obvious. I wouldn’t have a revolving door of employees if I acted like a human being rather than a tyrant.

There’s no better time than the present to rectify the issue.

“What do you like to do for fun?”

Maysen stares at me for a heartbeat, then shovels more food into her dainty mouth, delaying her response. “Work.”

I laugh. “That’s not fun.”

She shrugs. “It is to me. I don’t get out much, to be honest. My roommate and I tend to wander to the bars to let off steam, but that’s about it.”

As a young professional, I can relate. “But there’s more to life than a career.”

“Says the man who calls me at four in the morning for something that could have waited until office hours.” Her perfectly plucked eyebrow raises in a challenge.

“Touché.” I suppose it’s a little like the pot calling the kettle black. “What else do you do?”

“Read. Watch TV and movies. Exercise.”

Taking advantage while she’s distracted by the food, I scan her from head to toe, appreciating her toned body and curves in all the right places. Call me a pig, but she has a body built for sin, and I’d like to drag her down to my level of hell for a night or two.

Before she has a chance to read my thoughts, I turn my focus to the window as the first few rays of sunlight peek

through the buildings. I double-check my watch to make sure my internal clock is accurate. Yep, the office will soon be filling up with people, and nothing runs faster around here than gossip.

But as I look at Maysen, her strong façade starts slipping, along with her eyelids. I can't send her home in this condition. Lord knows she'll probably get into an accident and injure herself or someone else. I don't need that weighing on my already leaded conscience.

I walk to the closet and grab a pillow and blanket I keep for emergencies, bringing them to her. "Here. Catch a quick nap on the couch before starting the day."

"No, I'm okay," she says through a yawn.

"This isn't up for debate. Do it, or consider yourself fired." We both know it's nothing more than a veiled threat and something I'd never follow through. I'd find myself in a courtroom for wrongful termination so fast my head would spin.

However, it does get my point across as Maysen hesitantly accepts them and puts together a makeshift bed without an argument. Within minutes of her head hitting the pillow, tiny snores tumble from her open mouth as exhaustion hits. How can something so dainty make such an offending noise?

I pause to stare at the sleeping beauty as I clean up our mess. Soft, pink lips and rosy cheeks to match, eyes rimmed with thick black lashes and crinkle in the corners with her smile. Or, in this case, whatever dream is floating around her head.

What is wrong with me? Why do these thoughts keep popping into my head? I turn my gaze away from Maysen and continue putting my office back together, thankful for the task at hand.

I'll give her a few hours of rest before throwing her back onto the floor. But she'll still be in the same clothes as yesterday, which poses a problem. People will notice and start the gossip mill, probably tarnishing her reputation. Something

I swore long ago to never do to innocent women associated with me.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” I mutter as I lean over the couch and stealthily attempt to find the tag on her clothes to get her size. Huh, precisely what I thought. Size six.

With a few clicks of the mouse, I find something suitable and modest for her to wear around the office. More importantly, something that shouldn’t attract the attention of any other guy. Namely Ian. Just thinking about his hands touching Maysen sends fire through my bloodstream.

Why should I care? She’s free to date whomever she chooses—except him. The man is shadier than a tree, putting down moves like he’s some walking Casanova. Based on the rumors, he’s banged half the front desk staff and at least three people in accounting. The man has no shame.

Not that I have a leg to stand on either. I keep my affairs private and away from the office—mostly. As the old saying goes, you don’t shit where you eat. Or put your dick there.

The minutes tick away, and soon enough, I can hear the fluttering of conversations filtering through the closed door. Maysen hasn’t budged in the two hours she’s been sleeping. I almost don’t have the heart to wake her, but she needs to prep for today’s meetings, and I’m not about to do it myself.

“Maysen,” I whisper, leaning over the couch. “You need to get up.”

She groans, almost sounding in pain. “Not yet, Zack.”

Zack? Who the fuck is Zack? More importantly, why does it bother me?

“Maysen,” I say firmer, putting more authority into my tone.

Bloodshot hazel eyes blink open before widening. For the second time in a few short hours, she freaks out and falls from the couch to the floor.

“Wha-what time is it?”

I take a few strides back to my desk and resume typing. “Our first meeting is in an hour.”

Picking herself up off the floor, she brushes away some lint from her now wrinkled clothes before trying to fix her hair. “Oh, okay. Let me run home quickly to change, and I’ll have everything set.”

“There’s no time,” I say, pointing to the box sitting on the table. “Use my executive bathroom to change. You should find everything you need: a new toothbrush and toothpaste, comb, and toiletries—anything else you’ll have to make do with what’s available.”

Maysen stands in the middle of the floor, unblinking. Did her brain stem detach while she slept?

“I, uh, o-okay. Thank you.” She cradles the box to her chest and disappears behind the door.

When I hear the audible click of the lock, I run a hand over my face, doing everything in my power to scrub the images racing through my mind on what’s happening behind that door.



## *Maysen*

How long was I out? I pull at my cheeks, examining my eyes, wishing I had the foresight to take my contacts out. There’s nothing worse than trying to peel them off without significant pain and dryness. I should consider keeping a spare set of glasses at my desk for emergencies. Good thing I at least have some contact solution available.

I open the box and gasp at the beautiful navy blue shift dress lying inside, complete with a cream-colored knit cardigan. It’s something I would have picked for myself, timeless and classy.

Maybe I should keep a change of clothes here too. Something tells me it won’t be the last time I end up sleeping at the office.

Hopefully, Tyler didn't feel obligated to do this, though the gesture is much appreciated. The last thing I need is to explain why I'm wearing the same outfit as yesterday, only a more wrinkled version. It shouldn't surprise me that the dress fits perfectly, accentuating my assets.

I open a drawer, finding a stack of toothbrushes still in their packaging and travel-sized toothpaste boxes. Did he steal them from a dentist's office or buy them in bulk from one of those warehouse stores? Either way, I'm thankful for the fresh breath, especially after our impromptu breakfast.

It was weird sitting down at a meal with Tyler, making small talk while pretending that I didn't already know information about him. I still can't believe he doesn't remember me. Every once in a while, I swear there's a flicker of recognition in his eyes. But it passes so quickly I can't be sure I saw it correctly.

Either way. We'll consider this a fresh start. I'm not the lovesick teen pining over *the most popular jock at school*. No, I'm Maysen James, personal assistant to a senior partner at Madison Development Group.

I open another drawer and pause, my hand hovering over the device. Why would Tyler need a hair straightener? I can only guess one thing. Next to the flat iron is a pack of makeup-removing wipes and a few other feminine products.

Huh. Chrissy must really need to freshen up after their morning meetings.

Shaking the thought from my head, I comb through the tangled mess with a brush I found and try to tame it into something presentable, thanks to the can of hairspray on the counter.

Even though I took most of the makeup off, I'm satisfied with my appearance and open the door to find Tyler typing away at his computer. How many things does a person need to type? Even in my position, I'm never writing that much.

"The usual items for the meeting?" I twist the clothes in my hands, needing to keep them busy.

Tyler glances up, his face expressionless. “Yes. I’ve sent several files to you that I’ll need ASAP. Also, make sure Mr. Johnson is seated at the table opposite me.”

Right. Business as usual. The friendly gesture this morning is completely forgotten. “I’ll get right on it. Thank you for the clothes, by the way.”

A small smile cracks his stone demeanor. “You’re welcome.” For a brief moment, he checks me out from head to toe, spending too much time on my exposed legs before making a point to check his watch. “Those files aren’t going to print themselves.”

Shit. Still clutching the items in my arms like a life raft, I make a beeline to the door, catching my heel on an invisible lump in the carpet as I scurry out, stumbling several steps. I try to grab on to something—only the action throws me even more off balance. Meanwhile, my wrinkled clothes lie in a pile on the floor, including the hot pink thong I took off because I’d rather go commando instead of wearing the same underwear twice.

Heat creeps up my neck as I stare at the scrap of lace, wishing it’d combust into thin air.

“Problems?” A familiar voice chuckles behind me. Will my mortification ever end?

Ian stands there with two cups of coffee, clearly enjoying my embarrassment.

“Many.” I quickly gather the garments, praying for a hole to open up and swallow me. “I’ve had a morning already.”

“Yes, she has,” Tyler says from the doorway, a smug grin spread wide across his face.

What in the actual fuck?

Ian looks between the two of us, drawing his brows together. Oh god, he’s going to think we slept together. There’s no way he could draw any other conclusion. Me, with my underwear in hand, and Tyler standing there with arrogance radiating off him.

What is his game?

“Mr. Cannon.” Ian shifts on his feet, still piecing things together.

“Dunkirk.” There’s something about the tone of his voice that issues a warning. Not menacingly. More authoritative. And damn, if it doesn’t send a shiver down my spine.

*No. Stop it. No panties.*

Right.

The last thing I need is another wardrobe malfunction.

Both men stare at my arms and the offending article dangling near my elbow.

Before clearing his throat, Tyler slowly draws his gaze upward, his pupils practically consuming the green irises. “I believe you have work to do, Ms. James.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

I can feel his eyes burn a hole into the back of my head as Ian follows me to my cubicle. This is not how I envisioned my day to go. Then again, I never planned on spending the night at the office, only to find myself asleep on my boss’s couch.

“So,” Ian starts, setting the paper cups on my desk. “You and Tyler?”

“What? No,” I say quickly. “Never. I-I fell asleep here last night, and he let me rest on his couch when he came in. Honestly, it’s not what it looks like.”

Did I have to go and use the ever-cliché line? Nothing makes a person sound more guilty than “it’s not what it looks like.”

Ian must think so, too, twisting his lips to the side with doubt. “Sure. And you happened to have a change of clothes with?”

I look down, feeling the heat crawl up my neck before settling on my cheeks. “It... I...”



He laughs and places a hand on my shoulder. "I'm only teasing you. We all know he's a tyrant with unrealistic demands. I'm sure he kept you so busy you lost track of time."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Yes, exactly." Thank god he gets it.

Ian leans in, close enough that his cologne fills the small space between us, clouding my already fuzzy, sleep-deprived head. "Hot pink, huh?"

At this rate, I don't think I'll ever stop blushing. "And?" I quirk a brow in challenge.

He laughs and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "It may be my new favorite color."

Something about the way he touches me feels off. I don't know why. Almost like he's trying too hard. Or maybe I'm expecting some spark or sign, which is crazy. We're coworkers. Getting into a relationship with someone here would be a disaster. It hardly ever works out, creating an awkward or hostile work environment.

But Ian is friendly and sweet, a stark contrast to the monster across the aisle, giving mixed signals while going from hot to cold in an instant.

My gaze drops to his lips, parted slightly to show off his perfectly straight white teeth.

"You do look lovely for spending the night here."

Should I mention the feminine products and tools Tyler let me use while in his executive bathroom? Or the fact he even carries them in the first place? It's still not my place to question or care, yet I can't stop wondering why.

Before I can reply, a voice rumbles over Ian's shoulder. "Ms. James, I'm not paying you to flirt. I want those reports *now*," Tyler thunders, not hiding his annoyance.

Ian and I jump apart, giving me enough time to watch Tyler's retreating form before hearing his office door slam.

I think I found the cure for my constant blush as all the blood drains from my face, leaving me practically light-

headed.

“Drink this,” he says, pushing the cup my way. “You’ll need the caffeine to keep up.” He gracefully stands and pauses before exiting my cube. “I hope Tyler isn’t too hard on you today.”

“Me too,” I say, nodding.

The minute Ian disappears around the corner, I reboot up my computer and find the files I need for this morning’s meeting. I scrunch my nose and follow Ian’s suggestion, wishing I had more of the coffee that Tyler served earlier instead of this burned, overly-roasted swill.

Glad I kept that tidbit of information to myself. If Ian found out Tyler bought me not only this dress but also a full spread of breakfast items, he would have left with a completely different expression.

I barely made it in time as the first people started showing up for our meeting, ensuring each folder was in its correct place, along with the breakfast pastries and carafes of coffee and tea. It took a little longer than I anticipated trying to peel my contacts off to refresh them. Not to mention the long line of people waiting at the copier, putting my items in the queue behind four others.

From there, nothing changed, not even for the better. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. I barely had time to eat, only managing to nibble on a protein bar I found hidden in the back of my desk drawer. Tyler’s constant running and demands left me little choice. I’d think he’s punishing me if I didn’t know better. But why? Nothing has been out of order. Each meeting was flawless, judging by the pleasant murmurs of the executives leaving. Sure, I didn’t get those initial reports precisely on time, but he still had enough leeway to read them beforehand.

On the outside, Tyler’s all business, never giving anything away. No smirk or smile. No wrinkles around his eyes or mouth. Just a concrete statue, leaving me guessing his next move. It’s probably why he’s rarely told no.

It's also what makes me the most nervous. I can never get a read on him.

By the time the final meeting is through, I find myself in the familiar situation of being the last person in the office. The coffee Ian brought me hours ago is now ice cold, tasting even worse than before, if that's even possible. I throw it away with a sigh, trying to convince my stomach not to eat itself.

Besides some food, I could use a hot shower and a solid twelve hours of sleep. Glancing at my watch and doing some quick math, I realize that eight is all I can hope to get. It's still more than usual.

I grab the clothes from my bottom drawer—verifying my underwear is still deep inside the pants leg where it won't make a rude appearance—and start making my way to the parking garage. It's a good thing it belongs to the company. I can't imagine what the bill would have been since my car hasn't moved in over twenty-four hours.

My phone chimes in my purse before starting the ignition, instantly pulling my hopeful smile down.

**Jenna: Fair warning, you may want to wait a few hours before coming home. I'll be preoccupied for a while. Hopefully twice.**

Great. Now I can't even go home to relax. Is there anything else that can happen?

**Me: Please don't have sex on the couch.**

A.k.a.—my bed.

**Jenna: No promises.**

A shudder rocks my body as I pray she stays in her bedroom and doesn't spread any DNA across the apartment. I'd like not to have nightmares while I'm still there for the next month.

Okay, change of plans. I abandon my car—again—and head a few blocks down the street to go bug Jaryd at the Cask & Barrel.

After everything else, why not add a little whiskey to it.  
What could go wrong?



# CHAPTER

## *Six*

### *Tyler*

I loosen my tie and lean back in my chair, spinning to watch the sun disappear along the horizon as the downtown lights begin to illuminate the streets below. The bottle of scotch calls to me in my bottom desk drawer as I pour a generous amount into a crystal glass.

Even though it was a successful day business-wise, it was utter shit. Ian's constant presence and hovering rubbed me the wrong way.

"Fuck," I mutter into the amber liquid, downing it quickly to relish in the burn.

I hated how he stared at those pink lace panties lying haphazardly on the floor. What was she thinking? The minute I realized what they were, I had to try like hell to hide the growing bulge behind my pants, knowing she had nothing on under the clothes I bought for her. Then she continued to flirt with him after I spent all that time and energy making her comfortable this morning. Not that I'm jealous. Hardly. But

would it be too much to ask not to throw yourself at the office playboy the minute you have gifts showered upon you?

The obnoxious ringtone for my best friend breaks the silence and, thankfully, my thoughts. “Brandon, what’s up?”

“Are you coming or what?” I can barely hear him over the background noise.

Fuck, I forgot it’s Pete’s birthday. I groan and run a hand over my face, wishing I hadn’t promised to help celebrate. “Yeah, give me a few minutes.”

He ends the call with a laugh. Asshole. I pour another glass and quickly empty the contents with a flick of the wrist.

“Let’s get this over with,” I mutter under my breath as I shut everything down and walk out the door.

As soon as I walk into the Cask & Barrel, every ounce of stress lifts from my shoulders as I find my friends hanging out in their usual spot. It’s busier than normal tonight as I dodge the crowd and avoid the grabby hands of a few intoxicated females.

“The workaholic left the office,” Brandon jokes while slapping my back.

“Comedians. All of you.” Being my oldest friends, they’ve earned the right to harass me, knowing how fucked up my head is, thanks to my dad. The long hours, the one-night stands, and never dating anyone long-term are par for the course. I turn to Pete, who already looks three sheets to the wind. “Happy birthday, fucker.”

“Thanks, asshole.” He gives a lopsided grin, confirming my suspicions. Tonight should get interesting.

Matt flags down a waitress to order another round. Luckily, I had a drink waiting for me before I sat down. “How’s the new assistant? Is she hot?”

I damn near choke on the whiskey as the three of them stare at me. “Uh, I hadn’t noticed.”

“Bullshit,” Brandon says. “That’s why you almost spit out your drink?”

Matt raises a brow. “She’s been there for a few weeks, and you haven’t spilled the goods yet. Come on, give it up.”

“When did you turn into a gossip queen?” How did I know our conversation would take this direction? “She’s my employee. There’s nothing to discuss. You know my policy.”

“Yeah, yeah. But is she hot?” Pete’s glassy eyes spark with amusement.

They’re not going to give up until I tell them something. I clear my throat and quickly drain my glass. “Very.”

“Maybe you can introduce her to me.”

Something bitter fills my mouth while the thought bounces around my head. “No.”

Pete tilts his head to the side. “Why not?”

“Not a chance. You’re not allowed to date any of my employees.”

Brandon laughs. “That might be the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. Come on, tell us about her.”

Why the fuck do they care? “She’s our age. Tall. Brown hair.” Has the most beautiful smile and smells fantastic, though I won’t say it out loud. Hell, I’m not even sure where the thought came from.

“Anything else?” Matt asks.

I shake my head. “Nope. That’s it.” I need to change the subject quickly. “How’s the baby?”

And just like that, all thoughts of Maysen disappear as Matt drones on and on about his son. Frankly, I’m surprised Stephanie let him out of the house. Then again, she knows how close the four of us are and would never gripe about our night’s out. Not to mention Matt returns the favor, taking over the nightly duties when Steph goes out with her girlfriends once a month. If I ever find a woman, I hope she’s like her.

“It seems our waitress has disappeared,” I mutter, staring at the ice ball clinking around the empty glass. “Anyone else?”

Not that I needed to ask. I make my way up to the bar, finding an open area in the middle. Jaryd, the owner, is running around like crazy trying to keep up with the demand. He's a good guy, though I have limited interactions with him. But he runs a nice place, keeps it clean, and the clientele happy.

"The same thing?" he asks, somehow knowing what we've been ordering.

"You bet."

An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach as I look around—nothing out of the ordinary—same men in business suits and the few women tagging along.

I grab the drinks and turn toward the table when something catches my attention. "So, how was Mr. Irresistible today?"

Almost like icy cold water has replaced my blood, I freeze and turn to see who Jaryd is talking to. What are the odds someone else has that stupid nickname? My heart drops to my feet as a brunette picks her head up off the bar top.

"I'm so tired," she says, punctuating each word with all the effort she can muster. "I haven't seen my apartment since yesterday morning, and there's a high probability I'll never get my contacts off my eyeballs again."

Jaryd laughs and slides another glass in front of her. "I think you're exaggerating."

Maysen sits upright, taking a sip from the fresh drink while pointing at herself. "Look at my face. Does this look like someone who's put together and slept in a bed rather than her desk?"

He laughs and brushes some hair away from her forehead. I don't know why I focus on that slight movement, but it bugs me.

Some guy slides in next to her, flashing a toothy grin. "Is this seat taken?"

She blinks up at him, giving a doe-eyed look with a smile. "Not at all."



I quickly turn on my heels, trying to eliminate the jealousy threatening to taint my thoughts. What the fuck is going on with me? Why do I care if some guy is hitting on her?

Maybe it's because she's wearing the clothes *I* bought, using them to her advantage since they accentuate all her assets. Then there's the fact that she is probably still not wearing the pink lacy thong she dropped on the floor this morning from my office. That little undergarment has occupied more of my thoughts today than I want to admit.

Brandon tilts his head, staring at my sudden change in demeanor once I get back to the table. "What's up?"

Ignoring his question, I drain the glass as fast as I can. "Nothing."

"Bullshit. Something is eating at you." Matt swivels in his chair, now intrigued as well. Pete stares, barely blinking.

"I heard my stupid nickname at the bar, and it threw me for a loop."

"Ego much? And what makes you think it was about you?" Brandon tries to peer over the crowd, paying close attention to Maysen as she sits with her back to us. "Was it that girl?"

I nod, wishing I had grabbed two drinks for myself. "My new assistant."

Shit, why did I say that? Three sets of eyes swing my way—some faster than others—all sporting shit-eating grins.

"I've got this."

Brandon approaches Maysen, flashing his lawyer smile—one that would make anyone give up the goods, whether they wanted to or not.

Nothing prepares me for the scene unfolding before our eyes.

The asshole wraps his arms around her, and the two animatedly talk to one another, acting like long-lost friends rather than strangers.

What the hell?

After five minutes, he shakes his head while still wearing the grin. “Why didn’t you say Maysen was your new assistant?”

Now I’m thoroughly confused. “How do you know Maysen?”

All three men—including those who don’t know what day it is anymore—drop their jaws to the floor. “Are you serious? How do you not remember her?” Matt asks.

Remember her? My eye twitches in frustration. “Someone care to fill me in?”

Even in his inebriated state, Pete rests a hand on my shoulder. “We went to school with her.”

No. I would have remembered someone like Maysen.

Brandon leans across the table. “Imagine her with glasses, about twenty more pounds, braces, and longer hair.”

“You just described half the girls from our class.”

He rolls his eyes, not bothering to hide his annoyance. “Okay, fine. How many of them were cheerleaders? Sang in the choir? Went to the same parties we did? Does that help narrow it down for you?”

A flash of a face stands out as I go through the Rolodex of people from high school. It’s faint but there, in the back recesses of my mind. I never really knew her name but noticed we were together often. Her soft smile and nerdy tendencies first drew my attention. Whenever I wanted to talk to her, something or someone got in the way. My football teammates told me not to waste my time, along with the girls continually clinging to my arms.

But my eye always caught hers. Maysen had a simple beauty, unlike the other females in school. It was almost effortless. Everything skidded to a halt when I found out how innocent she was. I pushed those feelings away, doing everything I could to keep us at a distance. My reputation would have tarnished her, branded her as another notch on my bedpost. Even back then, I knew she deserved better than that.

Now I can't unsee the resemblance, picturing her with those wire-rimmed glasses highlighting her beautiful eyes and face.

The nagging feeling finally makes sense. It took everything I had back then to push Maysen out of my head. It looks like I did the job too well.

Only nothing has changed, including my reputation. I'm still Mr. Irresistible, the manwhore who leaves a trail of broken hearts behind him. Or that's what everyone says, not knowing the truth. Yes, I like sex and women, but those who make it to my bed are not as many as people think.

None of this changes anything. Nothing is going to happen between us.

I'll make sure of it.

Brandon leans over after flagging down a waitress. "You seriously didn't recognize her?"

"Why would I? High school was years ago. And it's not like she was actively hanging around us. We happened to be in the same places at the same time."

He frowns. "That's a bit oversimplifying. Not to mention you were the captain of the football team. She was a cheerleader."

"I was also captain of the hockey and baseball teams. So what?"

Clearly, I do not understand his point, judging by his harsh sigh. "Forget it."

Good. Because I don't want to talk about Maysen anymore. Instead, I throw the focus back on Pete and his messed up love life. "How's Gwen? Has she stopped asking you to impregnate her yet?" After Matt and Steph had their little one, baby fever hit the wives hard. Thank god I never have to worry about that.

Pete's face pales. "No. She keeps jumping me at all hours of the night."

“And what’s the problem there?” Matt asks, tipping back his glass.

“At some point, my dick will need a rest.”

I slap his back a little too hard, forcing him to jerk forward. “Won’t have to worry about that tonight. Whiskey dick has taken hold of you. It could be days before you can perform with the amount you’ve ingested.”

We laugh, but so does someone else, subtly drawing my attention back to the person I’m trying like hell to ignore.

I’ve spent years of my life ignoring her. How will I do that with her working so close to me?



## *Maysen*

The drinks are going down way too fast. At this rate, I’ll need to Uber it home again. My poor car is going to think I abandoned it. At least this time, I’ll have a change of clothes and some semblance of a bed.

It’s not helping that I’m getting hit on every few minutes when all I want to do is disappear into the crowd. With everything that’s happened over the last twenty-four hours, I need a little peace and maybe some alcohol to numb my brain.

“Is it okay if I stand here?”

Seriously? I roll my eyes before draining the last of the whiskey from my glass. “It’s a free country.”

His carefree laugh gives me pause. There’s something familiar about his voice. I turn my head to find the source, only to be just as surprised as him.

“Brandon? Oh my gosh, it’s been years!” I throw my arms around him, hugging him tightly. He returns the gesture and leans against the bar.

“Maysen, what in God’s name are you doing here? I thought you left the state to go to college?”

“I did for a while. Like everyone else, you always gravitate back. What about you? How have you been?”

He looks almost like the boy I knew in school, only with a few lines around his eyes and better grooming. It appears he finally figured out what hair products were rather than living in his ratty baseball caps twenty-four hours a day.

“Good. Busy, of course. So goes the life of a lawyer.”

I flag Jaryd down and order another drink for both of us. “A lawyer, huh? You always did like arguing with people. Kicked my ass several times in debate class.”

He shrugs, flashing a warm smile. “What can I say? It was a calling. How about you? Did you become a professional singer or an NFL cheerleader?”

I shove his shoulder. “You’re funny. Those were things to pass the time. I went into business management and found a job nearby.”

“Oh, really? Where at?”

“Madison Development.”

Brandon stills for a moment, keeping his glass suspended in the air. “Huh. What do you do there?”

Shit. I was hoping he wouldn’t ask that. It’s a bit embarrassing to admit you’re only a personal assistant after spending over a hundred thousand dollars on a professional degree that I can’t even use to its full advantage.

“Well, I’m starting at the bottom to get my foot in the door.” Brandon waits for me to elaborate. On a sigh, I continue. “I’m a personal assistant to one of the senior executives.”

Something passes across his face, too quick for me to decipher it. “Which one?”

I take a deep breath and swallow hard. “Tyler’s,” I say as quickly as I can.

A slow smirk takes over his handsome face. “Really?”

I nod.

“No shit. We’re all right over there celebrating. Do you remember Pete Crestley? It’s his birthday.”

I nod and glance over to the table he’s pointing at. Sure enough, I see the birthday boy sitting somewhat unsteady on the stool next to Matt Peterson, who’s doing his best to keep Pete from hitting the floor. Tyler stares into his drink, sporting an impressive scowl as he occasionally flicks his gaze our way. What is up his ass?

“Well, you’ll have to tell him happy birthday for me.” I try to keep myself calm and collected, not letting the man sitting at the table affect me.

Thankfully, Brandon must sense my discomfort and drains the glass, sliding it across the bar. “Well, I better get back. It was great catching up. Maybe we’ll see each other again soon.”

“Maybe.” We smile as he returns to his friends, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I wanted to come here to clear my head, not cloud it with trying to figure out Tyler’s moods. He swings hot to cold faster than anyone I know. Ever since the panty incident this morning, he’s had a bug up his butt, and I can’t figure out why.

Ugh, why did I have to remind myself about those? I rest my head on my folded arms again with a groan. Today has not been my day.

“Fancy meeting you here.”

I pick my head up and see Ian’s smiling face as he sits beside me.

“Where else do you go to forget about the day’s events?”

He flags down Jaryd and orders a round for us. “It wasn’t that bad.”

I tilt my head to the side. “Did you drop your underwear on the floor for everyone to see?”

Ian's cheeks pink up slightly before letting out a little chuckle. "True. But to be fair, I like to keep mine out of sight." He leans in closer. "At least when I'm wearing them."

This time, it's my turn to blush. "Right. Well, anyway, how about a change in the subject?"

Taking mercy on me, we fall into a comfortable conversation, comparing notes on our favorite drinks here while discussing a few of the clients we're meeting with next week.

Before I know it, my phone illuminates with a message from Jenna, letting me know it's safe to return home. Hopefully, it's been sanitized and won't look like a crime scene if I shine a blue light on it.

"Let me give you a ride home." Ian grabs his wallet to settle up his tab, taking the slip out of my hand as well.

"No, you can't. I've been here for hours."

He slaps a hundred-dollar bill on the counter, waving off Jaryd before he can ask if he needs change. "I insist."

It would be nice to get a ride home from someone I know rather than have to make uncomfortable conversations with a stranger.

"Thank you for the drinks and the ride," I say, slinging my purse over my shoulder.

A spark flashes in his eyes as he looks over my shoulder. "My pleasure."

After waving goodbye to Jaryd, I let Ian escort me out the door with his hand on the small of my back, ignoring a certain someone's burning stare as we head out into the night.



# CHAPTER

## *Seven*

### *Maysen*

Trying to avoid the boss when you're his assistant takes talent. One I'm trying to master at the very moment. Every time I hear his office door, I dash out of my cubicle and find a hiding spot: the kitchen area, the copy room, the front lobby. Hell, I even hid in the stairwell for five minutes, walking up and down several flights to kill some time.

There's no way he doesn't know by now. Brandon must have told him the other night at the bar. Conveniently, Tyler had wall-to-wall meetings yesterday, keeping him busy and out of sight. Our only communication was through emails or instant messages. Very short and to the point—leaving little room for anything else. Probably for the best.

I was hoping he wouldn't remember; giving us a clean slate. This awkwardness was precisely the thing I was trying to avoid. Even though I can't confirm he remembers, I know it. Deep down in my gut, I know.



Unfortunately, my reprieve ended as Tyler demanded my presence for our afternoon meeting in a concise and direct instant message.

**TC: You will be at the meeting.**

The minute it popped up, my whole body went cold. I'm not one to back down, but I also know not to throw myself into the lion's den. Sure, I was friends with the popular crowd—thanks to cheerleading—but it didn't mean I was untouchable. A few jocks still poked fun at my braces, glasses, books, and love of everything *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*. I didn't drink at parties and didn't sleep around. Or at all, putting me into the unique group of virginal, non-alcoholic outcasts.

It never bothered me because I had my friends who accepted me as I was. Popularity was not something I wanted. I only wanted to be liked.

Mainly by the man I'm currently avoiding.

But just like college, I need to break out of my shell and put my big girl pants on to face the world. Hopefully, Tyler won't make it too embarrassing.

The copier spits out sheet after sheet as I prep for the meeting, printing ten copies of the latest proposal. Our first meeting with these clients didn't go as well as anticipated. I thought a signed contract was in the bag, but Mr. Williamson wanted more time to consider it. He's a cranky old codger stuck in the past, though I saw a few cracks in his stubborn demeanor as his gaze kept wandering to my low-cut neckline during the meeting. Perhaps the short skirt and chest-accentuating shirt wasn't the best choice this morning.

Too late now.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

“No, no, no. Stupid piece of junk.” I swear this copier has it out for me. At least once a week, the damn thing jams at the worst possible moment. Either I need to learn to get my shit together sooner or live with disappointment. I glance at my watch and cringe before dropping to my knees to inspect the supposed issue.

“Problems?” Ian chuckles behind me.

I look over my shoulder at his amused expression with my ass stuck in the air, not missing his eyes trailing over my curves. *Please let my skirt be long enough to cover everything. The last thing I need is another wardrobe malfunction.*

“I’m about to lose my shit. It says there’s a jam, but I don’t see anything.”

His footsteps get closer before I feel him lean over me, resting his hands on my hips in a compromising position. “Let’s see, shall we?”

He pokes around with one hand still on my hip, checking everything I just did. The feminist part of me wants to scream that I’ve already done that, but the polite person in me stays quiet and lets him believe he’s helping.

“Hmm, I think you’re right,” he finally says, bending down more until I can practically feel his breath at my ear. “Maybe there’s something you’re just not seeing.”

A shiver runs up my spine, and not in a good way. Our flirting has always been casual and friendly. Ian’s forwardness throws me off, leaving a sour taste in my mouth.

Finally, I spy the tiniest piece of white paper jutting from one of the gears. With a flick of my nail, it flies out and flutters to the floor. “There. Fixed it.”

I try to stand up, but Ian keeps his hands on my hips, blocking my movements. He crowds my space until all I can do is brace my hands against the copier.

A throat clears behind us, forcing me to jerk backward, straight into Ian’s crotch. He buckles over with a cough, probably regretting his decision to leave little wiggle room between us. Can’t say I’m too upset about it.

Neither is the owner of the distraction. “Care to explain what’s going on here?”

Mindful to keep my toner-covered hands off my clothes, I pull myself upright and stare into Tyler’s narrowed eyes.

“Copier issue,” I say, hoping it’ll be enough because I’m not sure I can explain what Ian was doing.

Neither Tyler nor Ian say a word as they have a silent showdown. What in the fuck is happening between these two?

“That’s not what it appears to me.”

Finally, Ian steps up. “Are you implying something else?” Not sure that’s helping the situation.

Tension fills the air until the last page spits out from the death machine. I grab a paper towel from the stash I keep here to clean my hands before removing the documents.

“Everything will be ready before the meeting.” I flash Ian a weak smile before skirting out of the room, clutching the papers to my chest. Whatever is going on between those two, I don’t want any part of it.



This is a disaster.

Mr. Williamson looks about as interested as last time, even though we’ve put together the best package possible. The other team members nod their heads in agreement every time Tyler points out their weaknesses while highlighting what a merger with us will do for his company. The only sign of life on his face is when his wandering eye focuses on my chest.

Fantastic. Misogyny at its finest.

“Look, kid. I hear what you’re saying,” Mr. Williamson starts. “But I’m not sure you’re getting it.”

Tyler keeps his face indifferent, even though his annoyance radiates off him in waves. Calling him “kid” probably wasn’t the best idea. “If you look through the paperwork, I’m sure you’ll see—”

Mr. Williamson holds up his hand, cutting him off. “I can look at your charts all day, and they won’t tell me anything different.”

Shit, we’re losing this deal. I look at the other two executives from our team, shuffling things around with

worried expressions. Gaining this company would be huge.

I bite my bottom lip, summoning up the courage to speak. More importantly, psyching myself to do what I swore I'd never do to gain business.

Tyler starts to open his mouth, but I beat him to the punch. "Mr. Williamson, if I may." Before I can back down, I walk over to the screen projecting the five-year finance model, putting an extra shimmy in my step. "I think you should reconsider your stance. As you can see, the forecasted profit margins outweigh the risk, giving us both a higher bottom line. To me, this is a no-brainer."

The older man's eyes light up as he rakes his gaze up and down my body, focusing on my exposed legs before settling on my chest again. I clasp my hands in front to seal the deal, pushing my breasts forward.

It's disgusting, and I hate myself for doing it, but there's no other way to get through to this man. Sex appeal and distraction are the only things that'll work. And unfortunately, that leaves it up to me since Tyler doesn't have the right equipment, and I know this deal better than anyone else.

The long, pregnant pause before a quick nod of his head calms the butterflies in my stomach. "You've got yourself a deal, sweetheart."

I sigh with relief and retake my chair, unable to wipe the satisfied grin from my face. If only Tyler shared in my joy. I didn't think his scowl could get any deeper, yet I'm proven wrong as he glares at me from the corner of his eye.

Once all the papers have been signed and notarized, we walk to the elevators, making idle chatter along the way. Mr. Williamson stays close to my side, brushing against me or randomly placing his hand on my lower back.

"I'm looking forward to seeing more of you," he says, a filthy smirk playing across his lips.

I back away and force a smile. "Can't wait."

The minute the elevator doors close, I sag against the wall. I feel dirty and hate myself just a little.

Tyler must feel the same way; his eyebrow twitches with irritation. “My office. Now.” He wraps his hand around my arm, guiding me down the hall without causing a scene. Before reaching his office, a few people poke their heads out from their cubes, including Holly. The door slams behind us, rattling the walls from the sheer force.

He’s like a caged animal, pacing back and forth while pulling at his tie to loosen it from around his neck. “What in the fuck was that?”

I blink, trying to register what his problem is. “What was what?”

“That, back there.” Tyler points a finger in the direction of the conference room. “What on earth did you think you were doing?”

“Saving your ass,” I say, finding the strength behind my words. “You were floundering in there. We almost lost the deal. If I hadn’t stepped in, it would have been gone.”

“So that’s how you close the deal? Offering yourself up to the highest bidder? That’s not how we do business around here.”

He may as well have slapped me as I stagger back. “Did you just call me a whore?”

Tyler crosses his arms over his chest. “If the red lipstick fits.”

My palm stings as it connects with his cheek, the skin pinking up instantly. “Don’t you *ever* say that to me again. I did what I had to do for the good of the company. You think I enjoyed playing to his sick, sadistic ways? That man is the epitome of misogynistic pigs, and no amount of rational reasoning would convince him this was a good deal.”

“Really.” He leans against the edge of his desk, gripping it so tight his knuckles turn white. “This seems to be a theme with you.”

“I’m sorry?” What in the hell is he talking about?

Tyler leans forward ever so slightly. “You on your hands and knees with Ian directly behind you.”

No. He can’t think—

Yet the devilish grin is all I need.

“There was an issue with the copier.”

“Right. Or were you reliving the events from when Ian took you home the other night?”

The nerve! “Even if he did, it’s none of your business. My private life is just that. Private.”

Red creeps up his neck, showcasing the pulsing vein on the side, throbbing with each heartbeat. “Inter-office relationships are prohibited.”

A bitter laugh erupts from my throat, hardly sounding like myself. “Oh, that’s rich coming from you.”

Tyler tilts his head. “I’m not carrying on any relationship.”

Is he going to stand there and deny it? “Right. Because your weekly ‘meetings’ with Chrissy are completely on the up and up?”

His scowl deepens. “That’s not a relationship.”

“So you can have sex on company grounds, yet I get painted as the whore for doing what was needed to land an account.”

Slowly, Tyler releases his death grip on the desk and takes a few steps my way. I was half expecting to find fingerprint indents in the expensive wood as I tried not to meet his angry green eyes.

“I wouldn’t expect a woman of such naivete to understand, though apparently, looks can be deceiving. You want to portray an innocent, sweet girl, yet deep down, you’re no different than the rest of them.” He takes a step closer, his breath a whisper against my cheek. “Oh, how things have changed. Perhaps I should have given you the time of day back then because clearly, I was mistaken.”

All the air gets sucked from my lungs. Tyler's words strike like a knife, cutting and slashing away at my soul. But I won't give him the satisfaction of thinking he's won. After years of trying to grab his attention, I sure as hell don't need it now. "I guess you were."

With that, I fling the door open, turning a few heads as I stomp down the hall. Whispers and stares follow me as I go to the bathroom, but I ignore them all, including Ian, as he tries to stop my progression. I need to get away, desperately seeking a quiet space to let my anger fester and breed.

Mr. Irresistible is officially dead in my books.



## *Tyler*

Why does she push all my buttons? I had every intention of making things right between us since I didn't see her at all yesterday. It still doesn't make sense why she would hide the fact we knew each other for years, letting me make an ass of myself every day.

Then it all went to hell the minute I saw Ian straddling her this morning in the copy room. The smirk he flashed was the same one from the bar as he escorted her out the door. Red tinted my vision then, and it didn't change this morning either. That fucker dares to put his hands on her? Not that I care, only why do I?

I know what Ian is and recognize the same arrogance and cockiness he exudes. And I wish I didn't see so much of myself in him, know what he's capable of or the hidden lies behind his agendas. When he looks at Maysen, there's no innocent attraction. She's nothing more than a conquest. And once he gets his grips on her, she won't be the same, trying to pick up the pieces he'll inevitably leave behind.

I've seen it happen, done it to countless others with little to no remorse.

I tried protecting her back then, keeping her away from me. Now, all these years later, I'm still trying to protect her, only from Ian.

And it's not because I want her for myself.

Adding insult to injury, her little display in the boardroom threw everything I wanted straight out the window. I knew all about Williamson's proclivities, knew his old-school way of thinking—that women should be seen and not heard, their place belongs in the kitchen and not in business, blah blah blah. Yet, my need to get Maysen away from Ian outweighed the risk. Only I subjected her to a different form of predator. And what does she do? Play right into his hand, giving him *exactly* what he wanted.

I would rather lose the deal than watch her offer herself to his sick fantasies.

When he touched her by the elevators, everything went dark. My vision. My hearing. I didn't even know what I was doing until my office door slammed behind us, and she stood in front of me, chin up and ready to fight.

And fuck if it didn't turn me on.

It wasn't my intention to cut her down, but between Ian and Williamson, I lost it. The words spewed faster than my brain could compute. I hadn't even realized what I said until she stormed out, leaving me in the quiet to contemplate my actions, staring at the door she exited.

I pull out the bottle of scotch and pour a generous amount into the glass, tipping it back as fast as possible.

I didn't want to be the asshole, but some things will never change.

She should think of me that way.

Relationships get in the way of business. And I need to push her out of my mind and start looking at her as my assistant, not the girl I secretly pined for and protected years ago.





## CHAPTER *Eight*

### *Maysen*

By the following day, the dull hum of gossip had dwindled, pushing me to the back of everyone's minds. At least, that's what I hoped.

I can't turn my brain off; stop it from replaying the events repeatedly. I knew Tyler was an asshole, but he was never cruel. Not to anyone. So why me?

A leaded weight hangs in my chest, dropping down to my stomach until the acid churns and bubbles up to my throat. I hate feeling like I need to avoid my boss to do my job efficiently. How am I supposed to carry on with business as usual and pretend yesterday's events never happened?

For now, avoidance is essential, at least until things blow over. Give it a few days to settle down. The less I have to deal with Tyler, the better.

The cream swirls around as I pour a generous amount into the steaming mug of coffee. Most everyone is busy with

meetings and agendas, leaving me blissfully alone in the kitchen. It also doubles as a great hiding spot since Tyler hardly ever comes here. I'm not prepared to see him yet. Come to think of it, I haven't heard a peep from him all morning, which is odd. Usually, my instant messages would be blowing up with commands. It's been nothing but radio silence.

The calm before the storm.

Once I'm back at my desk, I shuffle around a few papers, organizing them for the next meeting. A shadow casts over them, bringing a chill that crawls up my spine.

"Morning." The crack in Tyler's voice draws my attention, almost like it was difficult to speak that low.

There's an apology written on his face and in his eyes. Good. He should feel bad about yesterday.

He extends a paper coffee cup to me while rolling his lips over his teeth. I don't move to take it, only toggle my gaze between the peace offering and his eyes.

"Is it poisoned? Or perhaps someone else's name is scrawled across the cup?" I don't bother hiding the venom behind my words.

*He called me a whore. He doesn't get sunshine and rainbows anymore.*

Tyler winces, retracting his arm slowly. "Look, yesterday, things got out of hand."

I scoff and fold my arms over my chest. "Out of hand? Is that what you'd call it?"

"Okay, I deserved that." He sets the coffee down, my eyes tracking the movement. "Can we talk in my office?"

Even though I hate him with the passion of a thousand fiery suns, getting alone with him would be a bad idea. There's nothing he could say to remove the sting lingering below the surface. Words etched into the very recesses of my mind, popping up unbidden and unwelcome. The look of hatred and anger in his eyes as he spewed them, not caring one bit about my feelings or the ramifications after things cooled down.

“I think it would be best to keep this professional.” I push the paper cup toward him. “We’ll communicate about work only.”

For a moment, he almost looked hurt, which is impossible because that would imply he had a heart. And judging by his rant and actions yesterday, the organ doesn’t exist.

“Maysen, I think you and I know we can’t keep it professional.”

Boy, that sounds like a challenge. “Yeah, we can.”

Tyler narrows his eyes. “There’s a history we can’t ignore.”

So he does remember. A hollow laugh bubbles from the back of my throat. *A history we can’t ignore?* For years, all he did was overlook me and walk past me as if I were a ghost. Now he wants me visible? “Wow, okay. Well, thanks for the joke, but I need to get back to work.”

The fire comes back to his eyes, daring me to push him. I’m not one to poke the bear, but I can’t help it. He opened the door first.

Before he can respond, Ian pops his head over the wall. “Hey, Maysen, I... oh, sorry,” he says, side-eyeing Tyler, who shoves his hands into his pockets. The two men have a silent stare down, filling the small space with enough tension to choke an ox.

There’s too much testosterone, and I have work to do. “What can I do for you?”

Ian slinks into the small space, practically shoving the three of us together. “I was wondering if you’d be up for lunch today.”

As much as I’d like to take him up on his offer, getting into anything—even something as friendly as lunch with a coworker—would be wrong. It almost hurts to let him down, staring at me with hopeful eyes, but something about his approach rubs me wrong.

“I’ll have to take a raincheck today. We have wall-to-wall meetings I need to prep for, not to mention a few things from yesterday I have to catch up on.”

It’s Tyler’s turn to sport a smug smile. He probably thinks he won this round. Well, guess what, buddy. You both lost.

My refusal doesn’t seem to bug Ian as he shrugs, though a shadow casts over his face as he glances down at the coffee cup Tyler left on my desk. “I get it. If you change your mind, let me know.” With a final glare at Tyler, he leaves us alone. I wish he’d taken the awkwardness with him rather than let it linger.

“You don’t have any urgent meetings this afternoon,” he says, resting his hip against my desk.

I shrug. “I’m not in the mood to get in the middle of a pissing match between you two. Not to mention the only thing that spreads around here faster than Chrissy’s legs is gossip.”

Tyler flinches again. Good. It was supposed to hurt. “You don’t understand.”

“Nor do I want or care to,” I say, cutting him off. I have no interest in hearing his excuses. “Please let me get back to work. I’m sure there’s a phone call you’re expecting any minute.” Turning back to my computer, I dismiss him and wait to hear his retreat. The minute his door clicks shut, I heave a sigh of relief. This thing between us is going to be more complicated than I thought.

The morning passes in a blur. Tyler abides by my request and only communicates about work-related issues through instant messages. My trips to his office are short and concise, leaving papers in a bin on the corner of his desk or dropping them unceremoniously in front of his computer before making a hasty retreat.

Is it petty and childish? Probably.

By noon, my stomach starts to rumble, waning my focus on the task. Part of me wishes I would have taken Ian up on his offer, but I know nothing good will come of it. The way those two have been acting toward each other makes me think

something else is happening. His “friendly lunch” would turn into something else, and I don’t need the headache.

The paper coffee cup still sits in its place, untouched. I know it’s from that little restaurant Tyler likes, which was hands down the best coffee outside a chain store I’ve ever had. It killed me a little to refuse the gesture. I don’t like things going to waste.

Tanya, the front receptionist, steps into my space with a to-go box in hand. “Delivery for you.” She smiles and sets the item on my desk, disappearing before I can tell her I didn’t order anything. But the delicious smell practically has my stomach eating itself.

Curiosity gets the best of me as I peek inside the white paper box. Oh lord. An open-faced meatloaf sandwich, complete with fixings from June’s Café down the street. The inside of my mouth practically turns into a river as I stare at my favorite meal.

Who on earth ordered it?

I have one guess, and I’m sure I’m right. After refusing the coffee, he probably thinks I won’t deny the food offering. Even though I don’t want to, I can’t accept it.

Grabbing the box, I walk around the corner to Holly’s desk, who’s deep into reports and blocking out the world with her earbuds. I can almost hear the music from where I stand.

I tap her shoulder, surprised she doesn’t jump at the unexpected interruption. “Hey, are you hungry?”

Holly spins and nods. “Starving. I was running late and forgot to pack my lunch, so I was about to order something.” She leans forward and raises a brow. “What’s that?”

“For you.” I place the box in her hands with a smile. “They sent me an extra order by accident and I thought maybe you’d want it,” I lie.

I know she can see through it, but I can’t let it go to waste. “Thanks.” She opens the box and practically melts into her chair. “Are you sure you don’t want it? I know it’s your favorite.”

I hold my hands up. “It’s all yours.”

After a quick thank you, I walked back to the kitchen to grab the salad I prepped this morning. Every eye turns my way the minute I step through the doorway, followed by hushed whispers and nods.

Great.

I keep my head up and walk back to my desk with the food in hand. This was not how I envisioned my day going. Using a little extra force, I stab at the salad while staring at my screen, trying to keep my focus on work and not the arrogant man across the hall.

Maybe I was a bit harsh this morning. Tyler did try to extend an olive branch. His words and actions showed remorse, but my pride wouldn’t allow them to be accepted.

Now I feel like an ass.

I grab the coffee cup, wishing I had taken a sip before it went cold. Something catches my eye as I hover it above the trash can.

*Maysen, I’m sorry*, was scribbled on the side of the cup in handwriting I’ve come to know all too well. No wonder Ian looked irritated before leaving this morning, seeing the apology written clear as day.

“Ugh, men.” The cup falls from my fingertips, making a satisfying thud at the bottom of the bag.

I glance at the clock and twist my lips to the side. Four more hours to go.



“What are you wearing next weekend?”

I jump slightly before spinning around to look at Holly. “Next weekend?”

She sits on the edge of my desk, brows wrinkled with a frown. “For the Children’s Hospital fundraiser. It’s one of the few perks we personal assistants get working here. A night to

rub elbows with the upper crust of society while looking fabulous and drinking for free.”

My blank stare must tell her everything she needs to know. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“There was an email. Hold on.” She whips her phone from her purse, scrolling and tapping the screen before sighing. “Denise screwed up and didn’t update her group list since Kara’s name is still on here. But you have to come. It’s so much fun: the food, the dancing, the alcohol. Not to mention they usually have some sort of entertainment throughout the night. It helps get people to open their checkbooks.”

“How dressed up do I need to be?”

“Dressy. Black tie. Formal gowns. Need to be fully waxed and primped. Plus, you can’t make me go alone.”

I laugh. “You just told me everyone is going.”

“As I said, *alone*.” Holly accentuates the word, drawing a giggle from us both. “Don’t make me fend for myself with boring small talk on subjects I don’t know or care about.”

It sounds fun, and I could use a night out that didn’t involve Jaryd trying to comfort me as I drown my sorrows into a whiskey glass.

“Fine. I’m in.”

She squeals in delight, even shaking her fists in the air like that GIF of Anna from *Frozen*. “I’m so excited.”

“I couldn’t tell,” I say with a laugh. “Looks like I need to go dress shopping.”

You’d think she just won the lottery with my statement. “You’ll have to send me pictures. Better yet, please take me with you! We can make a whole weekend of it.”

It’s not a bad idea. Jenna would give me terrible advice and probably pick something indecent or obnoxious. “I think we can arrange that. I’ll text you on Saturday.”

“Sounds good. Ah, I can’t wait.” Holly glances at her watch with a grimace. “Shit, I’m late. Gotta run. See you

tomorrow.”

I finish shutting everything down and head toward the elevators. Not surprisingly, I’m the last to leave again, only today due to avoidance rather than being overworked. I glance at Tyler’s closed office door and feel the lead weight from earlier return.

Why didn’t he tell me about the fundraiser? Maybe he assumed I got the email and didn’t need to discuss it. Or he wasn’t planning on attending, so that’s why I wasn’t informed. Or he doesn’t want me there.

I punch the button for the lobby, grateful for the silence on the ride down to the parking garage. Fuck him. After his hot and cold display the last few days—and frankly, since I started here—I’m not going to spend one more thought on Tyler Cannon. He’s my boss and nothing more. Our worlds couldn’t be more separate if we tried.

Once I’m in the driver’s seat, I text Jenna quickly, praying she’s not busy.

**Me: I need to work off some aggression.**

**Jenna: Mr. Irresistible get to you?**

**Me: More like Mr. Asshole of the year. Meet me at the studio?**

**Jenna: Yeah, why not. I could use it as practice for tonight.**

Perfect.

I pull up to the large industrial building, tucked away among the tiny shops and businesses on the downtown edge, and grab the workout bag I keep in my trunk. The minute I walk through the heavy glass doors, my muscles ache and quiver, waiting to be stretched and released.

Never in a million years did I think I’d be pole dancing for exercise, but Jenna is a bad influence. The first class she dragged me to, I was skeptical, wondering how I’d be able to do anything—especially get off the ground without hurting myself. I anticipated seeing nothing but girls who didn’t need



to be there: thin, willowy twigs flinging themselves around. Yet, it was quite the opposite. Women of all shapes and sizes, beginners to advanced, old and young alike, filled the vast open space. After my first session, I had to ice my upper body down, each muscle protesting against my every move. Not to mention trying to hide the “pole kisses” covering my legs. I looked like a damn leper or some assault victim. Only my abuser was a shiny silver inanimate object.

I wanted to quit and take up yoga instead for half a second. But I kept going back and learning new things, feeling my body grow stronger, the muscles strengthening and stretching, increasing my flexibility and comfort in my skin.

I was addicted.

Jenna’s smug grin didn’t help. Now I get why she loves her job—at least this part.

After changing my clothes, I stretch out, ready to relieve the stress of the day. Maggie, the instructor, smiles and waves as she walks around the room, helping everyone with different positions and questions as they warm up and mess around before everything starts. Jenna slides beside me, giving me a hip check before grabbing a nearby pole.

“So, you want to talk about it?”

I grit my teeth, feeling the pressure in my jaw. “Not yet. Let me get some endorphins pumping before I get pissed off again.”

She laughs, and we turn our attention to Maggie as class begins.

My whole body feels lighter by the end of class, despite a slight strain in my muscles. Jenna barely broke a sweat, which isn’t a shock since she’ll be doing much more tonight at work.

“You should come with me, watch my routine. Phil has been begging for new talent,” she says before opening her car door.

I laugh. “I’m barely good enough to attend class, let alone get paid for it.”

Jenna rolls her eyes. “You’re better than some of the others. Plus, I’m pretty sure Cynthia is throwing a party after work. It’d be good for you to come out and enjoy yourself.”

A night out does sound appealing. “Can’t. There’s a charity fundraiser I have to attend next weekend for work, and I promised Holly I’d go shopping with her tomorrow.”

“Spoilsport. Have any ideas on what you’re looking for?”

I shake my head. “None. Should I go long or short?”

Jenna drags her gaze up and down, narrowing her eyes with a scrutinizing stare. “Short. Definitely. And backless. Lots of sequins, so you stand out. Make Tyler eat his words.”

I huff a laugh through my nose. “I could give two flying fucks about what Tyler thinks right now.”

The slight smirk playing on her lips grows. “Yeah, but it’s more fun to torture the asshole.” With a shrug, she climbs into her little car. “Don’t wait up for me.”

The next day Holly drags me to no less than a dozen stores, not stopping other than for drinks and food, which I didn’t even want because it’s hard trying on fancy dresses when you’re bloated.

“What kind of dress are you wearing?” I ask, combing through another rack while trying not to look at the price tags.

She grabs a few dresses and slings them over her arm. “A short halter. Long ballroom dresses remind me of prom.”

I nod and gasp as I look at the next dress on the rack. It’s like someone took Jenna’s thoughts and made it to real life. Deep cut V in front and completely backless. It practically defies the laws of physics on how it’ll stay on my body.

Holly notices and practically tackles me. “That one. You have to go try it on.”

A pinch of excitement rolls through me as I step into the dressing room and slide the elegant, shimmery material over my body.

Tight, but not overly, almost like it's holding everything together. And damn, it puts my cleavage front and center. Not in a porno kind of way, but utterly flattering, making them appear fuller than they should be. It will require one of those sticky uplifting bras I see on Instagram. Then I won't have to worry about a nip slip.

The minute I step out to show Holly, I feel like a spectacle in the zoo with everyone staring. Several college-aged guys pass by, even slow down to rubberneck and prolong the show, and a few of the snobby associates who turned their noses up before nodding their approval.

“Holy hell, that is the one.”

I run a hand down the front and sides, checking to ensure nothing shows that shouldn't. The hem barely covers my ass as a cool breeze floats across my legs. There's no way I'll be able to sit without giving everyone a show. Usually, I'd be pulling at everything, trying to make it longer or cover as much as possible, but that will only create more problems. If I tug at the hem, my boobs will fall out. If I try to yank the V together, they'll fall out the other side. But the dress is so flattering. The excessive amount of skin on display doesn't bother me.

“Are you sure it's appropriate? I mean, it's the Children's Hospital.”

She nods with a wicked smile. “It's a fundraiser. Trust me. I've seen worse. This”—Holly waves a hand at the dress—“is classy and elegant. Red carpet-worthy.” She darts down the aisle with a snap of her fingers, returning with a pair of strappy gold heels. “Pair it with these.”

Taking the shoes, I slide them on and turn to face the mirror. Holly wasn't kidding. The heels make my legs look toned and a million miles long. I wish I had more time to go tanning to knock out the winter paleness still hanging around. But the peach-colored fabric blends so well you'd hardly notice.

One of the associates stops by to check on us. “That dress suits you. Gorgeous and very complementary of your figure.”

I twist my lips to the side, still unsure. “Is it too much for a charity event?”

She tilts her head to the side, her eyes raking over me. “Not at all. I’m sure you’ll be the envy of every person there.” She leans closer. “I’ve helped a few ladies recently trying to find gowns, and they’ve all been matronly with little definition. But this one.” She pauses for effect. “Would you mind if I snap a photo to send to corporate? They’re looking for pictures of customers to add to our social media accounts, and you would be perfect wearing this dress.”

“Um, sure.” I can’t say someone’s ever asked to post a picture of me before. After looking at her name tag, Amber, positions me in front of a display, giving me some instructions on posing. Good thing I decided to do my hair and makeup this morning. Who knew I’d end up doing an impromptu fashion shoot.

With an approving nod, she brings the digital camera to me for the final okay. Holly peeks over my shoulder, failing to control her excitement.

Damn. You’d think I was staring at a model rather than myself. The lighting, the way the dress flatters everything—even without the sticky bra.

“That’s the one,” Amber says with excitement. “They’re going to *love* it.”

With a good dent on my credit card, I grab the bags from Amber as Holly can’t stop chirping about how amazing it looked.

“Seriously, there will be a lot of single guys there. I bet you could score a date or two.”

“Ugh, dating.” Honestly, I haven’t been interested in putting myself out there after my two-faced asshat ex-boyfriend Zack cheated on me before throwing me out on my ass. Nothing about that situation made me want to jump back in with both feet.

Holly laughs before climbing into the front seat of my car. “Okay, fine. How about a string of one-night stands and a trail

of broken hearts?”

Sex without commitment? It's not something that's ever interested me. Sex is the ultimate connection between two people, bringing them together. It's love and lust and exchanging of power while submitting to the other. It's beautiful and messy and a gift to be cherished.

Fuck, I sound like a naïve hopeless romantic.

Maybe that's my problem. I've held this elemental, animalistic act too high, doing my best not to be like the other girls I used to know.

Everyone else does it.

Why not me?

But that would mean Tyler was right.

Screw it.

“We'll see.”



## CHAPTER *Nine*

### *Maysen*

“There. Perfect.” Jenna steps back, admiring her handiwork.

With all the stress I’d been carrying around the past week, trying to avoid Tyler whenever possible while maintaining a good business relationship, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to put myself together for tonight. I’m assuming he won’t be there since he hasn’t said one peep, nor has anyone confirmed his presence.

Probably for the better. I could use a night of letting go and shutting my brain off.

I stare at my reflection, hardly recognizing the person looking back at me. Perfect makeup, hair silky and smooth, pinned back at the sides while the rest hangs in a long curtain down my back. Other than being held together by tape and glue, you’d almost think I belonged in the world I’m about to invade.

“Are you sure this is appropriate?”

Jenna fastens the diamond pendant around my neck, letting the jewel hang precariously close to the valley between my breasts. Something else to bring attention to the area.

“You look hot. Own that shit.” She steps back with a devilish gleam. “Who knows, maybe you’ll be sending me a text to find somewhere else to sleep tonight.”

I bark out a laugh as I secure the matching earrings. “Like I’d bring someone back here to have sex on your couch. I don’t think so.”

“Fine. You’ll end up at their place instead.”

A flash of nerves runs through my veins. I thought I could do casual sex, but the seed of self-doubt is hard to lose. It’s not that I’m a prude, far from it. I enjoy sex as much as the next person. But to not be in a relationship, using someone solely for their body, is new territory.

Our eyes meet in the mirror, and Jenna smacks my arm. “Stop overthinking. I know you’ve been trying to find yourself for the last few years, proving you’re not the girl people thought they knew from high school.” She places a hand on my shoulder. “So, tonight, be someone else. Be the person you want everyone to see. Take a chance. Risk it all. Find out where the night takes you by not saying no.”

My lips curl up in the corners. “How’d you get so smart?”

“I’ve always been this smart. You just haven’t listened.”

Uh-huh. Sure.

My phone dances across the bathroom counter, illuminating Holly’s crazy picture she snapped of us while shopping last weekend.

“Hey,” I say, swiping on some lip gloss.

“You ready? I’m downstairs waiting for you.”

“Be right there.” I shove the phone into my small clutch, my eyes widening before swinging to my best friend. “What the fuck are these?” I grab one of the square foil packages, waving it in front of her.

Jenna shrugs. “A girl can never be too prepared. Besides, now you can have a few rounds of bathroom sex before getting a room at the fancy hotel you’re heading to.”

I have half a mind to take them out and leave them behind. Instead, I toss the condom back in my clutch and snap it shut.

Jenna’s right, though probably not about the bathroom sex. I have a little more class than that. I need to get over my juvenile ideals and hang-ups, get out of my head and live how I want.

Fuck all the Zacks and Tylers of the world—figuratively speaking.

I can be anyone I want with this new dress and look...as long as it doesn’t scream *Pretty Woman*. However, an extra three grand would go a long way in my hunt for an apartment.

I do a final check and spin with Jenna’s approval. “Knock ‘em dead, kid.”

“Don’t wait up.” I shoot her a wink before disappearing out the door.

As I approach the street where a pristine black town car waits, my steps falter. Holy shit, this can’t be for me. The driver opens the back door, tipping his hat as I get closer. “Ms. James.”

I tighten my grip on the clutch until an excited squeal instantly puts my nerves to rest. “Damn, girl. You are smoking hot!” Holly practically assaults me as soon as I climb in next to her. “Wait, I shouldn’t smudge you. I need you to stay just the way you are.”

The car pulls into the evening traffic, heading downtown to the glittering buildings illuminated by the streetlamps and moon.

“I feel practically naked.” Then I notice her outfit, narrowing my eyes. “You told me your dress was short.”

She looks down and shrugs. “It is.”

I pull at the hem hanging around her knees. “This is not short.” I lean to the side and point at my ass to emphasize my



argument. “Do you see how much skin is touching this seat?”

“Yeah, but you can pull it off.” She laughs. “Some of us don’t have incredibly toned legs and an ass you can bounce a quarter off.”

I roll my eyes and shove her shoulder. “Shut up. You do too.”

It doesn’t take long until the car pulls up in front of a high-end hotel, which I could never afford in a million years. Holly practically bounces in her seat, excitement radiating off her body.

“This is going to be a night you won’t forget.”

The driver opens our door, greeting us to a few flashing lights from local photographers. Yikes. You’d think we’re on the way to some awards show rather than a benefit to help sick children.

As soon as we cross the threshold into the enormous ballroom, my anxiety kicks into high gear until it practically suffocates me.

My jaw drops as we step further into the immaculate room—cream-colored vaulted ceilings decorated with crystal chandeliers that cast a glittering glow on the matching walls and marble floors. Round tables and chairs covered in perfectly pressed white linens occupy half the room. At the same time, men and women of all ages dressed in formal attire flitter around the other half, contributing to the dull hum of conversations and laughter. Waiters with trays of champagne navigate through the crowd, keeping everyone happy and satisfied.

I sigh with relief when I spy several younger women dressed similarly to me.

“Told you,” Holly whispers, knowing where my thoughts were going.

I toss her a quick glare before fixing a semi-permanent smile on my face. Okay, time to pretend as if I belong here.

Holly guides us through the crowd, introducing me to a few assistants and bosses she's met from previous events. All are super friendly and eager to meet the newest person to tolerate Tyler Cannon.

Once again, his reputation precedes him.

I grab a champagne flute from a passing waiter, letting the bubbles tickle my nose as I wander around, taking in the whole experience. Holly said there would be entertainment to make it fun, but I don't see anything other than the string quartet playing music off in the corner, adding to the splendor.

"Maysen." Holly waves me over to join her. "Let me introduce Andrew and Tessa Parker. Andrew is the Tree of Life Foundation COO, and Tessa is an executive with Mattson and Associates."

Ah, someone from our competition. "It's very nice to meet you," I say, shaking their hands.

"Pleasure to meet you, Maysen." Andrew smiles while wrapping his arm around his wife.

Oh my. I'm a sucker for a British accent. And lordy, he's a fine-looking specimen: tall, dark hair, goatee, giving me all the David Gandy vibes. Tessa beams at her husband while resting a hand on her very noticeable baby bump. She's one lucky lady.

"Congratulations," I say, nodding toward her stomach. "Is this your first?"

She laughs and tucks some hair behind her ear. "Oh no. We're old pros at this. We have two at home. A boy and a girl. This one is the tie-breaker." Judging by the look in Andrew's eye, he disagrees. Tessa ignores it and waves to my outfit. "I love your dress. It's gorgeous. I wish I could wear something like that, but, you know."

"Once you have the baby, I'm sure you'll wear things like this all the time."

She shakes her head. "Doubtful. Those days are over. Nothing is in the right place anymore."

We laugh until a shadow lurks over my shoulder, drawing Andrew's attention.

"Ah, Mr. Dunkirk. How are you?"

Ian slides up beside me, shaking Andrew's hand. "Staying upright and loving life, as always. Are you ready to leave your wife's firm yet?"

"Still on that, are you? It's a losing battle." Andrew places a kiss on Tessa's temple.

"I like a good challenge." Ian looks down at me with a wink. "Is it okay if I steal Maysen for a moment?"

Holly looks between us, unsure of how to proceed. She knows about Ian's persistent need to be around me, agreeing it's more aggressive than needed, but now is not the time to bring it to everyone's attention.

"Absolutely." I politely excuse myself from the group and let Ian guide me across the room. Hopefully, he didn't feel the shudder when he placed his hand on the bare skin of my back.

At least he's doing something productive, introducing me to several CEOs and executives from other firms, touting about my successes and accomplishments, rather than introducing me as Tyler's lowly assistant. I'm surprised he remembered all the awards and accolades I had acquired in college and the few jobs right after. Several men offered me their business cards, asking me to give them a call when I get bored over at Madison.

"Thanks for that," I whisper as we make our way to the tables once they announce dinner is ready.

"My pleasure." He pulls out a chair for me, letting his fingertips linger and glide over my shoulders and down my arms. Involuntary goose bumps appear as I bite my lip and try to ignore his heated gaze still focused on me.

Holly arrives and sits on my other side, filling me in on the night's events. After dinner is another cocktail hour, followed by the main entertainment and some dancing.

All of this on the company's dime? I might as well use it to my full advantage, grabbing another champagne flute from a passing waiter.

Servers hustle and bustle around, placing the plated food on each table, filling the air with the most delicious aromas. While we wait, I use the time to survey the room, noting all the people idly chatting and laughing. I spy Tessa at a nearby table, giving her a small wave. Over at another table, a friendly face smiles back at me as I connect with Brandon. Finally, someone I know outside of work.

He leans over to say something to the person sitting down from him, only there are too many people in the way to see who it is. It's probably a work associate—none of my business.

After dinner—the best I've ever had—the keynote speaker takes the stage, going into his spiel about what the hospital does, the families it helps, and how our donations make a difference in these children's lives. I caught myself wiping a tear or two away, thinking of the hardship these families must face during one of the scariest moments of their life.

Even though it means I'll have to sleep on Jenna's couch for another month or two, these people need the money more than I do.

Once the bar opens back up, the staff quickly sets up a few things on stage while the crowd goes back to networking and gossiping. Several women pull me aside to compliment my dress on the way to the bar. When I told them where I purchased it, their eyes widened, saying they saw the social media post the store put up a few days ago. I guess the picture went viral almost overnight, boosting the store's online presence and sales.

“What can I get you?” The cute bartender flashes a smile, letting his gaze drop slightly to follow the lines of my dress.

I look at the setup behind him, unsure of how to proceed. The four glasses of champagne were more than enough, threatening to turn my stomach if I ingested one more. A

bottle on the back row catches my eye. “Two fingers of the Balvenie 14, please. Neat.”

He raises a brow. “A woman who knows her whiskey. I like it.” Sliding the glass my way, I toss a twenty into his tip jar and a wink.

“Anything else would be a travesty.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” He lets his gaze linger for a second longer before attending to the group of men occupying the bar’s end.

I savor the first sip, letting the flavors dance across my tongue while enjoying this quiet moment. My anxiety has calmed a little, though the alcohol helps. It’s not that I’m introverted. Hardly. I’m more like a diesel engine. It takes me a while to get going, but it’s hard to stop once I start.

Luckily, Ian has found someone else to entertain, thanks partly to Holly taking pity on me. She’s turned into a good friend and ally, something I didn’t think I needed until now.

A tall figure stands beside me, a little too close for comfort. Why do guys think crowding a woman is an excellent way to get her attention? All it will do is piss her off.

“Enjoying yourself?”

I freeze with the glass in mid-air as his deep voice washes over me.

Holy hell. Tyler’s here.

Slowly, I turn my head to meet his eyes, staring straight into mine with an unreadable expression. His stone demeanor, usually reserved during meetings, is firmly in place, sending a chill down my spine.

Two can play that game.

“I didn’t think you were coming,” I say, his eyes focusing on the glass as it hits my lips.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Tyler flags down the same bartender that helped me. “I’ll take whatever she’s having.”

The bartender nods, quickly filling his request. It takes all my willpower not to admire Tyler in his black suit, opting for a traditional tuxedo instead of his usual suit and ties. Instead, I focus on the silver cufflinks peeking out from his sleeve, admiring their intricate design, swirling into some Celtic knot.

Another crystal glass slides before me, pulling my attention back to the present. “You never mentioned anything about the event, so I just assumed.”

“You know what they say about assumptions.” Tyler leans against the bar, taking a slow sip of the whiskey. “Besides, that would involve you speaking to me in more than one-worded sentences. Or at all.”

Seriously? “You want to get into this? In front of all these people?”

His eyes darken, clouding over with repressed anger. “Let’s not talk about causing a scene right now, considering your choice of attire.”

My skin bristles, sending the tiny hairs at the back of my neck to stand on end. Okay, it looks like we’re going to get into it anyway.

“Do you have something to say? How I dress and behave is not your concern. And while we’re on the subject, why do you care?”

Tyler stiffens at my sudden boldness, though he quickly pushes it aside. “I don’t.”

“Well, at least that hasn’t changed. I guess history does repeat itself.”

He watches me over the rim of his glass, taking a slow sip of the amber liquid. “You don’t know anything about my history.”

“I know enough.” Before I can elaborate, Holly comes running to my side.

“There you are. The show’s about to begin.” She looks over to Tyler, giving him a tight smile. “Also, I need to tell you something.”

Finishing off the first glass, I grab the full one and follow Holly where the crowd has gathered in front of the stage, not giving Tyler a second glance. I won't let him spoil my night.

The MC stands behind a podium, garnering everyone's attention as all conversations dull to a hum.

"Thank you for attending tonight's fundraiser. I know we can make a difference in the lives of these families, one donation at a time." He pauses for a round of applause. "So, let's get the most bang for our buck. Time to start the auction. We want to thank our large sponsors and their designated participants." He rattles off the names of the businesses, not surprising that Madison was among them.

"So, what did you need to tell me?" I lean over to whisper to Holly, barely listening to the rules the MC is laying down.

"Yeah, well, here's the thing. Each sponsor has a male and female designee."

"Uh-huh."

She pauses, keeping her eyes locked on mine in a silent plea.

No.

"You didn't."

Looking down, she chews on her bottom lip but doesn't look apologetic. "Just remember, it's for the children."

"I'm going to kill you," I throw at her, now paying more attention to what's happening since I'll be participating rather than watching.

"Be mad at me all you want, but this outfit is guaranteed to pull in the highest bid. And the company that raises the most gets platinum status and bragging rights for the year."

"Bragging rights?" I glare at her from the corner of my eye. "That's the best you can come up with?"

Holly shrugs. "It's free publicity."

Right. I'm helping the company by auctioning off my body for charity and taking one for the team.

Hopefully, whoever bids on me has a deep pocket and good looks.

A man with a clipboard approaches us, looking like some secret service member rather than a coordinator. “Ms. James?” I nod. “Follow me, please.”

“Put everyone to shame, girl. You’ve got this,” Holly says, gently shoving me.

“Remind me to hurt you later,” I hiss through my teeth. The traitor blows me a kiss as I follow the man backstage to stand with the others.

“First time?” a sweet girl asks, standing next to me. She smiles brightly, putting whatever nerves I had to ease.

“Yeah. I didn’t know about it until a few moments ago.”

She smirks. “It’s all in fun. This is my third year. Hopefully, I can raise more money than last year.”

“Isn’t it a bit piggish?”

Her bright eyes sparkle in the muted light as she shakes her head. “It’s flattering in a way. Not to mention it’s all in good fun. Each ‘date’ I’ve been on has been fantastic. One guy took my friends and me on his boat on Lake Minnetonka for a weekend excursion. It was a blast.”

Huh. That doesn’t sound too bad.

“Up first, we have the lovely Charlene from Mattson and Associates.”

She gives a thumbs-up and smiles before taking the stage with a few whistles sounding over the applause.

Perhaps it won’t be so bad after all.

I watch each participant play to the crowd, raising their totals with each wink and smile. So far, the highest bid has been two thousand dollars, set by an extremely handsome man who practically stripped on stage, catering to the squeals of the single female population below.

“Last, we have our representatives from Madison Development. Up first, we have Carter.”



I think I recognize him as one of the entry-level associates underneath Ian. Not overly tall but a good height, medium build with a clean-shaven baby face. I'm sure he'll fare well.

Not too terrible, raising a thousand dollars. The excited winner skips over to greet him while giving her information to the bookkeeper off to the side.

Shit. All the confidence I psyched myself up with flies out the window, barely hearing my name called over the rush of blood through my ears.

"Go on," the guy with the clipboard says, practically shoving me on stage. Each step feels like an eternity, my heart beating out of my chest as I stand and face the hundreds of eyes staring back at me. More hoots and hollers fill the room, forcing the MC to motion with his arms to quiet down.

Now I regret picking this dress. There's way too much skin showing, and even though it's taped to my body in the necessary places, I swear it's threatening to fall right off.

I'm going to kill Holly for this.

"Look at this stunner!" the MC proudly exclaims. "We'll start the bidding at one hundred dollars."

"One hundred," someone yells in the crowd.

"Two hundred."

"Four."

"Five."

Holy shit, it hasn't even been thirty seconds, and the total climbs higher and higher. I don't know whether to be proud or disgusted.

"Eight hundred," Ian cockily proclaims from the middle of the crowd. I catch his wide, toothy grin as he gives a wink.

"One thousand dollars," another familiar voice cries out, one that makes my insides flip-flop. Tyler's green eyes hold mine, feeling his gaze wrap around me from head to toe.

Ian glares at his competition, clearly ready to fight. "Fifteen hundred."

“Two thousand.”

“Three.”

I put a hand on my stomach, trying to calm the fluttering butterflies.

The MC doesn't miss a beat. “Wow, this is quite the bidding war. The current bid is three thousand dollars. Do I hear four?” He looks at Ian, waiting to see if he'll make a move.

Ian smirks and nods. “Four.”

Everyone turns their attention to Tyler, whose stoic expression hasn't budged since this started. Either he has the best poker face in the history of the world, or he doesn't care and wants to put the stones to Ian.

“Ten thousand dollars.”

Holy. Shit.

A collective gasp hushes the crowd. My knees almost give out at the price tag. Mr. Irresistible wants to pay ten thousand dollars for a date with me? The girl he blatantly ignored in high school? This can't be real.

Ian and Tyler's silent showdown continues amid the gasps and murmuring of the crowd. Tyler raises a challenging brow, goading him to continue, knowing full well his pocketbook is deeper.

“Ten thousand. Going once. Going twice.” He pauses to look at Ian, who throws his hands up in surrender. “Sold to Mr. Cannon for a new record.”

What the fuck just happened?



# CHAPTER

## *Ten*

### *Maysen*

Ten thousand dollars.

Tyler Cannon just paid ten thousand dollars for a date with me.

I shake my head and close my mouth, not realizing I'd left it gaping open once the gavel struck. Thunderous applause fills the room as I'm escorted off the stage, putting me face-to-face with the one person I was trying to avoid.

"Lucky bastard," a few men call out as Tyler makes his way to the bookkeeper, handing over his credit card like it's not a big deal.

The MC announces the end of the auction, dispersing the crowd to mingle or head to the dance floor, where a band sets up for the rest of the evening festivities.

"Congratulations on being the highest bid of the night. You must be so proud," the girl exclaims while running the transaction.

I can't pull my eyes away from Tyler's. Equal parts of trepidation and excitement course through my body, leaving my poor lungs confused with shallow and deep breaths, convinced there's not enough oxygen in the room with the way he's staring at me.

"Something like that," I manage to squeak out. Honestly, I have no idea how to feel at the moment.

The girl hands back Tyler's card with a huge grin. "Well, we appreciate your participation and the generous donation. Every little bit helps."

*This is for the kids.*

*This is for the kids.*

*This. Is. For. The. Kids.*

Maybe if I say it enough, the shock will evaporate.

Tyler still hasn't shown any emotion, only a curt nod as he places the card back in his wallet. Turning his expectant eyes to me, he holds my gaze for a moment before extending his elbow like a gentleman—which we all know is a fallacy. There is nothing gentlemanly about him.

Not wanting to embarrass myself or him, I tuck my arm around his, letting him escort me in silence to the other side of the room.

Soft jazz music floats around us as couples pair off, swaying to the music while laughing. I'm half expecting Tyler to lead us to the bar or let go of me entirely since we don't need to be together. Yet, he guides us to the floor, pulling my body flush against his, feeling every hard muscle behind his suit.

"What was that about?" I finally summoned the courage to ask the question plaguing my mind as I stood on display.

Tyler tilts his head to the side slightly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Is he seriously going to play stupid? "Your little pissing match with Ian?"

He snorts and spins me to the beat. “Just putting him in his place.”

“And where would that be? Somewhere at the bottom because you have more money?”

He furrows his brows. “Do you think I’m that shallow?”

“I don’t know. You tell me. Whenever you two are near each other, it seems like the start of some war. What’s the deal?”

I think he won’t answer for a moment, judging by the concentration etched on his face, like he’s carefully constructing his rebuttal. “I don’t like the guy.”

“Why?”

His grasp on my hip tightens. “He rubs me the wrong way.”

“That’s a lame excuse if I’ve ever heard one.”

Tyler shrugs. “It’s the truth.”

This isn’t getting me anywhere. Time to change subjects. “Why did you bid on me?”

“It’s a charity auction and a good tax write-off.”

“But why me? You could have bid on anyone else up there.”

He stays silent again. “No one else caught my eye.”

“Why would it matter? You just said it’s a tax write-off. The person associated with the bid is inconsequential.”

His hand moves from my hip to my lower back, pulling me closer. “No, they’re not.”

Why? “I don’t get it. Make me understand.”

A storm brews behind his eyes, darkening his irises in a warning. “Why didn’t you say who you were instead of making me look like a fool for weeks?”

I was wondering when that would come up. “Would it have made a difference? Clearly, I didn’t make a good enough

impression in high school for you to remember me, so what would it matter now as adults? You never noticed me anyway.”

“You’re wrong,” he growls out.

I scoff. “Somehow, I doubt that.”

“Don’t pretend to know me.”

“Same goes for you. Throughout school, I watched from the sidelines and silently cheered while you threw the game-winning pass in football, and went with my friends to your hockey games under the guise that I loved the sport when I only wanted to see you. We even attended the same parties. And you know what I saw? A boy who got everything he wanted: girls hanging off his arms, popularity, teachers who gave him anything he needed, recognition by the papers.” I swallowed hard. “Never once did you glance my way sitting next to me in class or in the hallways, always looking for the girls who were fake and plastic while passing up the girl with glasses and braces.” My voice cracks a little, failing to hide the hurt and pain I harbored for years. Sure it was a pipe dream, thinking the most popular boy would go after the nerdy girl. That’s the basis of every teenage romantic comedy movie. Only life never works out that way. The jocks still hung out with the jocks, and the rest knew their place.

Tyler stops swaying, letting my little tirade invade his thoughts. Maybe I should have kept it to myself. He probably thinks I’m a freak or creepy stalker, always wondering why it wasn’t me rather than do something with my life.

“Maysen, I—”

“Mind if I cut in?” Brandon clears his throat, standing off to the side with a smile.

“Sure,” I say, deciding for both of us. I could use a break after word vomiting all over the place.

Tyler doesn’t say anything, only nods and steps aside, but not before pinning me with a heart-stopping stare. “We’re not done with our conversation yet.” He storms away, leaving my head clouded with worry and regret.

“What was that all about?” Brandon asks, twirling us around the dance floor.

There’s no need to drag him into this drama. “Nothing of importance. You’re looking very dapper tonight. Where’s your wife?” Hopefully, the seamless change in the subject is enough to hint that I don’t want to talk about it.

Brandon takes pity and shakes his head. “She hates these things and decided to have a girls’ night out instead. Can’t say I blame her.”

“No kidding. A girls’ night out sounds amazing at this point, but so would getting out of this dress.”

“You may not want to say that too loud around some of these guys.” Brandon chuckles, looking over his shoulder. “Not to mention there’s not a lot to take off anyway. Don’t get me wrong. You look killer in it. I can see why you were the highest bid of the night. If I wasn’t married...”

I playfully shove his shoulder. “You would not, and you know it.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Seems to be a theme tonight,” I mutter under my breath.

Shit. Brandon must have heard, drawing his brows together. “How so?”

With a sigh, I muster up the courage to word vomit again. “Tyler implied that I didn’t know him back in school, but he’s wrong. Being part of the popular and non-popular crowds meant I had the luxury of observing and participating in all the events. And my observations were usually spot on. Add in the gossip about all his conquests and accolades, and voila.”

Brandon stays quiet for a moment, letting my words sink in. “Okay, I can see where you’re coming from, and there are some truths to that statement. However, not everything is as it seems. People only show you what they want you to see.”

I hum in agreement. “Even still, you didn’t have any problems recognizing me after all these years, even with my minor changes in appearance. Contacts versus glasses, plus a

slight weight loss, should not make me unrecognizable unless you never noticed in the first place.”

The song changes to something more upbeat, pulling us apart slightly but still keeping us close. “It’s not that he didn’t notice you. It’s just that he got good at pushing you away.”

“Pushing me away?”

I search his eyes, trying to find the meaning in his words, only he’s locked up tight like a vault. “You need to ask him. It’s not my story to tell.”

“So there’s a story?” I say, trying to keep my voice light and curious rather than quizzical and skeptical.

He shakes his head with a chuckle. “Nice try, but you two will have to figure it out before killing each other.”

After another couple of songs, the heat gets to me, and I excuse myself to the bar, desperately needing more alcohol as my head swims with this new information.

I slowly sip the whiskey, grateful for the giant ice ball as it hits my lips. A few women stop by to gush about my dress, asking where I purchased it and vowing to stop by the next time they’re looking. Who knew I’d be free publicity for the store just by wearing this? I should ask them for a commission.

“You know this doesn’t change anything.” I whip my head around, finding Chrissy fixing her lipstick with her compact mirror.

“What are you talking about?” I resist the urge to roll my eyes at her unwarranted intrusion.

She snaps it shut and puts it back in her purse. “Tyler. Just because he paid for you doesn’t mean anything.”

“Really? You mean he’s not going to take me to polo games or fancy dinners or fly me to watch an opera?”

A slow sneer pulls at her red lips. “If you want to consider yourself a high-paid whore, so be it. Some of us don’t need Tyler to drop wads of cash to get noticed.”



This time, I roll my eyes. “Is there a point to this, Chrissy?”

She takes a step closer, bringing the champagne flute to her lips. “You’re not his type.”

“Really. And how would you know?”

Her voice drops to almost a purr. “Because I’ve been fucking him for years. I know exactly what he likes and doesn’t like. And you”—she looks me up and down—“are nothing special. So enjoy your paid date, Maysen. Go ahead and think you’ve won the lottery, but he always comes back to me in the end. You can’t give him what he wants.”

Before arguing that I don’t want him, Chrissy grabs another champagne glass and saunters off, probably to find her next prey.

Years of self-doubt rear their ugly head at her words. I’m not dumb enough to think his bid means anything more than what’s on the surface, but a small part of me hopes he ignored every other girl because I was up for grabs.

I drain the whiskey and slide the empty glass across the bar. “Another, please.”

“Well, hello again, Ms. James,” an older voice calls from the side, instantly sending my nerves on high alert.

Fuck me. Is there a sign on my back that says, “easy target?” I turn my head and come face-to-face with Mr. Williamson, who rakes his gaze across every open inch of skin he can see.

“Mr. Williamson, how are you?”

“Much better now that I’ve had a chance to see you. Excellent work at the auction, my dear. That’s quite the price tag you managed to get. I would have bid on you myself if I were thirty years younger.”

I glance down at his wedding band, making a show of it. “And not married.”

He leans forward, the stench of alcohol reeking on his breath. “What my wife doesn’t know has never hurt her

before.”

Unease mixed with fear mingles in my stomach, swishing the whiskey around until it threatens to come up. I need to play this carefully. We can’t afford to lose this client, and I don’t want to fall into some seedy trap—time to dance the line.

“Now, I’m sure you don’t mean that. You’re a respectable man with high moral values.”

Mr. Williamson smirks, dragging his finger down my bare arm. “I’m also a man with needs my wife has failed to fulfill over the years. Not to mention, the younger ones tend to be more adventurous in the sack.”

“Mr. Williamson,” I start, swallowing hard.

“Let’s cut the formality, shall we? Call me Dennis.”

I nod, trying to work out an exit strategy. “I think that would be highly inappropriate since you’re our client. We need to keep things professional.”

His brown eyes crinkle at the sides. “How badly do you want our business? Isn’t your job to keep me happy?”

Panic grips my heart, squeezing until I can barely breathe. “Are you saying you’re not happy with our company?”

The crinkles disappear as his lips curl into something sinister. “I’d be much happier if you came to my hotel room and gave me a taste of what ten thousand dollars can buy.”

Bile churns in my stomach, the acid burning up my throat, leaving me speechless. He can’t honestly be saying what I think he is.

Tyler warned me, but I didn’t listen, thinking I knew better and could handle myself. How am I going to get out of this? Not one person around us is paying attention. Short of crying rape at the top of my lungs, I doubt anyone will save me.

“There you are,” Ian says, sliding up beside me. “I’ve been looking for you. There are a few other clients we need to talk to.”

Oh, thank god. An excuse to get as far away from Dennis as possible.

“Thanks for the reminder.” I force a smile, turning back to the sleazy older man. “Pleasure to see you again, Mr. Williamson.”

His brown eyes narrow slightly before turning to Ian. “Watch out for this one. She’s a real ballbuster.”

“Only when she’s not sealing the deal,” he replies with a wink.

Dennis gives a knowing smirk before nodding and walking away. What was that about?

“Thank you for saving me,” I say, letting Ian guide me to the dance floor as the band switches to a slower song. “That guy is a creep.”

“He’s harmless. Besides, it looks like you were holding your own, judging from your body language and how you leaned into him.”

Is he crazy? “You must have been looking at something else because I was trying to figure out how to leave without kneeing him in the balls. We can’t afford to lose him as a client. He’s kind of important.”

“Only to Tyler.” Ian’s eyes darken, practically spitting out the name as if it were poison. “Besides, you’ll do whatever is necessary for the company, right?”

His words have a hidden meaning, one I can’t quite put my finger on. Something about how he’s acting right now is off, like he’s teetering on the edge of rationality. I know those two don’t get along. Maybe I can get an answer from Ian since Tyler wasn’t too forthcoming.

“Were you really going to pay that much for a date with me?”

Ian tightens his grip around my waist, pulling me closer. “Nah. I was trying to raise the bar to hit Tyler in his wallet.”

Hmm, okay. I’m not sure how I feel about being used as a pawn to satisfy some male chauvinistic pissing match.

“Not that I’d need to spend thousands of dollars to get a date with you, unlike someone else.”

“Oh, really? You seem awfully cocky about that.”

He flashes that pretty-boy smile. “Not cocky. Confident.”

I stiffen as his fingertips graze down my spine, getting dangerously close to my ass. Okay, tonight officially sucks, and I’m so over it.

“Look, Ian,” I start, figuring out the best way to soften the blow. “I think you’re a great guy and fun to be around.”

He leans down, pulling me even closer. “All true.”

At least he can’t see me roll my eyes. “But I think it’s best to keep things platonic between us. Mixing business and pleasure creates chaos and uncomfortable working environments. Don’t you agree?”

This time, he pulls back, staring directly into my eyes. Something flashes in their depths. Anger? Annoyance? I can’t quite tell, but he quickly covers it with a fake smile. “Absolutely. I couldn’t agree more. We wouldn’t want to end up as the office gossip like you know who.”

Speak of the devil. Our eyes catch over Ian’s shoulder; Tyler’s stone demeanor holds as he sips his drink, casually talking to another client, though I doubt he’s paying attention to the conversation with the way he’s staring.

I’m too caught up in our little contest to realize I hadn’t answered Ian. “I’m glad you agree,” he says, his voice taking a rough edge to my non-answer. The song ends, jumping at the first opportunity to pull away while clapping with everyone else.

“Another dance?” He holds his hand out in invitation.

I shake my head, desperately needing some air, and get the hell away from this party. “In a second? I need to find the restroom.”

Without notice, he grabs my hand and kisses the back of it. “Make sure to find me when you’re finished.”

Forcing a smile, I nod and dart off toward the back of the room, rubbing my hands up and down my arms to rid the chill that won't seem to leave.

What is with everyone tonight? Is there an aphrodisiac embedded in this dress that's making the entire male population lose their ever-loving minds?

"There you are," Holly says as I step through the bathroom door. "I've been looking for you everywhere. Are you having fun yet?"

Her whole face beams with excitement that I don't have the heart to tell her about the sexual harassment or the pissing match between our two coworkers. "Absolutely. You were right. Best night ever."

"And girl, I think you secured our platinum status with that auction. It's weird that Tyler bid on you, isn't it?"

I shrug and check my makeup in the mirror. "According to him, it's a tax write-off—nothing else. And it was for the children."

She laughs as I throw her words back at her. It's good she's in the dark about the push and pull between Tyler and me. We've maintained our professional relationship while hiding our past from everyone. Not that there's anything to tell. But it would paint him badly, and even though he's an asshole, I won't bad-mouth him. At least not in public. To my friends, that's a different story.

"I'm heading back out. You coming?" Holly pauses at the door, holding it open for a few women as they walk in.

"In a minute. I need a quick breather."

She nods with a smile. "Okay. Find me in a bit. I'm going to mingle and maybe find a date." With a wink, she slides out the door. At least she has a mission, one that's opposite of mine.

Stay low and avoid any more confrontations.



## *Tyler*

Where did she go? After watching Maysen dance with that asshole, feeling helpless as he slid his hands all over her, I was ready to kill someone. Coupled with her run-in with Williamson, I've nearly reached my limit. If someone slapped a blood pressure cuff on me right now, it'd be off the charts.

Both think it's okay to touch her, clearly not paying attention to her body language that states to leave her alone. I could see her silent scream for help even from across the room. Before I had the chance to save her from Williamson, motherfucking Ian scooped her away. From one predator's hands to another.

When our eyes met, a mix of emotions ran through my system. I have to get Maysen away from these assholes but lack the means without drawing attention. Rational thinking isn't working. Instead, here I am, waiting for her to emerge from the bathroom, praying the other two won't notice or question my motives.

Maysen walks right by, head held high like she's on some urgent mission. Well, so am I.

"We need to talk," I growl out, snaking my hand around her elbow and guiding her away from the dance floor before she has the chance to object. She stumbles while trying to keep up with my long strides, wandering until I find an abandoned hallway, far away from the crowd and prying eyes.

Her quiet gasp fills the air as I cage her against the wall, bringing us chest to chest, almost close enough to touch.

"What in the fuck is your problem?"

Not going to lie; she's pretty sexy when she's pissed off. "We need to finish our conversation."

"What's the point? Let's go back to pretending we don't know each other and wipe the slate clean."

"I can't do that." Even if I wanted to, I couldn't. It's like someone opened the floodgates to all the repressed feelings I

couldn't show.

“Sure you can. It's not complicated. At least it doesn't have to be. We'll maintain our professional relationship, speaking solely about business matters and turn into passing acquaintances at the end of the day.”

No, that doesn't work for me. “You still think you're so bright.”

Maysen smirks. “More than you give me credit for.”

“And yet, you couldn't be more wrong.”

Her delicate little brows draw together. “Impossible. I'm hardly ever wrong.”

“Oh really? How about Williamson, for example.” The words slipped out of my mouth before I could stop them. I didn't want to bring it up and make her feel bad for believing the good in people rather than seeing them for who they are.

It's probably why she's dug her feet in the sand, stripping me down layer by layer without knowing it, exposing me, leaving me raw and vulnerable. And I hate feeling out of control, that she sees both sides of me and still shows up for work when everyone else has run away.

Her hazel eyes, usually glowing with golden specks, darken, giving away her rising anger. “How long will you keep throwing that in my face?”

“Until you learn your lesson.” My jaw pops as I grit my teeth. “It appears you still haven't figured it out, judging from what I witnessed at the bar earlier.”

For a moment, fear crosses her face, quickly covered by her need to fight. “It must not have been too bad since you didn't come to rescue me. I told you, I can handle him.”

Stubborn little woman. “Is that why Ian swept you away? Or did you want to make a spectacle of yourself, letting him slide his hands all over your body for everyone to see?”

Red creeps up her neck, tingeing her cheeks until I can practically feel the fire behind them. “Again, why do you care what I do or who I talk to?” Maysen lifts her chin defiantly.

“Why don’t you go find Chrissy and fuck her in a dark corner somewhere? Or is that only reserved for your desk after the long weekend?”

“You don’t know me,” I growl low enough for her to hear.

She confidently holds my stare. “Agreed. And judging by what I’m seeing, I don’t think I want to. You stand here and berate me about how I conduct business or treat me like a little girl who can’t take care of herself. Well, guess what. I’ve been doing just fine on my own without your help. In fact, I—”

Fuck it.

I crash my lips onto hers, first to shut her up. Second, because I’ve never found myself so turned on while getting read the riot act.

Maysen’s surprised gasp gives me the chance to drag the tip of my tongue along the seam of her lips, letting me taste the sweet nectar of her mouth as she blooms under my touch. She grasps my lapels, weakly pushing away at first, then slowly pulling me toward her.

She relaxes after a moment, allowing herself to kiss me back as I tangle my fingers in the hair at the back of her head, keeping her locked in place.

I don’t care if this is a bad idea, potentially exposing us to the world. All I want is for this kiss never to end. It’s hot and passionate, like fire and ice. Angry and intense. It’s the most alive I’ve felt in years. Possibly ever.

Suddenly, she pulls back, breaking the contact, trying to regain control.

We stare in silence, getting lost in our thoughts and each other’s eyes until hers begin to mist over.

“I—no. We can’t.”

She steps to the side, breaking my hold, and I instantly miss her proximity. “Can’t or won’t?”

“Both.”



Before I have the chance to bring her back, she runs down the hall, leaving me staring at her retreating form with nothing but a raging hard-on and clouded thoughts.



# CHAPTER *Eleven*

*Tyler*

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

*Delete. Delete. Delete.*

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

*Delete. Delete. Delete.*

Why is it so hard to text Maysen to see if she's okay? Even with that insanely short dress and obscenely high heels, she took off like an Olympic sprinter, leaving me in the dust and unable to find her once my body calmed down and rational thought kicked back in.

Maybe it's not appropriate to send her anything at all?

No, to be a good boss means checking up on an employee when they're distraught.

After hours.

On the weekend.

Unbidden.

*Jesus. Stop being a pussy and send something.*

Even I'm crabby with myself after a restless night of tossing and turning, wanting to make sure Maysen got home safely and didn't end up anywhere else. Like the street gutter.

Or Ian's apartment.

I should have punched that motherfucker in the mouth when I had the chance. The minute he raised my bid during the auction, I knew she was nothing but a pawn in his little game, trying to goad me into a competition for her.

Joke's on him. It was never a competition.

Blowing out a quick breath, I settle higher against the headboard, my thoughts barely keeping up with my flying fingers across the small screen.

**Me: Just making sure you're ok. Couldn't find you again last night. Call me.**

Short, precise. To the point.

Professional.

Sort of.

The phone vibrates within seconds, only to fuel my disappointment as Brandon's name illuminates the screen.

"What?"

"Jeez, so grumpy this morning," he says, amusement clear in his voice. "Did someone piss in your Cheerios?"

I scrub a hand over my face while groaning. "All night long."

After I couldn't find Maysen, Brandon attached himself to my side, keeping me distracted so I wouldn't do something I'd regret—like chasing after her or pummeling Ian. Probably both.

"Have you talked to her yet?"

A snarky laugh escaped before I could stop it. "Pretty sure she's avoiding me." However, I have a sneaking suspicion that

he already knows.

“Give her time. She’ll come around. Anyway, feel up to some baseball this afternoon?”

Shit. Why not? “Yeah, I could use a little Sunday Funday.”

He laughs and shuffles something on the other side of the line. “Pick you up in an hour.”

This could be just what the doctor ordered: beers, brats, and bros. Add in some outdoor fun and sports; maybe it’ll stop my mind from wandering where it doesn’t need to go.



## *Maysen*

“Time to get up, sleepyhead. You can’t hide away forever.” Jenna flings open the living room curtains, letting in the first beam of light I didn’t want to see today.

Groaning, I pull the covers farther over my head, trying to block out the world. “No.”

The minute I got away from Tyler, it was like emerging from dense fog and into the clear sky. Everything made sense without his cologne swirling around me or the feel of his body pressed against mine. Lines were put back in place. The boss-employee hierarchy is firmly re-solidified.

Only the entire Uber ride home, I could still feel his tongue exploring every inch of my mouth. Tasting and taking, nipping and biting, sucking my bottom lip like he somehow knew it turned me on.

All the more reason I needed to put as much distance between myself and Tyler Cannon as possible.

I peek over the covers, noticing how Jenna isn’t wearing her typical Sunday lounge attire of well-worn sweatpants and a sweatshirt, each sporting enough holes to practically make them see-through. A pair of leggings and an oversized Minnesota Twins T-shirt are in their place.

“Uh, what’s going on?”

She rolls her eyes and places her hands on her hips. “Decided to head to church. What does it look like? We’re going out.”

“But why?” I whine, elongating the last word like a three-year-old throwing a tantrum after being told to put away their toys.

“Because I need to get some vitamin D, and you need to spill your guts about last night. Not to mention we get to stare at men in baseball pants for three hours. That alone will cheer anyone up.”

She’s not wrong. Sports aren’t my thing, but show me some hot guys in tight pants, and I’m game for anything.

“Yes to some sun, no to spilling my guts.”

Jenna tosses a shirt and pants my way. “We’ll see.”

My phone buzzes on the floor with an incoming message. As soon as I see Tyler’s name on the screen, I instantly close it down and throw it at the end of the couch. Not today, Satan.

The smell of popcorn and hot dogs assaults my nostrils when we walk through the gates, dodging excited fans sporting jerseys and hats while carrying baseball gloves or various ballpark fare. It brings me back to my childhood, remembering when my grandparents would take me to the old stadium to watch the games, buying me sundaes that came in miniature baseball hats and enough hot dogs to choke an ox.

Now, as an adult, I can appreciate the spectacle around me, seeing little kids sharing the same excitement and enthusiasm as I had while holding their parents’ or grandparents’ hands, begging to go down to the field for the chance to meet their idols. The sheer joy on their faces brings a smile to my own. Maybe someday, I’ll be able to do the same if I ever find someone to settle down with.

“Tamp down your ovaries, woman,” Jenna says, bumping my shoulder and bringing me out of my daydream.

I shake my head, getting rid of thoughts about kids, marriage, and even a boyfriend. “Momentary lapse in judgment. I’m okay.”

“Not yet, but you will be.” She grabs my elbow and drags me to one of the beer vendors lined up along the walkway. Jenna smiles brightly at the guy behind the bar, who immediately takes an interest in her.

“Hi, ladies. What will it be?” He looks like he’s in college. Very young and clean-shaven with a boyish charm.

Jenna leans forward, turning on the sex appeal. “Two Castle Danger Ode IPAs, please.” Wow, it’s impressive they’re carrying one of my favorite craft beers here. It’s a smaller brewery in the northern part of the state, but it is better than anything I’ve ever had from some big-name brands. It’s why it’s been voted one of the top beers in the state for the last few years.

I don’t miss the sideways glances my way as he rummages through the cooler, pulling out two large cans.

Unfortunately, neither does Jenna. “You need a palate cleanser. How long has it been since you’ve had any action?”

Oh. My. God.

Almost instantly, fire licks my cheeks as I widen my eyes. She did not just say that. Out loud. For everyone around us to hear. And, of course, the hottie across from us perks up, taking his sweet time to crack open the cans.

“I get action.” Not that anyone needs to know, but I feel the need to salvage my reputation.

Jenna flashes a devilish smile. “I’m not talking with yourself. I mean with a man. An actual penis instead of a fake one.”

Is it possible for the ground to open up and swallow me whole? Is there a fire exit nearby that I can dart through to get away from this conversation she feels the need to have? Right now. In front of everyone?

“At least I know I can get the job done.” That was the one thing I hated about my ex. He never took the time to take care of me. I couldn’t tell you how many nights I had to finish myself because it was wham, bam, thank you, ma’am. I’m pretty sure he’d never make it as a bull rider since he couldn’t hang on for at least eight seconds.

“You just haven’t met the right guy.”

I look up and see him smirking at us, now one hundred percent invested in this embarrassing conversation and playing right into Jenna’s hand.

“See. Even he agrees. You need some dick from a guy who knows how to give it.”

I toss two twenties on the counter, not waiting for the total. “And now I’m done with this conversation.” Before either of them can speak, I grab my beer and walk away.

Jenna jogs up and shoves a napkin into my front pocket, more than likely with a phone number scribbled on it. “For later. He was cute. You should go for it.”

I narrow my eyes. “A little young, don’t you think?”

She shrugs, taking a sip of her beer. “Is there such a thing? Besides, you know what they say about younger guys. They have lots of stamina.”

“So does Bob, and he doesn’t talk.” We walk down the aisle to our seats, surprised she got something along the first baseline and only a few rows back. “How on earth did you score these?”

The gleam in her eye should be a warning. I’ve witnessed—and experienced—what happens after it appears. Nothing good.

“A client gave them to me last night. He *really* liked my performance.”

Perfect. “So you bought them with your vagina?”

She laughs and grabs her seat. “Didn’t need to. He was more interested in the show than being a participant.”

I quirk a brow, setting my beer in the cupholder in front of me. “That’s weird. Then why give you baseball tickets?”

“Ahh, that’s for me to know and you to figure out.”

What the fuck? “I don’t get it.”

Again with the smirk. “You will.”

If I’ve learned anything during our friendship, don’t ask questions when you don’t want the answer. It’s best to leave it alone and focus on the guys warming up on the field.

People start to trickle in, the seats quickly filling up except for the four next to us. Maybe we’ll get lucky and won’t be bothered with annoying people who only want to talk the entire time or drunks who do nothing but yell and spill beer all over the place.

Shortly after the first pitch, every ounce of tension disappears as the sun beams down and lifts my mood. Maybe Jenna was right, though I’ll never tell her. I didn’t realize how much I needed a mental break until now with everything going on.

Around the middle of the inning, people start shuffling around to grab snacks or drinks, forcing the rest of us to get a jumpstart on our leg workout with all the up and downs to let them through. I notice a group of guys heading down our row from the corner of my eye that didn’t cross our path earlier. Great. There goes my hope of not being annoyed.

“Maysen?”

Cold dread fills my chest, practically stopping my heart as I fractionally turn my head to the rowdy group, food and beer nearly spilling over their arms. A slow smile crosses his face as our eyes lock over the rims of our sunglasses. If only I could match his enthusiasm. Instead, the opposite happens. Here I thought I’d get a reprieve from all the drama that’s entered my life recently, only to come face-to-face with the primary source.

So much for my good day.



“Hey, Maysen. Fancy meeting you here,” Brandon says with a smile.

“Yeah, fancy.” I turn to Jenna, who only smirks.

Bitch. I should have known she’d be involved.

“Hey, Pete,” she says, leaning forward enough to put her breasts on display.

A smile instantly lights up his face. “Looking good, Jenna.”

Well, at least I know who supplied the tickets. Traitors.

Matt—juggling most of the snacks—gives a small wave once he sits and distributes the haul. I try not to laugh as he almost spills beer on the tub of popcorn while grumbling about getting no help.

I sigh with relief as Brandon takes the seat next to me. Maybe it won’t be a wasted day after all.

“How’s it going?” he says, adjusting himself in the seat.

“Not bad. Beautiful day for a game.” It feels weird to make lame small talk, but I don’t want to engage anyone else in this conversation.

Brandon must sense my apprehension because he smiles and nods. “It is. I’m glad you decided to come out.”

“Me too.”

During our short little conversation, I can feel a pair of eyes burning a hole through the side of my face. However, I refuse to give them another glance.

After two innings of pure, tight-pants enjoyment, I find myself in need of a bathroom and more alcohol. I point to Jenna’s can with a raised brow.

“Yeah, I could go for another. Oh, can you grab a pretzel too?”

“With cheese?”

She stares blankly. “Duh.”

I laugh and give an apologetic smile to Brandon. “Sorry. I promise to make it quick.”

He laughs and leans back. “If you think it’ll be quick, you’re grossly mistaken.”

“Let’s hope the lines are short then. I can’t miss my favorite pastime.”

“I didn’t know you liked baseball that much.” Brandon raises a brow.

I smirk. “I don’t. It’s the pants I love.”

He shakes his head and chooses not to respond, probably wise. As I make my way down the row, voicing my apology, a hand grazes the small of my back. I resist the urge to acknowledge his touch, focusing on getting as far away as possible.

Brandon wasn’t joking. The concession lines were ridiculous. Next time I’ll wait for the vendors going up and down the aisles and get whatever’s available instead—anything to avoid leaving my seat or interacting with the guy selling my favorite beer again.

As soon as I get back to my row, I damn near drop everything from my hands. Who decided to play musical chairs? Pete is now sitting in my spot next to Jenna. Brandon moved next to Matt, leaving the only open chair next to Tyler.

Great.

I hand the traitor her food and drink, though part of me wanted to toss it to the ground. Or over her head. My earlier suspicions were correct. This was all a setup.

Tyler didn’t try to touch me this time as I folded myself into the new seat, scooting as far away as possible.

“Did you get my text?” he finally says after a few minutes.

“Yep.” I won’t elaborate, which only irritates him more.

“Can we talk about this?”

“Nope.”

“Are you going to say more than one-syllable words?”

“Maybe.” There, that one is two.

Tyler rolls his eyes. “Honestly, act like an adult.”

A bitter laugh sneaks through my lips. “This is acting like an adult. I don’t want to talk about it, yet you can’t seem to take the hint.”

I try to ignore him, only to catch him shifting closer from the corner of my eye. “We need to talk about this.”

“Talk about what? How you assaulted me in a hallway last night? That’s what you’d like to discuss for everyone to hear?”

The tips of his ears turn red. “You want to yell that a little louder? I don’t think the umpire heard you. And I did *not* assault you.”

I give in and turn to face him. “What would you call pinning me against a wall and kissing me without permission then?”

I’m glad everyone is too engrossed in the game or their own conversations to pay attention to ours.

“You kissed me back,” he says, whispering low.

My traitorous body reacts to his voice, vividly remembering how it felt to have him pressed against me, bringing my teenage fantasy to life in the blink of an eye.

“An involuntary reaction.”

Tyler sees through my lies. “Your body says otherwise.”

“My body doesn’t speak for me, nor does it make my decisions.”

He leans closer. “I think you wanted it just as much as I did.”

Is he for real? “You don’t want me. You’re having some kind of pissing match with Ian, and I’m the collateral damage neither of you cares about.”

“That’s not true.”

I scoff and turn my attention back to the game. “I know what I know.”

He follows my lead, staring at the field as the inning ends. “You don’t, though.”

How dare he presume to know me. Never once has he shown interest. Not until Ian started paying attention at the office.

If there were ever a reason to take a vow of celibacy, this would be it.

For half a moment, we sit in silence. Nothing awkward or pushed. Just two people with a mountain of sexual tension between them.

Then Tyler has to ruin it by opening his mouth.

“I bet if I kissed you again, you’d react the same way.”

I look at him out of the corner of my eye. “You mean running away as fast as I can?”

Tyler leans closer. “Kissing me back, pulling me close, forgetting everything except the feel of our bodies pressed together.”

His gaze drops to my lips as I run my teeth over them. The last thing I want to do is kiss Mr. Irresistible, but at the same time, now that those words have a life of their own, every cell in my body wants to take this challenge and run with it.

“Wanna bet?”

“Hey, look,” Jenna exclaims, pointing to the big screen.

I breathe a sigh of relief, thankful to put a little space—and resolve—between us, short-lived as it might be.

Great. The stupid Kiss Cam. Nothing reminds a person of how single they are like seeing other people kiss.

“I love watching these,” says Jenna. Since when? She’s not a relationship-type girl, nor does she enjoy public displays of affection by anyone.

“Me too,” Pete says with a smile aimed at Jenna. What the fuck is happening right now?

The first few were cute: an elderly couple pecking each other on the lips, followed by a middle-aged couple sporting the same amount of heat. Another couple pops up, clearly embarrassed and laughing too hard to follow through. Even I’ll admit the dad holding his infant daughter and kissing her would melt anyone’s icy heart.

“Oh, my god!” Jenna screams.

My eyes widen as I stare at the screen. Fuck, no. It can’t be.

“Go on! Kiss him.”

“Do it.”

“Kiss!”

Tyler smirks as the people behind us chant and cheer, practically shoving our shoulders to help push us together. How in the hell, out of twenty-something thousand people, did we get picked to be on camera?

“Come on,” he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me up. I try to dig my heels in, refusing to give in to peer pressure, but I also don’t want to make an ass of myself. This isn’t a fight I’ll win since the camera hasn’t budged while I try everything I can to avoid the situation.

“Do it quick so we can sit down.”

The crowd cheers louder, no longer limited to the people directly behind us. The entire stadium is whistling, waiting for the show.

I close my eyes and lean forward, anticipating the hard peck, only to be surprised when he cradles my face in his hands, tilting my head to the side before slanting his mouth over mine, completely taking my breath away. All thought disappears, including the screaming crowd. My entire focus stays on Tyler’s lips, feeling them part and asking for permission while keeping it modest or family-friendly.

Damn him for being right. Before I can stop, I wind my arms around his neck, holding on tight as he bends me backward, putting on a show. His tongue licks against my lips, and I willingly grant him access, handing over my power.

The roar of cheers slowly filters back in, but not until I open my eyes and realize Tyler's no longer kissing me. Instead, I'm left stranded and stupefied while the camera moves on, forgetting about our chemistry.

How long was I standing there looking like an idiot? It had to be longer than a few seconds. The way Tyler's touch ignited sparks across my skin, lighting me up like no one ever has, felt like a lifetime.

I slowly sink back into my seat, staring into space but not paying attention to anything other than Tyler's few high-fives to the guys behind us.

Of course, he was right. As much as I want my brain to remind me that he's no good and any sort of relationship will never work, the moment he touches me, my body—my heart—takes over and does everything to contradict logic and sound judgment.

With the game still going on, I pretend to smile at the home run rather than the thrill of Tyler Cannon claiming my lips for everyone to see. There wasn't a hallway to hide in this time or specific people to avoid. Not a single fuck was given as he kissed me with wanton abandon.

And damn if I didn't like it.

"Told you," he whispers, clearly amused and satisfied with himself.

I slowly turn my focus back to him. "Don't be too flattered. I would have reacted the same way if anyone kissed me like that."

"Whatever you say."

Somehow we fall into a comfortable silence, engrossed in the game with Tyler explaining a few things I didn't quite understand. It's almost enjoyable being next to him, acting like

two friends rather than boss/employee. Or nobody and the most popular boy in school.

The passing vendors cry out for last call, prompting everyone to dig into their wallets before they miss their chance. It doesn't matter if it's the beer they've been drinking. All it needs to be is alcohol.

"Want one?" Tyler raises his hand, holding two fingers as the guy nods and digs through the ice bucket.

"Sure," I say, standing to grab some money from my pocket.

"I've got it." Tyler tries to brush my hands away.

"No, let me." Before he objects, I fling the bills from my pocket and pass them to the vendor before grabbing the two cold aluminum bottles.

Tyler stares at the white wad of paper in his lap as I try to hand him the beer. His brows further knit together as he opens it up.

"What's this?"

When I look over, the puzzle pieces start to click into place as I slowly realize what I'm seeing. Fucking Jenna.

"Oh, that. It's nothing."

He fans out the crumpled napkin, smoothing the wrinkles until every number is visible. "Really? Because it looks like a phone number."

Tired of holding on to the bottle, I sigh and set it in his cup holder. "Probably because it is."

For half a second, his green eyes turn black. "Why?"

"Why is it a phone number? Are you feeling existential all of a sudden?"

"No, why do you have it?"

"Why do you care?" I'm getting a little annoyed at his questions. "Just because I have some guy's phone number doesn't mean I'll use it."

“Good. Then you won’t care if I do this.” Tyler shreds the paper into tiny pieces, letting the breeze sweep them down the aisle.

“What is your problem?” I ask, letting my voice raise slightly.

“Nothing.” He grabs his beer and keeps his gaze locked forward on the game. “You just said you weren’t going to use it.”

“I never said I wasn’t. And you had no right to do that. Who I potentially date or get phone numbers from is none of your business.”

He stays quiet, choosing to ignore my question. I don’t understand what his issue is. For half a second, there was peace between us. He wasn’t a dick, and I wasn’t on the defensive from every word coming from his mouth.

Brandon looks over with a frown. He must have heard our little interaction. I lean over to Pete and smack his shoulder. “I want my seat back.”

He pauses in mid-conversation with Jenna. “Huh?”

Forget it. “Never mind.” I grab my beer and start down the aisle amid the protests of the people I’m inconveniencing to get as far away from Tyler as possible. On my way up the stairs, I text Jenna, letting her know I’ll meet her by the exit. She responds with a question mark, but I don’t feel like explaining myself over the phone. It’ll be a conversation back at the apartment, starting with lots of yelling for ambushing me with this cockamamie scheme of shoving Tyler and me together.

They’re all on my shit list.





## CHAPTER *Twelve*

### *Maysen*

“The boardroom is all set,” I say, poking my head through Tyler’s open door. This past week has been nothing but a cat-and-mouse game, keeping our interactions to a minimum and in public. The last thing I need is to be alone with Tyler—only people might start to get suspicious if I keep playing this game. Ian’s been hovering more than usual. And don’t think I’ve missed the constant eyebrow raises from Holly. I’ll be shocked if the muscles don’t freeze in that position, permanently making her appear surprised.

Tyler looks up from his computer, a slow smile creeping up. “Thank you.” Before I have the chance to ditch him, he calls my name. “Can you look at something, please?”

I close my eyes and sigh, letting my shoulders sink toward the ground. Fantastic.

“Absolutely.” I take careful, calculated steps to his desk, maintaining a healthy distance. The minute I get within an arm’s length, I pause and fight my traitorous body as his

cologne assaults my nose. Why does he have to smell so good? Someone you despise should smell like rotten eggs or week-old milk. Not like someone who makes you think of sex.

Maybe that's my problem. I need to get laid and burn off some of this sexual energy. Redirect it somewhere that isn't Tyler Cannon.

"Can you look this over to see if it makes sense? For some reason, it's reading funny to me." Tyler stands from his chair, gesturing for me to take a seat.

I swallow past the bundle of nerves crawling up my throat and lower myself onto the plush leather chair.

*I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.*

Nothing about the paragraph seems funny or out of place. It's the same as when I proofed it yesterday. Tyler leans over my left shoulder, bringing his face next to mine. Ah, so this was his plan. Trick me into getting close with no way out—sneaky bastard.

My heart rate kicks up a notch when I feel his gaze trace my profile. If I turned my head slightly, our lips would practically be touching.

No. Stay focused. Even if you want to kiss him again, it won't happen.

"Looks fine to me."

Against my better judgment, I spin the wrong way and come face-to-face with Tyler, sporting a satisfied smirk. "Good. I'm glad you like what you see."

I trap my bottom lip between my teeth, doing everything to push away the ever-present chemistry between us. How is it possible to hate someone while still attracted to them?

Maybe I should see a therapist. There could be some deep-rooted issues that need addressing.

I need to get out of here. "I should get back to the boardroom. The execs from Hoffman will be here any minute."

Before I have the chance to sneak around Tyler, he reaches out an arm, trapping me against his desk. “They won’t be here for another ten minutes. Besides, there’s something I want to talk to you about first.”

His green eyes bore into mine, pleading to hear him out. Only there’s nothing he could say that will change my mind. Getting into any sort of relationship with your boss will never work. Everything would be great if my body could get on the same page.

“Can it wait?” I hate how breathy my voice sounds.

Tyler eyes me like a predator, dragging his gaze up and down my body before focusing on my lips. “Are you avoiding me?”

My nerves kick up a notch, threatening the tiny vein on the side of my neck to almost explode from the pressure. “That would be silly, considering you’re my boss.”

The corner of his lip twitches with amusement. “Do I make you nervous?”

“Only when you’re crowding my personal space. But I would say that to anyone, so don’t think you’re something special.”

He takes a step back, still caging me in with his arm. “Did you go back and get that guy’s phone number after the game?”

Whatever warm feelings I had fizzled into the air. “You’re an ass. Not that it’s *any* of your business, but no. I didn’t.”

“Good.” His gaze drops to my lips again. “I can’t stop thinking about our last kiss. Tell me I’m not alone in this.”

Do I still think about it? Only on the lonely nights ending in Y, but Tyler can’t know how I feel. His reputation precedes him, and I know who will get hurt if I give in to this temptation and who will walk away unscathed.

I’ve spent too many years pining over this man, and I’m not about to let two moments of weakness dissolve everything I’ve built.

I place my hands on his lapels, ready to push him away, just as the door opens with Ian standing on the other side.

Great. Once again, I'm in a compromised position with one of these two. Why does the universe hate me?

A scowl quickly forms on Ian's face.

"I was looking for Maysen. Guess I found her."

I push Tyler away and hurry to the other side of his desk. "I thought you should know Hoffman is here early."

I nod and look back at Tyler, wearing a smug smile while shoving his hands in his pockets. Again, he's an ass.

"Thanks. I'll show them in."

Tyler quickly grabs my elbow, holding me back. "This isn't over yet," he hisses in my ear.

I jerk my arm free and frown. We've landed the last four big contracts because of my quick thinking and ability to read the room. What is his problem?

Ian stares at our silent exchange. Shit. I almost forgot he was there. I quickly brush past him, hiding my reddening face as I duck into the boardroom already filled with the representatives from Hoffman and Associates. This account isn't huge, but it'll still pull in a reasonable amount of business if we land them. And from what I've heard, Darrin Hoffman is difficult to deal with. He's been through four companies in the last two years, citing irreconcilable differences for his departure, like some glorified failed marriage.

I'm determined not to let us be the next in line.

"Mr. Hoffman," I say, extending my hand to the gentleman sitting closest to the door. From all my research, I know exactly who everyone is, their rank within the company, and any strengths and weaknesses they possess. At least my avoidance of Tyler has proven to help my professional life, even if it's hindered my personal.

"Darrin, please." I don't miss the appreciative glance as he not-so-subtly checks me out. Tyler doesn't either as he clears his throat once inside the room.

“Hoffman, good to see you again.”

“Likewise.”

Perfect. I can't wait for the pissing match to see whose dick is bigger because, knowing these two, that's precisely where this is going.

I sit next to Tyler and pull out my laptop, selecting the PowerPoint presentation I've worked my ass on the last few nights. Before the door closes to start the meeting, Ian glides through, taking the last available seat across from Tyler.

“My apologies for the late entrance. Tim was pulled into a last-minute meeting and asked that I fill in.” He flashes a cocky smile. “Darrin, nice to see you again.”

He returns the grin with a nod. “Glad you could join us. Maybe we can get something accomplished now.” I can practically hear Tyler's teeth scrape against each other, waiting for the dust to fall from the corners of his mouth.

This ought to go well.

Our team is flawless in their presentation, hitting every button to point out their deficiencies and where we can fill in the gaps. Ian glances our way every once in a while between jokes and sarcastic comments. Tyler brushes a hand against my thigh halfway through, sending a spark across the area. I try not to react and keep a stony demeanor, but he continues his silent assault, dragging his fingertips across the exposed skin, forcing me to shift my legs to quell the newly formed ache between them.

I glare at him from the corner of my eyes. The asshole smirks and wraps his hand around my knee. What in the fuck is wrong with him? Has he lost all his marbles? I fake a cough and slap his hand away, keeping everyone none the wiser about the antics happening beneath the table. The only person that looks our way is Ian—who undoubtedly needs to stay in the dark.

Most of the Hoffman team nods their heads in approval when we finish. Everyone except Darrin, who keeps a mask of indifference on his face.

“You’ve made some valid points, but I’m still not sold. We need to review everything you’ve presented and think it over.”

Shit. We’re losing him.

I look between Ian and Tyler, trying to figure out who will salvage this meeting. Since Tyler’s freakout after the Williamson incident, I’ve resisted saying anything unless prompted because—as Tyler put it—I’m only here to run the slideshow. They need to reiterate our stance and explain how we can make this merger work for both sides.

My nerves get the best of me as I chew on my bottom lip while clamping my hands between my thighs.

Tyler finally speaks up before I summon the courage to open my mouth. “I think the choice is clear. Given the amounts from your last fiscal year and what we’re proposing, you can double your profits while staying under budget. It’s a win-win situation. Only a fool would turn it down.”

Darrin’s eyes light up as he bounces his gaze between my lips and chest. Bile churns in my stomach, an uncomfortable feeling settling like a rock. Something about him rubs me the wrong way. Ian takes notice, smirking while sitting back in his chair.

I glance out of the corner of my eye and bite my lip harder. Why does Tyler look like he’s about to rip someone’s head off?

“You make a valid point.” Darrin smirks. “How about an after-hours meeting to discuss the finer details?”

Tyler stays stoic, tapping his pen furiously against the legal pad. “I think we can arrange that.”

“Good.” Darrin slaps the table before standing. “Let’s discuss it on the way out. Ms. James, it was a pleasure to meet you.” He clasps my hand, giving it a firm shake.

“I hope to see you again soon, Mr. Hoffman.”

Everyone stands from the table, heading out the door. Tyler pins me with a glare, silently warning me to stay put. What is his problem? I didn’t have any intention of going with anyway.

Once everyone is gone, I organize the room, preparing it for the next meeting in an hour. I rest my hands on the edge of the table and sigh. I can't get this dirty feeling off me. The way those men were staring makes me want to rush into Tyler's office and use his shower to scrub my skin until it's raw, though I don't think it'll wash away. Something about the way Ian and Darrin stared... it felt like I was a hooker turning tricks, even though I didn't do anything the entire time.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I don't hear the door click shut as I turn and come face to face with a furious Tyler.

"What was that about?"

I draw my brows together. "I don't follow."

He stalks toward me with careful, calculated steps. "Your little display at the end. What was that about?"

Has he lost his mind? "Go back to your office and take a nap. Clearly, you need more sleep if you're imagining things."

I turn back to the task at hand, waiting to hear the creak of the door—only nothing.

Tyler's hand grazes my hip, the first warning before his warm breath beats against my neck. "I think you know exactly what I'm talking about. Your little fidgeting ploy to garner attention?"

"What?" As soon as I turn around, I regret it. Once again, Tyler cages me against a table, leaving me vulnerable to his attack.

His eyes lock on to my lips as I clamp down with my teeth, slowly dragging them over the plump flesh. The same awareness from earlier settles in my stomach—instead of unease and dread, heat and longing get thrust to the forefront.

"I don't like when people look at my things."

Is he for real? "Your things? And what on earth makes you think you own anything in this room?"

Tyler smirks. "Trust me, Maysen. I own more than you fucking know. As the majority shareholder, everything in this office is mine—including you. And judging by the flush

creeping up your skin, you know I'm right. Your body is mine even if you're not ready to accept it."

My heart threatens to beat out of my chest as he comes nose-to-nose with me.

"I always get what I want."

Before I can rebut his argument, his lips crash onto mine, sucking all the oxygen from my lungs, leaving me no choice but to use him to breathe. Our tongues tangle together in a fierce competition, seeing who can gain dominance over the other.

I groan as he lifts me to the edge of the immaculate table, pushing my legs apart to slide against my body. This is dangerous. Anyone could enter the room and catch us in the act—with my skirt hiked up and Tyler gripping my hips, keeping me in place. But the rational part of my brain isn't registering the precariousness of the situation. All it can focus on is kissing the man who occupies more of my thoughts than necessary.

Tyler rolls his hips, his hardening erection pressing against my heated core. I groan again as he twists his fingers in my hair, pulling my head back to expose my neck to his restless ministrations.

"I think you enjoy being teased, wanting to see if you'll get a rise out of me." He presses into me again. "You feel that? This is what you do to me." His lips dip below the neckline of my blouse while simultaneously pinching a nipple between his fingers. "And if I react this way, you better believe others do as well. No one gets to see what's mine. Is that clear?"

His words resonate through my ears, clearing the fog of lust away. I shove his chest, putting some much-needed space between us. The resounding slap echoes in the empty room, reddening his cheek instantly. "Nobody—and I mean nobody—owns me. You may think you're Mr. Irresistible, but you're not."

Tyler brings a hand to his face with a cocky grin. "Your lips tell a different story."



“My lips don’t rule my head.”

The pressure rises in my chest as he takes a step closer. “You’re wrong. There’s something between us, Maysen. Deny it all you want, but you will see I’m right. You won’t walk away from me.”

I step to the side and gather the leftover items from the table. “Watch me.”

Without another glance, I fling the door open and dash to my cubicle, tossing the folders onto my desk before taking off again. I wish I had an office to hide in, somewhere I could slam a door to ease my frustration.

Who in the hell does he think he is? Using my nervousness as a tactic to gain sexual favor with a client might be the craziest thing he’s accused me of yet. Has he lost his mind?

Still, I can’t shake the ghost of his lips against mine. Or how his fingers dug into my hip, anchoring my body against his. And what’s worse, I wanted to believe his words, that he owned me, because then I could stop pretending that I didn’t like it when he got jealous.

No.

I won’t give in. Not now. Not ever.

When I get back to my desk, Tyler is holed up in his office, giving me the chance to set up for the next meeting without interruption. I work quickly, then grab my phone, skirting off to the break room. I quickly tap out a message to Jenna.

**Me: It’s amateur night, right?**

**Jenna: Oh, please tell me you’re actually coming.**

**Me: I need to blow off some steam.**

And also prove a point.

**Jenna: I’ll let everyone know. And who knows, you may never want to return to your dumb 9-5 job once you start.**

Highly unlikely. But no one gets to dictate what I can and can’t do with my body.

He thinks I'm doing it on purpose? I haven't yet, but now I have the sudden urge to follow through.

Let's hope he somehow finds out. I can only imagine how he'd react. And I pray I'm there when he does.



## *Tyler*

“This is a horrible idea,” I mutter under my breath, following the guys into Starlight, the exclusive upscale adult entertainment club nestled in the heart of the business district. High class and different from every other strip club out there, mostly filled with young executives and entrepreneurs who need to blow off steam at the end of the day without getting sideways glances for going to the more seedy establishments. From the outside, you'd never know women take their clothes off for money. Not to mention the other various activities that happen in the backroom. As upscale as it is, it's still a place where skin and sex sell.

Since we walked into the building, Ian has been glued to Darrin's side, exchanging jokes and lewd remarks. Not surprising they wanted to come here. As evident by the VIP seating, Darrin is a known playboy and enjoys his after-hours entertainment. I can think of a million places I'd rather be right now. If only we had sealed the deal earlier today. But something tells me this won't be a quick “meeting,” judging by their crooked smiles as they gawk at the girls on the different stages.

The scantily-clad waitress sets the glasses filled with an amber liquid in front of everyone. “First round is on the house.”

Ian smiles and leaves a generous tip on the tray. “Keep them coming.” Her face flushes before turning to leave. I don't miss Darrin's stare as she walks away.

“So, how can we make this work?” I ask, leaning forward to grab a glass. The smoky peat flavor hits my tongue as I sip,

completely shocked they're giving away a high-quality single malt like this.

"Relax, Tyler. There's plenty of time to talk business." Darrin smirks while staring at the girls. "Let's enjoy the show first."

So much for an early night.

The main floor has three stages: two off to the sides, with the larger one drawing most of the attention in the center. The dim lighting allows the spotlights to illuminate the girls, focusing on all their assets as they slide up and down the poles, dancing to the men sitting next to the stage with their tongues hanging out like hungry dogs. Not trashy like you see in the outskirts of town, but classy—well, as much as you can get when women strip for money: no tassels or bleached blonde hair, no "D" squad or sticky floors. The place is well-kept and doesn't feel like you'll contract an STD from the furniture.

Girl after girl takes the stage, each showing their dancing skills and muscles. I will give them credit. They're far more athletic than people believe. The strength it must take to do some of those tricks would surprise you.

Darrin and Ian keep the drinks flowing, snickering back and forth like schoolboys reading their first *Playboy*. All I want is to close this deal, not sit and listen to their pre-pubescent antics.

"What I wouldn't give to go to the back room with that one," Darrin says with a gleam in his eye. The petite redhead slides down the pole, bending backward before dropping to the splits and rolling toward the wolves in the front row.

"Bet she could entertain you for hours," Ian adds. "Fling her around like a rag doll."

The song ends, thankfully, and the redhead grabs the few remaining bills thrust her way while picking up her clothes along the way.

The DJ announces the next dancer, who promptly dives into her routine, twisting and turning to the upbeat music.

There isn't enough alcohol in this building to keep me sitting next to these two pigs. At this point, I don't care if I'm the one to close the deal with Darrin. With Ian being so buddy-buddy, he can do all the work. It's my signature on the papers at the end of the day.

I glance over the railing and spy a familiar face. What is Pete doing here? Gwen would skin him alive if she ever caught him in this sort of establishment.

"I'll be right back," I say, even though the two aren't paying any attention to what I'm doing, focused on the naked girl giving everyone a show.

The minute I reach the main floor, a prickle of awareness hits my skin. I check my surroundings, not finding anything out of place, as I pull out the chair next to my friend. "Didn't think I'd see you here."

Pete slides his gaze my way, the corner of his lip turned up in amusement. "Could say the same about you."

I laugh and flag down a waitress, ordering the two of us a round. "I'm here on business."

Pete follows my eyes to Ian and Darrin, hanging on the balcony's railing with their tongues practically hitting the floor.

"He always keeps it classy, doesn't he."

"Are you shocked?"

Pete laughs and claps when the dancer finishes. "Hardly. Ian's the kind of asshat that would bring a date here."

"Not wrong."

The DJ announces the next dancer, Gemma Fire, causing Pete to squirm and straighten in his seat. He must come here more often than I realize if he knows the dancers by name.

There's something familiar about her, though. I can't quite figure it out. The pink-colored hair and the layers of heavy makeup are throwing me off. But when she looks right at me, I know exactly who it is. You can almost hear the surprised gasp

as Jenna keeps up the routine, never once breaking character or losing her place.

Now I get why Pete is here. It also explains why they were so chummy at the baseball game.

“What does Gwen think about you being here?”

Pete smiles, still staring at Jenna as she teases another guy a few tables down. “Don’t know, don’t care. We broke up last week.”

Whoa. How did I not know about this? Have I been so focused on myself that I haven’t paid attention to my friends and their lives?

“I, wow, man. Sorry to hear that.”

Pete turns to face me. “Why? I’m not. It was long overdue. Her nagging and constant hovering made me realize she wasn’t the one. Besides, after three years together, if I hadn’t pulled the pin yet, I wasn’t going to. Stringing her along simply because the sex was too good to pass up wasn’t fair.”

Huh. Never thought I’d see the day when Pete would stand up for what he wanted. He’s always been like a puppy following girls around, doing everything he can to please them.

Curiosity gets the best of me. “Does this have anything to do with her?” I jerk my head toward Jenna, who’s now topless and doing some scissor-kick on the pole. The last thing I needed to see was Maysen’s best friend naked. Now I can’t unsee it.

Pete doesn’t answer, keeping his gaze fixed on Jenna instead. She notices and crawls over to us, her eyes darting from mine to his. A glimmer of apprehension crosses her face the closer she gets, and I doubt it has to do with the two of us seeing her this way.

“Hey,” she whispers, spreading her knees apart while leaning back onto her heels. “What’s he doing here?”

Pete’s hands twitch on the tabletop, clearly wanting to touch but knowing he can’t. “He’s here on business.”

Am I invisible? “Hi, I’m right here,” I say. “I can hear you just fine.”

Jenna leans forward, still not looking at me. “Tonight just keeps getting better.”

What does that mean? Before I can ask, she grabs the bill from between Pete’s fingers with her teeth, tosses him a wink, then slinks back to the pole to finish her routine. Thunderous applause echoes through the packed room, with several guys throwing more money on stage before she turns to leave.

“Did you break up with Gwen because of Jenna?” I ask when the crowd quiets enough so we can hear each other.

Pete smirks. “Not entirely, but she showed me that I could do better.”

“So you slept with her.” Not a question. He doesn’t respond, which is answer enough. “Tell me you didn’t do it here and paid for it.”

Again, silence.

Stupid, stupid, stupid man. Letting his dick think for his head.

“What can I say?”

“Maybe don’t let Little Pete run the show?”

He barks out a laugh. “Big Pete, man. Big Pete.”

Whatever. I flag down a waitress and grab another drink. After watching Jenna strip and knowing Pete has turned a one-eighty on his life, I don’t think I can take another minute. I glance back at the balcony, noting two girls sitting on Ian and Darrin’s laps. Wonderful. This is not how I conduct business. Why on earth did I allow it to happen?

I quickly toss some money on the waitress’s tray and slam the drink. “Okay, I need to leave. Enjoy paying for things others typically get for free.”

Before I stand, the DJ’s voice booms over the speakers. “All right, gentlemen, please direct your attention to the center stage. We have a special treat for you, so grab your wallets and

hang on to your cocks because you'll be purring this kitten's name all night. Popping her cherry on the Starlight stage, please give a long-awaited welcome to the delicious and sexy Tawny Delight."

Something stops me from leaving the table. The same prickle of awareness holds me in place. The new dancer confidently takes the stage, swinging her hips while flipping her blonde hair before grabbing the pole to start her routine.

"She's good," Pete says, leaning over. "And she's an amateur?"

You'd never know it from her skill and comfort level with her routine. Not that I'm an expert, but this girl is crazy talented.

She drops back to the floor, teasing the crowd by pressing her breasts together while trapping her hands between her thighs. Something about this seems familiar.

As if feeling my stare, the dancer looks up and freezes before a slow, sultry smile crosses her face.

Holy shit.

It's Maysen.



## CHAPTER *Thirteen*

### *Maysen*

Jenna is killing it up there, doing all the tricks I could only imagine performing without breaking something. It makes me want to attend classes regularly rather than only going to blow off steam when Tyler pisses me off.

I put the final touches on my costume: a front-clasped teal bra with enough glitter to make a five-year-old girl squeal in delight and a matching thong, thankfully without the glitter. The last thing I need is to scrub that area raw to get all the glitter off. A few of the girls helped secure the wig to my head so it wouldn't fall off during the show. Going incognito was required. It helps to keep the drunks away afterward, maintaining my anonymity. I stare at my reflection and turn my head from side to side. Not gonna lie; I look pretty damn good as a blonde. The makeup is overkill, but it's go big or go home like everything else in the entertainment industry.

The cheering crowd is my cue, pushing my breasts together one more time for good measure before wiping a



finger around my lips to catch any wayward lipstick. I can't tell if the butterflies in my stomach are from nerves or excitement. Probably a bit of both.

Jenna's bright smile greets me first as she ducks behind the curtain. "They're all warmed up for you. Are you scared?"

I shrug. "Maybe a smidge. I'm more afraid I'll slip down the pole and crack my head open."

"Don't worry. That's only happened once," Jasmine, one of the other girls, says. "She made the mistake of putting baby oil on her legs before taking the stage. It hardly happens. You'll do great, especially with that routine from warm-ups. It was hot." She waves a hand in front of her face to exaggerate the point.

"No promises." The DJ's voice booms over the speakers, hyping me up to the crowd. I blow out a slow breath. Okay, no room for nerves or negative thoughts. The whole point is to let loose, have some fun, and be someone else for a moment.

"Maysen," Jenna says, grabbing my elbow. "There's something I gotta tell you." The minute I hear my stage name, I transform myself into character.

"Can it wait until I get back?"

She lets go of my elbow and twists her lips to the side. "Okay, but don't say I didn't try to warn you."

I take the stage with a final mental pep talk, grateful I didn't stumble or trip along the way. Once the music starts, I block everything out—the guys in the crowd, my thoughts and fears, the little voice inside my head telling me this is a mistake. As soon as my back hits the smooth metal pole, I'm no longer Maysen James. I'm Tawny Delight, an entertainer who doesn't have any problems in the world.

The electric energy flows through me, zapping my nerves into oblivion as I swing around the pole, showing my strength and skills. I barely hear the catcalls and piggish comments from the guys in the front row. It's only me and the spotlight.

Until my eyes land on a familiar pair of green eyes sitting next to the stage.

What in the hell is Tyler doing here? I wouldn't have thought he'd need to be in a place like this, getting his rocks off when he constantly has women falling all over themselves to get to him.

This is perfect. I can witness it first-hand rather than wonder what Tyler's reaction would be on the off-chance he found out.

*He owns me?* I don't think so.

*No one gets to see what's his?* Well, try this on for size.

The music switches, giving me a hard bass line and the perfect opportunity to drop to my knees and crawl to the table next to him. I spread my legs wide while running my hands up my body, making sure to hit the pivotal points before running up the column of my throat. The four young guys smile wide, tossing several bills onto the stage, begging me to take off my clothes.

I glance over at Tyler with a wicked grin. His eyes dilate, never once moving them from my hands. Good. I want to make sure he's ready for this.

The flimsy clasp holding my bra together opens with a flick of my wrist, freeing my breasts into my waiting hands. The four guys yell with excitement, tossing more bills onto the stage as I lick my lips.

Every comfort zone I've ever been in shatters in seconds, thrusting myself into uncharted territory. I've never been one for the spotlight, always perfectly content living just off to the side. Close enough to the excitement but never partaking. Until now.

I take great care in making my way back to the pole, putting the finishing moves on my routine. I constantly sneak glances back at Tyler, whose fierce expression hasn't changed. You can see the whites of his knuckles through the dim lights, keeping his hands clenched tightly on top of the table. The guy next to him averts his gaze, undoubtedly commanded by the tyrant.

To throw a little gas on the fire, I reach a hand out to the audience during my final spin and flip Tyler the bird as I pass. Every guy stands from their seat, loudly whistling while cheering for more. The DJ pumps me up again, asking for another round of applause for my debut dance.

I quickly gather the money and my bra from the stage, grinning from ear to ear as I duck behind the curtain.

“Holy shit, girl. I would have never known you were a pole virgin before tonight,” one of the girls says before engulfing me in a hug.

“Yeah, you were amazing. Raised the bar for all the other amateurs wanting to try it.”

I secured the bra before taking a seat at the makeup table I was using. “Thanks, girls. It was more fun than I imagined.”

“Gonna give up that stuffy office job to join us?” Jenna asks, bumping her hip into my shoulder as I start removing the wig.

“Not that much fun,” I say with a laugh. “This was more to prove a point to someone.”

Jenna quirks a brow. “Would it happen to be someone in the front row?”

“Maybe.”

She laughs and wraps her arms around my shoulders, squeezing me tight. “Looks like you didn’t need my warning after all.”

“Nope. It was perfect. I couldn’t have wished for a better scenario.”

I glance up in the mirror just in time to see a pissed-off Tyler stalking my way, ignoring the protests of a few of the girls as they scramble to cover their bodies.

“What are you doing back here?” I hiss before he forcefully grabs my elbow.

“We need to talk. Now.”

Without another word, he drags me to one of the secluded rooms meant for private dances, clicking the lock once the door slams shut.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Tyler shouts, his voice bouncing off the walls.

“Me? What’s wrong with you? You’re the one acting like an animal, dragging me around like a rag doll whenever you feel like it.” I wrench my arm free of his grip.

Rage practically radiates off him in waves. My gaze falls to his chest’s rapid rise and fall and the small patch of smooth skin beneath the two undone buttons and loose-hanging tie. No. Stop. Now is *not* the time to get distracted. I need to hold on to this anger with both hands. Somehow, he has to get it through his thick skull that he can’t do this anymore.

“I thought I made myself clear this afternoon.” Tyler takes a step my way, only I don’t back down. I’m through hiding and running from this man.

“And I thought I told you that no one dictates my life. Contrary to your belief, you don’t own me. I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

He takes another step closer. “You can, but no one gets to see what’s mine.”

“Have you been huffing paint? *We* are not an item. *We* don’t exist. And *you* don’t get to tell me what to do. Once upon a time, yeah, I would have done anything to get you to notice me. Maybe even get claimed as yours. But that was a lifetime ago. I’m over childish dreams that don’t come true. I’m over wishing and praying you’d knock on my door, sweep me into your arms, and proclaim your undying love for me. You never wanted me then, so why would you want me now?”

For a second, his expression softens, relinquishing a touch of the anger still clinging to his features. “Don’t presume to know anything about my past. You, like everyone else, made assumptions based on rumors and glimpses of the truth. You had no idea what was going through my head, what challenges I faced, or the long line of people waiting to see me fail.” He

takes another step closer. “And you’re wrong about so many things, namely that you don’t belong to me.”

Once again, I find myself pinned between his arms—this time against the wall. My traitorous body wants to pull him close, feel his heat against mine, yet my brain is warning me not to trust him, that he’ll only do more damage than good if we let him break through the carefully constructed walls.

“You’re an asshole.”

He smirks. “Never said I wasn’t.”

“You don’t own me.”

“Yes, I do.” His voice drops, leaving tiny pinpricks to coat my skin from the rough timbre.

Our chests press together, feeling the rapid beat of his heart against the palm of my hand as I attempt to push him away. Feebly, at best. Somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind, I find his caveman possession flattering, even attractive, and downright hot. The thought of him owning me, not just with words, but manipulating my body to bend to his will, to cater to our whims, sends a new thrill of excitement straight to my core.

Then I remember his actions, how he constantly pushes all my buttons, accusing me of whoring myself out to get my way. That was the whole reason for tonight, to show him I belong to no one. I get to dictate what happens to me. If I want to flash someone my breasts, I will. So be it if I want hundreds of middle-aged men to gawk and stare.

“Get away.” It’s halfhearted at best, definitely not believable.

“No.”

“Tyler, I said move.” This time, my voice carries a little more force.

“No.”

Stubborn asshole. “Look, you made your point. I made mine. Let me go, and we can move on with our lives.”

His eyes drop to my lips momentarily, causing my tongue to wet my lower lip. My chest feels like it's in a vise, unable to get a full gasp of air.

“Mine.”

Before I can argue, his mouth descends upon mine, our teeth clashing in the sudden assault. Tyler snakes a hand up the front of my neck, squeezing slightly before grabbing the hair at the nape. Possession and need command this kiss, neither relinquishing our power as we hold on to each other for dear life.

Rather than push him away, I twist my fingers into his shirt, drawing him closer until wrapping a leg around his waist.

So much for keeping him at bay.

Yet, as we fight for dominance, everything about us fits into place—all the weeks of playing games, fighting this feeling between us.

One moment of weakness won't hurt anything.

Tyler moves his lips to my neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive skin. I use the opportunity to my advantage. “You're still an asshole.”

With a deft finger, he flicks the front clasp of my bra, freeing my breasts as my nipples pebble in anticipation. I bite my bottom lip seeing the new fire in his eyes filled with appreciation and lust. His large hands gently cup the sensitive flesh, letting their weight settle into his palms while his thumbs caress the hardened buds.

When our eyes meet again, the greens are almost swallowed up by the black, turning them so dark that they nearly appear feral.

“And. You're. Still. Mine.” He barely growls out the last word before taking my lower lip between his teeth and scraping it so roughly that I swear he drew blood.

Passion and desire swirl in the air as he swallows whatever protests linger on my tongue, twisting and turning until all I

can taste is him. I've dreamed of this moment for years, especially during the lonely nights with nothing but my vibrator and the regret of not being bolder when I had the chance. Now I can make up for lost time and show him what he missed while hooking up with the groupies and wannabes.

For one night, I'll forget he's my boss.

Tyler trails his fingertips down the center of my torso, twirling around my belly button before stopping just above the scrap of material between my thighs.

We break the kiss, holding each other in a silent staring contest, daring the other to make the first move.

A slow, devious smirk graces his lips before he breaches my barrier, dragging a fingertip painfully slow against my clit. The tiny shockwaves of pleasure zap through my system as he repeats the motion. Each pulse leaves me gasping for air, which is harder than it seems with his mouth attached to mine.

"Fucking Christ, Maysen."

He teases me, dragging along the lines of my lips, never pushing inside but sliding around my opening with tiny caresses. His tongue mimics the motions, keeping me guessing between quick pecks and long, languid licks.

The room spins as I try to keep my focus on his ministrations. Tyler has me simultaneously turned upside down and right-side-up. It's like he's touching every inch of my body at once.

Whether through impatience or need, he finally gives in. My head thuds against the wall when his fingertip easily glides inside from my arousal. A loud moan escapes as I flutter my eyelids closed, trying to empty my brain of all the reasons why this can only be for one night.

Tyler plays with my body, pumping two fingers in and out while biting down on a nipple. The English language doesn't exist; only incoherent sounds and panting breaths are all I know. He brings me to the edge, keeping his steady rhythm as the walls close in around me. I want to break and fall apart in his arms. Then I want him to put me back together.

Before I tumble off the cliff, he stops and backs away. The sudden loss of his body wakes me from my stupor as I blink back to life.

“Wha-what are you doing?”

Our labored breaths fill the silence. Tyler stares, never moving, never breaking eye contact. It’s like he’s having a silent war with himself. Shit. Did he change his mind?

He looks around the room, shaking off whatever thoughts he had before leaning forward to cup my face between his hands. Our mouths work in unison, savoring each other with less urgency.

“Not here. Not like this.”

Disappointment settles in. Right. A moment of passion, of weakness, is all this was. My face falls as I process the hidden meaning.

“I get it.”

Tyler smooths a palm against my cheek, tangling his fingers into my hair. “I don’t think you do. What I mean is, I’m not taking you here in some seedy back room at a strip club. We’re moving this to my place.”

I don’t think I heard him correctly. “Your place?”

In a heartbeat, he unbuttons his shirt and slides it over my body. “Yeah, my place. Right. Now.”

Before I can argue, he tosses me over his shoulder, smacking my ass for good measure, adding fuel to my already frustrated libido after being left hanging on the edge.

“Tyler, put me down. I can walk.”

“No.” He continues his mission, staying out of sight while ducking through the rear employee exit.

The minute the cold air hits my mostly bare ass, I regain my thoughts. “Wait, my stuff is still inside.”

He ignores my plea, making a beeline for his parked car in the lot. “I’ll text Pete to let Jenna know she needs to grab it.”



“Pete? Why is he there?”

The lights flash before he opens the passenger door, setting me inside. “Really? You need me to answer that question?”

“Oh,” is all I say.

Tyler slams the door shut and rounds the front of the car, typing away on his phone. The small space gets even smaller as he climbs inside, leaning over the center console to smash his lips against mine.

“God, you drive me crazy. I’m breaking all my rules tonight.”

I quirk a brow. “And what rules would those be?”

Tyler throws the car into drive and speeds away like a man on a mission.

“You’ll see.”



## *Tyler*

It takes all my energy not to crash my car as I drive to my apartment. Knowing Maysen is mostly naked underneath my shirt has my dick straining painfully in my pants. I can only pray there aren’t any cops out tonight because I’ll be blowing every stop sign and red light to get inside her as quickly as possible.

The minute she took the pole, I couldn’t stop staring. Her defiant little act was more of a turn-on than seeing her topless and dancing around the stage. It took everything I had to rein in my temper, knowing others were seeing her naked. Especially Ian, though I hope her disguise was good enough to fool him.

When she flipped me off at the end, it was like something possessed me. Every emotion and feeling I’d been shoving aside for the past few weeks came crashing to the surface. Before I knew it, I was backstage and kissing her like my life

depended on it. Hell, maybe it did. When she kissed me back, that was it. Game over.

From the corner of my eye, I watch Maysen squirm on the leather seat, more than likely trying to find any sort of relief. It wasn't my intention to be an asshole and leave her hanging. But I couldn't keep my hands to myself, not when she was there, practically begging me with her eyes and mouth, teasing me with her body pressed so close to mine. Touching her is almost an addiction, a compulsion I can't control.

Maybe I should remedy the situation now.

Keeping my eyes on the road, I wrap a hand around the inside of her thigh, dragging my fingertips slowly up her smooth skin until I find her wet center, still dripping with excitement. Her breath hitches before releasing a low moan. Fuck, I didn't think she could get any sexier, but when she grabs my hand and keeps it firmly in place, I almost drive into oncoming traffic as several car horns blare their displeasure.

Her breathing speeds up as my fingers work faster. I want to see her come undone at my hands, lose her inhibitions and bend to my will. Then, when she begs me to stop, I'll give her more because I know it won't be enough. Never enough.

It's hard to focus on the road with the heavy scent of her arousal filling the confined space.

"Tyler, god, please." I'm not sure how, but my cock swells even more at the sound of her hoarse voice saying my name like a prayer. If we don't leave here soon, there will be a mess all over the car.

Fuck, maybe we should get things a little dirty in here.

Somehow I navigate us safely into my spot in the parking garage without hitting anything or anyone. Maysen's still grinding against my hand as I throw the car into park, now fully able to give her the attention she deserves.

She swivels her unsteady gaze to mine, holding us in place until the world disappears. Nothing exists outside of this car. The fog creeping up the windows provides a shield from any potential voyeurs.

I switch hands and pull aside the edge of the shirt, caressing her exposed breast. If this damn center console weren't here, I'd climb on top of her and properly christen the front seat.

As soon as I feel her squeeze my fingers, I attack her mouth, swallowing her screams while giving her the release she desperately needed. There's no way I'll be able to drive this car again and not relive this moment—the dreamy look in her eyes as she came on my hand, how she held me in place to make sure I knew exactly where she needed it.

“Goddamn, Maysen. You're sexy when you come. Let's see if you can do that again.”

Without wasting another minute, I pull her to my seat and out the door, crossing the parking garage in no time. Once we're in the confines of the elevator, I press her against the wall, attacking her mouth with barely restrained hunger.

She thinks I never wanted her, but she couldn't be more wrong.

The elevator doors open, breaking the spell. This time, Maysen is the one who can't keep her hands to herself, practically shoving them in my pockets as I fumble with the keys to my apartment.

“Tyler, hurry.”

You don't have to tell me twice.

The minute the door shuts, it's game on. Need and want mingle together as I push her toward the couch. This may have to do because I'm not sure I can make it to my bedroom. Besides, it's only round one. And I'm determined to take this woman on every available surface I can.

The scrap of material between her legs disintegrates in my hands before peeling the shirt from her body.

“You are a fucking work of art,” I say, taking a step back to admire her natural beauty. Nothing fake or reworked. Hardly a blemish on her satiny skin.

Maysen reaches for my belt, easily threading it through the loops until it thuds against the hardwood floor. She licks her lips, trailing her fingertips along the rugged outline of my cock through my boxers.

“I could say the same for you.”

Fire lights her eyes as she wraps her hand around the hardened length, squeezing and massaging until stars practically appear before my eyes. I know what she wants, but not yet.

I fling my remaining clothes across the room and take a step back. Maysen knits her brows together. “What are you doing? Don’t you want this?”

I stay silent, keeping my gaze on her beautiful face. “More than you know.”

“Then why did you move away?”

At the risk of sounding like a pussy, I take a deep breath and caress one of her breasts, letting my thumb flick across the hardened bud. “Because if you keep touching me like that, this will be over sooner than we both want.”

Her lips form an “O” before lifting in the corners. “Is the great Tyler Cannon a one-pump chump?”

“Hardly,” I growl out, spinning her so fast it almost makes my head spin until she’s bent over the back of the couch.

Her perfect apple-shaped ass sticks gloriously in the air. I find myself unable to resist dragging my palms over each rounded globe. Maysen’s breathy moans are like gasoline to the fire brewing inside. The only problem is I don’t want this to be a flash in the pan. I press my chest to her back, my hard cock rubbing up against her pussy, showing how much she wants this too.

“I planned on taking my time, getting to know your body better than you do.” My fingers find her wet core before I grab my cock and slam into her, lifting the couch off the floor from the force. “But that can wait until later.”

Her tight wet heat surrounds my length, squeezing me until stars appear behind my eyelids. If I died right now, at least I would have died doing the one thing I've wanted for years: buried deep inside Maysen James.

I keep a hand pressed to the middle of her back, letting my palm slide along her spine while snaking my other arm around her hips, lifting her until her toes barely touch the floor. Each thrust lifts her higher, constantly changing the angles, finding a new depth inside as she claws at the cushions, trying to brace herself against the onslaught.

“Fuck, Tyler.”

It's too good. She's too good. Everything about this woman is perfect: the little moans and noises as I push her against the couch, how her hips meet mine thrust for thrust. And fuck me, her scent. I want her scent everywhere.

The familiar tightening of my balls serves as a warning. “Birth. Control?” I'm surprised I can even form words since incoherent grunts are all I'm capable of now.

“Y-yes.”

I grin like Charlie after finding the golden ticket. Well, this just made our night even better.

Unable to hold on any longer, I thrust a few more times before emptying myself into her, smiling as Maysen screams my name while pulsing around my cock with our mutual orgasm.

I collapse on top of her, doing my best not to put my entire weight onto her back. I can't imagine having the couch dig into your stomach is too comfortable.

“You are amazing,” I say, dragging my lips along the smooth skin of her back until I take one of her earlobes with my teeth.

Maysen turns in my arms. The tiny hairs around her face cling to her skin. It's what I imagine she looks like after a workout at the gym.

“I stand corrected.” She hesitates before leaning forward to brush her lips against mine.

No. That won't do.

I slide my hands against her cheeks until cradling her face and kiss her properly. Her surprised gasp lets me twist my tongue against hers, coaxing until she melts into my arms.

She stares into the distance when I pull away, like she can't regain focus. I move into her sightline and press a gentle kiss on her lips. “You still with me?”

She nods, coming back to herself. “Yeah, just spaced out for a moment.”

“Anything I should be concerned about?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “It was nothing.” She looks around the floor and chews on her bottom lip. “I should get going.”

She tries to step around me, but I stop her progress with an arm around her waist. “No.”

Her brows knit together. “What do you mean, no?”



## CHAPTER *Fourteen*

### *Maysen*

What the fuck did I do? My hormones and neglected libido somehow forged a hostile takeover of my rational brain because there's no way I would have willingly let Tyler fuck me over the back of his couch. Nor would I have let him get me off in the front seat of his car, where anyone could have been watching.

I need to get out of here, but one little sticking point hinders my means of escape: I don't have any clothes. In our lust-filled haste, all my belongings are still back at the club, and Tyler managed to shred the one article of clothing that would keep my dignity—at least what's left.

“I mean, no, you're not going anywhere.”

The cold air assaults my skin as we have our naked battle of wills. “You don't own me.”

The asshole smirks. “We've had that discussion before.”

“And the answer is still the same. Should I remind you how many hungry men were looking at me tonight? How they imagined touching my exposed breasts? Or better yet, do what you just did over this couch?” I run my hand against the smooth leather, still slightly warm from our bodies.

Fire flashes in Tyler’s eyes. Looks like I struck a nerve. “No one gets to do that.”

I take a step closer and poke him in his chest. “Says who?”

Maybe it’s the pheromones or the heavy lingering scent of sex in the air, but our eyes lock, and the urge to run goes out the door. I gave myself one night to spend with Tyler. And if I’m honest with myself, the thought of anyone else doing what we did turns my stomach. He is the only person I want touching me, kissing me, fucking me.

Before I can act, he swoops me over his shoulder while making purposeful strides down the hall to what I assume is his bedroom, slapping my ass for good measure in the process. I yelp in surprise as he crosses the threshold into his room, tossing me onto the immaculately-made bed.

Tyler hovers above me, crawling slowly up my body until we’re face to face. “If I have to fuck my point across all night long, I will.”

Another jolt of excitement shoots straight to my already aching pussy. I’ve never been one for dirty talk, but his filthy mouth turns me on faster than good ol’ BOB at home.

“You couldn’t handle me.”

His lips quirk up in the corners. “Is that a challenge?”

I don’t have time to dispute as his mouth takes mine, dragging all the air from my lungs. His skilled tongue dances effortlessly around my own, coaxing my inhibitions away. I reach up to frame his face with my hands, only to have them pinned next to my head. Tyler pulls back long enough to show his desire matches my own.

“Don’t. Move.”



Every defiant bone in my body wants to disobey his command, but the small, excited part of me stays still, curious to see what he plans on doing.

I focus on my labored breaths as Tyler sits back on his heels, taking his time to peruse my body. “Fucking perfection.” A surprised gasp escapes as he takes one of my hyper-sensitive nipples into his mouth, tugging and twirling until my hips have a mind of their own. My breast pops from Tyler’s lips as he looks up with a challenging eyebrow. “I thought I said no moving.”

Need and want mix together as I stare at his domineering form. All I want is to press my thighs together. No, scratch that. I need to press Tyler’s head between my thighs to quell this ache.

He must sense my urgency because he trails those sinful lips down my torso, skimming past my aching core to leave little love bites on my inner thighs. Usually, I hate it when guys touch the inside of my thighs with their mouths, leaving me squirming because it’s too painful or breaking into a fit of giggles because it tickles. There’s no in-between—until now. Tyler’s touch elicits a guttural moan from the back of my throat, loud enough that I’m sure his downstairs neighbors will think he’s torturing someone.

And they wouldn’t be wrong.

“Oh, fuck,” I cry out, clinging to the sheets next to my head when his tongue makes first contact with my throbbing clit. I can feel him smirk against my skin as he repeats the motion, taking his time to savor every inch of me.

Either Tyler is expertly skilled, or all the guys I’ve dated before have been doing it wrong. Shocks and tingles mix with warmth and pleasure with each swipe of his tongue, devouring me like I’m his last meal.

“Ungh, Tyler, fuck, don’t stop.”

He picks up the pace as I climb higher to the edge, feeling my muscles clench the minute he inserts a finger into my greedy hole. When he adds a second, it’s game over. I squeeze

my eyes tight and cry out with the most powerful orgasm I've ever had from someone going down on me. Wave after wave pulses through me. Tyler laps at my dripping pussy, making sure nothing goes to waste. A bead of sweat trails down my hairline as I try to catch my breath.

Holy fuck, that was intense.

And yet, I want more.

When I open my eyes, I face the devil himself, grinning like he did when he won the state championship for hockey two years in a row. Not that I was paying attention.

Tyler entwines our hands, keeping them firmly at my head while nestling his body against mine.

"This is what I wanted," he says, easily sliding inside me with a groan. "You. Beneath me. Taking everything because you are mine."

My eyes roll into the back of my head with each stroke of his cock. I can't even focus on his dirty words as he plays with my body, kissing the side of my neck, nipping an earlobe, pushing my legs farther apart with his knees while keeping his steady, torturous tempo.

I've never given up control before. Somehow I've always consciously been the one to initiate contact, show the other person how I like it, where I want it, never shutting my brain off because I'm so focused on getting to the end that I can't enjoy the ride.

That's not the case anymore.

Tyler knows my needs before I do, switching speeds and depths, keeping me guessing while sparking every nerve-ending to life.

Sweat slicks our skin, making it easier to glide against each other with little resistance.

He lets go of my hands, but before I can voice my protest, he switches our position, twisting my hips to the side with my back still pressed against the mattress. With my legs firmly clasped together, his cock feels even bigger, if that's possible.

“Fuck, Tyler.” I grab his biceps, holding on for dear life as he pounds into me, nudging us closer to the headboard.

Tyler wraps his free hand around my neck, squeezing it. “You feel so good, Maysen. So fucking tight.” He holds me in place before dragging his hand over a breast, pinching the nipple between his index finger and thumb. I cry out in pleasurable pain as another orgasm rocks my body without warning, shorter this time but not lacking in intensity.

I don’t have time to catch my breath as Tyler flips me again, moving us to a sitting position as I straddle his lap with my back firmly against his chest. That same freehand settles against my neck, his fingers dragging along my jawline, keeping me in place as we move in tandem.

“You feel that?” he growls low in my ear. I nod my head as best I can. “That’s your body recognizing its owner.” He hits another spot deep inside, forcing me to grab his forearms for stability.

“Yes,” I pant out like a whore in church.

“This body is mine whenever and wherever I want. No one else touches what’s mine. Understand?” Tyler tightens his grip again, turning me on even more. I know it’s all talk, and I can’t explain why it excites me more than it should, but in his arms, it feels right.

I moan again, squeezing my eyes as tight as possible as his movements become more sporadic. The control he’s desperate to hold onto wanes with my lack of response.

“Say it,” he growls out again. “Say it now, Maysen.”

“Y-yes. Yours, Tyler.”

It was all he needed to set off his release, jerking a few more times before emptying himself inside me. The feel of his cock pulsing against my walls sets me off again, gasping for air with our mutual release.

I just sold my soul to the devil as I quickly fell into the depths of the abyss without feeling the burn.

We fall onto the mattress, both completely spent but not touching. It might be too much if Tyler gets too close. I'm already knocking on the door of bad decisions. Letting residual feelings surface to blossom into more would be a bad idea of epic proportions.

Yet, as we stare at each other, lust still swirling in the air between us, all I want is his arms around me, pulling me close to let me know this isn't all in my head, that he didn't just rock my world a million times over and broke me for any other man who may come after him.

*No. Stop it. This was just sex.*

"You are nothing short of amazing, Maysen," he says, pushing some hair away from my eyes to give us an unobstructed view. "You'd never know how much of a wildcat you are by looking at you."

My lips turn up in the corners. "Hardly a wildcat. Maybe I'm just that good in bed."

"Hmm, give me some credit. I want to think my performance was worthy of an encore." He smirks. "Oh wait, it was. How many orgasms was it?"

I shove his shoulder and fold my hands under my head. "So cocky. And there won't be another encore. This is it. No more."

You'd think I just told him the world was flat with the look on his face. "What do you mean?"

I trap my bottom lip with my teeth. "This was great, but it can't happen again. You're my boss. Getting into any sort of physical relationship isn't possible. Sex is never just sex. Emotions always get caught in the mix. Soon, rumors will start floating around the office about favoritism or how I'm getting ahead by opening my legs. Eventually, it'll end with one of us wanting more than the other can give and me leaving the firm because, let's face it, you're not going anywhere."

"Whoa, pump the brakes, Debbie Downer." Tyler holds his hands up. "Jumping the gun a little there? All of those scenarios are just that. And if they start to come true, we'll

handle them together. But if you think this was a one-off night, you're grossly mistaken. I've tasted honey, and now I want the whole damn jar."

I stare into his green eyes, praying to see any malice or cruel intent, only to be met with sincerity and hope. He's not asking for a relationship, but he's also not dismissing the potential.

"This is a bad idea," I whisper again.

Tyler moves closer, wrapping a hand around my waist to drag me to his body. "It's not."

I place a hand on his naked chest, refusing to look up. "I should go."

His grip tightens. "No."

"Tyler." I sigh. "Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"No." He places a finger against my lips. "You're staying here, and that's final." Somehow he manages to wiggle the sheets and comforter open beneath us, trapping me into the cozy cocoon of his arms. "We'll talk more in the morning."

He's right, though I won't say it to his face. I can't go anywhere tonight, so I might as well enjoy this little bit of peace while it's still here.

Against my better judgment, I snuggle closer and let sleep take over.

The protective warmth that aided my slumber disappears as an alarm chirps on the other side of the bed.

"Too early," I groan, slowly picking my head up to wipe the sleep from my eyes.

For a moment, I forget where I am, feeling disoriented as I look around the unfamiliar room. It's not until Tyler pulls me back down and buries his face in my neck that the last few hours' events come crashing back to the forefront of my mind—not to mention the intense soreness between my legs.

“Don’t move. You disrupted my good dream.”

I chuckle and push against his chest. “Yeah, well, your alarm disrupted mine, so let’s call it even.”

He turns off the offending noise and climbs on top of me. “Care to bring those dreams to life?”

“And who says they were sex dreams?”

Tyler trails his lips from my jaw to my ear. “Because you were moaning my name all night long and kept me up. Have you ever tried to sleep with a raging hard-on?”

The appendage in question twitches against my stomach, coming to life. “Down, boy. We can’t start this right now. We have to go to work and pretend like last night didn’t happen.” I chew on my bottom lip. “Speaking of, how are we going to do this?”

Tyler rolls his eyes before reclaiming his spot on the bed. “Do what? Sex? That hurts. I know I did a better job than that last night.”

“Shut up. Everyone will be in the office in about two hours, and we can’t show up together. Not to mention I have absolutely nothing to wear unless you’d like me to parade around in your shirt and no panties.”

He growls and pins me down again. “Maybe you do need a reminder.”

I squirm beneath his touch. “Relax. I was kidding.” Mostly. “But, seriously, how are we going to play this?”

“What’s so wrong with us walking in together?”

He can’t be this dumb. “Because we *never* show up together. And I know people will see it all over my face.”

“See what?”

He knows damn well what. “You know.”

“Enlighten me.” Damn his stupid smirk. I want to slap it right off his face. As soon as I pick up my hand, he firmly grasps my wrist and pins it to the bed. “There’s no need for foreplay. I’m a sure thing, sweetheart.”

“You’re an ass,” I say, struggling against his hold.

“Tell me.”

I turn my head, but Tyler grips my jaw, redirecting my gaze back to him. “They’ll see that we were together last night. It’d be like doing the walk of shame with everyone staring at us.”

“So? Let them stare.”

I sigh. “You don’t have to worry about your reputation, though. I do. Tyler, this job means everything to me. We need to keep this under wraps.”

He disagrees, letting the tiny lines appear around his eyes, but he doesn’t give a voice to his thoughts. “If it means that much to you, fine. We’ll keep it between us. For now, at least.”

I cup his cheek with a smile. “Thank you. Now we need a plan.”

“Under one condition.”

“Anything.”

He trails his nose along the bridge of mine. “Let’s start the day properly before I have to pretend you don’t exist as anything more than my assistant.”

Yeah, I can live with that compromise.



I’m never leaving this bathroom.

Tyler’s immaculate white granite bathroom feels more like a five-star hotel than an apartment. All high-end fixtures, which isn’t surprising. He’s always wanted nothing but the best. At least from what I’ve gathered over the years. New cars, new clothes, constant changing of arm candy...

Thankfully, Tyler and I agreed he’d go into the office first to keep appearances, giving me the chance to get ready without further distraction. It was hard enough watching Tyler strut around in nothing but a towel. If he didn’t leave when he did, I’m positive he would have needed a second shower.

I step out into the steam-filled space and grab one of the towels off the warmer. Maybe I should rethink my stance on not dating. The perks are hard to pass up: no more sleeping on a couch, a bathroom bigger than Jenna's living room, earth-shattering sex every night. Hell, he probably has a maid and a cook.

However, the cons are just as glaring: gossip, heartbreak, tarnished reputation.

And trust. I still don't trust him. For as long as I've known him, he's been a playboy, constantly wanting a different girl on his arm. Hell, look at his "meetings" with Chrissy. Just thinking about her and what she's done with Tyler in his office has red tinting my vision. I have zero right to be angry or jealous, but anyone touching him would push me over the edge after what we shared last night.

Another con. I don't handle jealousy well.

Shaking my head, I tighten the towel around my chest and walk into Tyler's bedroom. A beautiful dress lays across the already made bed, complete with undergarments and shoes. I pick up the notecard lying on top and can't help but smile.

*Maysen,*

*I thought this would be better than showing up in one of my shirts and no panties. Like I said, no one sees what's mine.*

*Please bring the files from my office with you. I'll need them right away.*

*Tyler*

Even when doing something thoughtful, he manages to be bossy. I roll my eyes and inspect the clothes. Like the other dress he bought, it's a similar cut and style to what I'd pick. Except I think he's trying to kill me with the height of those heels.

I glance at the clock and cringe. Shit. I have a half-hour to get to the office, and I'm without a car or purse.



Fuck my life.

I dress as quickly as possible, pulling my semi-dry hair into a braid since I don't have time to do anything else, and dash down the hallway, peeking my head into several rooms until finding Tyler's office. Unsurprisingly, it's a mirror image of the one at work, which helps since I know his office better than my cubicle. I grab the files in his outbox and check the apartment one last time for anything I need. Once I'm out the door, that's it. Then again, knowing Tyler, he'd probably send someone to retrieve whatever I needed.

"Ms. James?" the doorman calls as I try to sneak by, acting as if I belong here rather than slinking out like last night's conquest.

I slow my steps and force a smile. "Yes?"

The older man smiles and escorts me to the curb. "Mr. Cannon sent a car to pick you up."

Of course, he did—anything to throw his power around.

"Oh, um, thank you," I say, not knowing what else to do. A shiny black town car pulls up, and the older man opens the back door. I pause before stooping down. "I, uh, don't have any money for a tip."

"No need. Mr. Cannon already took care of it," he politely smiles.

I nod and climb into the back, feeling out of place. "We should arrive on time, miss." The driver smiles in the rearview mirror before entering the morning traffic.

"Oh. Perfect." And I continue to make things awkward. I'm grateful he doesn't attempt any small talk while driving, leaving me time to stare out the window as I figure out where I am since I didn't pay attention last night in Tyler's car—for obvious reasons.

Shit. Why did I have to remind myself of the incidents of last night? I press my legs together, remembering how Tyler's fingers felt.

No. Stop it right now.

When we're about a block away, I start to twist my fingers together. I can't let anyone see me pull up in this car. It'll be obvious who paid for it. And no one would believe this was an Uber.

"Excuse me? Would it be possible to drop me off right here?"

The driver looks over his shoulder. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "Yes, please."

He doesn't question my motives and eases into an open spot. "There you are." He holds a business card out to me between his fingers. "If you need to go anywhere else, please don't hesitate to call me."

"Thanks," I say, taking the card and quickly exiting the car. A few steps down the sidewalk, I already regret my decision. Goddamn heels are trying to kill me. I have half a mind to march into his office and chuck them at his head. I giggle as I picture him ducking behind his desk with a shoe nearly hitting him in the eye.

The smile stays on my face the whole way to my cube, earning me a few puzzled stares. Holly peeks around the wall, still in her chair.

"Hey, girl. Nice dress. Is it new?"

I set my things down and nod. "It's a present from a friend."

"Birthday?"

I draw my brows together. "Huh?"

She waves her hand up and down. "Is it your birthday?"

"Oh, um, no. Just a present. It didn't fit her, and she couldn't return it, so she gave it to me."

Holly must buy my excuse, even though I stuttered my way through it. I'm not good at lying—a flaw in this line of business.

"Well, it looks good on you. Also, you should know that Tyler is in a surprisingly good mood this morning. Guess his

meeting went well last night.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, surprised I hadn't stopped breathing yet. “O-oh?”

“Yeah. I haven't seen him this chipper in a while. Maybe we'll be lucky, and it'll last all day.” Holly looks up and barks out a laugh. “Holy hell, Ian. You look like shit.”

She wasn't joking. Dark circles ring his eyes as he pulls off his sunglasses. “Yikes. What happened to you?”

Ian leans against my cube wall. “Long night. Lots of alcohol. Very little sleep.”

I try to stifle my laugh but fail miserably. “You should have called in sick.”

“Can't. I have to finalize the paperwork for the Hoffman account.”

I raise my brows. “Oh, you got him to sign? That's good news.”

“Yeah, no thanks to Captain Jackass,” Ian says, jabbing his thumb toward Tyler's door. “He ditched us halfway through the meeting last night to hang out with his friend, then disappeared altogether. I do all of the legwork and get nothing for it.” He smirks. “I should make him file the paperwork without giving him the details of what we had to promise. But I know this account will bring in more clients, which will all come my way, thanks to Darrin.”

My heart feels like it will beat right out of my chest. Oh shit. Tyler was hanging out with Pete last night. Still in his business suit. And if Ian says he ditched them, all three were at Starlight, watching me strip and dance across the stage.

Bile riles up my throat. “It's a good thing you have ethics then.”

Ian tilts his head to the side. “You okay, Maysen? You look a little green.”

Holly narrows her eyes. “Yeah, what's gotten into you?”

I shake my head and grip the edge of my desk for stability. “N-nothing. I haven’t had my morning coffee yet, so I’m somewhat out of sorts.”

Ian’s scrutinizing gaze puts my system on high alert. I can’t say anything for fear he’ll know it was me last night, but again, I’m terrible at lying.

Before he has a chance to ask the question dancing around in his eyes, Tyler’s voice booms over his shoulder. “Ms. James. I’m not paying you to socialize. Did you get those files I asked for?”

So much for his good mood. Holly jumps in her chair before scooting back to her cube, leaving Ian and me to deal with Tyler’s wrath.

“Y-yes, sir. I was about to come into your office to deliver them.”

There’s no amusement on Tyler’s face, only pure rage as he keeps his gaze on Ian.

“Relax, man. I was telling her how I managed to seal the deal last night after you bailed. You’re welcome, by the way.” Without a reaction, Ian continues. “You missed all the good action.”

“Where did you guys go?” I ask, surprised I managed to keep my voice even.

“Starlight. You know, the strip club,” Ian says with a grin. “There was this blonde with a fantastic body and tits so perfect you’d swear they weren’t real.”

Red creeps up Tyler’s neck. “Mr. Dunkirk, this is hardly the appropriate time or audience to talk about your events from last night. Unless you’d like to have a sexual harassment suit filed against you, I suggest you leave Ms. James’s cube and get back to work. Now.”

I watch as Ian’s gaze bounces between Tyler and me. “I’ll talk to you later.” He slinks away, leaving an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Tyler, I—”

“My office.”

I cringe at his harsh tone, grabbing the files he had me bring from his house. Holly looks over her shoulder, giving me a sympathetic look while mouthing “good luck.”

Yeah, I may need it.



## *Tyler*

Unreal. Ian is even more of a pig than I ever imagined. To bring up the club during business hours, talking about things that don't need to be mentioned *ever* within the walls of this company is a new low. Our reputation will take a hit if word gets out about his little stunt last night with Darrin. Not to mention if anyone found out Maysen was one of the dancers on stage. The last thing she needs is a scarlet letter on her chest. It would ruin any plans she had of making it in this business because I know the strong woman she is wouldn't be able to come back from that blow.

I close my eyes and remember her confidence as she performed, how insanely sexy she was, even when giving me the finger. Then I remember all the other men who saw her bare breasts swaying to her moves, how she held them in her own hands, caressed them, and teased the crowd until they cried out for more.

I stop those thoughts immediately. Nothing good will come from thinking about how many guys wanted her or wanted to do her. At the end of the night, it was my name Maysen called out over and over again. And as far as I'm concerned, it'll stay that way.

Maysen sneaks in, clinging to the folders like a life vest. She jumps as the door slams shut, mindful to keep a buffer space between us.

“Tyler,” is all she has time to say before I attack her mouth, slamming our bodies against the door while anchoring

her face to mine. Papers flutter and scatter to the floor as she tries to push me away, but instead, she melts into my touch, moving her hands along the planes of my chest until wrapping them around my neck to pull me closer. I groan into her mouth, enjoying her taste, savoring her flavor, letting our tongues work in tandem like we have all the time in the world.

Maysen is the only woman who both infuriates and turns me on simultaneously. Her little timid act is simply that. I know the beast that lives dormant inside, waiting to pounce on its unsuspecting prey.

Both of us try to catch our breath as we pull away. I grip her jaw with one hand, not hard but strong enough to let her know who's in charge. "What are you fucking doing to me?"

She blinks a few times, her eyes darting back and forth while drawing her brows together. "Huh?"

I let my hand fall loosely down the column of her neck, feeling the velvety soft skin as I get to the low-cut V of her dress. "I knew this dress would look exquisite on you, but damn. The reality is so much better than I imagined."

"Wait, you're not mad at me?"

"Mad at you? No, sweetheart, that's definitely not who I'm mad at."

"Then who?"

"I'm furious with myself," I say, skimming my lips along her cheek.

Her eyes flutter closed as I keep my lips pressed against her skin. "But, I thought, with how you reacted to Ian—"

Just the mention of his name raises my blood pressure. Even though her anxiety makes my inner caveman beat his chest, the simple fact remains: Ian has seen her practically naked, whether or not he knows it.

"I'm furious that asshole can't take the hint and leave you alone, constantly trying to horn in on what's mine."

Her pink lips quirk up in a corner. "But I'm not—"

“Don’t argue with me, Maysen. Look at what you’re doing to me.” I roll my hips against hers, smiling when she elicits a light moan from the contact. “I can’t even control myself around someone who doesn’t stand a chance with you. Jealousy and distractions aren’t my things, yet all I can do is picture your delectable ass bent over my desk with a tie shoved in your mouth to keep you from screaming my goddamn name for the whole office to hear.”

A shiver runs through her body, and I know it won’t be long before I make that particular fantasy a reality. Judging by her reaction, Maysen feels the same way.

“You can’t say things like that,” she chides, bending down to pick up the scattered papers.

I push her back against the door when she straightens to her full height. “And why not?”

Her bright hazel eyes glaze over with concern. “You know why.”

“What happens behind my door is our business and no one else’s.” I nip lightly at the crook of her neck. “So if I want to fuck you, it’s going to happen.”

This time, Maysen succeeds in pushing me away. “Not here. Not in the office. You can fuck me anywhere but here.”

I raise a brow. “Anywhere?”

Instantly, her cheeks flush, practically turning the shade of a tomato. “Ugh, my stupid brain doesn’t work anymore. No, you cannot fuck me anywhere, especially not here.” She runs a hand down her dress to smooth out a few wrinkles. “Here are the files you requested. If there’s nothing else you need, I’ll get everything set for your meetings today.”

Before I can press my lips to hers, she darts out the door, making sure to close it behind her. Considering the mind-blowing night we shared, her shyness is rather cute. And just as I thought, driving my car this morning wasn’t easy without thinking about how she came on my hand in the front seat.

I sit behind my desk and shake my head, tilting it to the ceiling. I need to get a fucking grip on myself. There’s a

reason I don't do relationships, yet it's all I can think about when I'm around Maysen.

We need to be careful, especially around Ian. I can't quite place my finger on it, but something about his demeanor was different at Maysen's desk. It was more than him goading me to engage. His cockiness was off. I'll need to keep a closer eye on him.

After a few deep breaths, the semi-erection Maysen left me with disappears, finally allowing my focus to return to work, where it belongs.





## CHAPTER *Fifteen*

### *Maysen*

“Jaryd, the usual,” I say the minute my ass hits the barstool.

He looks up with a smirk and slides an old-fashioned my way. “You look less than chipper tonight. Long day?”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I mutter into the glass, letting the first sip burn away any lingering feelings that wanted to creep into my system.

Today was a challenge in every sense of the word. Tyler tested my patience at every turn, giving me sly looks or attempting to brush against me as he passed. By the second meeting, I had to move and sit across from him because his wandering hands were getting into forbidden territory during office hours. And I knew that one simple touch would throw me over the edge, and I’d cave like the weak-kneed girl I’m trying so hard not to be.

Casual. This has to be casual if we wander down this road.

On top of it all, Ian kept walking by my cube, flashing little smirks and winks—incredibly odd behavior by him, but then again, he and Tyler seem to be having some sort of pissing match over me, so nothing they do is normal.

When the clock hit five, I bolted out of the office like rabid dogs were chasing me. And since I still don't have my car, the logical place to hide was the Cask & Barrel.

“Good news. At least it's the weekend. Any exciting plans?” Jaryd places the polished glass away and leans against the bar.

“Some quality time with a few bottles of wine and Netflix.” Not to mention trying to forget a particular event that plagues my thoughts.

“Sounds like my kind of weekend.” He turns his head when someone else sits at the bar, giving me a wink before tending to his job.

Truth be told, it's not exactly how I'd like to spend my weekend, but to make things less complicated, it's what needs to happen.

It's not until the third drink that I remember I don't have my purse or phone. Shit. I have no way of paying for my tab or getting home. Why didn't I call Jenna before I left the office?

When Jaryd points to my empty glass, I shake my head and bite my bottom lip. “Sooooooo, I have a problem.” He raises a brow and waits for me to continue. “I sort of forgot I don't have my purse or phone. Is there any way I can borrow yours to call Jenna?”

He laughs and hands me the phone from his back pocket. “It's hardly a problem when the solution is easy. And I know you're good for the money. Don't worry about it.”

“Thanks, friend.” I wait until he walks away before punching in her number.

“Jaryd! Buddy! What's going on?”

“Sorry to disappoint, but it’s the friend you let get kidnapped last night.”

Her annoying barking laugh rings in my ears. “You were hardly kidnapped.”

“Being hauled over someone’s shoulder doesn’t scream willingly.”

She laughs again. “I knew you were safe. But why are you calling me from Jaryd’s phone?” I pause for dramatic effect. “Oh. Right. I have your stuff. I’m assuming you’re calling for a ride?”

“That would be nice.”

I hear her keys jingle in the background. “Be there in a few.”

We end the call, and I slide Jaryd’s phone across the bar. He smirks and returns to help the other waiting professionals coming off a long work week—if theirs has been anything like mine. Well, maybe not exactly like mine. I doubt any of them are sleeping with their boss.

Not sleeping. Slept. Even though Tyler says we can make this work, I know better. Secret affairs always get discovered and never quietly. They’re loud and destructive, like setting off a bomb in the middle of Times Square. Collateral damage everywhere.

“You ready?” Jenna asks, breaking my staring contest with the giant ice ball occupying my glass.

“Beyond ready.” I give her a sideways glance.

“What?”

I tap my finger against the bar. “Based on the events of last night, I believe you’re buying this round.”

She rolls her eyes and slaps some money on the counter. “You big baby.” Jaryd laughs and tries to give her the change, but she pushes it back toward him. “Thank you for babysitting this toddler. I’ll make sure she takes a nap since she’s so cranky.”

“Funny,” I say, giving my thanks to Jaryd again on the way out. “Can we please stop and get my car?”

“Already taken care of.”

I turn my head as she pulls into traffic. “How?”

“A friend helped me.”

Does she think I’m stupid? “Huh. I’ll have to tell Pete thank you next time I see him.”

Jenna barely contains the smile on her face. “Who said it was Pete?”

“Seriously? Are you really going to play dumb? He just happened to be at the club on a night you picked up?”

Her blush takes over her face. “Coincidence.”

“My ass,” I say, looking out the window as our neighborhood comes into view. Once we enter the apartment, I look for my stuff, only to find it neatly placed on the coffee table. I check my phone for missed calls or messages, only to be disappointed when nothing’s there. Then again, everyone who needed to get a hold of me either knew I didn’t have my phone or was at the office.

Jenna sits next to me on the couch and hands over a chilled glass of wine. “I figured you would like one of these.”

“You should have brought the bottle. So tell me, how serious is this with Pete?”

She looks off to the side. “It’s not.”

“That’s it? No details or anything like that?”

A devious smirk crosses her lips. “I’ll tell mine if you tell yours. How was Mr. Irresistible in bed?”

This time, it’s my turn to blush. As much as I try to forget last night—and this morning—my body clings to the memory of Tyler owning me, pushing everything to the limit until I thought I’d die.

“Never mind. I don’t need to know that bad.”

Jenna laughs and pushes her cold toes against my leg. “Don’t go all prudish on me now. Seriously, I want the details. You’ve only been pining after him for what, twenty years?”

Only she knows that I’ve been crushing on Tyler since the second grade. “Besides the point.”

“No, that *is* the point. All your teenage hormonal fantasies came true last night, and I want to know if the wait was worth it.”

I might as well bite the bullet. It’ll be easier in the long run for both our sakes. “And then some.”

“I knew it,” she says, setting her glass on the coffee table. “How many?”

Lord, this conversation needs to end before it begins. “I lost count. A lot.”

“Talented?”

“Very.”

“Hung?”

“Like a horse.”

“Did he let you ride him all night?” she asks with a smirk.

With a sigh, I let loose. “Yes, all night, most of the morning, in the car, on his couch, then his bed. I’m surprised I didn’t walk with a limp today, though the heels helped.” I quickly drain the glass and head to the kitchen for a refill.

“Damn, I didn’t know the boy had it in him. Or you, for that matter. Kudos to finally breaking out of your shell.” She clinks her glass to mine when I retake my seat.

I draw my brows together. “What do you mean?”

Jenna adjusts her position on the couch. “You’ve played it safe when it comes to guys, going for the good boys, the ones who call their mom every Sunday, color inside the lines using only primary colors. Ever since you started working for Tyler, you’ve changed in a good way. Before, you always settled for what was in front of you. Now, you’re demanding what you deserve, taking no shit from anyone.”

“Losing your job and getting dumped will do that to you.”

She shakes her head. “That may have been the jumping-off point, but not the catalyst. I think it’s Tyler.”

“Tyler? Why do you think that?”

“Because he pushes all your buttons, gets under your skin like no one else has. And as much as you complain, I know you love it. He challenges you, makes you work for things, pushes you because he sees your worth.”

I chew on my bottom lip. “How do you know?”

Jenna smirks. “Because his friends also listen to the same things I hear.”

“He talks about me?”

“More like complains, kinda like you do with him. People who want to deflect their feelings about a subject usually say the opposite of what they mean. And you two have mastered that in spades.”

My phone lights up on the table. I lean over to see who it is and quickly lock the screen.

“Case in point.”

“This isn’t that,” I say, setting my glass down on the table.

“Then what? Why are you ignoring his calls?”

A message dings, but I flip the phone over. “Why are you avoiding giving me details about you and Pete?”

“Oh no, don’t try to turn this around. Answer my question.”

“When you answer mine.”

We sit in a silent stand-off, neither of us willing to budge. “Well, as much as I’d love to sit here and watch you avoid your feelings, I need to work.” Her phone dings as a slow smile creeps onto her face.

“Pete?”

Her fingers fly across the screen before placing the phone back in her purse. “Guess you’ll never know.”

I follow her to the kitchen for a refill, praying another bottle of wine is in the fridge. “Be safe tonight,” I say like I always do when she leaves.

“You too.” She pauses at the door and gives me a sideways glance over her shoulder before heading out. What was that all about?

With my glass of wine in hand, I dig out my well-worn sweatpants and sweatshirt from the dresser I commandeered in Jenna’s room and change into my weekend wear. I have zero plans to do anything other than drink myself into a stupor.

Just as my ass hits the cushion, a knock sounds at the door to break the silence.

“Ugh,” I groan loudly, hoping whoever’s on the other end heard it, though it could only be one person. “Jesus, did you forget something?” I fling the door open and nearly fall backward when I see who’s standing on the other side.

“I wouldn’t necessarily call me god, but you were crying his name repeatedly last night.”

I’m so glad I wasn’t holding my wineglass because it would have shattered at his feet. “Wha-what are you doing here?” Shock doesn’t even cover what I’m feeling. Here I thought I’d be free of this man for the weekend; give me time to sort things through my head and come up with valid reasons why sleeping with my boss is an epically bad idea—no such luck.

“You sent me to voice mail, then didn’t answer my text.” Even though his voice appears smooth and even, I can hear the huskiness behind the words. It’s almost like he’s enjoying watching me squirm.

My chest constricts as I trap my lower lip between my teeth, practically peeling the skin away. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Why do I feel so nervous? I’ve gone head-to-head with this man over everything, yet after last night, one smoldering look—similar to what he’s currently sporting—burns from the inside out, reducing me to a pile of ashes. Everything that’s

happened over the last decade, aiding my growth to get over him, vanished, turning me into the shy teenager longing to be noticed.

Tyler steps into my apartment, backing me up before shutting the door behind him. “Really? Well, it’s a good thing I ran into your roommate downstairs, who kindly let me know you made it home safe.”

Traitor. Of course, she let him in. Hell, knowing her, she probably concocted this whole event.

“Are you two working together?”

He slips the jacket off his shoulders and flings it over one of the barstools in the kitchen. “Not in so many words. More like mutual aid.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.” I maintain a safe distance, keeping myself on high alert as he loosens the tie around his neck. Heat flushes my cheeks as I think about his comment this morning and what he’d like to do with it.

Not now.

“As I said, I wanted to make sure you made it home.”

“Even though you knew I didn’t have my car, purse, or phone? Why would you call me?”

Tyler leans against the counter opposite of me. “I figured by now you had it.”

“Bullshit,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest. “You never leave things to chance.”

He smirks, popping the top button of his shirt open to expose a little bit of his chest. “True. So if you know me so well, why don’t you tell me?”

I stare at the small patch of skin, letting my thoughts drift to places they shouldn’t. “Creepy stalker? Someone who is looking for a restraining order filed against him?”

“The only thing I want against me is you.” Tyler pushes himself off the counter, closing the distance between us in a



few steps. The tiny kitchen gets impossibly smaller as we stand toe-to-toe, never once breaking eye contact.

My heart feels like it might take flight, beating so fast you'd think I just ran the Boston Marathon. Tyler leans close, the scent of his cologne fueling my raging hormones. Jesus, I'm like a dog in heat whenever he's around. All I can think about is jumping his bones.

I brace myself against the counter, mentally preparing to get my breath taken away from his all-consuming lips.

Only... nothing.

I must have fluttered my eyes closed, knowing the inevitable would happen. As I pry one open, I'm greeted by Tyler's amused grin, flashing me a pearly smile while reaching for the abandoned wine on the counter.

"Don't mind if I do." The bastard brings the glass to his lips. Not exactly what I had planned.

I stare, mesmerized, waiting for my brain to kick back into gear.

"That's mine," I say, wishing my voice had more authority.

He licks his lips, drawing my gaze instantly to the motion. "And?"

I swallow thickly. "Maybe I don't want your lips on my glass."

Tyler smirks, handing me the glass. "Sweetheart, I'll put my lips wherever you'd like."

Holy hell, who turned up the heat? Flames practically lick the greens of his eyes as he pins me in place with his gaze.

"We're not having sex," I say, finally coming to my senses.

He chuckles and steps back. "Did I offer?"

"Cocky bastard." He laughs even harder, pulling my lips into a smile.

"You should be a good host and offer me something to drink. Unless you'd like to continue sharing."

I scrunch my nose up. “And share your backwash? No thanks. You can have your own.”

I stretch up on my tiptoes, reaching for one of the wineglasses in the cupboard. Tyler slides his hands up my hips, practically pulling me into his chest. His warm breath tickles against my neck before pressing his lips to my ear.

“I’ve tasted your sweet essence, came inside that addicting pussy of yours multiple times, and you’re worried about a little spit?”

The glass slips from my fingers and shatters against the counter, sending shrapnel flying everywhere. Tyler doesn’t flinch but pulls me away from the wreckage and out of harm’s way.

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath. Of course, the scenario I thought I had avoided when Tyler appeared at the door happened anyway, in true Murphy’s Law fashion.

“Are you okay?” He turns me to face him, concern etched across his face as he checks me out from head to toe, finally stopping on the minor cut on my finger. “Does it hurt?”

I barely noticed it until he said something. A few drops of blood seep from the dotted line along my index finger’s side.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I say, finally snapping out of my stupor.

Tyler draws his brows together, clearly not taking my word for it. Instinct takes over as I try to shove the finger in my mouth to stop the bleeding, but Tyler’s grip holds me in place.

Instead, he wraps his lips over the injured area, using his tongue to clean the wound. Usually, this would gross me out, but we’ve exchanged enough bodily fluid that nothing should matter, as he so eloquently stated.

Our gazes lock as he continues his ministrations. The air thickens with unspoken desire, fueling the growing pressure between my legs. Each stroke of his tongue has me wishing it was working against another part of my body.

I bite my lip, unable to look away. “It, uh, feels better. Thanks.”

Tyler doesn't release my hand or give any inclination to do so anytime soon. Instead, he places a kiss on my palm, trailing his lips along my arm while pushing back the sleeve of my sweatshirt.

"How about now? Did I miss a spot?" The low timbre of his voice leaves me quaking.

I swallow hard. "Nope. All good."

He chuckles against my skin before picking me up and setting me on the opposite counter. "Don't move." I watch him roll up his sleeves as he turns in a small circle. "Where's your broom?"

"Don't worry. I've got it." I try to hop down, but his firm grip holds me in place.

"You don't listen for shit. Sit still and tell me where it is."

Okay, his authoritative tone isn't helping matters, but I follow his orders and point to the small closet by the door. Tyler cleans up the mess in no time, double-checking to ensure every last shard is gone. When satisfied, he lifts me down slowly, allowing my body to slide against his. I can't help but stare at his lips as he quirks them up in a smile.

"You didn't have to do that."

He shrugs and reaches up to grab another glass. "It was partially my fault for distracting you." I gulp again, drawing his attention. "Relax, sweetheart. Why are you so tense?"

I ignore his question, focusing on pouring the wine into his glass before dumping the remainder in mine. If he continues his seduction ways, I'll need all the alcohol I can get.

With a jerk of my head, I lead us over to the couch and curl into a corner. Tyler sits in the opposite corner with an ankle resting on his knee. He looks so out of place, still dressed in his business suit, surrounded by our mismatched furniture, crappy 1970s shag carpet, and laundry baskets of clothes we haven't put away.

He takes a sip of wine, looking everything over with a judgmental glare. "How long have you been here?"

I tap a fingernail against the glass. “A couple of months. I moved in right before I got hired.”

“Oh? Where were you before?”

“My ex’s place.” I take a large gulp, needing to wash Zack’s name from my mouth.

Tyler nods. “This place is awful tiny for two people. How many bedrooms?”

Somehow I knew he’d ask that. “One.”

A mischievous gleam sparkles in his eyes. “Oh, so you and Jenna...”

“God, no. Get your head out of the gutter.”

He laughs. “So, where do you sleep?”

I pat the cushion between us. “You’re on my bed.”

His face twists from humor to disbelief. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Why would I kid about that? It’s not something I broadcast to people since it’s a little embarrassing.”

Tyler keeps his eyes on mine. “Why don’t you have a place of your own?”

I look down at the wineglass, wishing it would give me a good answer rather than the lame one that pops into my head. “I, uh, haven’t had time.”

He tilts his head to the side. “No time? What have you been doing?” I give him a noticeable glare. “Oh. Yeah, I guess I’ve been working you a lot lately.”

I scoff. “That’s the understatement of the year.”

“Even still, you should make enough money to find something decent.”

Does he even know how much I get paid? “I’ve saved up a little for a down payment, but finding something I like that doesn’t require me sitting in traffic for an hour is difficult. Plus, I don’t know if I want to live alone,” I say quietly.

“Wait,” he says, placing his glass on the coffee table. “You’ve never lived alone?” Lord, why did I have to admit that? I shake my head, refusing to meet his eyes. “Never?” Again, another shake of my head. “Not even after college?”

I tap my glass again. “I lived with my freshman-year roommate and our friends until I moved back to Minnesota. Then I lived with my parents for a few months until I met my ex and moved in with him.”

“His idea?” Tyler squeezes the hand in his lap into a fist. Thank god it wasn’t the wineglass. Otherwise, I’d have to buy Jenna a whole new set.

“Not really. I inserted myself into his life, leaving my things at his place until I never left.”

“What happened?” he asks, barely containing the jealousy from his tone.

I try to suppress the smile from blooming across my face. “Let’s just say monogamy wasn’t his strong suit.”

I thought that little bit of info would lift his frown. Instead, it deepened. “He cheated on you?”

“Multiple times. I was too wrapped up in my professional life to notice until I came home to all my stuff sitting in the hallway while his new girlfriend giggled behind the closed door.”

“And where is this guy now?”

I laugh and scoot closer, placing a hand on his white-knuckled fist. “Why? Are you going to defend my honor?”

“Or teach him a lesson.”

“Don’t bother. Zack isn’t worth the time or energy. And it didn’t hurt when he dumped me. He was convenient. My feelings for him were superficial.”

“You didn’t want to be alone,” Tyler states the obvious.

I nod. “Exactly.”

He looks around the apartment again, like he’s seeing it for the first time. “Does this at least pull out into a bed?”

I scrunch my nose. “It’s probably better that it doesn’t. Would you like a metal bar poking you in the back all night long?”

He moves closer and places his hand on my knee. “I can think of something else that could be poking you in the back instead.”

“Dirty,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Not everything is about sex.”

“But it could be.” Tyler leans closer, still sporting that stupid sexy smirk.

“Down, tiger.” I push him back, even though all I want is to grab that loose-hanging tie and pull him on top of me. “Don’t you need a break?”

“I gave you your space all day. How much more do you need?”

Enough to sort through the years’ worth of baggage between us.

“More than ten hours.”

“Seriously?”

I chuckle and reclaim my spot in the corner. “Seriously.”

Tyler must not like the new space between us because he slides onto the middle cushion, brushing our knees together. “For someone who wants to keep this simple, you sure add some complications.”

“How am I adding complications? Because I don’t want to have sex twenty-four/seven?”

He takes another sip of wine. “You freak out when I’m near you in public and when we’re alone. You can’t have it both ways.”

I drag a foot onto the couch, hugging my knee to my chest. “And for someone who says they don’t do relationships, it sounds an awful lot like you want one.”

This time it’s his turn to pause. “I told you before. I’m breaking all my rules for you.”

“I still don’t know what that means.”

His eyes soften. “Shouldn’t it be obvious by now?”

My whole mouth turns to sand as I process his words. Is he saying he wants a relationship, even though I’ve said it’s impossible since we work together?

“I’ll be right back,” I say, dodging his question again.

I can feel Tyler’s eyes as I quickly escape to the bathroom, locking the door behind me. I stare at my reflection, not understanding what he sees in me. I’m the complete opposite of every girl he’s ever dated. I doubt they’d wear threadbare sweatpants in front of him.

But he’s still here. Granted, I’m sure he only wants to have sex since I denied him earlier. But that’s what I want, right? Simple, easy, no-frills.

I still believe he doesn’t really want me, that this is just a flash in the pan idea. He’ll scratch his itch and move on to the next person. And as much as I tell myself not to get my hopes up, it’s too late. My hopes were up the minute I ran into him in the hallway that first day.



## *Tyler*

I look around the cramped apartment again. This cannot be Maysen’s living arrangement, staying on Jenna’s couch with no privacy or space to call her own. Nothing about this place has her touch, her mark. She says she’s afraid of being alone, but I’m not sure how much of that I believe. Maysen isn’t one to back away or cower. Hell, she puts me in my place every chance she can get.

Does she think this is a game to me? That I’m only in this for the chase? The thought crossed my mind before I discovered—remembered—who she was. But now it’s like I have a second chance to do this the right way, how I wanted to years ago but couldn’t because of what everyone would have

thought. Sure, I have a reputation that precedes me, but does anyone care anymore? We're all adults, and this isn't high school.

I drain the wine from my glass and set off to give us both a refill. The contents of the fridge should frighten me. I haven't seen anything this bare since college. Do they even eat? It'd probably explain why she's always so light-headed or falling asleep. I glance over to the couch, a.k.a. her bed. That probably doesn't help either. A few minutes of sitting on it has a pain radiating through my ass.

Knowing Maysen, she won't let me help her find an apartment, even though I have some excellent connections that could get her a deal on a great space nearby. Hell, I'd move her into my building if she'd let me. Wouldn't that be convenient—an elevator ride separating us, no looking over our shoulders to see if anyone is watching? Then we could carpool together without it being gossip fodder at the office.

I accidentally kick a box next to the couch, flipping the lid off slightly. Damn it. I bend down to put it back; only something catches my eye. I pull the top back more and push aside a magazine partially covering the teal toy. Maysen is mighty brave to leave her little battery-operated friend in such a public place, though something tells me they don't entertain many people here. I smirk as images of her using said toy flood my thoughts—her leg propped up on the back of the couch, opening her up as she thrusts the toy in and out, quietly moaning so she doesn't disturb her roommate. Or does she use it when Jenna's at work, filling her lonely nights in more ways than one?

My dick twitches with need. Maybe we can try it out later. She can show me how she uses it, or I can come up with a few ideas of my own.

The click of the door has me rushing to put everything back to normal. Maysen rejoins me on the couch, sporting her black-rimmed glasses and her hair piled high on her head.

“Thanks for the refill.”



I nod, keeping my eyes on her. “What plans did you have tonight?” Maybe with your little friend?

She shrugs. “Drink wine and watch TV.”

“Anything else?” I nudge.

“Nope. Why?”

I grab the glass from her hands and set it on the table. “Nothing to relax you?”

“You took away my relaxation,” she pouts.

I lean over, getting close enough to hear her breathing change. “What about your friend?”

She pulls back slightly, her delicate brows drawn together until the realization hits her like a truck. “Oh, my god. Why were you looking through my stuff?”

I chuckle and lean back. “It was an accident. I kicked the top off the box after refilling our wine. It’s not my fault you leave your sex toys out for others to find.”

Maysen hides behind her hands, groaning loudly. “Can you please pretend you didn’t see it?”

I pull her hands down. “Not with the images running through my head. Want to bring them to life?” I wag my brows for emphasis.

“Shut up.” She pushes me away to grab the remote control, flipping on the TV. “What do you want to watch?”

“You and your teal lover.”

If looks could kill, I’d be six feet under right now. “Not funny.”

“It sort of is.”

Maysen ignores my laughter and flips through the different streaming apps until she picks a movie. “Just for that, we’re watching a rom-com.”

“Sounds good to me.”

She stares at me in disbelief before crossing her arms over her chest, which isn’t helping the swelling in my pants. I

honestly don't care what's on TV. I only want to spend time with her and prove that I'm no longer what she thinks I am.

Halfway through some Sandra Bullock movie, she yawns and scoots closer, resting her head on my shoulder. Instinct takes over as I wrap an arm around her, pulling her close.

“How did you know where I live?”

I'm honestly surprised it took her this long to ask. “I have my ways.”

She looks up through her lashes. “No, seriously. Did you sneak into my personnel file or something?”

I shake my head and press her head back to my shoulder. “No.”

“Okay?”

I sigh, realizing she won't let this go until I give her an answer. “I followed you from the bar.”

“You...what?” This time she pulls back, looking me in the eyes.

“When you left the office, I gave you a head start so it wouldn't look like we were going together. Knowing you didn't have your car, phone, or purse, I wasn't sure how you planned on getting home. I had hoped you'd come to me for a ride.” I swallow hard. “Going to the Cask & Barrel was the last place I expected, but when I saw you sitting on the barstool talking to Jaryd, I sat back and made sure you were okay. After the rules you laid down this morning, I wasn't sure if sitting next to you would be welcomed or not, so I kept my distance. When Jenna showed up, it didn't ease my mind. I had to see for myself that you were okay.”

“So you stalked me,” Maysen says with a laugh.

“Technically, I guess.”

Her tiny hand runs across my chest, grabbing the loosened tie and pulling it over my head before snuggling back into my side. “Thanks for caring.”

I kiss her forehead and smile. “Anytime, sweetheart.”

We sit silently for a bit until the end credits start to roll. Maysen reaches for the remote and flips through more selections. “Anything you want to do now?”

I grab her hand and set the remote down. “Go out to dinner with me.”

“Tonight?” She quickly looks at her clothes and cringes.

“No, not tonight. Tomorrow.”

The silence stretches between us until the corners of her lips turn up. “Okay.”

My heart practically skips a beat as I press my lips to hers. “And then dessert at my place.”

“We’ll see, buddy.”

Oh, there won’t be any question about that.



## CHAPTER *Sixteen*

### *Maysen*

This is weird. Sneaking around the office, pretending like I'm not having the best sex of my life, *lying* to my only friend here as I keep making excuses on why we can't meet up after work. One of these times, someone will call my bluff, and our secret will be blown wide open. It's bad enough he calls me into his office every five minutes, trying to keep up the guise of being a horrible boss, only to assault my lips the minute the door closes.

No, I can't think of kissing Tyler right now.

Holly pokes her head around the corner, sliding her jacket over her shoulders. "Another late night? If you keep this up, you'll end up like Jack Nicholson from *The Shining*."

I laugh and spin to face her. "All work and no play makes Maysen a dull girl."

"Truth."

Can't argue with that, though if she knew what was actually keeping me here late, she wouldn't find it dull.

Corrin slows down as she walks by, a smile growing on her lips to mimic ours. "Ladies, are you coming to The Last Call for an impromptu executive meeting? The assistants are highly encouraged to attend."

Holly beams with excitement. "Absolutely. Is this about the retreat next month?"

"It is. We're going over some final details for the weekend, figuring out the room situations to submit to the resort."

Both women must sense my confusion as they stare at me. "Didn't Tyler mention anything about it?" Holly asks.

I shake my head. "Not a word."

"Not surprising," Corrin says. "He's been a little absent-minded lately. Not sure what's wrong with him, but we're all noticing the change." She pauses before giving me a forced smile. "And change isn't always a bad thing. He's less grumpy and tyrannical, which is nice."

A lump forms in the pit of my stomach. Have we been so focused on each other that we didn't account for how our quasi-relationship affects our work?

No, I'm putting too much into this, letting my fears and insecurities overshadow everything. So Tyler's in a better mood. And I don't think I'm working more than I used to. Hell, he hardly makes me stay late for work purposes anymore.

"Still a workaholic," I add, trying to keep some of his personality traits intact.

Corrin nods. "That he is. I assume you'll tell him about the meeting once he's done in the conference room?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Perfect." Corrin looks at Holly with a smile. "Ready?"

"Lead the way."

They wave goodbye with “see you soon” chants over their shoulders. Great. An impromptu meeting with all the executives and assistants. And why hadn’t Tyler mentioned the retreat before? Was he planning on not going, though I can’t understand why not since he’s a senior executive?

I glance at the clock on the screen. The meeting will be at least another half hour, once again leaving us alone in the office. I bet Tyler plans it that way, knowing he can be a little bolder without the watchful eyes of a particular male who has constantly been hovering around us.

Voices start filtering down the hall, making small talk and jokes as they head to the lobby. I stand and smile at the entrance to my cube, not missing Tyler’s appraising glance as he passes. Once the coast is clear, I head to the conference room, tossing the various half-eaten pastries into the garbage and loading the coffee mugs onto the tray to wash.

The door closes behind me, followed quickly by the click of the lock.

“Finally,” Tyler says, brushing his hands across my hips before pulling me into the safety of his arms. “I can have you all to myself.”

I chuckle and turn to face the impossibly gorgeous man with sin in his eyes. “Calm down there, boy. You act like you haven’t seen me in ages.”

He shrugs his shoulders and buries his face into the crook of my neck. “What can I say? I miss you when you’re not in these meetings.”

He nips at the skin below my ear, sending a shiver through my body. “You miss not feeling me up underneath the table.”

Tyler pulls back, placing a gentle hand on my cheek. “Among other things.” He leaves the statement open to draw my own conclusions to its meaning.

Erring on the side of caution, I take it at face value rather than let my hormones dictate my thoughts. “Right. My excellent note-taking skills.”

“I much rather prefer your dictation.”

“You’re such a pig,” I say, playfully slapping his chest.

Tyler leans in, bringing our lips so close they’re practically touching. “You love it.”

Not that I’ll admit it to his face. He has a big enough ego as it is. Then again, I’m a horseshit liar, and Tyler seems to read me like a book, even when I do my best to protect myself.

The minute our lips crash onto each other, the world disappears, leaving me light-headed while clinging to his lapels for stability. As much as I deny it, I miss being around him. There’s something about his energy that fuels my own. It’s so much more than sex, though that seems to drain me more than recharge.

All thoughts dissipate like smoke in the air as he presses me against the table, continuing his assault on my mouth. Those naughty hands that keep me awake at night trail up my thigh, pushing the skirt higher to expose more skin. A low rumble erupts from his chest when his fingertips trace the top of my stockings.

“Fuck me, Maysen. I swear you wear this simply for torture.”

I smile against his lips while half-sitting on the edge of the hardwood surface. “One of my favorite pastimes. Not to mention at someone’s request.” Apparently, wearing pantyhose hindered his full access to my body, which was unacceptable. I simply gave up after spending a small fortune replacing the shredded silk items.

“I don’t like to work for what’s mine.” A thrill shoots through me like it always does when he gets possessive.

“Are you implying I’m easy?”

His hand slips between my parted legs, finding the other present I left him. Tyler’s eyes widen with surprise.

“Maysen, please tell me you came to work wearing something underneath this skirt and had only taken them off before coming in here.”

A slow, devious smile crosses my features. “My mother taught me not to lie.”

“Fuck.” His resounding growl sends a shot of desire straight to where his fingers start to explore the slick, sensitive skin. “You’re making me regret our decision to keep up this charade of holding you at arm’s length.”

Tyler curls a finger inside, bringing a moan to the surface. Thank god no one else is in the office; otherwise, they’d be wondering who’s making the porno in the conference room.

Our eyes stay locked together as he increases the pressure by adding another finger while gripping the hair at the nape of my neck with his other hand. My mouth goes slack, trying to form a scream but getting swallowed up by an all-consuming kiss right away.

My chest feels constricted, squeezed as it forces air in and out of my lungs. I hook a leg around Tyler’s waist, practically pulling him on top of me.

“Tyler,” I pant out once he finally releases my lips.

He stares at me like he’s looking straight into my soul. “What do you need, sweetheart?”

The stupid organ in my chest does a weird flutter like it usually does when he uses my pet name, confusing me more while trying to keep this casual.

But, right now, all rationale has left the building. The only thing left is raging hormones that refuse to go quietly into the night.

“You,” I pant out.

The smile crawling across his face is one I absolutely love because it means I’m about to be fucked seven ways to Sunday.

Until a knock at the door shatters everything around us.

“Maysen? You in there?” The handle jiggles, forcing us to quickly fly apart and straighten whatever clothing we displaced in our moment of passion.



“What the fuck is he doing here?” Tyler hisses, red quickly coloring his face with barely repressed anger.

“Just stand right there,” I say, pushing him against the wall so he’ll be hidden behind the door when it opens. The look in his eyes could level a building, but we don’t have time for petty jealousy now. There’s more at stake than stroking his precious ego.

I blow out a quick breath, praying I can explain the flush across my cheeks or anything else awry, and open the door, finding a puzzled Ian on the other side. “Hey. What are you doing here?” I keep a firm grip on the edge of the door while partially blocking the entrance.

Ian quirks a brow. “I could ask you the same thing. Why did you lock the door?”

Playing dumb, I draw my brows together. “I didn’t know it was. Someone must have accidentally clicked it on their way out. I was cleaning up the room so we don’t get ants over the weekend.” I sweep a hand behind me for emphasis.

I’m unsure if he’s buying what I’m selling, but he nods. “Have you seen Tyler?”

“Not since he left the meeting. But I know everyone is going to The Last Call right now. Maybe he’s already there.”

Ian smiles and nods. “Good, so you do know about it. Want to carpool together?”

I shuffle from foot to foot, feeling the needy shocks from being left high and dry. “Oh, um, thanks for the offer, but I’d rather drive myself. I’m meeting up with some friends after, and I’d hate for you to bug out early and miss anything.”

“I don’t mind,” he says, taking a step closer.

I can practically feel Tyler’s anger radiate through the door. He’s about three seconds away from blowing our cover.

“I’d still rather drive myself. Thanks, though.”

Ian accepts my excuse with a nod. “Don’t be too long. There will be a drink with your name on it as soon as you get there.”

I force a smile. “Can’t wait.”

Ian wanders down the hall and out of sight, hopefully right out of the building. Tyler’s practically fuming as he emerges from behind the door, doing everything in his power not to alert anyone else to his presence.

“The fuck is his problem?”

I’ve never seen him this enraged before. If he could spit fire, I know he would. With a hand on his cheek, I coax him to look at me.

“He’s gone. It’s fine. I can handle Ian.”

The flames still dance in Tyler’s eyes. “But you shouldn’t have to.”

“No, he should take the hint like a good boy, but clearly, he’s a slow learner. Believe me. I’m not interested in anyone else.”

That seems to bring him out of his rage, his face softening with each deep breath. “Good.”

I roll my eyes at his caveman attitude. “Now that we have that mess cleaned up, I need to work on this one so I can head over with everyone else.” I start pushing him out the door. “Go. Otherwise, Ian will know something’s up.”

“Fuck that asshat,” Tyler grumbles before assaulting my lips again with his.

“Can’t. I’m fucking the asshat in front of me. I can only straddle one ego at a time.”

Some levity finally returns to his eyes as they crinkle in the corners. “You’ll be regretting that statement later tonight.”

Statement. Threat. Promise. Whatever.

As long as I’m straddling Tyler, he can call it whatever he wants.



I’m not sure what I expected when I walked through the doors of The Last Call, probably something more along the lines of

the Cask & Barrel: classy, quiet, whiskey flowing like water.

Not this hybrid version. The upper seating area consists of leather couches and chairs—very swanky and snobby, almost like you expect the smell of cigar smoke to linger in the air. But the closer you get to the massive bar occupying the middle of the room, it's like you've crossed the proverbial train tracks to the other side of town. TVs blasting various sporting events with guys huddled around to cheer on their favorite teams. High-and-low top tables take up the middle, giving the best of both worlds, with the noise being slightly less but still serving the baskets of peanuts and popcorn to bring it all together.

Jekyll and Hyde would have been a better bar name.

Holly waves me over to a long table against the wall, pushing out the chair she saved for me. “You made it. They must have made a huge mess.”

I laugh, crossing my eyes for emphasis. “I swear, every one of them only drank half their coffee and ate their pastries like they were two years old—crumbs everywhere. I didn't want to leave it for Jerry, so I vacuumed it quick.”

“Aw, isn't that sweet?” Chrissy says, putting her cleavage on full display as she leans forward. “Kind of like Cinderella, only without the ashes and soot. Well, at least that we can see.”

“Ignore her,” Holly whispers. “She's bitter that she's down here and not up there with the execs.”

I look at the higher level, noting everyone from junior to senior with an amber liquid in hand while joking and laughing. It takes a minute to find Tyler. As if he can sense my stare, he looks up with a small smile, one he uses in secret and made only for me. Warmth spreads through my chest as I bite the corner of my lip—which I know from experience sets a fire in his blood.

“How exactly are we supposed to have a meeting to discuss arrangements when we're separated?”

Holly shrugs while draining her martini glass. “Not sure, but they're buying the drinks, so who cares. Never question

free alcohol.”

Truer words have never been spoken.

Before flagging a waitress, a light pink drink appears in front of me. I trace the arm attached to it to find Ian smiling away like he won the lottery.

“As promised.”

“Oh, um, thanks,” I say, setting the glass on the table.

“Get everything straightened up?” he asks, letting his gaze drop to my chest with a smirk.

“Yep, like brand new.”

Chrissy moves to Ian’s side. “Good news. As soon as Tyler comes to his senses and fires you, you’ll always have a backup job as a janitor.”

Ian snorts but quickly covers it with a cough. “I wasn’t sure what you’d like, so I opted for the safe bet of a Cosmo.”

Oh, vodka. How you love to hate me.

“Thanks,” I say, staring at the glass like it would bite me.

“Let me know if it tastes okay.”

I stare at him for a beat. What an odd thing to say. Typically, I don’t accept drinks from others unless I watch them get made. There are too many horror stories about women getting drugged with zero memory of how it happened. My friends and I made a pact about responsible drinking in high school. Guess I’ve carried it into adulthood.

I bring the glass to my lips, keeping them closed and fake a hum of approval. “It’s perfect.”

One of the other executives from above bellows for Ian, giving me a reprieve. Though I doubt Ian would be dumb enough to spike a drink with all our bosses here, there’s still something I don’t like about that guy. Maybe it’s his overconfidence or believing that everything falls right into his lap with a snap of his fingers. Or the fact he went from simple flirting to creepy almost overnight.

With Ian currently occupied, now's my chance to rush to the bar and abandon his drink to order a fresh one. This way, he'll think I'm still drinking the one he bought while easing my overactive imagination. Even though vodka tends to give me the mother of all hangovers, the thought of sipping on Cosmos all night sounds appealing.

I didn't realize how isolated I'd felt in the few months I worked at the office. Several other assistants grab chairs by Holly and me, gabbing away like we've been friends forever. They talk about past events and retreats, excitedly gushing about the upcoming one next month and hoping for a repeat of a few years ago when several CEOs started stealing things off the walls or were riding the stuffed animal displays in a drunken stupor.

Soon enough, the warm buzz of alcohol heats my cheeks, finally letting me relax. But that's not the only thing warming my cheeks as I feel Tyler's blatant stare while nodding his head to someone vying for his attention. This could be dangerous, playing cat-and-mouse around everyone. And fuck if it doesn't turn me on a little. The low-lying ache between my legs starts up again, reminding me he never finished what he started. Shadows cover his eyes as he watches me shift in my seat, looking for some friction.

**Tyler: Keep it up and you'll find yourself pinned against a bathroom stall.**

I smirk and quickly type out my reply.

**Me: Promises, promises.**

**Tyler: Bet you wish you wore panties now.**

**Me: Why? Still easy access. And who says I need you?**

**Tyler: Bet my tongue could convince you.**

Fuck, he had to bring that up. Images of us trapped in a tiny stall with him lapping at my center take over all rational thought. Being turned on in front of everyone is the last thing I need.

And yet...

**Me: Keep it up and there will be a mess on this chair.**

A devious smirk tugs at his lips. Thank god he moved away from others. If only I had made the same choice, although that might look suspicious.

**Tyler: A mess I'd create and clean up.**

I bite my lip again, keeping my eyes locked on his.

**Tyler: I can practically taste you now, lapping at your excitement. Maybe I'd swirl one of these whiskey-covered ice cubes over your body to cool you down, with my two favorite flavors dancing across my tongue.**

I close my eyes, trying to focus on my breathing. Holy shit, I'm going to orgasm without him even touching me.

**Tyler: My fingers itch to feel you, stroke you where no one else can. After you come all over them, I would bend you over a table and fuck you senseless. Then maybe you'd reconsider ever coming to the office without panties again.**

**Me: Maybe I should take care of this myself.**

His head whips up so fast you'd swear it would have fallen off. His eyes glaze over, keeping their possessive stare as I make a point to cross my legs Sharon Stone-style.

**Tyler: Don't.**

His one-word threat makes me want to push it some more until another pair of eyes turns their attention to me. Fuck. The last thing I need is to flash everyone in the office, especially Ian.

Holly looks over, drawing her brows together. "Maysen? You're looking a little flushed. Are you okay?"

Hell no. My boss just sent me some of the dirtiest texts in a very public setting, practically bringing me to orgasm without touching me after leaving me aching and wanting from a few hours ago. For a second, panic sets in when her eyes dart between Tyler and me as he quickly slides his phone into his pocket. Shit. Does she know something's up? If she does, she's not showing it, keeping her expression neutral and unjudging.

“Yeah,” I squeak, wishing the frog would leave my throat.  
“Vodka.”

The one-worded answer is enough of an explanation as she clinks her martini glass to mine. “Gotta love to hate it.”

Soon enough, the upper meeting breaks up, filtering into our space as the retreat details get laid out. All the executives will have their own rooms, while the assistants will share a room. Not exactly what I was hoping for, but it’s not surprising that the company wouldn’t want bosses sleeping with their assistants. And not in that sense necessarily. Cohabitation between the sexes is generally frowned upon professionally. Tyler smirks, mischief playing in his eyes. I know that smirk; been on the receiving end of it many nights. Each time it involves multiple orgasms and screaming to the heavens.

With him flying solo and me having a roommate, I wonder what he has planned or how we’ll be able to sneak off together without drawing suspicion.



## *Tyler*

I honestly didn’t think anyone would go for it, keeping teams together rather than executives rooming separately from their assistants. Richard didn’t even ask why when I suggested he bring it up. I’m sure he was too distracted by the possibility of getting Chrissy to himself without needing to work for it.

Maybe her being accountable to a roommate will keep her away from me for the weekend. The last thing I need is her lurking around every corner. Hotels and CEOs hopped up on alcohol are what Chrissy considers easy targets.

The disgust in everyone’s expression was enough to shoot down the idea, as evident in Denise’s unamused frown. She chastised Richard for suggesting an HR nightmare riddled with potential sexual harassment claims. He shrugged it off.

Knowing him, he'll do everything to get her in his room anyway.

Am I being a little hypocritical? Probably. But unlike those two, Maysen and I are in a relationship. Sort of. I don't know why she's fighting me on this. Then again, I did say they're not my thing. There's something about Maysen that makes me want to be different. Whenever I look at her, I see more than a one-night stand or a casual fling. I'm not saying there's a white picket fence and two-point-four kids running in the yard, but it's more than I've ever envisioned with anyone else.

Her laugh draws my gaze to where she's sitting with the other assistants, completely carefree and at ease. I love seeing this version of her. Since we must keep this façade going, being the tyrant and running her ragged gets old quickly. I'd rather see her smile simply because her whole face lights up, making her even more impossibly gorgeous than she already is.

Fuck. This relationship stuff is turning me into a sap.

I head to the bar, needing another refill on my drink. A few junior execs chew my ear, wanting pointers on a presentation next week. I'm happy to oblige, even though the answer is relatively obvious. They're still learning, and everyone's success is good for the company.

"Tyler, there you are." Chrissy's alcohol-fueled voice is like nails on a chalkboard. "Been waiting to get you alone all night. Care to help me with a problem I'm having?"

"Not really," I say, unamused and monotone, hoping she'll get the hint. Of course, with all her drinks, the subtleties of a brush-off won't be noticeable in her current state.

She drags a hand up my forearm, playing with the rolled-up sleeve near my elbow. "But it's your favorite. I have a button that needs pushing, and you're the only one who knows how to do it."

"Somehow, I doubt that. Why don't you ask Richard? I know for a fact he pushes your button all the time."



Chrissy frowns pathetically. “If I wanted an overweight older man sweating on me for five seconds, I’d go to him. But I’m in the mood for a good fuck. And you’re the person to do it.” She leans closer, practically pressing her lips to my ears. “It’s been too long, lover. My pussy aches for your cock inside it.”

The bartender places my drink down, giving me a thumbs-up. Maybe I can persuade him into taking Chrissy to the backroom to fulfill her needs.

“Not tonight.”

She rears back as if I slapped her. “What the fuck is your problem?” she practically screeches, turning a few people’s heads nearby. “You’ve been avoiding me at the office and ignoring my texts and calls. Is there something going on?”

Red clouds my vision as I down the fresh whiskey in one gulp, completely fed up with this conversation. “Remember who you’re speaking to. I am a senior executive. I make the calls around here, not some assistant who doesn’t know how to keep decorum. Drink some water and sober up. This is unbecoming of you and a poor reflection on the company in such a public place.”

I look down the bar and see Maysen staring at us, chewing her damn bottom lip like she always does when nervous. Damn it. She doesn’t need to see this. Hell, nobody needs to see this.

I need to get out of here. And fast.

Chrissy grinds her teeth with a sneer before stomping away like a petulant child. Pissing her off isn’t the wisest decision. Her tendency for retaliation and unstable moods is well-known around the office. It’s also why there isn’t any disciplinary action in her personnel file. Everyone is afraid of what she’ll do.

I’ll have to tread this carefully. However, the benefit of being the boss means I won’t be intimidated, especially by her.

Maysen is still staring at me, trying to pay attention to Holly simultaneously. I flash her a quick smile and nod, letting

her know everything is fine. She returns the gesture and focuses on her conversation.

I grab my coat from the upper level and say my goodbyes to everyone still discussing business because they don't know how to relax. After making sure Gayle, our finance director, will settle up the bar tab, I quickly head for the door before someone else pulls me aside.

In the safety of my car, I type a quick message to Maysen.

**Me: Make your excuses to leave in about ten minutes.**

**Maysen: Ok. My place or yours?**

**Me: Mine.**

As if that's even a question. I can't take one more night of fooling around on her cramped couch or in the kitchen or bathroom while praying Jenna won't come home unannounced. I think she's purposely dragging her feet on getting her own place.

Whether or not she knows it, her living arrangement is about to get remedied and fast.



## CHAPTER *Seventeen*

### *Maysen*

“This one has a gorgeous open-concept, almost loft-like feel to it,” Karin, Jenna’s realtor friend, says, her voice echoing off the empty walls.

It’s probably the smallest apartment we’ve seen so far, clocking in at around five hundred square feet. I’m not sure I’d classify it as an open-concept; studio loft for sure since the only room that isn’t out in the open is the bathroom. Thank god.

Tyler keeps his post beside me. His stoic and judging gaze runs over every feature, narrowing on each imperfection like they were in blaze orange, crying, “pay attention to me!”

Surprisingly, he’s been a moderately good sport, considering this is the third property of the morning. After last week’s impromptu bar meeting at The Last Call, he made it abundantly clear my living situation needed to go. I had a feeling he disliked me still sleeping on a couch, but when Jenna walked in on us after work on Wednesday, deep in the

throes of me riding his cock, Tyler unleashed his unadulterated hatred of our lack of privacy. How was I supposed to know Jenna would be home so early? Not to mention we hadn't planned on having couch sex, but I forgot my laptop since we decided to put in a little extra work at his place, and Tyler couldn't help himself when I bent over the coffee table, giving him a glimpse of me *not* wearing underwear. Again.

Jenna only laughed at his outburst and said she'd make a call to a friend.

Karin has been a good sport, considering Tyler gave her two days' notice to find suitable apartments in my price range and the area I'd like to live. However, his standards are clearly different than mine. I only require a mostly clean place that doesn't need a lot of repairs. Tyler, on the other hand...

"This is highway robbery," he says, scrunching his face as he shuts a kitchen cabinet. "They want how much for this closet?"

Karin straightens while clutching the portfolio a little tighter to her chest. "This is a very up-and-coming neighborhood. Lots of little shops and restaurants within walking distance, small galleries, and chic boutiques."

Tyler scoffs, turning in a small circle in the middle of the room. "I've seen hotel rooms bigger than this." He turns on the faucet, letting the water run until it's slightly less cloudy. "Really?"

Karin thumbs through a leaflet in the folder left on the counter before nodding. "Yes, a few things need addressing, but all fixable. Did I mention the private balcony and outdoor space?" She quickly changes tactics by walking us over to the sliding glass door where I assume the bedroom would be, showcasing a tiny wrought-iron balcony, barely able to fit a chair or small table. Hell, two of us couldn't even stand on it at the same time.

"Nice." It's about all I can say to describe the place. Is it me? Not really. But it's cute and cozy, something I could work with to make my own.

Tyler snorts, not even trying to hide his distaste. “What else do you have for us?”

Karin flips open the portfolio and scratches something down on the paper. “I have two more properties for you. Both are slightly higher in price but still doable.”

I was hoping to find something within my budget so I’m not living paycheck to paycheck, but if I have to adjust a few things, so be it. The only problem will be finding something Tyler would accept as well. Hell, you’d think we were getting this apartment together with as picky as he’s being. Not that I don’t appreciate his help. He’s been asking questions I hadn’t thought of, putting Karin on the spot to justify a few things. The man knows real estate and business.

“Let’s go,” he says, beelining it to the door.

I flash an apologetic smile to Karin, who shakes her head with a chuckle. “He’s not the first disapproving boyfriend I’ve dealt with and won’t be the last.”

At least she’s taking it all in stride. I didn’t want to correct her that he’s not technically my boyfriend. But it sounds better than “the boss I’m currently fucking.”

Tyler’s already waiting in his car as I slide into the passenger seat before following Karin to the next property. I can practically feel the annoyance emanating from his body.

“It wasn’t the worst one we’ve seen,” I say, trying to lighten his mood.

He scoffs and glances over at me. “That was a dump, Maysen. And completely overpriced. It’s not much different than your current living situation other than your bed would double as your couch instead of the other way around.”

I grab his hand and lace our fingers together on his jean-clad thigh. “Maybe we’ll find a winner with one of the next properties.”

We stop at a red light, giving him time to turn and face me. “My offer still stands.”

I roll my eyes. Not this again. “I’m not moving in with you. Besides, this is supposed to be casual, remember?”

“Apartment shopping together is casual?” He quirks a brow before pulling back into traffic.

Damn, he has me there. Nothing about our relationship has been casual, even though I try to convince myself otherwise. Refusing to label this will make the eventual heartbreak easier.

*Another lie I keep telling myself.*

Tyler brings our joined hands to his lips, kissing each of my knuckles. “One day, you’ll learn to just listen to what I say.”

Heat blooms in my chest at his sweet gesture, even though his words are very caveman. You’d think I’d be disgusted by his show of dominance, but instead, finding that it turns me on.

He smirks and presses the palm of my hand against his leg, dangerously close to his groin. “You have dirty in your eyes, and we don’t have time to play out what’s in your head.”

“I think you’re the dirty one,” I say, barely keeping the obvious arousal out of my voice.

Before he can respond, we pull behind Karin’s car at the next apartment.

“To be continued.” He leans over and snipes a kiss, practically taking my breath away.

Remind me again why moving in with him is a bad idea?



Karin and I have different views on slightly over budget. As much as I would have loved to be in either of the two apartments we just left, an extra thousand a month wasn’t exactly what I planned.

“It’s the price you pay to live in your desired location.” I mock Karin’s voice as Tyler drives us back to his place. “Was she high?”

Tyler manages to sport a smile. “I’m not going to say it.”

“Then don’t,” I clip. I’m so glad he’s amused at my misfortunes. “This is serious. All I want is a nice place where I won’t be house poor and can do everything I want.”

We pull into his covered garage and park. Tyler twists in his seat, palming my cheek while rubbing his thumb along my skin. “Sweetheart, this is the perfect solution. You can save all your money and do whatever you want. Plus, unlimited sex. It’s a win for everyone.”

The stupid organ in my chest flips and flops, warring with my brain on who should win this battle. Would living with Tyler be the answer to everything? Probably. But then I’ll be in the same position I was with Zack. The minute things go south, I’ll be on my ass again, begging friends to let me crash at their place. And I love Jenna with all my heart, but she can’t be happy with my constant intrusion into her personal life.

“Tyler, I-I don’t think it’s a good idea,” I finally say, placing my hand over his. “We’re not even dating. What would happen if we got into a fight? Or I lose my job? Then what?”

A low growl erupts from the back of his throat. “Can you shut down your overactive imagination for two seconds? One, I’m sick of hearing you say we’re not in a relationship. Yes, I don’t have an excellent track record or much experience in this department, but I know we’re more than just casual sex. Two, you’ll get fired over my dead body. Three,” he pauses to grab both my hands. “Couples fight. They cool off and think things through. You know what happens then?”

I shake my head, unable to pull my eyes away from his. “What?”

He leans close, taking up all the space until my entire body is acutely aware of his commanding presence. A slow, lascivious smile tugs at his lips. “Make-up sex.”

I take a slow, deep breath, inhaling everything that is Tyler Cannon into my system. All his points are valid. But he’s also

not wrong about my overactive imagination. “How can this work? Our relationship. We can’t even bring it public.”

“Why not?”

Words fail me as I bite my bottom lip. I know there’s a valid reason, but I can’t think of it right now.

Tyler sighs before pressing a gentle kiss to my lips, coaxing them to follow his lead, which I would have done without question. I know this man wouldn’t do anything to put us in danger. The more time I spend with him, the more I realize he’d rather cut off his second favorite appendage than see me hurt. We all know why he wouldn’t cut off the favorite. He needs it to fuck me into submission.

Before we can start something we can’t stop, Tyler pulls away, rounds the car to help me out—so gentlemanly and still surprising every time he does it—and grabs my hand as we walk to the elevator.

“We need to stop at the desk to check my mail,” he says, tapping something out on his phone before sliding it into his pocket.

I snuggle into his side, stealing every ounce of heat to ward off the chill inside the small space. Tyler wraps an arm around my shoulder while kissing the top of my head. For a man who says he’s not good at relationships, you could have fooled me.

Then again, I can’t say I’m much better.

Maybe there’s a learning curve for both of us.

We walk across the pristine lobby to the desk along the farthest wall, greeted instantly by a smiling older gentleman wearing a gray suit.

“Mr. Cannon.” He hands over the stack of mail before nodding at me. “Ms. James, a pleasure to see you again.”

“Hello,” I say with a squeak. It’ll never stop being weird being greeted by Tyler’s doorman. Yeah, my interactions are limited to pleasantries and friendly waves as I’m either doing the walk of shame or sprinting to get upstairs.



“Do anything fun today?” he asks.

His question takes me by surprise as my brain restarts. “Oh, um, just a little apartment hunting. Nothing big.”

“Apartment hunting, eh? Find anything good?”

Tyler snorts next to me, still digging through his mail. “Nothing suitable for habitation.”

I jab him hard in his side. They weren’t that bad. “It’s what’s in my budget.”

“If I may, there’s currently an opening in our building. One of the smaller units was recently renovated and is available. Would you be interested?”

I try not to let my mouth hang completely open. Is he serious? There’s no way I’d be able to afford a place here. “Well, here’s the thing, I—”

“We’d love to see it,” Tyler says, cutting me off.

Seriously? Why is he even entertaining this?

Curtis—according to his nametag—smiles brightly and ducks into the back office briefly before reappearing with a set of keys in his hand. “I think you’re going to love it, Ms. James.”

“Please, call me Maysen.”

He nods, not agreeing to the request, leading us to the elevators we just exited. I glance up at Tyler, who’s sporting a smug smile.

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up,” I whisper through the corner of my mouth.

No response, which I didn’t expect one as we got off on the third floor. At least several floors are separating us from Tyler’s apartment.

Curtis heads to the last apartment down the hall. It doesn’t escape my notice that the doors are closer together than on Tyler’s floor, which is a good indicator that I’m not getting the wool pulled over my eyes.

“As I said, it’s one of the smaller units, only around thirteen-hundred square feet.” I practically choke on my spit. That’s the largest one we’ve seen today. We walk into the open space, looking similar to Tyler’s floor plan, only downscaled. Bright light streams in from the floor-to-ceiling windows occupying the living room, making the kitchen’s white cabinets glow. “It’s a one-bedroom apartment with a full bath, in-house laundry, and bonus room.”

Bonus room? I ditch the guys for a self-guided tour. This is way more space than I need, even more than Jenna currently has in her apartment. The whole place smells new, with the lingering scent of fresh paint and cleaner. High-end stainless steel appliances decorate the kitchen, including a wine fridge stashed within the island. The same luxurious feel carries into the bathroom, closely resembling Tyler’s. A bedroom with a walk-in closet is across the hall. I could almost get that new king-sized mattress I’ve dreamed about with all this space. A door to the left of the closet piques my interest as I follow it into an en suite office. Oh, I could make plans for this space. Fill it full of bookcases with all my paperbacks currently rotting in storage, a large L-shaped desk to store my laptop and various other work-related items—a secret library of sorts.

It’s almost too good to be true.

When I make my way back to the kitchen, Tyler looks over, sporting a knowing smirk. “You love it, don’t you.”

I close my eyes briefly before biting the bullet, taking a deep breath. “How much?”

Curtis slides a piece of paper across the granite countertop.

No. Fucking. Way.

“Th-that’s it?”

He nods. “We haven’t advertised it yet, but it won’t last long at this price.”

A knot forms in my throat. There’s no way this is happening to me. How could I find the perfect place in the same building as Tyler while staying within my budget?

Somebody pinch me because I must be dreaming.

Tyler reads my expression and slaps a hand on Curtis's shoulder. "We'll come down and fill out the necessary paperwork later."

Instead of knowing what to do, I stand there with my mouth open, staring at Curtis's retreating form. Higher brain function finally settles in as Tyler closes the distance between us.

"Is this real? I mean, really real?"

He nods, snaking his arms around my waist to pull me close. "It is. And it's even better that I won't have to travel far to find you."

Who would have thought we would have stumbled upon this place today after all our bad luck? I wrap my arms around Tyler's neck and take control, kissing him without abandon, thanking him without words for being there for me and not pushing me into something he wants rather than what I need.

"Care to christen my new place?" I drag my nails along his abs, loving how they contract and quiver with each stroke underneath his shirt.

Within seconds, our clothes are off as we get lost in each other along every surface we can find.



## *Tyler*

Maysen's glowing face is all I need to know I made the right decision. After the hellish morning of nothing but shoebox apartments in less than desirable neighborhoods, I'd had enough. If she wasn't willing to concede that living with me was the more appropriate option, then being in my building where I know she'll be safe and protected would have to do.

I slide out from the covers, careful not to wake her. After our quickie in her new apartment, we fixed ourselves to head down to sign the paperwork, then practically ran to the elevators to celebrate at my place. Her screams and moans still

live within my thoughts, plaguing them until all I can think of is her. Somehow she's gotten under my skin, a feat I never thought was possible.

Her lashes fan her rosy cheeks, still smiling even though I know she's exhausted. I slowly drag a finger across the rise of her cheekbone, trailing it along her jaw and underneath her plump lips, still slightly swollen from my attack.

Everything about this woman is perfection. She's an addiction I can't get rid of and one I don't want to.

Slipping into the crumpled clothes lying in a heap on the floor, I quietly close the door behind me as I head down to the lobby.

"Mr. Cannon," Curtis says, pulling out a manila folder behind the desk.

I glance down at the new lease agreement, verifying the numbers are correct. "And the difference between what Ms. James pays and the actual rent has been added to mine?"

He nods. "Yes, sir. The additional charge shows up on this line."

I nod and sign the bottom. "Thank you, again, for doing this."

Being a loyal customer—and a board member—has its perks. One text to the building manager was all it took to ensure Maysen would think she was getting a steal of an apartment while giving me the peace of mind knowing she's safe and sound. Not to mention keeping her close.

"She'll never see the difference?"

Curtis shakes his head. "No, sir. She will be none the wiser."

We shake hands before I head back to the sleeping angel in my bed.

I'd rather she always be there, but this is the second-best option. As much as I hate to admit it, the apartment feels empty when she's not there, which is crazy because nothing has changed except my overwhelming need to constantly have

her by my side. It's like I'm not myself without her. And for someone like Maysen, who wants to be strong and independent, having a place to call her own will give her a sense of pride rather than feeling like she's failing at adulthood. It's important to her; therefore, it's important to me.

But let's face it. We will still spend more time at my place than at hers.

Maysen curls into my side as I slip back under the covers. "You're cold," she murmurs, dragging her lips along my collarbone.

This woman. A simple touch is enough to ignite an inferno inside me, fueling my need for her until it burns everything around us to ashes.

"Let's find a way to warm me up." Need pulses between us as I close the distance, desire consuming us both until the world melts away into nothing.



## CHAPTER *Eighteen*

### *Maysen*

“Three full days of relaxing, drinking, and watching our bosses make asses of themselves.” Holly plops her suitcase on one of the beds, staking her claim. “You’re going to love it.”

Three days of sleeping alone is not exactly what I call a vacation. Stupid Tyler, making me co-dependent with his constant presence in my life. I was content living the single life, killing my back on Jenna’s couch for as long as she let me stay. She even faked her sadness when I called her after signing the lease. It would have been sweet if Pete’s voice hadn’t rung through the other line chanting “helicopter, helicopter” while she harshly chastised him. Needless to say, the call was short-lived.

This retreat couldn’t have come at a worse time. My apartment is a mess. I’m still trying to haul all the items from my storage unit, but Tyler keeps blocking me, judging my mismatched furniture and hand-me-down décor. I should have rented a U-Haul when he wasn’t looking and brought it all in

at once, though I don't know how I would have gotten it into the building by myself. Every time he offered to buy something, I politely turned him down. Unfortunately, the ass purchased my bedroom set without asking, stating that he would get the final say since he's sleeping there too. I couldn't argue. The memory foam mattress is like sleeping on a cloud.

I unpack my suitcase, a habit I picked up thanks to my parents, who hated living out of bags when we traveled. I wasn't sure what to bring, so Tyler brought some of the clothes stashed at his place as I was frantically texting him that I would end up naked most of the weekend. Of course, the caveman said I could only be naked in his room, which was the plan, though I don't know how to execute it.

“So, what all can I expect? How formal is everything going to be? Are my leggings and sweatshirt going to get me kicked out?”

Holly laughs as she closes the last drawer. “Tonight is casual. Basically, a meet-and-greet to get to know the other execs and assistants before diving into tomorrow's lectures and meetings. They're dull but helpful—new tricks of the trade, comparing notes of what's working and what's not, social media hacks, and updated marketing strategies. The good news is you can pick and choose which ones you want to attend. Corrin and I put together a game plan to tackle almost everything. What are you and Tyler doing?”

I blankly stare at her. “Uh, I don't know. He hasn't said a word about anything. I'm a little over my head at this point.”

Holly twists her lips. “That's odd, even for him. He's not one to have things slip past him.”

“We've, uh, just been a little busy with clients. I'm sure he has something planned,” I quickly say, trying to cover for us. Moving, secret rendezvous, and lots of sex have occupied all our free time. Not to mention trying to keep current on his client list has both of us chained to our desks during the day. Honestly, this retreat snuck up on us so fast we debated not even going.

She doesn't say anything, just watches with a careful eye as I fish out my phone to shoot Tyler a message.

**Me: Do we have a game plan for tomorrow?**

No response.

I look up to Holly and shrug. "Maybe he's still driving."

She laughs and sits on the bed, fishing through her briefcase. "Don't worry about it. I think I have a copy of the syllabus." She hands me a three-page document with notes scribbled within the margins. "I'm going to the purple ones, so maybe we can buddy up."

I scan the different seminars, making a mental note of the ones I think would be most beneficial. "Yeah, we could probably do that. I'll run it by Tyler later."

"Great." Holly glances at her watch. "We should probably get ready. Free drinks wait for no one."

With Holly's help, I put together a decent outfit—coincidentally one that Tyler packed. Just a simple black skirt and a pale pink sleeveless silk blouse. Nothing too flashy. Hopefully, it will help me blend into the crowd. The whole time she kept shaking her head, telling me to relax, that I was putting too much thought into it. Then she suggested maybe finding a single guy to hook up with to release the tension I'm carrying.

Oh, I have plans to relieve the tension, but he's definitely not single.

Technically.

Ugh, why am I still fighting this? Tyler and I have been together for a couple of months exclusively. What we have isn't a fling or casual sex anymore. When you spend all of your free time with someone or have them consume your thoughts day and night, failing even to entertain looking for anyone else, what else could this be other than a serious relationship? Maybe it's the fact we're still hiding like I'm his dirty little secret that has me skeptical this is going anywhere.



We walk into the already crowded lounge area, teaming with laughter and conversations, before finding a free spot at the bar to order our drinks.

“Two Pink French 75s, please,” Holly says, giving me a wink.

“What on earth did you order?”

She smiles and thanks the bartender, handing me one of the pale pink sparkling glasses. “This is my go-to drink every year—one of their house specialties. It’s delicious and sophisticated, so bottom’s up.”

I take a sip of the fizzy concoction, humming appreciatively. “Wow, that’s good. What’s in it?”

“Hendrick’s, champagne, simple syrup, and a splash of pink lemonade. It’s smooth enough to go down easy yet dangerous enough to knock you on your ass if you have too many.”

“Great. Get me addicted to something that could have me sleeping on the bathroom floor later.”

Holly laughs and guides us to the middle of the crowd. “I’ll stop you before we get to that point.”

She introduces me to a few people she’s met over the last few years, falling into easy conversations about work and life. I check my watch, praying for a notification that Tyler’s answered my text message. Nothing. Radio silence.

After another round of drinks, we find a group of people from a rival company.

“You work with Tyler Cannon, right?” Matthew, according to his nametag, asks. I’d put him around my age, maybe a few years older. Finely dressed. Probably any girl’s dream if she looked—which I’m not.

I nod. “I’m his personal assistant.”

A gleam lights his eyes. “Ah, so you know him intimately then.”

Heat floods my cheeks. “I-I’m sorry?”

He leans closer, letting his woodsy scent fill the space between us. “You must spend every waking hour with him. I’ve heard he’s ruthless in the boardroom and goes over-the-top demanding things of his employees. I bet you spend more time with him than your boyfriend.”

My flush deepens. “I don’t know about that.”

“Which part? The boyfriend or Tyler?” A slow smile graces his face. “Forgive me for being so bold, but I don’t see a ring on your finger. I have difficulty believing someone as beautiful as you could still be on the market.”

“Well,” I start, trying to find the right words to let him down easy, until a shadow casts over my drink, sending every hair on my body standing on end. You can almost feel the irritation radiating off his body as he closes the space between us.

“Are you trying to steal my assistant, Carpenter?” Tyler’s smooth voice echoes through my ears. On the outside, it’s almost jovial, like he’s laughing at a secret joke. But I know better. There’s a slight edge to his tone that screams possession and power.

“If she’d willingly leave you, absolutely. I’ve heard she’s doing fantastic work, even managing to save your ass a few times.” Matthew tosses a wink my way.

Oh, please don’t poke the bear. I can practically hear Tyler’s teeth grinding while keeping the smile plastered on his face. “Maysen’s gone above and beyond her duties and has proven to be a valuable team member.” I look up and see his eyes soften around the edges. “She’s irreplaceable.”

Warmth spreads through my chest. I know there’s a double meaning to his words. Tyler may be looking at Matthew, but I know he meant it for me.

“Well, let’s hope things work out in your favor. Otherwise, don’t be surprised when someone grabs her when she’s available.”

“Not likely,” Tyler says, the ice clinking against his glass as he takes a drink.

Matthew nods to someone over our shoulders, giving his excuses before leaving. I bite my bottom lip and glance back at Tyler with one hand shoved into his pocket, looking positively delectable.

“Ms. James.” The low timbre of his voice sends a shot right through my core. “Playing up the competition?”

I drain the rest of my drink, trying to counter the low-lying current thrumming through my veins. “Just being friendly, that’s all. I wasn’t sure if you were here or not since you didn’t answer my text.”

Our eyes stay on each other, letting the edges blur until we’re alone. “I had a response to your question, but it wasn’t work-related.” He runs his eyes across my outfit. “You look lovely, by the way.”

“Thank you. But I do need a work-appropriate answer. Holly started to give me the rundown of how things will go over the next few days, but I don’t know if there’s something specific you want me to attend or if I’m on my own.”

Tyler takes my empty glass, and I follow him to the bar to refill our drinks. “We can go over the courses later tonight if that works. Use it as a cover?” He leans close, causing my eyelids to flutter as his warm breath hits my ear. “Because I’m about three seconds away from dragging you down the hall and fucking you senseless.”

“Later,” I hiss, praying no one is paying attention to us.

He presses a hand to my lower back, guiding us to a group of executives who greet Tyler warmly, all very interested in meeting the woman who tamed the tyrant.

Most of the time, I have no idea what they’re talking about as they discuss various accounts and compare horror stories. I smile and keep polite company as I slowly sip my drink, feeling the tingle in my fingertips as the alcohol works its magic. It must make its way to my toes as I fidget from foot to foot, only rolling my ankle once. I try to play it off gracefully. Luckily, Tyler saves me with a firm hand on my back, stabilizing me without drawing attention to my nerves.

I half-expect him to remove it instantly. But no, he keeps his hand securely in place, even letting it graze lower against the top of my ass. For a moment, I pretend we're a real couple, almost leaning into his side. Until I spy Holly in the group next to us, keeping her eyes locked on Tyler's hand.

Oh no. I jump away as the sticky pink liquid sloshes around my glass, almost spilling all over me.

"Oops. Clumsy me. If you'll excuse me for a minute." Tyler looks down, his brows drawing together until he catches Holly's narrowed eyes.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

I take off toward the bathroom, depositing what's left of my drink on a nearby table. This is bad. If Holly saw us, who else did? Ian? Chrissy?

I find an empty stall and lock the door, leaning against the cool metal, desperately trying to catch my breath.

Maybe it's all in my head. This isn't a big deal. So what if my boss had his hand on my back. He was trying to calm me down. That's all.

"Maysen?" Holly calls out. Oh, god. Please let us be the only two people in here.

I open the stall and straighten to my full height. "Hey, how's it going?"

She leans against the counter, crossing her arms over her chest. "I could ask the same thing about you. What's going on?"

The cold water barely registers as I wash my hands. "Can't a girl go to the bathroom during a social gathering?"

Before I have the chance to grab the door handle, she deftly moves in front of me, blocking the exit. "You know damn well what I'm talking about. Why was Tyler's hand on your ass?"

Fuck me. There are two ways to answer this question. One: lie and say it was an accident, or you're scared to turn him in for sexual harassment. Two: admit to having an affair with an

authority figure and losing my job, friends, and business reputation.

Should be an easy choice, right?

Her foot tapping draws me from my inner turmoil, heaving a sigh as I look into her unamused face.

“The truth,” she says without emotion before I even have the chance to lie.

“It’s complicated.”

“Try me.” Holly crosses her arms over her chest, clearly in no hurry to get out of here.

The only thing is, I don’t want to have this conversation in the women’s restroom where anyone can walk in and hear the word vomit I’m about to spew.

As if on cue, the door bursts open with two giggling women heading straight for the empty stalls. Holly takes pity on me as she grabs my hand and guides us back to the crowded room, straight to the bar for another round of drinks.

We find an abandoned table in a quiet corner. “This will do. Now sit and start talking.”

I follow her command like a scolded child, practically draining the glass in one gulp. I’m going to need all the liquid courage I can get.

“Tyler and I... well...” How do I put this into words?

I’m fucking my boss.

He’s the best lay of my life.

I’ve secretly harbored feelings for him for almost twenty years, and all my teenage fantasies are coming true.

Holly puts her hand over mine, not even realizing it was shaking. “You can trust me, I promise.”

I blow out a shaky breath, darting my gaze around us to make sure we’re out of earshot. “Okay, so, here’s the deal. Tyler and I have been secretly seeing each other for a while now.”

She tilts her head to the side. “I gathered that. How did this come about?”

“Well”—I chew on my bottom lip—“we’ve known each other for a long time. We went to school together.”

Her brows draw together. “Seriously? Then why did he act like he didn’t know you?”

“I don’t know exactly. We went to a larger school, so maybe that’s why. Tyler was the big man on campus, and I was the girl who was friends with everyone but kept a low profile.”

“Okay,” she says, not satisfied with this tidbit of information.

“And I’ve wanted him for years,” I finally acknowledge. “So when I ran into him here, and he had no idea who I was, it stung. I figured it was better to have a clean slate rather than remind him of the nobody he ignored in school. Everything was going fine until his friends found me while they were out drinking one night. I’m assuming they clued him in on who I was. After that, he was on a mission to make it up to me for being a jackass.”

“Even though he still treated you like one at the office?”

At least we know his strategy worked. “Had to keep decorum and all.” She nods with a smile. “It all came to a head during the auction.”

Her eyes widen. “That’s why he bid on you?”

I shrug. “Probably? I honestly don’t know. I figured he didn’t want Ian to win.”

“More than likely a mixture of both.”

“Right. Well, he kissed me in the hallway after that. And again when we went to a baseball game, though I’m blaming that one on the Kiss Cam.” Holly quirks a brow, but I refuse to dive into that story. “Anyway, remember Ian talking about that meeting where Tyler ditched?” She nods. “He ditched for me.”

“Now his good mood makes sense. He was getting laid.” She snickers before taking a drink.

I roll my eyes. “Because good moods are always a direct cause of sexual interactions.”

“Hey, it’s stress relief. If you’re not stressed, you’re not making other people’s lives a living hell. It’s scientifically proven.” The smile fades a bit from her face. “But why the secrecy? No one around the office would care. Or dare to say anything against him.”

I twirl the empty glass on the table. “But they would talk about me. My reputation could be at stake here in the office or in any future ventures I may have. The business world is small, and if people hear I get around by sleeping with the boss, it won’t look good.”

Holly leans forward. “Who’s looking?”

“Ian, for one.”

“He needs to mind his own business. Not to mention he’s the last person to judge anyone about office affairs. He can’t keep his dick in his pants to save his life.”

“And he’s been desperately trying to get into mine since I started, so it’d be catastrophic for him to find out about Tyler and me.”

Speak of the devil. Ian walks through the door, making a big production to announce his presence. A few girls give him a once over as he makes his way to the bar. I’m sure they’d like to accompany him back to his room later. I slink down in my chair, praying I can hide in plain sight.

Holly catches my gaze and frowns. “What an asshat. Don’t let him ruin tonight.” She pats my hand. “Stick by me, and I’ll make sure everything is okay.”

I chew on my bottom lip. “You’re not upset about what I told you?”

She scoffs and drags me from my seat. “Hell no. In fact, I think you two compliment each other. He’s ruthless and barbaric, and you’re sweet yet tough. You’re like a Sour Patch Kid to his wasabi peas.”

I can’t help but laugh. “You must be hungry.”

“Starving,” Holly says, dragging the word out. “I blame it on these drinks, which we need more of if we continue working the room.”

“I don’t know if I should have more. These are pretty lethal.”

She shushes me and gets another round. “Last ones, I promise. I wouldn’t want you to be lying on the bathroom floor. That’d make tomorrow a nightmare. There’s nothing worse than being in lectures with a hangover.”

“Yeah, my college self said the same thing once or twice.”

We find a spot away from Ian, but luck is not on our side as he slinks his way over to us. “Ladies, looking wonderful tonight.” He eyes our empty glasses. “What are you drinking?”

“Our last drink of the night,” Holly says without missing a beat. “We want to keep our brains uncloudy for tomorrow.”

He nods and smiles at me. “Maysen, have you met the people from Johnston and Kimble?”

I shrug. “Not sure. Where are they?”

The bartender slides over the fresh drinks as I lay a twenty down on the counter for him. One thing I’ve always learned: keep your bartender happy.

“Here, let me introduce you.” With a jerk of his head, Holly and I followed him to a side of the room we hadn’t covered yet.

“Jerry. Brian. Clint.”

They shake his hand before looking my way. “And who’s this?”

Ian smiles wide. “Let me introduce Maysen James, one of our up-and-coming assistants at Madison.”

Awareness lights up Clint’s eyes. “So this is the infamous assistant keeping Tyler together. It’s a pleasure to meet you finally.”

How in the hell have I amassed a reputation already? I’m not a deal closer or a headliner in the business journals, yet



everyone seems to know who I am and what I do. Maybe Tyler gives me more credit than what's due. Is he actively trying to get me hired somewhere else? Or is he being all caveman again by bragging about what's his?

The latter seems more believable.

Holly gets pulled away by Corrin, squeezing my hand before she leaves me to the wolves. However, Ian surprises me by touting my skills, guiding me around the room while telling everyone that I should have a higher position because I'm worth it. Wow, it's like he's done a complete one-eighty. He never tries to flirt or lay his hands on me or crack the always inappropriate joke.

This version is so much better. I even laugh at his terrible impersonations as he breaks the water with several larger groups.

"I thought you were going to stop drinking," Ian says as he leans against the bar next to me.

"So did I, but you're giving me a workout with all your praise. Are you trying to get rid of me or something?"

He laughs and takes a sip of his drink. "Hardly. But I think you're worth more than you give yourself credit. You should hold a higher title than an assistant with your business sense. And who knows if Tyler would ever offer you a promotion. Knowing him, he'd rather chain you to his desk and never see the light of day."

Not entirely wrong. Tyler would like to chain me to his desk, but not for the reason Ian thinks.

"Well, I appreciate the vote of confidence in my abilities. Maybe one day, I'll venture into something new. Until then, I'm perfectly content where I'm at."

By the time Ian finishes parading me around the room, my clutch is practically overflowing with business cards from executives who want to snag me away from Tyler.

Speaking of, where is that man? I haven't seen him since Holly discovered us. He should be the one bragging me up, not Ian.

I find Holly still with Corrin and pull her off to the side. “Have you seen Tyler?”

She shakes her head. “Not for a while.”

A loud fake laugh sounds nearby, drawing my attention. Chrissy’s in the center of a group of men, chewing on the end of her straw while batting her lashes like she was trying to put out a fire. But her choice of attire throws me for a second. It’s modest with hardly any skin showing. Designer pants and heels make her legs look a million miles long, coupled with a green satin shirt that screams country club rather than exotic. And right next to her is the one person I want to be attached to my side all night, giving her a bright smile that’s typically aimed at me.

“What the hell?” Holly mutters, giving the words in my head a voice. “Why is he with her?”

When he places a hand on the small of her back, the room goes dark. I know it’s nothing. Tyler wouldn’t dare do anything as stupid as fall into her web. He’s told me his disdain for Chrissy and her games countless times. But this act seems like he’s playing right into it.

Well, two can play this game.



## CHAPTER *Nineteen*

### *Tyler*

Where the fuck is Maysen? Did she leave without telling me? So what if Holly saw my hand on her back. She was stumbling. Anyone would have done the same thing. Yet, Maysen lets her overactive imagination get the best of her, acting like the sky is falling.

Maybe the sky should fall. I'm sick of hiding, of running away from how I feel about her. I've done it for years, doing everything people wanted and expected of me, and where did it get me? Sure, success is great, but it also means lonely nights and meaningless flings. That's not what I think of when I'm with Maysen. She's the opposite of obligation. Our time together has been seamless. She brings color to my black and white world, an uncontrolled spirit. Even though it wouldn't kill her to listen and not argue every chance she gets. Still, she has gumption, fire, and a spark missing in my life.

So why am I letting her keep us in a box?

It's been well over an hour. Maysen has to be here somewhere. If only I could get away from Richard and Chrissy, using me for my connections and butting in on every conversation like it would help score a major contract.

Newsflash. No one is giving up any clients, especially not to a lazy asshole who gets grabby the more he drinks. Every time I tried leaving, they'd usher me to a new crowd while keeping my liquor glass full, so I couldn't even use the bar as an excuse.

The one shock of the night, though, has to be Chrissy. For the last few years, she's dressed the part of a high-end hooker, keeping steady watch at the bar, looking for her next Richard Gere prey. Tonight, she's almost unrecognizable. Hardly any skin showing, prim and proper, and even more surprising... polite.

I didn't think she had it in her.

It's rather nice not to get hit on constantly, feel her claws sink into my skin, tearing the ounce of flesh she feels she deserves. Even her jokes are appropriate. It's almost as if she stole Maysen's mannerisms and put them to good use.

I should text her and figure out where she is rather than sit here and talk to people I don't want to, all to show face. I don't need to suck up to other executives. My name is good enough in this world.

Before I pull my phone out, a familiar faint laugh draws my attention to the group near us.

Mother. Fucker.

Why in the hell is Maysen with Carpenter again? Better yet, why is her hand on his chest?

Anger gnaws at my stomach, bubbling up my throat until I can practically taste the acid burning in my mouth. What is she playing at? I can't move my eyes away as she leans into him, laughing again. It's as fake as Monopoly money, though I doubt anyone else knows. Maysen finally looks up, our eyes connecting until a slow smirk graces her lips.

Oh, sweetheart. Don't play this game. You won't win.

I make my excuses, not giving a shit that I abandoned the group in the middle of a story. I need to drag Maysen away from here, remind her who she belongs to, but I can't make a spectacle without blowing our cover.

I spy Holly, who also seems concerned with the show Maysen is putting on. I quickly stalk over to her, tamping down the raging inferno so it doesn't erupt the minute I open my mouth.

Holly's eyes grow wide the closer I get. "Mr. Cannon?"

I jerk my head, and she takes my lead, stepping away from the group. "I need you to tell Maysen to meet me out front."

She draws her brows together. "Okay, but why me?"

I pin her with an unwavering, no-nonsense stare. "Don't ask questions, just do it."

Without waiting for her answer, I turn on my heels and storm out of the lounge, hoping the chill of the night air will cool me down. I'll need a few minutes so I don't bite her head off.

Jealousy is a foreign concept to me. Before Maysen, if things got complicated, the "relationship" ended. No hard feelings—at least on my end. Just a clean cut. But the thought of severing Maysen from my life isn't an option.

I wait in the shadows off the side of the main doors without being conspicuous, pretending to type something on my phone so they'll assume I'm just working if someone sees me.

Maysen walks out the doors within minutes, wrapping her arms around her middle as a gust of wind kicks up. I place the phone back in my pocket—time to show this little woman a lesson.

I wrap a hand around her elbow, dragging her away from the building with a gasp. "Tyler, what the hell?"

The anger inside simmers to a low boil but is not entirely dissipated. "We need to discuss your actions in there."

Her tiny feet barely keep up with my long strides, walking the paved path to the secluded private cabins. She stumbles over a twig, but I catch her before she completely loses her footing.

“Slow down,” she huffs. “You’re acting insane.”

I look left and right, ensuring no one is around before dragging her to a copse of trees, shielding us from onlookers.

The minute her back hits the bark, it’s game over. I roughly cradle Maysen’s face in my hands while attacking her mouth, swallowing her potential shrieks. Need and want mix with irrational jealousy as I explore her body, molding it to my desires. She moans in response while pressing her pelvis against my hardening erection.

“I told you I don’t share.” In a flash, I turn her to face the opposite direction, placing her hands flat against the tree. “Do not move.” I adjust her hips, pulling them back slightly until we line up perfectly. “This isn’t going to be sweet or romantic.” I undo my pants with deft fingers just enough to pull my now throbbing erection out. Maysen looks over her shoulder as I fling the skirt up, tearing her now-soaked panties in two, giving me full, unadulterated access.

She nods her head, granting me the permission I seek. “Okay.”

The world stops as I thrust sharply, feeling her warm heat surround me instantly. Even buried deep inside her, I can’t stop picturing her hand on Matthew’s chest and the smile she flashed him. Each picture increases the intensity of my mission to claim her, to ruin her for every other man.

“Ungh, Tyler. Yes.” If she doesn’t quiet down, someone will discover us, blowing our secret out of the water. I place my hand over her mouth, muffling her cries and effectively silencing her.

“You. Belong. To. Me.” I wrap my other hand around her waist, keeping a firm grip while practically lifting her off the ground.

Her inner walls tighten, pulsing against my cock as she bites my finger, trying to withhold her scream as she comes. I empty myself into her with a few more jerks, roughly pushing her against the harsh bark.

When she's limp in my arms, I pull out, letting her sag against the tree while catching her breath. I smile as the evidence of our quickie runs down the inside of her thigh.

Maysen turns with fire in her eyes, putting her clothes back together. "What in the hell is your problem?"

I zip up my pants and take a menacing step forward, silencing her instantly. "I should be asking you the same thing."

God, I love it when she's angry. "You have to stop pissing all over me like a damn dog marking his territory. Maybe I should neuter you, so you'll calm the fuck down."

"Then stop trying to get a reaction out of me by putting your hands on other men."

Her cheeks pink up. "The same goes for you. Don't think I missed your hands on Chrissy."

So that's what has her panties in a bunch. "I did the same thing to her as I did to you. Consider it covering our bases to throw anyone off who thought we were an item."

Maysen pauses, thinking about the scenario. If someone saw me put my hand on both her and Chrissy, they wouldn't believe it was anything other than a friendly gesture.

"Okay, fair enough. But why didn't you come looking for me?"

I place a hand on her cheek. "I tried. Believe me, sweetheart, I wanted you next to me rather than Richard and Chrissy, but they had their claws so deep in me I couldn't get away."

She nods, placing her hand over mine with a wince. I examine her hand and notice the tiny cuts and scrapes peppering her skin.

"It's fine."

“No, it’s not.” I press my lips to the abused skin, regretting how rough I was. My only thought was to get inside her. Everything else be damned. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.”

Maysen nods and follows me back to the path leading to my private cabin. I carefully entwine our hands, relief washing over me the minute she gives a gentle squeeze, letting me know everything’s okay.

“How’d you get so lucky to have a private cabin?” She stops in her tracks the minute she crosses the threshold and turns in a circle to get the full effect.

I smirk and secure the door, bolting everything I can to all but guarantee we won’t be interrupted. “Did you expect something else?”

She looks over her shoulder. “I guess not. You would be the pretentious prick who needs isolation and the best of everything.”

I snake my arms around her waist, pulling her close to my chest. “Would you rather sneak around the lodge and risk getting caught?”

Maysen turns, wrapping her arms around my neck. “I suppose this will do.” Our lips touch briefly. “You’ll just have to show me the benefits of being away from everyone.”

“All in due time. First, we need to attend to your hand.”

The guilt sets in again as I examine the damage. It’s even redder than before, with little chunks of bark lodged in the cuts.

“Seriously, it’s fine, Tyler. You don’t need to make a fuss over it.”

No matter how much she tells me she’s okay, I’m not. I never want to hurt her. Play rough, absolutely. But there should never be blood.

I drag her to the bathroom and open my shaving kit, thankful I never threw out the travel-sized bottle of antiseptic spray a few years ago after getting an infected splinter.



“Sit,” I demand with little amusement in my voice. Maysen smirks and lowers herself onto the closed lid of the toilet. I wet a washcloth and dabbed at the scrapes, brushing away as much debris as possible without hurting her.

“I’m not made of glass,” she quietly says. “I won’t break from a little rough sex. If I didn’t like it, you’d know.”

Maysen screws her eyes tight as I spray the cuts, blowing on them gently to alleviate the pain and help them dry faster.

“I never want to mark you.” She quirks a challenging brow. “Not like that, at least. And I know you’re not fragile. You put up with more shit than you need to and still bounce back as if nothing happened. Your strength is one of the many things I...” I trail off, too afraid to voice the rest of the sentence.

Her hazel eyes bore into mine, reading the words I couldn’t say. Very few people have that ability. Brandon. My mother. And now, Maysen. She joins the elite group of people I allow to know the real me.

“Me too,” she says, pushing my hand away to cup my cheek. “What are you doing to me?”

“I could ask the same thing.”

She looks down, drawing her bottom lip between her teeth. “So, now that you have me here, what are you going to do with me?”

Mischief and every dirty thought swirl in her eyes, begging me to continue what we started in the woods.

All in good time.

“Well, we should probably get our game plan set for the next few days since you were so hellbent on doing it earlier.”

Her smile falters slightly. “Oh, yeah. That’s a good idea.”

I tug her up and press our lips together before she can say another word. “We have all night for the other stuff. And after tonight, I don’t plan on talking much when we’re here. Just the two of us naked and exploring our bodies while you yell to the heavens how I’m the best you’ve ever had.”

Pink tints her cheeks as she shoves me. “In your dreams.”

“Oh, no,” I say, kissing her nose. “Reality.”

We head back to the living room, finding my opened briefcase and a copy of the syllabus for the conference. Maysen grabs a notepad and starts writing down the different courses she’s interested in while jotting down what I’d like her to attend.

“These don’t have anything to do with my job. They’re more along your lines of work.”

“Says who? You never know when an opening could come up. Besides, aren’t you expected to know everything about my position? It wouldn’t hurt to immerse yourself into the waters.”

“Not to the point of drowning. I can’t learn my job *and* yours. And really, it’s a moot point. No one voluntarily leaves the office, and I somehow doubt I’ll get looked at for a promotion.”

Her wavering self-confidence surprises me. She is a force of nature in the boardroom, taking over when the lower members of the team falter. Hell, Maysen knows more about this business than they do, yet she lacks the assurance that she can make it on her own merit. Is this why she’s hesitant to take our relationship public? The same fear that holds her hostage professionally keeps her back personally?

I must have stayed quiet for too long because she tilts her head to the side, placing the paper and pen on the table. “Hey, you okay? I-I didn’t mean to imply I couldn’t handle it. Of course, I’ll do whatever you ask.”

The thought of her bending to my will isn’t even tempting enough to bring a smile to my face. I don’t want her to blindly do as I say. The way she challenges and pushes at every opportunity makes her beyond sexy. Don’t get me wrong. She’s amazing without clothes, but her mind, business acumen, and fiery personality outshine everything else. It’s more than just the physical attraction that keeps me like a puppy at her heels, begging for all her attention and love.

Maysen wants things of her own, and she should chase her dreams. Selfishly, I hope they include me.

“I know you can.” Her cheek warms my palm as I ease her onto my lap with my other arm. “You’re the kind of person who would walk up to the devil himself and make him kiss your shoes.”

“Are you calling yourself the devil?”

My lip twitches, almost breaking into a smile. “Sweetheart, I will kiss whatever you want me to.” An idea pops into my head. “In fact, let’s try that.”

Her delicate brows draw together. “I don’t follow. You want to kiss my shoes?”

Oh, my sweet girl. Either she doesn’t understand the game or wants to hear me say it.

For this woman, I will do whatever she asks. Tonight, she’s in control. She gets whatever she wants until her confidence is so solid that it never risks crumbling again.

“What do you want?” I drop my voice to a low, husky growl. Maysen squirms in my lap, rubbing her ass against my quickly hardening erection.

Slow, lazy eyes meet mine, appearing almost drunk. “You.”

I smirk. “You have me. What do you want?” I lean forward, barely letting my lips touch her skin. “Should I kiss you here?” I trail down the lines of her shirt, barely touching her skin. “Or here.”

It’s taking all of my restraint not to rip her clothes off and bury myself deep inside her. But this isn’t about me. It’s about her, making sure she knows how important she is, how I’m not always an asshole when it comes to her. When in actuality, I have nothing but her best interests at heart.

Maysen clutches the lapels of my suit coat, dragging me closer. “Tyler, quick fucking around and kiss me.”

Her chest moves against mine, creating enough friction to pebble her nipples through her shirt. “Not until you tell me

where. Tonight, I'm at your mercy. Whatever you want. Wherever you want."

She jerks back slightly. "I'm in charge?" The glorious smile gracing her lips grows even wider. "Well, then." Maysen adjusts her stance, swinging a leg over my lap to rest on her knees, putting her slightly above me. "Anything?" I nod. "Then I want you to kiss me."

"Take what you want, sweetheart."

Finally, she locks our lips together, twisting her tongue against mine, never letting go of the lapels in her hands. We savor each other, getting caught up in the moment rather than thinking about what's coming next. Because, honestly, I don't know. For once, I'm not the person in charge. The fiery angel who owns me body and soul is.

Because I can't give up too much, I try to drag my lips down the column of her throat, needing to taste more than her mouth. Maysen pulls back, clearly amused.

"You don't listen well, do you." It's not a question simply because we both know the answer. I have control issues. And she's torturing me on purpose. Probably a little payback from the tree incident. "I said kiss me."

Wasn't that what we were doing? The dim light bulb in my mind brightens as she stands up and pushes my shoulders until I'm lying flat on the couch. Maysen shimmies out of her skirt, letting the material pool around her feet. She grabs my hands, bringing them above my head as she crawls over my body. With her knees on either side of my head, she lets go of my hands to brace them on my chest, arching her back and putting those perfect breasts on display.

"Kiss. Me."

Yes ma'am.

I waste no time lifting my head and diving into her sweet center, tasting our combined essence while keeping our eyes locked.

"Holy shit, Tyler." She digs her nails into my chest, grinding her pelvis against my face, guiding me to where she

needs my tongue most.

This would be a hell of a lot easier if I could use my hands. But this is about making her feel good. And right now, she's only using me for my mouth.

Some sacrifices are worth it.

A quiver runs through her thighs, tightening their hold against my head. I increase my tempo, using my intimate knowledge of her body to detonate the ticking bomb inside. She stills over my face with a shriek, falling forward to grasp the edge of the couch, letting go of the tension and directly into my waiting mouth.

I smile against her swollen lips, leisurely stroking the still-vibrating nub with the tip of my tongue, elongating the shockwaves coursing through her body.

Watching her come without being able to touch her might be my new favorite thing.

Maysen regains her senses, sliding off my body to stand next to the couch on shaky legs. She doesn't say a word, only threads her fingers through mine, pulling me up and down the hall to the bedroom.

"On the bed," she commands.

I don't think my cock could get any harder. Hell, one touch would probably set me off right now. It's a good thing tonight is all about Maysen.

I do as she wants, lying in the center with my hands behind my head, casually waiting for her next move. Maysen crawls over to me, slowly stripping the clothes off my body and tossing them to the floor.

"Someone wants to come out and play," she says, brushing her fingers against the rigid line in my pants. I suck in a harsh breath, doing everything in my power not to blow my load before getting inside her. She makes quick work undoing my pants and boxers until there's nothing between us.

"He's patiently waiting his turn."

Shadows cast over Maysen's eyes, turning her into a sultry predator eyeing its prey. She scoots lower down the bed, settling between my legs. Licking her lips, she firmly grasps my cock at the base, running her fingertips over the smooth skin like touching it for the first time.

The world disappears when her tongue glides across the swollen head, and I swear I blacked out for a second. Seemingly pleased with my reaction, she wastes no time fully engulfing my cock with her mouth, sucking me like I'm her favorite drink.

No. Tonight is about her.

"Maysen, I..." Goddamn, it's hard to think as I watch her head bob up and down; those pretty pink lips wrapped so tightly around my shaft. "This is about you."

She sits up slightly, letting my cock pop from her mouth. "This *is* about me."

I draw my brows together. "How is sucking my cock about you?"

She smirks, dragging her nails against my shaft, causing it to jerk in her hand. "When a woman sucks a man's dick, it's not about him. It's about her and the power she wields over him." Maysen dips low, dragging her tongue along the ridge of my head. "You feel that? That's me knowing precisely what drives you wild. Or if I flick my tongue like this," she says before demonstrating her words. "Your eyes will roll into the back of your head. Guys always assume a blowjob is about them, but it's not. Believe me when I say, if I'm sucking your cock, it's because I want to give you the same amount of pleasure you give me." She grabs my hand while adjusting her stance to easily slide my fingers inside her now-soaked pussy. "This is what you do to me. It turns me on to see you enjoy yourself. Now, do you want to keep asking questions, or can I get back to sucking you off?"

With those two options, it's an easy choice.



Maysen sprawls across my chest, sweat slicking our skin, among other things. I'm shocked the whole room didn't catch fire with how ignited things got.

"Feel free to put me in charge more often," she says, still trying to catch her breath.

I chuckle and kiss the top of her head. "I think you know how often I relinquish control of a situation."

She tightens her arm around my chest. "You mean never?"

"Right. But for you, I'll make an exception."

She stops tracing an invisible pattern on my chest and picks her head up to meet my gaze. "Is that all I am? An exception?"

How could she ask me something like that? Isn't it obvious by now that she's my world?

"What you are is something I wasn't expecting or prepared for." I cup her cheek, running my thumb along the crest. "Somewhere, somehow, I must have done something right to bring you back into my life. I know you think I didn't see you, but you're wrong. And even though you fight me every step of the way, there's no one else I'd rather have in my bed than you."

A loud yawn escapes her as she snuggles into my side. "I'm glad I'm in your bed, too."

I chew on my lip, summoning the courage to continue pouring my heart out. "Maysen, I want you in more than my bed. This arrangement you keep insisting on isn't working. I need more. We have what everyone else wants. It's more than an affair. It's more than anything I've ever felt before." She stays quiet, still. Shit. Maybe I said too much. I know her feelings about taking us public, and after tonight's minor incident with our jealousy running rampant, it could only get worse if the whole office treated us like we were in a fishbowl. But I'm sick of lying in the shadows. I'm not one to cut and hide. And neither is she. There has to be a way to convince her nothing bad will happen. Nothing can touch us if we face this

head-on as a united front. “Maysen? Please say something.”  
Tiny snores echo around the room, giving me my answer.

Impossible woman.

Pulling the blankets securely over us, I place my lips on hers. “I love you,” I whisper before sleep takes over.





## CHAPTER *Twenty*

### *Maysen*

**Tyler: Unscheduled early morning meeting. Miss you already. I'll fill you in at the office.**

I've read the stupid text about a hundred times after waking up alone in bed. This weekend had been one for the books. After sneaking around the retreat without getting caught, we decided to stay another night to enjoy all the resort's amenities we couldn't before. It was weird driving away only to turn around and jump back into Tyler's bed. Holly only smirked when I returned to the room to collect my things during a break in the seminars the next day. I promised to fill her in on some of the details today since she's dying to know everything about Mr. Irresistible.

Once I settle into my chair, I flick on the computer to find no less than twenty-five urgent emails from clients I've neglected the last few days.

Happy Monday, I guess.

Holly slides into my cube and takes her perch on the corner of my desk. “So, how was your weekend?”

I spin to face her, the smile never leaving my face. “Perfect. And yours?”

“Probably not as eventful. Did you get any sleep because you looked dog tired during the seminars.” She laughs and nudges my shoulder, dropping her voice to a whisper. “And I don’t think anyone was the wiser.”

“Coffee and Visine are a lifesaver,” I say with a laugh. “And sleep wasn’t high on the agenda.”

A twinkle sparks in her eye. “It wouldn’t be on mine either with that man between my sheets.” It’s the first time Holly’s eluded having a crush on Tyler, confirming my suspicions that every female in this office would love a piece of him. One more reason to keep this firmly under wraps.

“It was almost too easy, but his reputation as a loner and tyrant helped keep most people away.”

Holly nods. “It doesn’t hurt, that’s for sure.” She leans close with a smirk. “Did you happen to see Chrissy on the second day?” I shake my head. “I knew her newfound persona was too good to be true. She showed up to the last seminar looking like she had a quickie in the bathroom.”

“Not shocking. You can put lipstick on a pig, and it’ll still be a pig underneath.” A frisson of unease settles into my stomach. “How did you hear about it?”

Holly looks down quickly before meeting my gaze again. “I wasn’t going to say anything because I know you had extra time together, but Chrissy and Tyler were in most of the same seminars as Corrin, sitting dangerously close together.”

A small tidbit of information someone forgot to share with me. After the first night, Tyler was more attentive, quiet, and not commanding like his usual self. Did our power shift transfer our dynamic, making it something he no longer wants? It was entirely out of character; afterward, he said I was an exception. But to what? He keeps telling me he’s breaking these imaginary rules. None of it sits well with me.

Maybe my paranoia is getting the best of me, or I'm still clinging to the past, refusing to look forward and envision what we could have.

If he wants something more, which he has said before, why am I constantly questioning everything? Maybe it's me who's the problem.

Although, waking up alone in bed this morning to a text message doesn't help matters.

Holly reads me like an open book with my silence. "Hey, I'm sure it's nothing. Didn't Tyler say that the first night when he all but commanded me to find you?"

I nod. "I have this feeling, though. I can't shake it, but I don't know what it is either."

Her face softens, the small worry lines around her eyes disappearing. "I've worked with Tyler for years, seen him run out every assistant who knew what they were doing but couldn't handle his attitude. You're the first person to make it this long, not to mention put that man in his place. He treats you differently without being obvious. There's respect in his actions, subtle to those who don't know how to look for it. Plus, he tracks you with his eyes. It's part of how I figured things out before confirming them with you."

Shit. If Holly figured it out, who else did?

As if sensing my minor panic attack, Tyler pops his head into my cube. "Ms. James. A word, please?"

Holly smirks, placing a hand on my shoulder. "I need to go meet with Corrin anyway." She glances back at Tyler, still in his professional persona. "I'll leave you two at it."

I roll my eyes as she disappears, leaving us alone. "Your office?"

He nods, looks behind his shoulder, and quickly dips down to press a kiss on my lips. "Now."

My insides do their typical flip thing whenever he exerts his authority. I grab a notepad and pen, following him like a lost puppy—a routine we've mastered to keep everyone in the

dark. The minute his door shuts, he spins around and gives me a proper greeting, stealing the breath from my lungs while cradling my face as if I could break if he lets go.

“I’m sorry I had to leave this morning,” he says between kisses.

I wrap my arms around his neck, keeping him close. “You could have woken me.”

Tyler chuckles and leads me to his desk, perching me on the edge and between his legs as he lowers himself onto his chair. “You looked so peaceful. I didn’t want to wake you. Besides, I know how much sleep you got over the last few days, and it wasn’t enough to properly function.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You got just as much as me. Probably less.”

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, and I melt into his touch as it lingers across my cheek. “I don’t require as much sleep as you do.”

I’m going to call bullshit, but wisely keep my mouth shut. “What meeting did you have? Shouldn’t I have been there?”

Tyler scoots back, putting some space between us. “I got pulled into a project with Richard that I can’t get out of. And he insisted on bringing Chrissy as the assistant rather than you.”

Just the sound of her name sends an ominous chill up my spine. Not that I’m surprised Richard would insist on his assistant being there. One, she has a longer tenure than me. Two, she provides a service I don’t, hence his appeal to keep her around.

“So you’re saying you’ll spend lots of time with Chrissy?”

His face stays impassive, not giving anything away. “Don’t overthink this. Trust me, I don’t like it any more than you, but I can’t get out of this. It’s too big of a project and too important to walk away, regardless of who’s heading it.”

“Oh,” I say, hating my weak voice.

Tyler tips my chin to meet his eyes, peering directly into my soul. “Why is this still an issue? You know how I feel about her compared to you. There’s no contest.”

Right. He’s been sleeping with her for a lot longer than me. It’s hard to shake what’s comfortable, especially casual sex. And somewhere along the line, we stopped being casual. There are sleepovers and dinner dates, weekends on the couch, or hanging out with his friends. From the outside, it’s a relationship, except for my reluctance to bring this public. But why? What is holding me back?

“I know,” I lie.

Tyler doesn’t seem convinced, letting the wrinkles crease his forehead. “Come here.” He smoothly pulls me off the desk to straddle his lap. “Can you give your overactive imagination a break for two seconds? You have nothing to worry about.”

A knock at his door sends me scrambling to straighten up and grab the notebook in time for the door to swing open.

Speaking of the witch...

“Tyler, Richard is looking for you,” Chrissy says, back to her push-up bra and short skirt attire.

“I’ll make sure everything is taken care of.” I quickly nod and brush past the bimbo to head back to my cube. Not that I have anything to take care of, but it sounded like a good excuse.

Maybe I need more coffee. The lack of caffeine running through my system could explain my fuzzy head and negative thoughts. I take off toward the breakroom, hoping to avoid any more talk of this collaboration, but I slow my steps as two male voices filter out into the hallway.

“Anything exciting happen over the retreat? I still can’t believe I had to miss this year. Fucking flu,” Tanner, one of the lower executives, says.

“Just the usual crap. Trying to one-up each other by comparing accounts, bottom lines, meeting times, blah, blah, blah,” Ian says with a mock yawn. “Nothing new.”

“How did the new girl do?”

“Maysen? Fine, I guess. I introduced her to a bunch of people who were genuinely interested in her skills.”

“Think she’ll leave? She has a lot of promise and could help the company in the long run.”

Ian nods. “She’s working for Tyler. It’s inevitable. That man is an ass with zero fucks given.” He leans forward slightly. “Especially since he was getting some action during the seminars.”

“What else is new? His dick may get more of a workout than yours.”

Ian snorts. “Yeah, well, Tyler is a creature of habit. He came running in almost late, fixing his clothes, then guess who followed, re-buttoning her shirt with smudged lipstick?”

The entire world slows to a standstill as I wait on bated breath.

“Like I even have to guess.”

*Say it.*

“I’m surprised Richard let her leave his side long enough for someone else to stick his dick in her.”

No. It can’t be. They couldn’t have. Ice courses through my veins, turning my legs numb.

“You know they’ve always had a thing,” Ian says. “I don’t know why they try to hide it. It’s not like it’s some big company secret. Everyone knows.”

Not everyone, apparently.

*Stop, Maysen. You’re being ridiculous. Tyler is with you, not her.*

Perhaps, but now he’s working closely with the blonde whore who’s been digging her claws into him since day one. Tyler is still a man. Sway some boobs and easy sex before them, and they all succumb to temptation.

I've seen it, experienced it. Zack was a prime example of weakness. And somehow, history is threatening to repeat itself.

Forgetting my caffeine mission, I head back to my desk with a heavy heart and leaded thoughts. Once back in my space, I dissect the last several days, looking for a glaringly obvious sign something was wrong. Only I can't find anything that would trigger this nagging doubt. Tyler's jealousy, my jealousy, and the subsequent mind-blowing sex afterward reaffirming our commitment to each other is enough to calm the waves in my stomach. Plus, the extra day we spent doing ordinary couple things: holding hands as we strolled by the lake, pressing me against a tree to kiss me like it's the first time, then holding me close all night.

I shake my head and push the wayward thoughts away, pouring my focus into the meetings Tyler set up for today.

Shit. If he's the co-lead on this project with Richard, how will he handle these meetings?

"Maysen," Tyler says behind me.

I spin and smile at his handsome face. "Yes, Mr. Cannon?"

It's not an accident using his last name. I need to reassure myself that Ian is mistaken, that nothing could have happened with Chrissy. When I submit, the power trip it instills in him gives away his true feelings. Even in the boardroom, where formality is mandatory, his predatorial eyes find mine, lighting a fire within their depths with promises of retribution later in the privacy of his bedroom.

Luckily, those same fires ignite within the green depth, easing my troubled mind. "I'll need you to head my meetings for the day."

A rock lodges itself in my throat, making it difficult to swallow. "I-uh, what?" I manage to sputter out.

Tyler smirks, leaning against the entrance to my small space. "You're the only person who knows my agenda, the points we need to make, and can close the deal without issue." He takes a step closer, running his thumb along the crest of my

cheek. “Please? You’ve earned this right. Show them you’re more than what they give you credit for.”

My heart flutters in my chest. All this time, I thought he only wanted me near to fulfill some chauvinistic need. It appears my role was bigger than I anticipated.

“Of course,” I say, keeping my voice steady without giving away my excitement. “I can take over for today.”

“The week.”

Once again, let the choking commence. “The week?”

Tyler sighs. “Yes. Possibly next week too. It all depends on how quickly we can power through this project. With any luck, I’ll be free after a few days.”

A twinge of sadness passes over his face, quickly brushed away by his domineering business persona.

“If that’s the case, you’ll be the most successful person on the floor this week. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of everything.”

His green eyes flash again, this time showing something akin to pride. “I know you will.”

The pull between us is almost unavoidable until footsteps behind him stop our progress.

“Tyler, there’s an important matter I need you for,” Chrissy says, placing a hand on his shoulder to draw his attention elsewhere.

“Give me five minutes,” he huffs, clearly annoyed at the interruption. Frankly, so am I.

Chrissy pouts, shifting closer. “It can’t wait.”

“Fine.” Tyler turns on his heels with a quick lingering glance, leaving me behind.

Chrissy smirks, flashing her white teeth behind those red-painted lips. “Sorry, urgent matter only he can fulfill. You understand, right?”

I’m shocked she can’t hear my teeth grind against each other. “Absolutely. I know how dedicated he is to his work.”



“And then some,” she says with a lilting voice, disappearing down the hall.

Fuck, I hate her. It shouldn't bother me that she's working with Tyler this week, but how she touches him is more than friendly. It's the touch of someone who intimately knows the other's body. And I loathe the fact she knows his.

Holly peeks her head around the corner. “Whoa, did I hear what I thought I heard? You're taking the lead?”

A fresh round of nerves racks my body, turning my blood to ice. “Holy shit. I can't believe this is happening.”

She abandons her chair to engulf me in a bone-crushing hug. “Girl, you're going to slay it. Who knows. Maybe you'll find yourself in your own office soon.”

I hold my hands up. “Let's not put the cart before the horse. I have to get through this week unscathed and without any problems.”

“I have faith you'll rock it,” she says. “If you need any help, and I'm available, just ask.”

“Thanks.”

I glance at the clock, noting the first meeting will be here in half an hour. No assistant means I'll have to pull double duty, getting things ready while spearheading the team for the win.

Not how I thought my day was going to go.



**Tyler: Running late. Start eating without me. Try to be back before bed.**

It's been the theme this week. Go to work alone. Come home alone. Eat dinner alone. Go to sleep alone.

I push the cartons of Chinese food away, suddenly not hungry anymore.

You'd think I'd run into him at the office, but Richard and Chrissy have him tied up so tight that we can't even share a

passing glance. Most days, he's not even in. Our sole communication has been texts and emails.

I miss his arms around me. The scent of his cologne as he passes. How he'd always find a way to sneak in a kiss or two, even if we had wall-to-wall meetings.

What is wrong with me?

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

I scramble from my stool, almost face planting as I race to the door. Maybe Tyler forgot his key or planned some romantic gesture straight out of a Sandra Bullock movie.

Jenna's smiling face appears on the other side, Holly in tow. "We brought wine because you need some company," she says, holding a couple of bottles up.

I try not to let my apparent disappointment show as I widen the door. "Come on in."

"We figured you needed a girls' night," Holly says, making herself at home while grabbing three wineglasses.

"Did you now?" I quirk a brow. "And who implied I needed one?"

Jenna shrugs and takes out two more bottles of wine from the bag over her shoulder. "A little birdie told me you've been sulking the last few days, feeling alone and left out. We're here to remedy the situation."

I roll my eyes and take the amply poured glass from Holly. "Also, there's a need to celebrate your incredible success in closing *every* deal this week on your own."

Not that it was hard. These meetings basically ran themselves. I was just a face and a company signature. If I'd know any better, I'd say Tyler set these up as sure-fire wins, knowing I'd be running them.

"It's not that big of a deal," I say, reclaiming my seat at the counter.

Jenna takes out several plates, dishing up the abandoned food for everyone. "Good thing you ordered plenty. I'm

starving.”

“No, please. Help yourself.” It feels good to laugh. “I wasn’t hungry anyway.”

“Bullshit. I’ve seen you eat.” She looks me up and down. “And judging by how your shirt hangs off you, it’s been a while since you’ve had a good meal.”

“I eat.”

It’s Holly’s turn to raise a brow. “Really? Because I’m fairly positive you’ve been living on coffee and Diet Coke this week. You haven’t stopped moving once, taking minimal breaks, and running yourself ragged.”

Ugh. I thought I was hiding it better than that. “I had a salad one day.”

“That I forced you to eat.”

“Does it matter?”

Jenna sighs, chewing some food before turning my way. “Maysen, I’ve known you forever, seen this behavior before. This is senior year all over again.”

“What? No.”

“Yes,” she says, sipping her wine. “The last time you were head over heels with this man, you damn near shut down when he refused to acknowledge your existence.”

“I wasn’t... I’m not... head over heels for Tyler Cannon.”

Holly and Jenna both stop and stare like I’ve grown three heads.

“Add denial to the list,” Holly smirks.

I dart my gaze between my two friends. “I’m not in denial.”

“Sure,” Jenna says, elongating the word. “Okay. Fine. So, what was your plan for tonight? Wait up and see if he shows? Stalk the parking garage? Use your key to his place and lay naked in his bed?”

Okay, the last one was a distinct possibility. Part of me hoped he would crawl into bed with me, but I wake up to cold sheets each morning and an even colder feeling deep in my gut. We've never gone this long without communicating professionally or through dirty texts when the other has plans. It's the driving force between the constant unease churning my fears and the self-doubt I've tried so hard to push away these last couple of months.

Holly's face softens as she covers my hand with hers. "Look. Whatever is going through your head right now isn't real. Tyler may be an ass, but he's a faithful one. He's put you so high on a pedestal that no one could ever come close." She breaks out into a knowing smile. "He's in love with you."

Love? How could he be in love with me? I've barely sorted out my own jumbled feelings into something other than intense attraction.

"We're not even in a relationship. How could Tyler be in love with me?"

Jenna practically slams her empty glass on the counter. "It's getting deep in here. I'm gonna need my waders soon."

"What are you rambling about?" I ask.

"You and your frustrating brain." She takes a breath, closing her eyes to push back her irritation—a move I know all too well. "You and Tyler have been exclusive now for months." I open my mouth to object, but she thrusts a hand in the air to stop me. "You haven't seen anyone else, nor has he. You're glued to each other's hips in more ways than one. You spend every waking minute together, and every unconscious thought consists of him. Hell, I think it's sweet you're even in the same building, even though I still think it's a waste of money when you sleep together anyway." She lowers her voice, no longer ranting. "This isn't high school anymore. He's not the man you thought he was. He's so much more. Give him the benefit of the doubt and believe that your dreams can come true for once."

I choke back a tear because I refuse to get emotional. "Will they, though? I have this horrible feeling that something's

going to happen.”

Holly slides off the stool and wraps her arms around my shoulder. “Nothing’s going to happen. It’s all in your head.” She pulls back with a smile. “Just admit you love the guy and let the universe take over.”

I choke out a laugh. “You know I hate giving up control.”

“That’s not what I heard,” Jenna mutters.

I smack her shoulder. “Where in the hell did you hear that from?”

My traitorous friend only smirks. “Let’s just say your boyfriend gets chatty when you get brought up during conversations.”

I’m not sure who to kill first: Tyler for blabbing his mouth about our sex life or Jenna for telling me about his indiscretions.

“Can you please admit you love the man so we can watch the movie now?” Holly says, smiling from ear to ear.

“Ugh. Fine. I’m in love with Tyler Cannon. It’s official. Mr. Irresistible is off the market.”

“Fucking finally,” Jenna says, quickly typing a message on her phone. No doubt letting her boyfriend know the mission was a success. She’s not the only one who knows each other’s tricks. I wouldn’t doubt Pete and Brandon had a hand in tonight.

“Okay. Now that’s settled, let’s get our sexy Italian on the screen and live in a fantasy world for two hours.” Jenna drags Holly and me to the couch, flipping through Netflix to find her movie. She’s not wrong. That man is sex on legs. But after my verbal revelation and acceptance of my true feelings, he’s a distant second to a man with green eyes and the keeper of my heart.

A floating feeling washes over me, drawing me from the edge of sleep I must have somehow found. The last thing I remember was Jenna topping off everyone’s wineglasses from

the final bottle as we played romcom roulette. So how exactly did I get in my bed?

Tyler's side of the bed looks slightly messed up, not like someone had been underneath the covers but was lying on top. Finding a piece of paper that brushes my fingertips when I reach out to confirm I'm still alone is even more confusing.

*Sweetheart,*

*You have no idea how difficult it was to leave you this morning instead of ravaging you senseless, but I figured your friends would disapprove of the noises coming from your bedroom since you're not exactly a quiet one. At least I got to lay next to you for a few hours, drinking in your scent and beauty.*

*Unfortunately, the project is taking longer than anticipated, and I have to work this weekend. But come hell or high water, I will see you tonight. Enjoy your sleep now because you won't get any later.*

*Be naked and ready.*

*Tyler*

Even when he's bossy, he finds a way to be romantic. Something I didn't think was possible. My heart sinks a little, realizing I still have to wait an entire day to see him. This sucks.

Tossing the covers off, I stalk to the bathroom to climb into a steaming hot shower to wash away this melancholy. I peek into the living room first, making sure Jenna and Holly are okay. Both are splayed across the couch, snoring peacefully. I giggle at the thought of finally switching places with Jenna.

I squint against the harsh light bouncing off the white fixtures in the bathroom, thankful I had the foresight to take some ibuprofen before passing out. Not sure how effective it is when you take it with wine instead of water, but the dull ache

instead of a raging inferno in my head says it must have been okay.

After washing away the night, I wrap a towel around my chest before wiping the mirror to check out the damage. Outside of the lingering sadness, you'd never know anything was wrong. I look down, and a flash of blue catches my eye by the hamper. I smile and hug Tyler's shirt to my chest, not helping the longing still hovering at the surface. Something's off, though, as I bring my nose to the fabric, trying to piece it together in my mind.

There's something else here besides his cologne. Something unfamiliar. I sniff it again until awareness slaps me in the face.

This is perfume. And not mine.

Tendrils of dread grip my chest, leaving me gasping for breath as I drop the offending shirt to the floor.

No. There has to be a mistake. This is my paranoia taking over, making me believe things that aren't there. It's just a coincidence that Tyler has another woman's perfume on his shirt. I take a calming breath, even though my hands are still shaking. Work the problem.

He's working side by side with Richard and Chrissy and who knows who else since he's been tight-lipped about it. I'm sure they were close enough at the meetings for her scent to attach to his clothes. She practically hangs on him at the office when she thinks no one is looking, so logically, it's not out of the realm of possibility that this is completely innocent.

Tyler wouldn't cheat on me. But would it technically be cheating if we aren't an actual couple? What if my constant insistence on keeping this secret has finally pushed him over the edge? He could see my reluctance as a lack of commitment.

I'm the one that has refused to put a label on us. Me. Not him. He's probably tired of waiting for me to acknowledge what I've only accepted tonight.

Fuck.

A loud sob escapes as I crumble to the floor, my brain finally exploding with infinite what-if possibilities.

“Maysen,” Jenna says, banging on the door.

I stand and swipe at my eyes, which is pointless because I can’t stop the onslaught of tears from streaming down my cheeks.

Fear grips her features as she looks me over from head to toe. “What’s wrong? What is it?”

I point to the shirt on the floor, unable to find my voice. She picks it up, not understanding how Tyler’s shirt has thrown me into the mess before her.

“Th-there’s another woman’s perfume on it,” I finally squeak out.

Holly joins my meltdown and hugs me tight. “There’s a logical explanation for it, I’m sure. Maybe someone was spraying perfume nearby, and he walked into the cloud.”

Plausible, especially considering who he’s been spending time with. I wouldn’t put it past Chrissy by any means.

“H-he also left me a note.”

Jenna finds the paper lying on the counter, reading it carefully before turning to me. “Honey, this is good.” I widen my eyes, and she shakes her head. “Not the perfume part. This.” She hands the note back to me. “Cheating men don’t leave romantic love notes on their girlfriend’s bed, right?”

“We... I’m not his girlfriend officially.”

Holly rolls her eyes. “Yes, you are. So stop with that crap.”

Jenna grabs my hands, trying to stop them from shaking. “Calm down and take a deep breath.” I do as she says, closing my eyes while emptying my thoughts. “Good. Now, think about this. Why would he leave his shirt in your bathroom if he was seeing someone else? He would have buried it in the hamper or changed clothes to hide the evidence at his apartment.”

Valid points. “I guess.”



“No guessing.” Jenna guides the three of us back to the living room, pulling me down to sit next to her on the couch. “This fear you’re feeling is years of rejection you’ve placed on yourself, believing you weren’t enough, which is far from the truth. Stop holding onto an idea and look at what’s in front of you.”

“A shirt with the scent of another woman?”

“No,” Holly says, sitting on the coffee table. “Love.”

Jenna smiles softly. “Falling in love can be the best and worst feeling. It’s opening yourself up to another, shedding your armor, and making yourself vulnerable. You’ve built an almost impenetrable wall against Tyler for years. The last thing you need is to start putting those bricks back into place now that you two are finally together.”

“Has he ever given you a reason to doubt him?”

I think back over the last few months and shake my head. How many times had Tyler done simple things for me that I overlooked because I couldn’t see beyond his reputation? The clothes after late nights, food when I forget to eat, making sure I’m never the last person out of a room because he viewed me as more than an assistant. Then at the retreat, he was so sweet, almost completely out of character, showing me a side I always longed for in a partner.

“I guess not,” I finally say.

Jenna nods and runs her fingertips under my eyes. “I think you should surprise him today.”

I widen my eyes. “But he’s probably in meetings or with Chrissy or Richard.”

“Fuck them,” Holly says. “I say wave your relationship in her face, showing her that you have something she doesn’t.”

“Other than class,” Jenna adds with a laugh.

“Well, if I do that, I wouldn’t have class anymore.”

Holly rolls her eyes. “Whatever. I say you march over there and proudly claim your man.”

They're right. Tyler has never given me a reason to doubt his feelings. Who would have thought he was better at relationships than me?

I hug them both as I stand. "Help me find something to wear?"

Their faces light up like I just told them they won the lottery. Before I know it, they're rushing me into my closet, treating me like their personal Barbie doll.

"He won't be able to resist you," Holly says, admiring the final product.

You'd think I was preparing for another charity auction with what these two have put me through.

"Are you sure this is appropriate?" I pull at the skirt, wishing there was more material to cover my bare thighs.

Jenna smirks. "Stop fidgeting. If anything, it needs to be shorter. You look hot. Now own it like you did at Starlight."

Holly raises a brow, but I hold up my hands. "Long story. Don't ask."

Jenna slings her arm around Holly's shoulders. "I'll fill you in while she's having hot office sex with the boss."

I roll my eyes and fish the keys out of my purse. "Wish me luck."

"You don't need luck," Holly says.

"And you better come back with less than perfect hair," Jenna yells as I shut the door behind me.

A bout of nerves hits me as I wait for the elevator. Maybe I should send a quick text to Tyler, giving him a heads up. He could make an excuse to leave, giving us the entire day to reacquaint our bodies with each other.

**Me: My bed was awful cold this morning. Care for a surprise visit to warm me up?**

Within seconds, the message changes from delivered to read. But no dots appear on the screen. I keep checking my

phone the entire way to the parking garage, waiting for a response.

The cell reception is terrible down here. Once I get into the building, I bet he'll respond with his usual sexting, knowing how much I love his dirty talk.

Silence.

Shit. Maybe this is a bad idea. I should turn around right now and head back. Tyler's probably in some meeting, too busy to send me a quick message.

Too late to turn back now as I walk through the front doors. Nerves eat away at my stomach the whole elevator ride up.

This isn't going to work.

No, he's going to love it.

Tyler hates surprises.

No, that's me.

Didn't he say he loves my feisty side?

The butterflies disappear with each step closer to his door. Jenna's right. Love is about opening yourself up to another person, taking them in with everything you have, and giving it back with just as much force. I'll tell Tyler I'm in love with him, that I want to take this public, consequences be damned. There's nothing we can't handle together. We've shown it in business. Now it's time to show the world the other side of us.

"Surprise," I say, swinging his office door open but stop dead in my tracks, dropping my purse to the ground.

"Oh, god. What are you doing here?" Chrissy shrieks, propping herself up on Tyler's desk, her hair a complete mess and her shirt hanging open. That's when I notice the condition of his usually pristine office. Papers flung from one end to the other. His computer and monitor pushed precariously close to the edge, ready to tumble over with a gentle push. The couch cushions on the floor. The coffee table not where it's supposed to be.

It's like someone had a sexcapade and didn't bother to clean up the aftermath.

His executive bathroom door opens, a cloud of steam following Tyler into the destruction, looking freshly showered with his hair still wet while buttoning his shirt.

My gasp snaps his head up, shock registering his features. "Maysen?"

I slowly back out the door, pressing a hand to my mouth as if it would stop the tears from falling.

"Maysen!" Tyler's voice echoes through the empty space, but I ignore the urge to run back and face him.

I should have known better than to think he could change.

He's still the same arrogant asshole from high school, letting things fall into his lap without trying.

And yet, I can't mask the hurt dwelling within my heart.

I thought being ignored was horrible.

No, I was wrong.

This is way worse.



## CHAPTER *Twenty-One*

### *Tyler*

“Let’s hurry this up. I’ve already had to reschedule my entire week. Canceling my plans for today was not part of the deal,” I say, slapping my briefcase onto my desk.

Chrissy doesn’t even look upset. Instead, she flashes one of the fake smiles she uses to get everything she wants. Sorry, honey. Wrong guy.

“I know, and I’m sorry about that. But you’ve been beneficial this week. There’s no way Richard could have pulled off this merger by himself. He’s old and out of the game.”

She’s not wrong. I’ve had several meetings with Denise and a few higher-ups about what to do with Richard, short of forcing him to retire. His lack of production hasn’t gone unnoticed—he only takes the slam dunk cases or low-end accounts to pad his monthly numbers. Hell, even the douche canoe Ian puts in more work than him.

This account was a test to see whether or not Richard still had the chops for the business. Unfortunately, he failed.

It could explain why Chrissy has been sucking up all week, hardly letting me stray from her side. If Richard's out, she's out, considering she's burned every bridge in the office by not keeping her legs or mouth shut. Not my problem, though.

"He had no business taking this project in the first place. It was above his pay grade."

Chrissy slides off the chair, stalking me like her prey as she rounds my desk. "There's no comparison between you and him. Your prowess and commanding presence keep everyone below you." She licks her red lips, letting her gaze drop to my pants. "In fact, I'd like to get beneath you right now."

I pin her with a cold, icy glare. "No."

My rejection stuns her for a moment. "I'm sorry, what? No?"

"Did I stutter? For the last time, I'm not interested anymore. You know my stance on dating. We were never a couple, so stop acting like we were. There's nothing between us. After this project, that will be the end of it. There's nothing more to tie us professionally."

All the blood drains from her face. "What are you saying? Am-am I fired? Is Richard fired?"

Shit. I probably shouldn't have tipped my hand yet. "No, you're not. But I don't want you around me anymore. You're not my assistant. Stick to Richard, do your job, and you should be fine."

Not a complete lie, but I also don't know their fate yet. Once word gets out that I've done all the legwork while Richard sat back and did nothing, I can't guarantee they'll make the cut.

"You can't mean that. After all our history, all the pleasure we've given each other." She sits on the corner of my desk, leaning forward to crowd into my space. "How many times have I sucked you underneath your desk? Or rode you to

orgasm before everyone got into the office after a long weekend? Surely you don't want to give that up."

Not even the sight of her breasts poking through her blouse turns me on. Yeah, it was another story in the past, but now I have something different. Something real. Maysen changed my views and made me see that I'm worthy of an actual relationship instead of some tawdry affair or fling.

"Don't kid yourself by reading more into what it was. You provided a service I needed but no longer require." I push away from her, keeping my arms crossed over my chest. "And if you don't watch yourself, I'll go to HR and file a complaint."

Red slowly creeps back into her cheeks. "Oh, I think you better watch yourself. Do you think going to HR is a good idea? You're the authority figure, praying on the lowly assistant. All I have to say is that you threatened my job if I didn't obey your commands. Who are they going to believe?"

My jaw tenses. "Don't even try it. You can't make up lies to get what you want."

Her blank stare gives nothing away. "Okay." She hops down to reclaim her spot on the couch, opening her notebook as if nothing happened.

I pause and watch her closely. Something's off. Chrissy is taking my rejection too well. I expected yelling or a tantrum, not compliance.

It's the calm before the storm or the eery quiet before disaster strikes.

This isn't good.

Keeping my guard up, I open the presentation we've worked on all week, letting her dictate the notes from our many phone conversations and research with the previous company.

I barely look up as she makes a cup of coffee from my station, ignoring her as she offers me one because I refuse to feed into her need to be recognized.

Of course, it backfires when she pulls the same stunt, pretending she didn't hear me ask to get the papers I sent to the copy room.

I quickly glance at my phone. Should I send Maysen a quick text telling her to be naked and waiting in about an hour? Because I have no intention of being here longer than that. It's been a week since I've been inside my girlfriend. I'm not about to waste another second on someone that isn't her. I make my way down the hall without looking back like a man on a mission.

"What the fuck?" Where are the papers I printed? I smack the side of the machine a few times, hoping the documents will magically appear. Nothing. Just the annoying red light begging for attention. I roll up my sleeves and follow the on-screen instructions, trying to locate this supposed paper jam.

After ten minutes of being on my hands and knees, I find a measly scrap of paper stuck to one of the drums. I pluck it between my fingers and slam the door shut. Within seconds, everything I'm waiting on appears on the tray. I glare at the offending machine and wipe my forehead with the back of my hand. Unfortunately, black smudges coat my skin, knowing full well that it's probably all over my face.

Damn. I owe Maysen a *colossal* apology. How often has she claimed the same thing happened to her, and I blew it off as a weak excuse?

I look down and swear under my breath. Did the whole toner cartridge explode without me noticing? There's nothing but black dust coating the front of my shirt. When I said I wanted to get dirty within the hour, this was not what I had in mind.

Chrissy looks up with a frown as the door flies open. "What happened to you?"

Since I can't salvage the shirt, I wipe my hands on my chest, smearing it further. "Don't ask."

"Where are the papers?"



I pin her with a look that begs her to keep pushing. “Still in the copy room.”

She stands from the couch, keeping her distance. “Why don’t you get cleaned up, and I’ll see if we need to reprint them.”

Cleaning up will only delay my departure, but I also don’t want to make an even bigger mess than I already have. I nod and make my way to the bathroom, flicking the lock behind me in case she gets bold and joins me in the shower.

I wipe the steam from the mirror and grab the spare clothes from the closet. Today is an absolute mess. What else could go wrong?

A faint voice other than Chrissy’s sounds from behind the door. I open it with a flourish, feeling the rush of cool air against my skin as I finish buttoning my shirt and tucking it into my pants.

A gasp snaps my head up, coming from a voice I’d know anywhere.

“Maysen?” What on earth is she doing here?

Tears well in her beautiful hazel eyes, the hurt evident within their depths. She doesn’t utter a word; simply snatches her purse from the floor and sprints like a pack of wolves are nipping at her heels.

“Maysen!”

I chase her down the hallway, but she beats me to the elevator, slipping inside while frantically hitting a button. The last thing I see before the doors shut are the tears streaming down her face with her arms wrapped tightly around her middle; the look of a broken woman.

What in the hell happened?

I storm back to the office, finally assessing the condition. It looks like a tornado hit, stringing items from one wall to another, with Chrissy sprawled across my desk in a compromised position.

She sits up, perching herself to accentuate her exposed breasts while leaning back on her hands. “Looks like she caught us.”

Red tinges my vision. “What in the fuck are you playing at?” I’m through with her little seduction game. “Button your goddamn shirt and answer me.”

Her face pales for a moment. “I don’t understand what you see in her. She doesn’t even compare to me.”

“You’re right.” Chrissy smiles like she’s won the grand prize. “There’s no comparing Maysen to you.”

She slides off my desk, her shirt still hanging open. “I knew you’d come to your senses.”

I grip her wrists as she slides her hands around my neck, halting her progress immediately. “Eye-opening, really—because you’re not even in the same league as her. Your toxicity and childish behavior are your downfalls and, ultimately, your undoing. This conduct will no longer be tolerated at Madison Development Group. Leave, now.”

Chrissy takes a step back, leaving her mouth hanging open. “You can’t be serious.”

“Do I look like I’m fucking joking?”

Her fierce eyes dart around the room and then narrow on mine, turning them into slits. “But it’s okay for you to fuck her while carrying on a ‘frowned upon’ relationship? You’re a walking double-standard, Tyler. Think long and hard before you do something you’ll regret.”

I take a step forward, holding back the smirk as she retreats. “I don’t believe in regrets. Everything has a time and place. And I’m not about to blow my second chance with Maysen because the office slut can’t take the hint.”

My head jerks to the side as her palm connects with my cheek. I half-expected the slap, knowing I’d pushed her limits. It only pisses her off more when I smile wider.

“This isn’t over.”

“Yes, it is.”

Without another word, she gathers her things and storms out of my office. The pictures rattle against the walls as the door slams behind her.

Fucking finally.

I quickly grab a few things from my desk before turning off the lights and sprint to my car. Maybe I can catch Maysen and explain things. She can't honestly believe that I'd fuck Chrissy or cheat on her with anyone. I know she still harbors some jealousy regarding my previous arrangement, but after last weekend, I thought we cast it aside, buried so deep that archaeologists wouldn't find it for a million years.

No. I refuse to believe anything other than Maysen knowing how much I care about her.

I barely make it into our apartment parking garage without an accident. Four people flipped me off, two honked their horns, and one threw their milkshake at my car, only narrowly missing.

Thankfully, the elevator ride to her floor isn't that long. My heart feels like it's about to leap from my chest, not the usual way it does whenever Maysen's around. No, nerves and dread flood my system, making each step feel like my last. I can't get her devastated image out of my mind.

I slide my key into the lock, not giving two shits about the door denting in the wall as I stalk through the apartment like a man on a mission.

"Maysen!"

Holly and Jenna pick their heads up from the couch before shutting off the TV. "Tyler? What are you doing here?"

"Where is she?" I'm sure I sound like a crazy person, considering their matching expressions with equal amounts of shock and confusion.

"Maysen went to see you." Jenna narrows her eyes slightly. "What did you do?"

Ignoring her tone, I stalk back to the bedroom, looking under the bed and in the closet before going into her office,

only to find it like the rest of the apartment. Empty.

“Tyler, answer me.” Jenna follows me into the bathroom with her hands on her hips. “I’m not kidding. What did you do to her?”

“Nothing,” I yell, throwing my hands in the air. “I didn’t do anything. Fucking Chrissy is what happened.”

“You fucked Chrissy?” Holly gasps. “I thought that was over?”

I rest my hands against the counter, hanging my head. “It was. Is.”

Jenna shoves my shoulder. “So help me, Tyler Cannon. If you hurt her, I will beat your ass until you can’t sit for a week.”

Holly and Jenna follow me to the kitchen as I pull out a stool, letting the gravity of the situation fall upon my shoulders. “It’s a misunderstanding. I swear, nothing happened.”

They eye each other before swinging their accusatory gazes to me. “Start explaining.”

I sigh and take them through every scenario, starting with Monday morning and how I got sucked into the project from hell. They quietly listen as I detail everything Chrissy did and said during the week, right down to what she wore to garner my attention—which failed miserably. All leading up to the text message I woke up to, stating how she urgently needed to meet, leaving out the critical fact that Richard wasn’t even invited. Holly breaks her stone demeanor when I mention the copier fiasco, nodding her head with the first sign of life since I started this story.

“So you showered, and what, Chrissy joined you?” Jenna asks, clearly annoyed.

“No. I locked the door in case she thought about it.” She doesn’t look away from my glare as I continue. “When I opened the door, Maysen was completely stunned and crying. I chased her down the hallway, but it was too late. Then I saw what Chrissy had done to my office. She made it look like we

had wild sex everywhere. And to really sell it, she was sprawled across my desk with her shirt wide open and her tits practically falling out of her bra.”

“Fucking bitch,” Holly seethes. I can practically hear her teeth grinding.

“Yeah, well, I fired her after she called me out for sleeping with Maysen.”

Holly tilts her head. “How on earth did she know?”

I scrub my hands over my face, letting the exhaustion of the morning sink in. “I don’t know. It’s all a giant clusterfuck.” I turn to Jenna. “Do you know where she’d go?”

She shakes her head. “No clue. Have you tried calling her?”

I pull out my phone and hit her number again. It rings twice, then straight to voice mail. “She’s screening her calls.”

Both Jenna and Holly try calling as well, getting the same result. “Looks that way.”

I open my messages, ready to send her a text, but something gives me pause. A message I haven’t seen, but someone else has. “I think I know how Chrissy found out.”

I spin the phone to show them. “I don’t get it,” Jenna says.

“I never saw this message. But someone opened my phone and read it. Which means they probably also saw all of our messages.”

Realization hits them as they nod their heads. “Fucking bitch.”

It explains why Chrissy acted the way she did. Maysen must have sent that message when I was struggling with the copy machine or in the shower, giving Chrissy all the time she needed to concoct her stupid scheme. She knew exactly how to hit Maysen where it’d hurt the most.

“So, what are you going to do?” Holly slides the phone back to me with a frown.

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

Jenna stands, letting the stool scrape against the tiled floor.  
“I’ll do what I can before work and keep you updated.”

“Me too,” Holly says.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

They smile sadly and gather their things before disappearing out the door.

I keep hitting her number as I walk to her room and lie on her side of the bed.

Two rings. Voice mail.

Two rings. Voice mail.

Voice mail.

Voice mail.

Voice mail.

Shit. I throw the phone across the room with a yell. Great.  
It’s fucking turned off.

Now what do I do?



## CHAPTER *Twenty-Two*

### *Maysen*

“Checking in?” the blonde woman behind the desk perkily asks. I’m sure I look like a hot mess with mascara streaked across my face. It probably goes well with the blotchy patches and red nose from crying the entire time I was driving around, trying to figure out my next move.

My phone has been ringing off the hook since I left the office. Tyler must be holding down the button or have some sort of autodial that calls every five seconds like the scam artists who insist your car’s warranty is expired.

“Yes. Do you have anything for the week?”

She clicks a few things with the mouse before looking up. “I have a suite available if that works.”

“Fine,” I say, sliding my credit card across the desk.

“Excellent. One key card or two?”

I try to hold back the tears from her simple request. “One is fine.”

I appreciate that she doesn't make any small talk as she enters my info into the system. I don't think I can handle being pleasant at the moment.

After giving me the standard spiel regarding the hotel policies and whatnot, I take the elevator to my floor and slump into my room, making sure the Do Not Disturb sign never leaves the doorknob.

I couldn't go home, knowing it'd be the first place Tyler would look for me. Not to mention, my two friends would probably still be there, waiting to see if my little plan had worked.

How could this day go so horribly wrong?

Unbidden images of Chrissy sprawled across Tyler's desk, in different positions and states of undress, flood my imagination, churning the acid in my stomach until I sprint to the bathroom and relieve the contents into the toilet.

She warned me months ago that he would come crawling back. I didn't care at the time because we weren't a thing. Perhaps I should have heeded her warning before starting an affair with my boss. Working close all week must have brought back his feelings toward her. Because, again, sex is never just sex. It's an emotional connection. And I fell over the edge after I told myself I couldn't. Tyler wormed his way into my heart even though I tried like hell to keep him at arm's length.

Tears stream down my face as I finally mourn the relationship I always wanted but could never fully have. Tyler was consistently out of reach for someone like me, falling into the arms of women like Chrissy. As they say, history will repeat itself.

Now I regret letting Holly and Jenna dress me up. All I want is to get into my comfy sweats and eat my weight in pizza and ice cream. I pull out my phone and pick one of the delivery apps, ordering just that.





Day three post-Tyler is a little better than day two and significantly better than day one. Denise was understanding when I called her this morning, faking some bug that's going around, one that would keep me out of the office for the week. I offered to work remotely, but she said to rest up and not worry about anything, which was probably better since working would involve being in contact with Tyler. I haven't turned my phone on since I got here, so I have no idea how many messages are waiting for me. I'm guessing the little red number in the corner of the app will be at least double digits, if not triple.

I feel like a heel for cutting everyone off, but I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone, not even Jenna, who knows all my secrets. She's too close with the enemy since she's dating Pete. If I tell her where I'm at, it won't take long for him to find out and relay the information back to Tyler. And I'm not ready to see him. Not yet. I need to let my heart and brain sort through everything and figure out what to do with my life. My career at Madison Development Group is over. I can't be in the same space as those two, flaunting their affair in everyone's face. And I'm sure by now, my tryst with Tyler is the new water cooler gossip. I'm sure Chrissy didn't hesitate to proudly proclaim how Tyler cast me aside and crawled back into her arms.

I wish I had my laptop, though, to start job hunting. I glance at the clock on the nightstand. Tyler should be prepping for his meeting with the Candor group, giving me a window to leave this room and verify I'm not a vampire by venturing into the daylight.

With a deep breath, I switch on my phone and close my eyes, psyching myself up to see what awaits me.

And just as I thought, the little number indicating my missed messages sends my anxiety into overdrive.

Tyler, of course, has the most, but I blow past his name, leaving them unread because I don't care what they say. Holly has the fewest, with Jenna somewhere in the middle.

**Me: I'm fine. Don't worry. Not ready to talk yet. Will message again when I am.**

Both women get the same message before switching my phone to do not disturb rather than turning it off again. It's not like anyone can track my phone, so there's little chance of being discovered. Add in the benefit of living in the metro area and the millions of different hotels to hide in plain sight.

After a quick shower, I grab my keys and head to my car, praying no one sees me on the way to my apartment.



## *Tyler*

This is ridiculous. Three days of radio silence, not knowing where she is, whether she's okay, or who she's with. I know Maysen would never cheat, and it still hurts that she assumes I would. All because of this fucking reputation I can't shake. Whoever placed it on me years ago should be dragged into a dark alley and shot.

My sour mood has shifted my work demeanor, leaving people jumping out of my way in the halls and every room I enter. It'd be almost comical if I gave a shit. The only person dumb enough to push my buttons is Ian. Every time I see him, he's sporting a smirk, like he's harboring a secret, trying to bait me into asking about it.

Fuck him.

Surprisingly, no one has asked where Chrissy is except Richard. The only thing he knows is that she's not here today. The details of her firing have yet to be revealed since Denise and I still need to meet this morning.

Speaking of which...

"Tyler," Denise says, closing my door behind her. "We need to talk."

The most dreaded four words anyone wants to hear. At least I was expecting them.

“I’m typing my report regarding Chrissy’s termination right now.”

She nods and sits in the chair opposite me. “Good. We’ll need that for her file if she decides to take legal action for wrongful termination.”

Highly unlikely, but I wouldn’t put it past her to try. “Nothing about letting her go was wrongful.” Chrissy isn’t one to roll over and accept the consequences. Knowing her as well as I do, there’s something up her sleeve.

“In regard to Richard, how should we handle this?”

I lean back in my chair and scrub my hands across my face. “I don’t know. It’s obvious he’s out of the game. Our test showed precisely what it needed to, but I don’t think he’ll go for early retirement. Though, maybe with Chrissy gone, it’ll help our cause.”

Denise frowns. “Yes, his sordid affair with her abruptly ending could help. Also, you should know that there’s a rumor around the office regarding you and her.”

I tense. “I figured. Do we know who started it?”

She shakes her head. “Not yet, but it doesn’t matter. Is there any basis behind it?”

“I cut ties with Chrissy months ago.”

“You know these relationships are frowned upon, creating more work for me than necessary.”

I refrain from rolling my eyes. “Your point?”

Denise leans forward. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me regarding why your assistant, who’s had impeccable attendance since we hired her, has suddenly become ill and will be gone for the week? The timing is uncanny, wouldn’t you agree?”

A lump forms in my throat. I knew better than to think Maysen would be here today, but to know she won’t be here

all week is a shot to the chest.

“Not yet.”

“Tyler, as someone who has known you for a long time, I’m not blind to see something is going on between you two. Relationships between authority figures and subordinates are discouraged; however, you two seem to make it work. You keep it professional in the office...” She pauses to pin me with a knowing glare. “Mostly. But you’ve become even more successful than before. Maysen gets nothing but glowing reviews from the team and even our new clients.”

I nod, pushing back the emotions bubbling to the surface. “Maysen’s a valuable asset to the company, so I want to discuss something else with you. Can we meet this afternoon?”

Denise smirks. “I can hardly wait to hear what it is.”

With Maysen gone, prepping for my morning meeting takes longer than usual. After Denise leaves, I quickly grab one of the temps and give her a quick rundown of everything I need for the conference room. I’m not about to have her make copies and potentially fuck them up.

Another pang hits my chest as I walk past Maysen’s empty cubicle. I stop and turn to the one ally I have in the office.

“Is she okay?”

Holly doesn’t even bat an eyelash as she swivels to face me. “I have no idea. She hasn’t reached out to anyone since Saturday.” Her phone pings and she smiles at the message before turning to face me again.

“That was her, wasn’t it.” Not a question. Holly doesn’t say anything, confirming my suspicions. “Just tell me she’s okay.”

“She’s okay,” Holly says. “She doesn’t want to talk.”

At least I know she’s all right. “Can you tell her I miss her?”

“Just give her some space right now.”

“I’ve been giving her space for three days.” I sigh and hang my head. “Please?”

Holly nods. “I’ll see what I can do.”

That’s as good of an answer as I can hope for. “Thank you.”

With a nod, I turn and walk down the hall. Maysen’s okay, and that knowledge will have to keep me going until she realizes how silly this situation is.

The sooner she comes to her senses, the better because without her in my life—professionally or personally—I can’t function.

As evident when I walk into the conference room and see the temp not doing her job.

It’s going to be a long day.

After narrowly snagging the Candor execs by pulling an ace from my back pocket, the day seems to have taken a turn, especially after Denise agrees with my idea. Time to put things into motion.

Richard looks up from his computer when I knock on his door.

“Cannon. What can I do for you?”

The door clicks behind me before I settle into the seat across from his desk.

“We need to talk.”

Richard leans back in his chair, resting his hands on his stomach. “Here to explain why my assistant isn’t at work today?”

Okay, it looks like we’re putting the gloves on right away. “She was let go for insubordination.”

“That’s a crock of shit. What happened? Did you come onto her, and she turned you down? Did your precious ego get bruised?”

“Hardly,” I say, crossing my legs at the ankles. “Quite the opposite.”

Red starts to creep up his neck. “You lie.”

“Richard, please tell me you didn’t think you were the only person she was sleeping with at the office.” His blank stare says it all—poor sap. “We have a reputation to uphold, and she no longer fits our core values.” Not that she ever did.

“So when am I getting a new assistant?”

“You’re not.”

He leans forward. “Come again?”

I slide over the packet Denise and the other senior partners put together earlier this afternoon. “We suggest you accept this offer. You’re not getting any younger. Why not enjoy life a little? Travel around the country, or take Margie on that Mediterranean cruise she talked about at the Christmas party last year.”

The tension lies thick in the air as he leans forward, gritting his teeth. “And what if I don’t want to?”

Now it’s my turn to give a menacing glare. “Believe me. You want to take this deal. I’d hate to see you left with nothing to fall back on.”

Richard scoffs. “You think you’re so smart. No one could take on my accounts right away. You’d be drowning, hurting this company more.”

“We have it covered.” I smirk. Anyone on the floor could handle the three accounts he has on the books for the week. It’s almost hilarious he thinks he’s too important to lose. “In fact, you could get a jump start on your retirement today.”

“You’re joking, right? You want me to pack my things and march through the office with everyone still here?”

“I don’t care how you do it, but we’d appreciate it if you did it quietly and respectfully.” I stand and jut my hand out. “It’s been a pleasure working with you, Richard. I wish you nothing but the best in the future.”

He doesn't take my hand. "Fuck you, Cannon. Get out of my office."

I hate being the one to deliver this news, but I figured it'd be better coming from me since I knew he'd want an explanation on Chrissy. And I knew he thought he had her all to himself. I wasn't about to divulge the other three people stupid enough to fall into her spider's web—no need to rub salt into the wound.

Without another word, I shut the door behind me as I exit his office, trying to withhold the smile creeping to the surface, but it pops anyway. Everything is coming together.

Step One, done.

On to Step Two.



## CHAPTER *Twenty-Three*

### *Maysen*

“Ugh.”

This is crazy. Why am I torturing myself? Even after Zack kicked me out, I never holed up somewhere to drown in my misery. I’m stronger than this. What is wrong with me?

I know the answer without needing to verbalize it. Tyler Cannon is what happened.

With Zack, there weren’t emotions involved, at least nothing significant. He was an asshole on a good day, conveniently there to let my brain escape my failures as an adult.

It’s a complete one-eighty with Tyler, nothing but a sea of raw emotion and passion, creating a perfect storm I never saw coming. His thoughtful words and actions and constant encouragement of my professional ambitions were a breath of fresh air, especially since I’m hard enough on myself as it is—my own worst enemy.



Yet, even knowing all that, my brain won't acknowledge he's changed. In my mind, he's still the same boy from high school, breaking my teenage heart all over again. Not that he was ever aware of the damage he inflicted on my unrequited, one-sided love affair.

I don't know what to do anymore.

Except I do know I can't sit in this room another minute. I may scream if I have to eat one more meal from a to-go container.

After a shower—because it's been a couple of days—I head to the hotel restaurant, opting to sit at the bar rather than inform the hostess I'll need a pathetic table for one.

Thankfully, the bartender has a heavy wrist and generously pours me a glass of whiskey, some brand I've never heard of, but he swears it's the best.

Everything on the menu sounds fantastic, from the truffle fries to the smothered strip steak. Not a burger or pizza in sight, which I appreciate since I think I've had my quota for the year.

A shadow casts to my side, leaving me sighing into my drink as the figure occupies the empty seat next to me. The last thing I wanted was to get hit on. Now I'll have to force myself to make polite conversation before letting him down that I am one hundred percent uninterested.

“Fancy seeing you here.”

A chill runs up my spine as I swing my gaze to Brandon, looking thoroughly amused and equally shocked.

“Likewise. What brings you here?” I try to calm my racing heart, rationalizing the potential excuse he has for being in a random hotel bar in one of the many suburbs.

“A business meeting with an out-of-town client who's staying here.”

I draw my brows together. “After hours on a Friday?”

He nods. “I try not to make it a habit, but you know, duty calls. Now, how about you?”

Obviously, he knows I don't have a good reason for being here. I'm sure Tyler has kept him up-to-date on everything that's gone down this last week. Somehow I doubt he's a spy. Brandon isn't the kind of person to have malicious motives, so I shouldn't believe this is nothing more than an innocent, accidental run-in.

"Oh, you know, I heard great things about this place and wanted to check it out. Let's call it a mini-staycation."

He laughs and flags down the bartender, ordering two of whatever I'm drinking. "Sounds like fun. And you're not running away from something, right?"

My cheeks flame, turning my attention to the ice ball in the glass rather than his probing eyes. "Not in so many words."

"There weren't that many to begin with." He takes a sip of his drink. "Tyler's been worried sick about you. Frankly, we all have. Are you okay?"

I laugh dismissively, partially because I don't know the answer to the question. "Sure. Grand. Wonderful. I couldn't be happier for the power couple of the office."

Brandon frowns. "Um, half of the power couple is sitting right here. What are you talking about?"

Seriously, he can't be this stupid. I exaggeratedly look around. "Why? Is Chrissy here?"

"Maysen," he sighs. "Be real for a minute."

I drain the amber liquid from my glass, giving up trying to find something else to fill my stomach. "What's there to say? I caught him fucking her at the office."

"Did you, though?"

I snort. "Uh, she was half-naked on Tyler's desk, and he emerged from his bathroom like McSteamy did when Derek discovered Addison cheated on him a second time."

The blank expression on his face is almost comical. "I'm going to assume that's a reference to some TV show. And just like TV, it's all make-believe."

“Whatever. I know what I saw.”

Brandon rubs his forehead in apparent frustration. “Or you saw a master manipulator curating a scene, knowing you were coming and wanted to hit you where it hurt.”

“You know, it’s not nice to talk about your friends like that,” I say, grabbing the fresh drink.

“He’s not the manipulator. Did it ever occur to you that perhaps Chrissy was playing both of you?”

I think Brandon’s headache is contagious because the beginnings of a massive one take root in the middle of my forehead. “And what reason would she have for that?”

On a sigh, he swivels his body to face me. “Maysen, Chrissy wants power. And she believed that if she bagged Tyler, she’d be untouchable. You were a threat she needed to eliminate. Tell me”—he leans in closer—“let’s say Tyler caught you in a similar scenario with Ian. Wouldn’t you want to talk it out and clear the air?”

“Ian has nothing to do with this. Tyler knows there’s nothing between us.”

“Just like you know there’s nothing between him and Chrissy.”

“Except there is. There’s history. Months and months of meaningless office sex.”

Brandon slaps his hand against the bar. “There. That’s the point. Meaningless. And when did it stop?”

I open my mouth, but the words fail to form. I know when it stopped. The minute Tyler figured out who I was.

“See. Chrissy was nothing, but you are everything to him.” Brandon sighs. “I’ve seen this before with Tyler. Last time, I couldn’t do anything about it. This time I can.”

I pinch my brows together. “What do you mean last time?”

The bartender sets two more glasses in front of us. Apparently, he knew we’d need all the alcohol we could get to have this conversation.

“You had a crush on Tyler in high school, right?”

I snort into my glass. “Everyone did.”

“Yeah, well, he didn’t have a crush on everyone. Just one person.”

“Who? Tammy Sullivan? Julie Baker? Trina Schwartz?”

Brandon rolls his eyes. “You.”

Okay, now he has my full attention. “You lie.”

“Hand to God,” he says, pressing his palm against his chest. “I know you think he didn’t notice you, but he did—all the time. Tyler was always looking for an excuse to bring your name up in conversation or migrate your way at the house parties. But he saw you as an innocent, someone pure of heart who would suffer at the hands of his reputation. So instead of going after the one thing he wanted, he kept his distance to spare you the humiliation associated with being involved with *Mr. Irresistible*.”

I narrow my eyes. “That might be the dumbest, most immature thing I ever heard.”

“It’s high school. Of course he was dumb. All guys are at that age. In his mind, Tyler was doing what was best for you. I told him it didn’t matter what anyone else thought. If he wanted you, he should go for it.”

“Then he’s a coward.”

“He was confused,” Brandon says, grabbing another drink. “It didn’t change the fact that he had to push you away to spare you from the inevitable ridicule.”

I slam my drink against the bar, letting droplets splash over the side of the glass. “Did he think I couldn’t handle it? That I was some timid girl who needed saving?” Brandon pins me with a stare. “Okay, fine. I was back then. But give me some fucking credit. I could handle the bullies and jerks. It’s part of growing up. But for him to not even take a chance is...is....”

“Childish,” he says, finishing my sentence. I nod. “Which is why he had to grow up to figure out that reputations only go as far as you allow them. No one cares what crowd you were

part of in high school. People were always messing with his head, telling him who he should be and what he should be doing. The guy never had a chance until you came back into his life.”

“So he chose to run.”

Brandon raises a brow. “Sound familiar?”

Damn. He has me there. “This is different.”

“Is it?”

Not really. If what Brandon says is true, Tyler was making decisions for us before talking it out. “I guess you could say I’m doing something similar.”

Relief spreads across Brandon’s face. “Look, I’m not excusing his actions as a teenager. What I can do is attest to the man he’s become—someone who deserves the benefit of the doubt. Or at the very least a chance to explain.”

Shit. He’s right. How many times has Tyler proven he’s changed, and I’ve simply ignored it?

I really am a jackass. I’ve put both of us through an enormous amount of unnecessary pain this week because I was insecure and hadn’t changed my view from ten years ago?

Brandon nods. “Again, I’m not here on his behalf. I’m just a concerned friend who thinks you two are perfect for each other, and I’d hate to see you throw this away over a miscommunication.”

I place my hand on his arm. “Thanks. You’re a good friend.”

He blows on his fingers and buffs them against his shirt. “I know. So you’ll talk to him?”

“Yeah, I’ll talk to him. Probably not tonight because I can’t make it too easy for him.”

Brandon laughs. “Nothing’s ever easy between you two.”

I shrug and finish my drink. “It makes life interesting.”

Brandon grabs my tab before I have the chance to place my card down. "It's on me."

"No, you don't have to."

He smiles and signs the slip once the bartender brings it back. "You can repay me by fixing this situation."

I roll my eyes. "Fine."

"Good," he says with a winning smile. "Worth every penny."



The apartment is eerily quiet as I walk through the door for the first time in a week. After checking out of the hotel, I decided it was time to face the music. That and I missed my mattress.

Luckily, there's no sign of Tyler, though it seems he has been here at some point. Several flower vases with still-alive roses and daisies decorate the kitchen counter and the coffee table in the living room. Their delicate floral fragrance is a welcome surprise. I was half expecting the place to smell like rotting garbage or week-old Chinese takeout since that was the last thing I ate here. But nope, everything is clean and tidy. Hell, even the floors sparkle to almost a shine. Did Tyler hire a maid? Not that I'd put it past him. I'm sure, in his own way, he was trying to help me out.

Dragging my suitcase, I make my way to the bedroom, only to be assaulted by more flowers covering every available surface. Did he buy out the flower store? Better yet, how long have they been here? Not one is wilting or showing any signs of decay. Were they replaced daily?

I rub my forehead and flop onto my bed, trying to ward off the impending headache. There's so much information I needed to unpack after my conversation with Brandon last night. Does knowing that Tyler's had feelings for me all along change anything?

Brandon was right about giving him the benefit of the doubt, though. Now that I've calmed down, I can see the

situation for what it was: a failed attempt at Chrissy seducing Tyler because she saw me as a threat.

A smile breaks across my face. Now there's a first. *I* was a threat to another woman after the great Tyler Cannon.

Okay, I need to sort this out. Thinking about our interactions since I started working at Madison, it's clear he's treated me differently than his past assistants. Even Holly noted the differences, saying she could count on one finger how many times he ever offered to buy his assistant food or coffee, let alone a wardrobe, after forcing her to stay and work all night. Granted, she didn't know about the clothes until after I told her about us. But still, he was a tyrant, hardly showing any sympathy or compassion after running his assistant through the wringer.

I grab his pillow and hug it to my chest. It still smells like him. I wonder if he stayed here while I was acting like a child. The ache in my chest grows as I sit up and appreciate the romantic gesture of my homecoming, even though he knew he wouldn't see it.

He sure knocked it out of the park for someone who doesn't do relationships.

As sweet as this all is, I don't know if I'm ready to see him yet. But I need to talk to someone and organize my feelings.

Heading back to the kitchen, I grab my phone off the counter and dial Jenna's number.

"It's about fucking time you called me!" Her screeching voice nearly ruptures my eardrum, forcing me to hold the phone away.

"I wasn't ready to see anyone yet."

"I'm not just anyone." Jenna quiets for a moment. "Are you okay?"

I blow out a breath and settle into the corner of the couch. "Yeah, I'm okay. I saw Brandon last night, and he gave me a lot to think about."

The telltale jingle of her keys sounds over the line. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Hmm, it looks like I should check to see if I have any wine in the fridge because I feel we’ll need a lot of it.

“Good lord, woman,” Jenna says before throwing her purse on the counter. “Thank god you’re not allergic to flowers because, damn.”

I laugh and hug my friend, grateful she’s here and not pissed at me for disappearing for days on end. “He went a little overboard.”

“It’s sweet.” We walk over to the couch after grabbing the wine bottle and glasses. “He cares about you.”

I stare into my glass as if it held the answers to the universe. “Yeah, I guess. It’s all so confusing.”

Jenna draws her brows together. “What’s confusing about it?”

“It’s just... he’s always been this unattainable fantasy. I guess a part of me still can’t believe we’re together. It’s also the part that can’t see him other than the playboy he was.”

“When are you going to get past that? You’re almost thirty years old. Grow the fuck up already,” she huffs. “You’re an adult; he’s an adult, having an adult relationship. Stop acting like you’re still in high school. This little protest of yours this week was absurd. What happened to my badass bitch friend who danced practically naked on a pole and gave the love of her life the middle finger in the process?”

Images of that night play through my head. The freedom I felt for doing something where I could forget my problems—and the added bonus of riling Tyler so much that it forced us to admit our true feelings.

A smile tugs at my lips. “She took a hit and needed to lick her wounds.”

“Imaginary wounds that should only have taken a few days to realize you were wrong,” Jenna quips.

“I wasn’t wrong. I saw what I saw.”



Jenna sets her glass down. “You saw what you wanted to see. Some broken part of your brain has been waiting for this relationship to end. You need to fix this.”

The weight of my decisions this past week hangs on my shoulders—Jenna’s right. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty. Tyler wasn’t naked coming out of the bathroom, and Chrissy still had most of her clothes on. Hell, even her hair still looked like she walked out of a salon rather than had her brains fucked out. If I closed my eyes, I could probably still see Tyler’s shock and horror and hear the desperation in his voice as he chased me down, but I was too stubborn to stop and listen.

Maybe I really am broken. I look around the room at his peace offering, feeling more like the asshole I always accuse him of being.

Jenna takes pity and places a hand on my knee. “Let’s order some food. We can’t have this discussion on an empty stomach. That leads to hangry decision-making.”

Even though I’ve lived on takeout all week, I can’t say no to my best friend. “Fine. But I get to pick.”

We stuff our faces with Chinese food while taking a little break from the trainwreck of my love life with a little dose of *Top Gun*.

“There’s nothing better than sweaty men playing in the sun,” Jenna says around a bite. “The volleyball scene makes the whole movie.”

“Agreed. Tom Cruise is *hot*.”

She points her chopsticks at the TV. “He still looks good in a white t-shirt and jeans, riding a motorcycle. Have you seen the new one yet? It’s like the man never aged.”

I shake my head. “I’ve been a little busy.”

Jenna whips her head my way, her eyes almost bulging out of their sockets. “How many times have we watched this movie?”

“More than I can count.”

“And you *still* haven’t seen the sequel?”

“Busy,” I say, slowing it down for her.

“Wallowing in self-pity isn’t busy,” she scoffs. “If Tyler doesn’t have you chained to his bed, we’re going later this week.”

I practically choke on my sesame chicken. “And why would I be chained to his bed?”

She smirks over her classic white to-go container, shoveling a piece of broccoli into her mouth. “To make up for lost time. According to Pete, that man has been a beast, more so than usual. Once he gets you back in his arms, all that pent-up sexual frustration needs to go somewhere, and I would bet the farm it’ll be between your legs all day and night.”

“And who says that’ll happen?”

Her expressionless face is almost comical. “It’ll happen. Tyler is crazy for you.” Jenna waves her hand around the room to prove her point. “I wouldn’t doubt if he makes you move in with him so he can keep an eye on you. He’ll probably take your running shoes just to be safe.”

I snort at her joke. “Too bad I’m also good at running in heels. If he tries to take those, one of them may end up impacted in his chest. And I’m not sure about the whole moving in thing yet.”

Jenna rolls her eyes. “You practically live together now. What’s the difference?”

It’s the same argument I’ve had with both of them since I started my apartment search. “And look what happened. Could you imagine this same situation with us living together?”

“Yeah, you’d actually have to talk to him.”

“Not funny,” I say, pushing her knee with my toes. “I like my space.”

“I’m sure Tyler would be more than willing to give you space in his apartment. From what I hear, he has plenty. Hell, he could keep this apartment for the doghouse you’ll

eventually put him in since he's practically paying for it anyway."

The piece of chicken dangling between my chopsticks drops back into the container. "What?"

"This would make quite the doghouse." She laughs like she didn't just drop a bomb.

"No, about him basically paying for my apartment. What did you mean by that?"

Her eyes widen as all the blood falls from her face, turning her pale and gray. "Oh, um, nothing. Forget it."

I pin her with a stare. "Uh, not happening. Spill it. Now."

Jenna sighs and places her food on the table. "Fuck me and my big mouth." Her eyes hold an apology. "Remember how you said you couldn't believe the amazing deal you got on this apartment?"

"Yeah?"

She chews on her bottom lip. "That's because Tyler's been paying half of the rent."

"What?" I yell a little too loud, causing Jenna to jump at the brash tone. "What the fuck?"

"Since you refused to move in with him, this was the best solution to keep you close and safe. It's charming. Almost poetic."

"Nothing about deceiving me is romantic." I can feel the little vein on the side of my neck pulse with irritation. "How do you know about this?"

Jenna sheepishly looks down. "It may have come up in conversation between me and Pete one night."

My head feels like it's going to explode. "Let me get this straight. My so-called friends and boyfriend have been lying to me regarding a vital piece of information about my life. And I'm simply supposed to be okay with this? Was anyone ever going to tell me?"

“Probably not.” She shrugs. “Tyler assumed you’d just move in and be none the wiser.”

I swear that man will send me to an early grave. Where does he get off making these types of decisions, dictating my life as if it’s his right?

Sure. I can sort of see his side. The apartments in my price range weren’t great or in the best locations. This way, we’d be closer and in a good neighborhood. But to do this without telling me is over the line.

But can I fault him for trying to protect me in his own twisted way? The anger simmering at the surface cools as I drain the rest of my wine from the glass.

“I hate every single one of you.”

A smile cracks Jenna’s face. “You’ll live.” A text alert has her picking up her phone with a smile. “Would you say you’re a little tense right now?”

I scoff and refill my wineglass. “That’s the understatement of the year.”

Jenna flips her phone, showing me the message from her boss. “Someone called in sick. Feel like working off this frustration?”

I smile for the first time in a while. “Absolutely.”

Her fingers fly across the screen; our eyes meet briefly before she tosses the phone next to her. “All set. You take the stage at eleven.”

Oh good. The early shift. It’s probably for the best since I will have to work tomorrow. This way, I can clean up and not look like I’d been partying all night.

Jenna fills up her glass and clinks it with mine. “Let the show begin.”



## CHAPTER *Twenty-Four*

### *Tyler*

“I really don’t feel like going anywhere tonight.” No, I’d rather sit and wallow at the fact that Maysen still hasn’t answered me all week. I hoped she’d send a message letting me know she was okay. Anything would be better than this radio silence.

Pete kicks his feet up on the coffee table, much to my annoyance. “It’ll be good for you to get out of this stuffy apartment, get your mind off of everything for a while.”

“Maybe I’m comfortable where I’m at.”

“Are you, though?” He smirks and slaps my knee. “Come on. It’ll be fun.”

I keep my face impassive. “Nothing about seeing your girlfriend naked screams fun.”

“Speak for yourself.” Pete rolls his eyes with a sigh. “Fine. Then don’t look at her when she’s on stage. There are plenty of other places to look.”

What on earth makes him think I want to go to Starlight? I have zero interest in seeing anyone naked other than Maysen. Not that those places ever appealed to me before. Hell, it was torture when Ian and Darrin had their damn meeting there months ago.

The image of Maysen on the pole giving me the finger pops into my mind, stirring my dick to life while a slight smile crosses my face. Seeing her confidence and defiance was probably the sexiest thing about her whole performance. Of course, knowing how many guys saw her naked doesn't calm the irritation brewing in my stomach.

All I want to do is bare my feelings and force her to listen to reason, even if it means cashing in my man card.

“You know I hate that place.”

“I know, but come anyway.”

Why is he pushing this so hard? “What are you playing at?”

Pete feigns innocence before standing up. “Nothing. Can't a guy bring his heart-sick buddy out for a few hours to forget his troubles?”

“Not without an ulterior motive.”

Something fishy is going on, and I'm just curious enough to want to know why.

We make our way to a table near the front by the center stage, close to where we sat the last time I ventured into this sin hole. Don't get me wrong. I'm not against this line of work. It's just not my scene. We give our drink order to a sexy waitress wearing the absolute bare minimum. It's still more than the girls on stage, each catering to the crowd in front of them, mostly younger guys waving bills around like they had an endless supply.

“How are you allowed to be here? I figured they'd have a policy about significant others being on-premise while working.”

Pete shrugs. “I wouldn't call me a significant other.”

I pin him with a glare. “Are you sticking your dick in her?” He smirks. “Yeah, you’re a significant other. Not to mention the far-off look you get every time you talk about Jenna. You never looked that way with Gwen.”

The music changes as the dancer in front of us switch places with someone else. “You’re not the only one living your high school dreams.”

I cock my head. “How did I not know you liked Jenna back then?”

Pete shrugs and takes a sip of his drink. “You were lost in your own world most of the time. And I didn’t want to add to your dilemma with Maysen by admitting having feelings for her best friend.”

Shit. It would have made my life easier if he had. Maysen would have been around more often, and I wouldn’t have to hide my true emotions, though I doubt it would have changed my opinion of her innocence. But maybe the stigma of my reputation would have been shut down had I been off the market.

So many possibilities, but I don’t want to play the what-if game. You can’t change the past. You can only learn from it and move forward.

Another dancer takes the stage, wearing a short lavender wig and a sparkly teal skirt set. Her triangle bra barely covers her breasts, turning the heads of several guys around us.

Pete slinks down in his chair, keeping his eyes away from the dancer.

“What’s wrong with you?” I ask, but the words slowly die on my lips as the realization hits hard.

I know that body, felt it quiver in my hands, heard her scream my name in the dark recesses of the night.

What in the actual fuck?

I can’t hear anything over the whooshing of blood in my ears. I don’t know if it’s from shock, anger, or surprise. Probably all the above.

“Why is Maysen on that stage?” I swing my gaze to Pete, still studying his drink as if it held the answers to the universe.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She still hasn’t looked my way, dancing against the pole while running her fingers through her hair. A few guys call out, demanding to take it all off. I ball my hands into fists, my knuckles practically popping from the force.

Once her feet land back on the ground, Maysen plays to the crowd, pushing her breasts together until they almost fall out of the barely-there top. The room stills as she reaches for the front clasp with a smirk.

Fuck this.

As the garment breaks free, I rush onto the stage and push her back to the curtain. Maysen gasps, not putting up a fight until our eyes meet. Anger replaces the surprise once we’re away from the disapproving yells of the crowd.

“What is your problem?” she screeches. “Are you trying to get kicked out?”

On cue, two burly men who look like they could rip a phone book in two with minimal effort come storming our way. The first one grabs my shoulder and pushes me against the wall—the second shields Maysen as she situates herself.

“What in the fuck do you think you’re doing?” the one holding me asks. “You’re outta here.” He adds more pressure to his grip, nearly buckling me to the ground. One good motion, and he’ll snap the bone.

Maysen grabs his free arm, trying to come between us. “Joe, don’t. It’s okay.”

“Rules are rules, darling. He’s outta here.”

She slides her hand up his bicep, and I do everything I can not to draw more of his wrath. “Please? He’s my boyfriend.”

The second guy flanks her other side. “You know the rules. No boyfriends allowed.”



“I didn’t know he was going to be here,” she says sweetly. “Can I have a minute to talk with him?”

The two men exchange a look before releasing me. “Make it quick, but he’s still gone.”

Maysen smiles sweetly. “Absolutely.” After the two walk away—but still within eyesight—she swings her angry gaze to me. “Mind telling me what you’re doing here?”

The ache in my shoulder is completely forgotten as we have our silent face-off.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

Several heads pop out from behind dressing screens and mirrors, no doubt wanting to watch the show. We’re not going to have this conversation with an audience. Thankfully, she doesn’t protest when I grab her arm and haul her into one of the empty rooms, making sure to lock the door, so we avoid any unnecessary visitors.

“Have you lost your goddamn mind?” Maysen props her hands on her hips. I’m sure she was trying to look intimidating, but it’s hard to pull off when naked and painted to look like you belong on a street corner rather than in an office.

“We’ve had this discussion before. No one gets to see what’s mine.” I take a cautious step toward her as she paces back and forth like a caged animal.

“Listen to me for the last time. I am *no one’s* property. I will do as I please.”

“Except showing off your naked body to other men. Maysen, this is a hard line for me.”

She pauses, taking in my disheveled appearance for the first time. “You look like hell.”

I take another step. “And you look beautiful. This week has been torture for me, yet you look like a runway model with hardly a blemish to show.”

I watch her chest take a deep breath, her throat working to swallow hard before she pulls off the thick lashes covering her

eyes. “There are plenty of blemishes, believe me.”

“Not from my vantage point.” I take a shaky breath. “Why haven’t you called? I’ve been worried sick about you. No one heard from you or knew where you were. Do you know how scared everyone was?”

“Jenna and Holly knew.”

“They knew you were alive, not where you were. You have no idea the scenarios that were going through my head.”

Maysen sits on one of the couches. Some of the fight leaves her face, though the fire is still lit in her eyes. “You had your own company to keep you warm. I don’t know why you needed me too.”

For fuck’s sake. “Let me be perfectly clear. I do not want Chrissy. I’ve never wanted Chrissy. The only person I want is you, even though you are the most challenging, frustrating woman I’ve ever met.”

“Not from my vantage point. Do you know what I felt when I saw her displayed on your desk in a way we’ve done countless times?”

“And did you hear the shock in my voice?”

She sticks her defiant chin in the air. “Are you sure it wasn’t guilt?”

I can’t take it anymore. I close the distance between us, hauling her into my arms. “Guilt would imply I did something wrong. The only thing I did wrong was not run down the stairs to beat you to your car. Instead, I let you go and dealt with the aftermath.”

Her body trembles slightly. “You mean you ran back into her arms?”

I shake my head. “No. I fired her on the spot.”

“You... what?” she gasps. “Why?”

“Because you don’t go after the woman I love and get away with it.” Maysen’s face freezes in shock, chewing on her

bottom lip until the skin practically rips to shreds. I tug it free with my thumb. “You know I hate seeing you hurt yourself.”

A million emotions float through her eyes. The silence practically kills me as she processes this information. “You don’t mean that.”

I cup her cheek, tilting her head to the side. “Why must you fight me every step of the way?”

Those hazel eyes leave mine to stare at the buttons on my shirt. “Because it’s what I know. You’ve always been out of reach, an unattainable fantasy. Nothing good ever happens to me. There’s always another shoe to drop, another monster lurking in the shadows to keep me down.”

“No more monsters, no more doubt. When we first met, I was weak and refused to fight for what I wanted or stand up to those who thought they knew what was best for me. I’m too old to play games and not interested in people’s opinions of my life.” That brings a smile to her face. “I’m not my reputation anymore. You’ve changed me for the better.”

“No more Mr. Irresistible?” Her eyes light up with humor, clearly laughing at my expense.

“Only to you, Maysen.” I swallow hard. “I love you. But you need to meet me halfway here.”

Without warning, she lifts onto her tiptoes and seals her lips over mine. Fucking finally. I take control, pushing her back against the wall with both hands cradling her face, making sure she doesn’t run again.

This whole week of torment disappears because we’ve finally come back home, exactly where we need to be.

“I’m still pissed at you,” she says, leaning back slightly to break the kiss.

For fuck’s sake. “Why now?”

Maysen leans forward, dragging the tip of her tongue along the side of my neck, something she knows drives me absolutely wild, as evident by the tightness of my pants.

“Because you’ve lied to me for weeks and recruited others to join in the deception.”

“Huh?” She continues to drag her lips across my skin. “Ow,” I yelp as she nips sharply at the skin under my ear.

“Did you honestly think I wouldn’t find out about the apartment situation?”

Shit. “Sort of, yeah. Who told you?”

She pushes me back slightly, putting some space between us. “Who do you think?”

Fucking Pete and his goddamn big mouth. “I swear, put boobs in front of that man, and he’ll spill every secret known to man.” Her unamused expression stops the laugh trying to break free. “Are you really that upset about this?”

I watch her tiny fingers grasp my shirt, twisting the material so tight I’m afraid it could rip a hole right through it. “Furious.”

There’s a fiery spark in her eyes, but not from anger. Okay. I’ll play this game.

I meet her stare, closing the distance again. “You know I have control issues. Do you think you’ll win this little war?”

A slow, devilish smirk appears as she leans up, pressing those delicate lips close to my ear. “I believe you owe me an apology. And I plan on receiving it somewhere other than here.”

That would have thrown me over the edge if I wasn’t already turned on. “Fine. But you’re still not in charge.” I kiss her roughly, tongues twisting and teeth clashing in desperation. “Get some fucking clothes on and meet me at my car. Now.” I leave little room to argue, but I know she won’t. Judging by the goose bumps coating her skin, she’s equally turned on and desperate for our reunion.

Does it bother me that she still hasn’t acknowledged my declaration? Not really. She will. By the end of the night, she’ll be screaming my name and those three little words I know she feels.



## *Maysen*

I don't know if it's shock or irritation or some other mystery emotion floating through my system that's driving me. Still, the urge to get out of here and devour Tyler as soon as possible is so overwhelming that I almost forgot to throw on different clothes and grab my things. Joe and Rick were both waiting outside the door, sporting equally unimpressed expressions before hauling Tyler out the back, despite my protests.

“Did you kiss and make up?” Jenna asks with a laugh.

I pull up my leggings and secure the wig back on the Styrofoam head on the table. “You're on my shit list.”

“I didn't realize I'd made it off. Sweet.”

“Not funny. How could you ambush me like this?”

She rolls her eyes. “Please. You're about to have some epic make-up sex. You're welcome. Consider that my gift to you.”

“Getting my boyfriend hauled away by the bouncers is hardly present-worthy. I should repay the favor with Pete.”

That got her attention. “Keep your voice down,” she hisses. “I do my best work when he's here, mainly because he ups the ante when the guys around him see the hundred-dollar bills he tosses my way and the special attention that money brings.”

“Scammer.” Actually, it's pretty genius. I doubt she keeps Pete's money at the end of the night. Hell, she probably gives him the bills, so he's not out anything.

“Work smarter, not harder.” Before I turn to find Tyler, she grabs my arms and pulls me into her chest. “You deserve all the happiness in the world. Now go and accept it.”

I squeeze her tight, thankful to have her in my life. “Love you.”

“I’m not the one you need to say that to,” she says with a chuckle. “Go get your brains fucked out.”

You don’t have to tell me twice.

It’s not hard to spot Tyler in the parking lot, leaning against his car like some creepy stalker or bad boy straight out of a movie. I almost feel like walking on air with each step. I don’t want to seem too desperate and sprint the rest of the way, but I want to keep this rouse up for as long as possible.

His knowing smirk almost derails my plans, scooping me into his arms as I wrap my legs around his waist.

“What took so long?” Tyler buries his face into the crook of my neck, sending a chill up my spine and desire between my legs.

I cup his cheeks and kiss him long and hard. “I had to give Jenna a piece of my mind.”

He carefully walks us over to the passenger door but doesn’t move to open it. Instead, he pins me against it.

“Yeah, I’ll have a similar conversation with Pete tomorrow. Tonight, I have other plans.”

Another shot of arousal sends my nerves on fire. I try to tamp down the panting, but the minute he rolls his hips, it’s over.

We act like two lovesick teenagers rather than two business professionals with hands roaming in places that aren’t appropriate for the public eye.

“You’re a walking contradiction,” I say between breaths. “You don’t want the guys inside the club to see me, but you’re willing to let any passerby catch sight of my body?”

Tyler freezes, then skillfully flings the door open, pushing me inside. “Nobody sees you except me. No exceptions.” Why are his authoritative commands so hot? He slams the door and crawls in beside me, grabbing the back of my neck to pull me close for another scorching kiss. “My place or yours?”

I smirk. “From my understanding, they’re both yours since you’re paying for them.”

“Funny.” The corner of his lip twitches. “Then it’ll be a surprise.”

Unlike last time we left Starlight, I’m fully clothed but just as turned on and desperate for his touch. Maybe I should have kept the skimpy outfit and tortured him on the ride home. Or we could have relived the previous events.

Tyler turns his head slightly, still focusing on the road. “Don’t even think about it.”

I feign innocence. “What? I’m not thinking anything.”

We stop at a light, allowing him time to give me attention. “We are not repeating history. Once I start, I won’t stop, and I’m not about to fuck you in this car.” I open my mouth, but he holds up a hand to stop me. “And no, touching yourself isn’t allowed either.”

“Geez, you know how to suck the fun out of a ride home.” An idea pops into my head. He said I couldn’t touch myself. But he never said he was off limits.

With Tyler’s laser focus on the road, he doesn’t even hear the soft click of my seatbelt or pays attention when I shift to lean toward him to put my right hand on his thigh.

“What are you doing?”

I draw lazy circles with my fingertips, trailing them higher toward the prominent tent in his jeans. “Oh, nothing much.”

His dick twitches when my pinky brushes against it. Tyler tears his gaze from the road briefly in warning. “I said no touching.”

Ignoring him, I continue my work, deftly undoing the buttons and zipper until his cock springs free. “You said I couldn’t touch myself. I’m following your instructions.”

“I also said I’m not fucking you.”

I stare at his profile, trying not to laugh as the little vein on the side of his neck pulses. “Does it look like any of my holes are filled? The rules are still intact.”

He's as hard as a rock when I curl my fingers around his shaft, stroking the velvety soft skin with a twist of my wrist. Tyler groans but doesn't look my way. Perfect.

I get onto my knees and lean over the console, wrapping my lips around the tip to lick away the tiny drop of precum. There's nothing better than his taste on my tongue. I moan and take him deeper, pumping at the base while wiggling his jeans further down his hips.

"Maysen." His strangled voice pushes me on, taking more of him down my throat.

I pop his cock from my mouth and look up slightly. "Do you want me to stop?" I ask, knowing full well I have him by the balls. Literally.

Tyler pushes my head down, forcing me to take a little more than I was prepared for. "Fuuuuuuuck, baby." I adjust my stance as he guides my ministrations, alternating between lapping and sucking from just the tip to the whole shaft. I love having this kind of control, bringing a powerful man like Tyler to my mercy. "God, sweetheart, just like that."

Fuck, I swear I could come just from his words alone.

I moan around his cock, feeling it jerk against my tongue. He's getting close, but I don't care. I know his stamina. If he comes, he'll be ready again by the time we get upstairs, more than likely after taking care of me.

"Ah, Maysen," he grunts in warning before shooting his load, pushing my head to take it all. This might be the hottest thing we've ever done. I'm beyond ready for him to fuck me. At least our timing was right. I hadn't noticed he'd pulled into the parking garage as I cleaned him up and tucked him away.

"I couldn't help myself," I say, sitting back in my seat.

Tyler swings his unfocused gaze at me, then hauls us out of the car so fast I swear we were moving at superhuman speed.

"Couldn't help yourself, my ass." The minute the elevator doors shut, he pounces like a feral cat, pinning me to the wall



with his hips while his hands go straight under my shirt to rip my bra in two.

I gasp, but my surprise is quickly gone when he tweaks my nipples, almost to the point of pain.

“Tyler, the camera.” I’m sure he doesn’t want to give the poor security guy a stroke—or a free show. Right now, there could be a hundred people in this elevator, and I wouldn’t care. I’m so lust drunk the only thing existing in my world is the man currently driving me wild.

He pinches my nipple again, and I’m wound so tight from before that I almost come, except the elevator doors open to his floor, saving me from really putting on a show. It doesn’t stop me from being a panting mess as he drags me down the hall—the pictures on the wall blur before Tyler shoves me inside the apartment. Our clothes trail behind us on the way to his room, kissing each other like he’d just returned from war.

I suppose my little stand-off this week could classify as such.

“Lay down. Now.”

Chills run over my skin as I slide to the middle of the bed, waiting for my next instruction. I had every intention of taking control, apologizing with words and my body until there was little room for doubt. It looks like Tyler has the same idea, though he has nothing to apologize for.

Heat practically radiates off his skin as he hovers over me, drinking me in with his eyes. Even with the desire pulsing between us, there’s a hint of apprehension and fear.

This is my fault. Instead of facing things like the strong woman I’ve grown into since reconnecting with Tyler, I ran away like the lovesick teenager of my past, convincing myself I wasn’t good enough when that clearly wasn’t the case. My heart knew he was telling the truth, but my subconscious refused to believe it.

“Whatever you want tonight, I’m yours.”

This takes him by surprise. He sits back and runs a hand through his hair. “Maysen, that isn’t —”

I pull him down, kissing him without abandon, pouring my heart into everything my brain won't allow me to say.

"I'm yours," I repeat, so there's no missing my meaning.

A slow smile graces his impossibly handsome face. "I hope you had plenty of sleep this last week," is my only warning before he dives between my thighs, causing my eyes to roll to the back of my head when his tongue connects with my throbbing clit. I clutch the comforter in my hands, tugging until it practically covers my face.

Tyler holds my hips down, not relenting in his torture of languorous licks and deep dives into my sweet spot. Each time he brings me to the edge, he backs off, keeping the ebb and flow of my orgasm out of reach.

"What do you want, Maysen." Somehow, I force my eyes open, connecting with his through the gap in my legs. He doesn't stop lapping at my center, holding me with his crushing stare.

"M-make me come, Tyler." He licks again, and I cry out. "Please."

He doesn't increase his pace, bringing me to the edge again, only this time not backing off.

"Who do your orgasms belong to?" he asks, never taking his mouth from my pussy.

Another lick, another outcry. "Yours. God, please. Yours!"

"That's right. In this bedroom, I am your god." With a final flick, I come apart, abandoning the sheet to grip his hair as I ride out the strongest orgasm I've ever had.

I can feel him smile against my skin before he picks his head up to trail his wet lips across my stomach, through the valley of my breasts, stopping to appreciate my hardened nipples, finally sealing his lips over mine. There's always something so erotic about tasting myself on his tongue.

There isn't time to process anything because, within seconds, Tyler fully sheaths himself inside me, pausing for a moment without breaking our kiss. I thread my fingers through

his hair, keeping him close until he finds a rhythm, rocking slowly in and out. My hips keep time, meeting his thrust for thrust.

“Your pussy is the only one I want, the only one I need.” He thrusts sharply, and I gasp, sinking my teeth into his shoulder. “You’re it for me, Maysen. I’m never letting you go, whether you like it or not.”

“Never,” I pant, clinging to him like he’s the only thing keeping me here. Our constant battle of wills, banter, and fighting stems from the same place. Our connection is deeper than anything I’ve ever experienced in my life.

But these emotions can wait.

I wrap my legs around his narrow waist, attempting to flip him over, only he shields my attack by widening his stance, opening me up further.

“Not gonna happen, sweetheart.” He pumps harder, burrowing deep inside me so my clit rubs against his pelvic bone, making me come instantly. Tyler smirks and picks up the pace, trailing his lips to my ear. “You’re not in control until you give me what I want.”

Another orgasm races on the heels of the last one. I cry out, chanting every swear word I know. I’m not sure how much more I can take. Every touch sets me off. It’s heaven. It’s hell. It’s so uniquely...us.

I can barely catch my breath. He’s taking no mercy, and I can’t tell if it’s a punishment or a reward.

“Tyler, please... I need you to come.”

He shakes his head. “Not until you give me what I want.”

What does he want? My body? He has it. My heart? It’s his too.

Somewhere in the fog, it hits me. I know exactly what he wants. It’s what he deserves to hear.

“Ahhh. Tyler. I love you.”

He finally slows down, taking his time, but it's already too late. I'm too far gone in ecstasy that tears fall down my cheeks as he holds me in place, cradling my face in his hands.

“Again.”

I pull him down, tightening my legs around his waist as I cling to his shoulders and press our foreheads together.

“I love you. With everything I have. You're it for me, too.”

Our mouths connect, tongues twisting together like two perfect puzzle pieces.

With a few more thrusts, Tyler stills on a grunt, chanting my name quietly into my ear before falling on top of me after his release. We lay together in a hot, sweaty mess, refusing to let go because we need this connection.

We need each other, plain and simple.

After our heart rates slow, he leans up on an elbow and brushes the matted-down hair from my forehead. “I love you, too.”

I place a hand on his cheek. “If we keep fighting, I'll need to add daily cardio to my routine to get into sex shape.”

He laughs and rolls to the side, pulling me into his chest. “Your shape is perfect. So am I forgiven about the whole apartment thing?”

I place my chin on his chest, trailing my fingertips along the ridges of his abs. “As long as you forgive me for last week's stupidity.”

“And for trying to show other men your body.”

“Ugh, whatever.” I roll my eyes, but he doesn't find the humor in it. “Fine. No more showing my body to other men.”

“Good. If you want, I'll put a pole in this room, and you can dance for me anytime you want.”

“Hmm. Now there's an idea.” And it's not a bad one. I could go to class and show him what I learned. Too bad I won't make tips this way, though something tells me I won't

have money issues for long. If Tyler has his way, I'll be moved in by the end of the week, if not sooner.

A yawn escapes as I struggle to keep my eyes open. This little sex marathon drained all my reserves, and I'm running on fumes.

Tyler chuckles and presses my head back to his shoulder. "Let's nap. But don't expect to sleep too long. Like I said, we have a week's worth of catching up."

And that's just fine with me.



## CHAPTER *Twenty-Five*

### *Maysen*

Surprisingly, I'm not tired, considering Tyler was trying to kill me with sex all Saturday night and well into Sunday. We took breaks to eat and talk about everything, which led right back into sex on whatever surface was closest. I'm thankful his apartment is on a higher floor because I'm confident the city got a nice view of my naked ass against the sliding balcony door.

The chair feels foreign when I take a seat behind my desk. It seems like a lifetime since I've been here. I have missed the fast pace and meetings, even though some of them drained my will to live.

At least some things haven't changed. Holly pops into my cube and takes her usual seat. "You're alive. Feeling better?"

Right. I called in sick all week. "Yes, much. A little rest was exactly what I needed."

She pins me with a glare, and I try not to shrink from it. “Good. And the other thing?”

“Nursed back to health.”

“Thank god,” she says, visibly deflating and lowering her voice. “I’ve been worried about you.”

I grab her hand, squeezing it. “I didn’t mean to make you worry. I just needed to work things out on my own.”

“I heard you had a little help,” she says with a smile.

“Several helpers, actually. Some of them unknowingly.”

Holly shakes her head. “Those poor guys got more of a show than they bargained for.”

“Yes, they did.”

We break into a fit of giggles as Denise peeks around the corner. “Oh, good. You’re here. Maysen, can I see you in my office?”

A frisson of fear grips my chest. Shit. Is she going to ask for a doctor’s note? There’s no way I can produce one since I wasn’t actually sick, and I doubt our medical covers heartbreak.

Holly squeezes my arm for comfort. “We’ll catch up later.” She nods to Denise before disappearing to her cube.

“After you,” Denise says. Luckily, it’s still early, so the office is relatively quiet—not a lot of curious eyes to witness what could be the demise of my future here at Madison Development.

The door clicks shut as I sit in front of Denise’s desk.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” she says with a warm smile. “It’s been an interesting week.”

I twist my fingers nervously in my lap. “O-oh? I’m sorry I added to it.”

“Hardly. However, since your absence, there have been a few changes in the office. I can’t go into details, but a vacancy has opened, and myself, along with the other senior

executives, were hoping you'd be interested in filling the position."

They can't mean Chrissy's job. Why would I move to assist Richard? Unless they know about Tyler and me and want to keep us separated.

"Um, I wasn't aware of an opening so soon. Which position is it?"

Denise smiles and pushes a piece of paper my way. "A mid-level executive. Here's the breakdown of the job description and what we're offering for a salary package."

I scan over the document, trying not to let my eyes bug out of my head. Holy shit. That's a *huge* pay raise. This can't be right. I know this isn't what they offer someone off the street.

"But, shouldn't I start at the entry-level first?"

Denise's smile relaxes my shoulders a little. "Typically, yes, you would start at the bottom. However, your performance since your hire has proven you're more than capable of handling the workload. And Mr. Cannon's clients had nothing but rave reviews of your work the week before. Given that you're already familiar with the systems and your background and degrees, we're more than confident you are perfect for the position."

This is it. It's what I dreamed of when I first saw the job posting on that stupid little website, knowing I was applying for a job that wasn't what I wanted, simply to get a foot in the door. I'm not sure what I expected when Denise asked me to her office, but a promotion and raise surely wasn't it.

I must be taking too long because her smile falters slightly with a tilt of her head. "Is that a yes?"

"Yes, absolutely. Yes." I stand to shake her hand, hardly feeling the connection from the buzzing throughout my body.

"Excellent. I'm excited you're accepting the position. Like I said in your interview, I know you'll do great things for this company." She stands and ushers me through the door. "Let's get you settled in your new office."



Office? I fidget with my fingers, smiling and thanking everyone who wishes me congratulations. We walk past Tyler's office, still dark and empty. He said he would be late today, but I assumed he'd be here by now.

My steps falter as we approach Richard's office, now completely bare with no signs of life.

"Here you are. Congratulations again, Maysen. We'll get to work on putting together some candidates for your assistant. Should we meet around mid-week to discuss them and set up meetings?"

I spin in a circle and nervously nod. "Yes, that sounds good to me."

"Perfect. Well, I'll leave you to it. Take the morning to get situated. I believe one of the senior executives will give you a rundown of expectations and your new client list."

*My client list? It sounds so foreign, almost like fiction. Somebody pinch me because this cannot be real.*

"Thank you again, Denise, for this amazing opportunity. I won't let you down."

She smiles in the doorway. "I know you won't."

I walk over to the massive desk, trailing my fingertips along the smooth wooden surface.

A knock at the door makes me jump and spin so fast I almost stumble.

"Look at you. Gone for a week then climbing up the corporate ladder," Ian says, making himself comfortable in one of the chairs.

I sit at the edge of the desk. "I'm still in shock this is happening. What happened to Richard?"

Ian props an ankle on his knee. "You didn't hear?" I shake my head. "Well, you happened."

"Me?" I jerk my head back. "What did I do to Richard? I wasn't even here."

“But you did have a hand in getting Chrissy fired, right? It’s been your plan all along, taking her out to keep Tyler for yourself? What’s the matter? Afraid of the competition?”

My blood freezes like ice. “Wh-what are you talking about?”

The room shrinks as Ian stands, crowding my personal space. “It’s funny how Chrissy got fired for sleeping with the boss, yet when you do it, you get a promotion without going through the proper channels.”

“Ian, you’re not making any sense.”

He runs a finger down my arm. Bile threatens to rise with a sense of dread that this will not end nicely.

“How does a lowly personal assistant bypass an entry-level position, only to get bumped straight to the middle? Do you know how many people wanted this office and had to sit silently and watch them give it to you?”

My chest tightens with each breath. The simple act becomes more difficult with each passing second. “I didn’t ask for this. It just happened.”

His sneer sets off alarm bells in my head. “Did you just happen to fall on Tyler’s dick as well? I had my suspicions that day you came out of his office, and your thong fell to the floor. Why else would you need to change? Not to mention he treated you differently than every other assistant. You didn’t need to be in all those meetings, yet there you were, chained to his side like a little puppy.” Ian drops his gaze to my chest, and I tighten the cardigan around my middle in reflex. “Don’t worry, Tawny. It’s nothing I haven’t seen already. Although if you’d like to give me a private show, I’d be more than happy to accept.”

Blackness creeps into my vision, leaving me swaying on my feet. Oh shit. He did recognize me that night at Starlight. His constant leering and inappropriate flirting make sense. If I was willing to strip for strangers, he probably thought he’d be a shoo-in to get some action at the office.

“Look, Ian. I had nothing to do with Chrissy getting fired. I didn’t even know Richard was gone until today.”

He tilts his head to the side. “Tyler strong-armed Richard into early retirement. He didn’t tell you?” I shake my head, unable to speak because I don’t know if I can form words. “I’m sure he needed to make room for his little girlfriend, though having you as his assistant would work out better. He gets off on power trips, so maybe your relationship is doomed. Don’t worry. I’m not above taking his sloppy seconds.”

Before I can process his words, Ian falls to the floor in a heap, clutching his cheek. I turn and find Tyler standing above him, radiating anger and practically breathing fire.

“Say that again, Dunkirk, and it’ll be your last. You have no right coming into this office and belittling a superior.”

Ian stands on shaky ground but quickly recovers. His eyes practically turn black with rage. “Fuck you, Cannon. I’m not the one giving promotions to people who don’t deserve them. Do you know how long I’ve waited for Richard to retire? I deserve this position. Not your fucking plaything of an assistant.”

I’m surprised a crowd hasn’t gathered outside my door with the noise they’re making.

“Both of you, knock it off,” I finally say. “This isn’t the time or the place.”

Ian directs his hatred toward me. “Where is the place? On Tyler’s desk? I hear that’s where the action is. Both you and Chrissy have had personal attention there.”

Tyler lunges forward, but I grab his arm, barely stopping him. “Watch it, or you’ll be eating through a straw.”

Ian steps forward, still rubbing his reddened cheek. “Or you’ll get rid of me like Richard or Chrissy? Sorry, man, but I’m not about to suck your dick to keep my job. From what I hear, even that won’t save you. Isn’t that what happened when Maysen walked in on you and Chrissy last Saturday? Did Maysen catch you in the act, so you needed to apologize by getting rid of the slut on the side?”

How in the hell did he know about last Saturday? No one was here.

An eerie calm washes over Tyler as he straightens to his full height. “And what do you know about that?”

Ian pauses, dropping his guard for a moment. “I, uh, heard it from one of the other executives. Something about a surprise meeting, then Maysen walked in on you and Chrissy in the act.”

Tyler takes another step closer. “No one knew about that meeting. In fact, the only people who did were either in this room or terminated. What else aren’t you telling us?”

Ian looks like a caged animal, desperately trying to find an escape. Anger is a funny thing. I don’t think he meant to show his hand, but it’s too late.

“You were in on this, weren’t you?” I ask, needing to hear it for myself.

He looks between Tyler and me, finally giving in to the hatred brewing beneath the surface. “Who do you think tipped her off? You two weren’t exactly discreet in your flings. Chrissy was blind because she assumed you’d fall back into her lap like always. All she needed was a push, especially after her comments at the charity auction. She knew how insecure you were and exploited it at the right time.” Ian balls his hands into fists at his side. “Why else would I suggest recruiting Tyler for this stupid little project with Richard? It’s common knowledge he’s useless, and the board was trying to find a way to get him out. Chrissy was collateral damage. It’s not my fault she couldn’t see the writing on the wall.”

I can’t believe we missed this. We should have known Chrissy wasn’t smart enough to be the mastermind in this game. I just didn’t think Ian was that sinister.

“Pack your shit. Leave this office, and we won’t press charges or ruin your career.”

Ian’s laugh doesn’t even sound like him. “You can’t fire me.”

“No, but I can.” Denise walks through the door, closing it behind her. “Thank you for yelling your plan loud enough that every board member, senior executive, and myself heard. We’ve also had finance look into your accounts because your accounts weren’t adding up at the end of each month. Unless you’d like to spend the next ten years in jail for embezzlement, I suggest you follow Mr. Cannon’s advice and leave. Security already packed your things and is waiting for you by the elevator.” She holds out her hand. “Key card and badge.”

He looks between the three of us, slapping the items into her waiting palm. “You’ll be sorry. I’ll become more successful than ever and take you down.”

Tyler laughs. “I’d love to see you try because you won’t be able to show your face around the city after I finish with you. It’d probably be better to leave the area, Dunkirk.”

“Fuck you,” Ian says, letting the door crash against the wall as he stomps out of our lives.

Denise follows closely behind, telling others the show is over since we’ve become the spectacle I’ve tried to avoid since starting here.

Tyler wraps me in his arms, pressing my head against his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

I shove him back. “Is what he said true? Did I get this job because I’m fucking you?”

He narrows his eyes. “I’ll let that slide since you’ve had a busy morning. But to answer your question, no. I had nothing to do with you getting the job. After informing the board we’d been in a relationship for months, I recused myself from the meeting because it was a conflict of interest. You got this job on your own merit.” He picks up the flowers from the floor, now crumbled and wilted. “I was late because I got these for your first day.”

Guilt settles in as I pluck the card from the center of the destroyed bouquet.

*Congratulations on your promotion, sweetheart. I knew you were meant for greater things.*

*Love always,*

*Tyler*

A tear slides down my cheek, and Tyler quickly brushes it away. “I’m sorry I said that. I didn’t mean it.”

He cups my cheek and lightly presses our lips together. “I know, baby. Are you okay?”

I look at the curious eyes all pointed in our direction. This probably isn’t a conversation we should have in a doorway for the office to witness, but honestly, it’s the least worrying thing they’ve seen all morning.

“Yeah, I’m okay now.” I hold him close, pressing my nose into his neck. The soothing scent of his cologne eases my tension. “I think our cover’s blown, though.”

His chest rumbles with a laugh. “Sweetheart, it’s been blown for a while. Like Ian said, we weren’t very good at hiding it.”

“Yeah, I guess not.” I pull back and run a hand through his hair. “Thank you for coming to rescue me.”

Tyler kisses me again, almost to the point of being indecent. A few hoots and hollers sound behind us, along with some applause.

“Anything for you.” He turns and looks at the crowd, who quickly disperse back into their offices and cubes—except for Holly, who gives us a thumbs-up.

The rest of the morning isn’t quite as eventful. After meeting with the other executives, I sit behind my desk and start working on my client list, setting up the first of my weekly meetings.

A message pops up in the corner of my screen, pulling a smile instantly.

**TC: I need to see you.**

**Me: I'm busy right now. You'll have to make an appointment.**

Within seconds, my computer pings with a notification. I check my calendar and see every day is occupied with Tyler's name. That arrogant little shit. He's literally blocked off my calendar, so the only thing on there is him. Shit. I forgot our calendars are still linked.

And speak of the devil. Tyler walks into my office, shutting the door behind him. "I'm here for my scheduled appointment."

I quirk a brow and lean back in my chair. "Oh? And what exactly are we meeting about?"

He turns and draws the blinds. "Important business."

"Which is?"

His long, tall frame settles in front of me, taking the usual position I would in his office. "Breaking in your new desk."

Hmm. How could a girl resist?



## *Epilogue*

### ***Tyler***

“I knew it,” I say, taking the phone off the hands-free cradle and shoving it into Maysen’s hands as we head home for the night.

Six months ago, we moved the last of her things from the apartment downstairs into my place. Nothing has ever felt more right in the world than sharing my space with the woman I love—something I never thought I’d say. If you told me years ago that I’d find myself in a committed relationship with the one I’ve always wanted but couldn’t have, I’d say you were crazy. Now, I can’t imagine my life without her in it.

Soon enough, she’ll say the same thing.

“What’s this?” Maysen reads the article that popped up on my alert, smirking at the end. “He honestly never learned.”

It appears Ian wasn’t as smart as he thought he was, getting fired from his current job because of—you guessed it—embezzlement.



“I knew he would fuck up eventually. He always thought he was smarter than everyone else.”

Maysen rolls her eyes. “Right. Because you know everything, don’t you?”

“I’m glad you’re finally catching on,” I say with a wink. “It’ll make things easier when we’re married.”

She freezes in her seat, slowly turning her head toward me. “Was that your lame attempt at asking me to marry you?”

Silly woman. “There will be no asking. It’s inevitable. You’re mine, and the whole world will know it.”

“Typical Mr. Irresistible, taking what he thinks he deserves. And what if I don’t want to get married?”

I throw the car in park and pull her across the center console into my lap. “This isn’t up for debate, Maysen.”

She scoffs. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe I’d like something more romantic than an order to get married?”

I trace her jaw with my finger. “Sweetheart, you know I’m not good at romance.”

“Says the guy who flooded my apartment with flowers after a fight.”

“That was just a good business move.”

She quirks a brow. “So this is a merger? Wow, you sure know how to knock a woman off her feet.” Her cute little button nose wrinkles. “Thanks, but I think I’ll pass until I see the fine print.”

Frustrating woman. “How many times do I have to remind you that you are mine?”

“Settle down, caveman. Everyone already knows I’m yours. What else do you need?”

It’s true. All her fears about being discovered at the office were unfounded. The outpouring of acceptance was overwhelming, especially when she proved she could handle the position better than Richard, which wasn’t hard. Of course, the defiant little witch tried to hire a male assistant to get

under my skin. Considering how our relationship started, I wasn't about to leave things up to chance. Maysen had similar thoughts on me hiring another woman for her old job. It worked out in the end. Kevin does good work, and I don't have to worry about him trying to get into my pants. And Maysen is happy with Elizabeth, so everyone wins.

The elevator ride up is quiet, tension filling the tiny space.

"I need more," I say, finally answering her question.

She turns her head with a frown. "This isn't good enough for you?"

I fall into step behind her, putting a little space between us.

Her hands fly to her mouth the minute she walks through the door, spilling the contents of her purse as it drops.

Like every apology I've given, flowers decorate every inch of space in our apartment. Soft music plays in the background, thanks to Pete and Jenna, who were more than happy to help.

I can hear her sniffles as she walks into the living room on a bed of rose petals.

"Tyler," she whispers through the fingers covering her mouth. "I-I don't know what to say."

I drop to one knee and hold out the box that's been burning a hole in my pocket all week. "This isn't a business merger or a means to an end. You're it for me, Maysen James. You're the most difficult, frustrating woman who keeps me on my toes and constantly puts me in my place. Your passion, quirks, laughter, and smile make me love you more and more each day. And I want the whole world to know it. Be my partner, my lover, my wife. Marry me."

The tears continue to fall as she nods her head. "Yes."

Without warning, I scoop her into my arms and slide the ring on her finger before kissing her without abandon.

Finally, she's mine.

"I told you it was inevitable."

Maysen laughs and threads her fingers through my hair.  
“Shut up, Mr. Irresistible.”

“Whatever you say, Mrs. Irresistible.”

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# ABOUT *the Author*

Jodie Larson is a wife and mother to four beautiful girls, making their home in northern Minnesota along the shore of Lake Superior. When she isn't running around to various activities or working her regular job, you can find her sitting in her favorite spot reading her new favorite book or camped out somewhere quiet trying to write her next manuscript. She's addicted to reading (just ask her kids or husband) and loves talking books even more so with her friends. She's also a lover of all things romance and happily ever afters, whether in movies or in books, as shown in her extensive collection of both.

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