

MY
PERFECT FAKE
MARRIAGE

DAVID LEVY

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A FAKE MARRIAGE ROMANCE

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Thank you for reading!

Also By David Levy

About the Author


A FAKE MARRIAGE ROMANCE

David Levy

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EMMA

*T*onight is the night my life will change forever. Okay, I'm a little bored and being overly dramatic.

I'm attending a vital gala with my brother, Jared, with the intention to network. As I look around the crowded room, filled with so many famous and infamous people in San Francisco, all decked to the nines, I feel lonely. My black, long, silk dress seems to hug my curves a little too much. I sigh and push my wavy black hair behind my shoulder.

Maybe I should leave early. Jared is with Sam. What happened to my brother? I can't remember him being this... what? Scared of a woman? Well, if Jared doesn't make a move, I'll go over and tell Sam how he feels about her. I think that's what a little sister should do. I could network at some other event.

For now, I can mingle and give my elevator pitch. *Hi, I'm Emma Jackson. I graduated from USC with a degree in marketing and business. I'm a receptionist looking for...blah, blah, blah.*

I open my purse and retrieve my phone. If I don't talk to someone now, I'll go insane. Tonya is my best friend and was my savior when I left home.

"Okay, I hear terrible music. You're either at the gala or stuck in an elevator," Tonya says with a chuckle.

"Yeah, I thought this was a good idea. Now, I'm not so sure."

“You’re doing the right thing. Shit.” Tonya pauses. I imagine her waving her hand before she pulls her natural hair back and continues speaking. “It’s time to make your move.”

“Ma’am.” A waiter holding a tray of champagne approaches me. “Would you like a drink?”

I nod, smile, and take a fluted glass from his tray. The waiter walks away as I tell Tonya, “Jared has a little hottie he wants, and I am a third wheel tonight. Unfortunately, I’m not doing a good job at networking.”

“So, you wanna stay a receptionist for the rest of your life?”

“It’s not a terrible job. I know, I know, it’s not a career, either.”

Tonya laughs. “Give yourself another thirty minutes and network with one person. After that, leave.”

I nod, knowing that Tonya can’t see me. “Thanks for the advice.”



“*W*hat is your name again?”

I’ve been talking to this old dude for twenty minutes now. Okay, maybe I’m exaggerating. He’s tall, with salt and pepper hair and a friendly smile. He’s been talking to me ever since Jared left my side a couple of minutes ago. Jared is doing his big brother thing and trying to babysit me. I think. Maybe he’s just trying to find out if I’m networking.

“Emma.”

“Emma?”

“And your name?”

“I’m Stanley Bigalow. I’m on the board of CEW Enterprises.” Stanley briefly smiles. “So, did I hear correctly that you are a business and marketing whiz?”

I shrug and joke. “Whiz, I’m not sure about, but I majored in business and marketing.”

“Have you thought about investment management?”

“Yes, I do like assisting clients with investments. Is that your career field?” I sip the last of my champagne.

Stanley nods. “Well, I don’t do much of it anymore. I spend most of my time helping Rick make decisions. You know, you should meet Rick.”

My body goes numb, but I smile. I don’t need to see myself to know it’s one of those painted on smiles that make me look silly. However, it’s the best way to pretend I don’t know Rick. I call *Rick* Dad. I am so over what happened five years ago when he pushed and slapped me during an argument.

“Why don’t I give your name to Rick? I’m sure he has a position you could interview for. I mean, you already know his son, Jared.” Stanley smiles like he just thought of a genius idea.

Should I lie or tell him the truth? Do I want him to know I could work at CEW Enterprises without an interview? Nope. I’m making it on my own. “Um, I think Jared has already given him my name. Thank you for the suggestion.”

Stanley shrugs and says, “I think I can give you a hand...”

I stop listening to Stanley and begin scanning the room. It’s almost time for dinner, and I have a choice to make. Do I go to dinner and interrupt Jared and Sam? No, I should just go home when they serve dinner. Well, I’ll check on him first. If he’s acting like some love-sick teenager, then I’ll do the work for him. I shrug.

Payback is a bitch. I can imagine Jared poking his nose in my love life. Wait. What love life? I haven’t had a man between my legs in so long, I think I forgot how to open my legs. Does that make sense? Shit.

“Yes, there he is.”

I squint as I look at Stanley. Yes, I realize he's still speaking. My one-person conversation is more entertaining than listening to Stanley until I see him wave to someone in the crowd. My father emerges from the crowd, briskly walking toward us.

Stanley looks at me and smiles. "I want you to meet Rick."

A waiter passes by, and I stop him and place my empty glass on his tray. I've been back in San Francisco for six months and haven't seen Dad. Often, I've thought about this moment and how I'd feel. I don't feel sick or numb. I'm not scared. I don't want to run away.

The moment Dad struck and pushed me, I was meek, I'll admit. For years, I wasted time trying to please Dad without success. He always told me I was wrong, that I didn't do something right, or that I needed to be more like him. That night, we argued, and I told him how I felt—I didn't want to go into the family business.

Dad is a tall man with a stocky build. He strides when he walks and looks more like a commander of an army than an investment professional. He stares me down, his blue eyes narrow as he singles me out. Most people would think he has an unreadable expression, but he seems nervous to me.

"Stan, I see you met my daughter," Rick says as he pats Stanley on the back without breaking his stare. "A daughter who is too busy to let me know she's back in town."

"Daughter?" Stanley looks from me to Dad.

Dad looks at Stanley. "She didn't tell you? Emma's my daughter."

Stanley takes a step back and studies me like I tried to flirt with him or something. I ignore the disgusted look he gives me. I chuckle and tell Stanley, "I'm not sorry about omitting that fact. I don't spend time telling everyone I'm Rick Jackson's daughter."

Stanley nods and flashes a tense smile. "You're okay."

"No, she's not." Dad glances from me to Stanley and back again. "Unfortunately, Emma's ungrateful and pig-headed."

She'd rather delay the inevitable—working for me—to pretend she's smart enough to make it on her own."

Here we go. If I don't stop this, he'll continue.

"Don't be stupid, Dad. I'm smart enough to make it on my own."

"Don't be stupid?" Dad leans closer to me and stares me down. "You are one ungrateful little girl. I have tried to teach you—"

Stanley backs away and tells us, "I see someone I need to talk with. See you at dinner."

"Remember, Dad. I'm not the same girl you smacked around years ago. I don't need you criticizing me."

"Listen to me, little girl. You're not Jared. You're not smart enough to make it on your own."

"Don't waste my time with your bullshit, Dad. If you're not going to support me, I don't need you," I tell him. A couple strolls by and waves to Dad. He gives them a quick wave. "Understand me, Dad?"

Dad walks away.

TREVOR

*T*his gala isn't my scene. I'd rather be at home, drinking a beer and watching sports. Tonight, I'm here as a *wingman*. Jared wanted me to assist him in getting Sam. I told him I would. Now, I'm here, and I'm the forgotten wingman. My best friend doesn't need me. From what I've observed, Jared's doing well with Sam.

The gala is crowded, but most people are in their groups, chatting away. It isn't a place for strangers to mingle. Everyone here knows each other. I glance around the large ballroom, and my attention settles on the quartet playing soft music.

"What the hell are you doing in the corner, man?"

I straighten my red tie, slide my left hand in my pants pocket, and sip my water with lime. Jared slaps me on the upper arm and stands in front of me. I smirk.

"I'm trying to entertain myself." I pause and point toward Sam, who stares at us until I look her way. "Looks like I'm not needed."

Jared shrugs and sheepishly looks down. "I thought tonight would be a disaster because Emma's here. I invited her tonight so that she could network a bit. Thankfully, Sam understands."

"Emma?" I pause searching my mind for a face to put with the name. "I'm not following."

"Damn, man. I know you've never met my sister, but I have mentioned her a time or two." Jared chuckles.

I finish drinking my water. Before I can take the glass from my lips, a waitress approaches me and motions for me to put the glass on her tray.

“The last time you mentioned her, you were going to her graduation.”

Jared nods. “Now she’s back. Emma’s totally different, man. I’m proud of her. She is straightforward, not afraid, and...”

Jared stares at me like he’s thinking about something. I frown. “Jared, are you still there?”

He points at me with his index finger. I watch him shake his head like he’s still thinking about something. When he speaks, it sounds like he’s still thinking. “You know what? You’re on notice. Stay away from Emma.”

I chuckle. I’m not amused but confused. “You’ve gotta remember to let me into these conversations of yours.”

“Emma’s turned into a woman you like to chase after.” Jared shoves his hands into his pants pockets and stares me down.

He gives me that look I give motherfuckers who want to make a move on my sister, Amy. He looks protective and ready to pull a gun on me. I sigh and raise my hands in a surrender pose. “Listen, Jared. Remember, I suggested our pact about not dating each other’s sisters.”

“Yeah, well. It would be best if you remembered that pact. I don’t want a dead best friend.” He punches me in the chest.

I try not to touch my chest where he hit me, but that shit hurt. As I rub my chest, I nod. “Got it. Shit, I like the chase, but I’d like to see old age.”

Jared smiles. “Good. Now, how do you think I can lose my sister so that Sam and I can slip out of here?”



revor? Is that you?”

“I join in with the crowd to clap for the quartet. When I look around, I see Rick, Jared’s father, next to me. He slaps me on the back and stands in front of me.

“Hi, Mr. Jackson.” I extend my hand to him.

After a brief handshake, Rick crosses his arms over his chest. “I saw your name on the guest list. I wasn’t sure it was you until now.”

“Well, I’m here to help Jared, but it doesn’t look like he needs my help securing his...ladylove.”

Rick shrugs. “Jared can take care of himself. It’s my dim-witted daughter I worry about.”

“Emma?”

“Yeah,” Rick gestures like he’s throwing something away. “Look, Trevor, never have daughters. I know it sounds sexist, and this *woke clan* would cancel me, but shit, it’s not worth it. Emma is so pig-headed and stupid that there’s no helping her.”

I cock my head to the left because my tie feels tight around my neck suddenly. I yank at my collar. Rick sounds like Dad. No, the words aren’t the same. Although I don’t know Emma, I need to stick up for her. It’s not because of what Jared’s said about Emma. No parent has the right to speak so negatively about their child. She’s not even here to defend herself.

“I understand how you may feel, Mr. Jackson, but I’m sure Emma’s a smart young woman. Besides, I don’t know a woman who isn’t stubborn at some point.”

Rick laughs. It’s a hearty laugh. However, I frown because I didn’t tell a joke.

“That’s a good one, Trevor. Trust me. If you ever met her, you’d run away fast.” Rick pauses and sobers before he speaks again. “You need to understand that ever since she was a child, she’s struggled to do the basics. I’ve tried to do everything in my power to help her get what she needs, but...”

I cross my arms over my chest and watch Rick wave his left hand like he is disgusted with the conversation. “She’s

here at the gala. You know, she's pretended that she's not my daughter. Yeah, she's not telling anyone because she's in one of her flights of fancy modes."

When I step back, I extend my hand to Rick. It's time to leave. I'm not interested in the conversation. I'm starting to remember my issue with my father. I wonder how Dad tears me down when he is around strangers. "It's good to talk with you again, Mr. Jackson. I need to get ready for dinner."

Rick nods and shakes my hand. "I certainly understand. Enjoy the night, Trevor."

EMMA

“*A*re you leaving now?”

I listen to Tonya, holding the phone to my ear as the musicians pack up their instruments. My feet hurt, and I shift from my left foot to my right. These heels are killing me.

“I should be,” I tell her and glance around the room, looking for Jared and Sam. “I’m going to wait for dinner and leave. I’ll figure out something.”

There is a long pause before Tonya asks, “He’s there, isn’t he?”

“Jared?” I laugh, trying to change the subject. When Tonya doesn’t laugh, I say, “Yep, Dad’s here. Just to answer your next question, I’ve already had a run-in with him.”

“Did you kick him in the nuts? You know he’s not planning to have any more kids. He’s afraid of having another daughter,” Tonya jokes.

For the first time since I talked to Dad, I laugh. I nod, even though I know she can’t see me. “Shit, Tonya. Is there a reason why I came back to San Fran?”

“It’s your home.”

“I know, but...” I stop talking. I’m different now. Years ago, I would have rushed to the nearest bathroom and sobbed. I would have wondered why Dad doesn’t love me like he loves Jared. Worst, I would have cursed God for giving me a dad like Rick.

“It’s cool to be sad, Emma.” Tonya sighs.

For a second, I press my lips together. “I’m not sad. I’m pissed and happy. I told the motherfucker off, and he walked away.”

“It’s still with you, though.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. I felt my body tremble for a bit because I was so fucking pissed at Dad, but I’m glad I stood up to him.”

“Well.” Tonya clears her throat before saying, “Now it’s time for you to understand that you didn’t kill Dane.”

Dane. Please, Tonya, don’t bring up Dane. He’s still the love of my life. I killed him because I was late. Every time, I drove back to LA. The day I took the train, Dane was killed. That makes it my fault.

“Are you there?” Tonya’s voice breaks into my thoughts.

I clear my thoughts. “Let’s not talk about Dane right now. I’m trying to network so that I can get a job.”

“How about this? You find a cute motherfucker there, get your freak on, and move forward. Dane’s gone. He’d want you to find love.”

I laugh because of the “get your freak on” comment. Hell, I wish I was one of those women who could have sex with a man without having some kind of feelings for him. Hell, I’ve been in a long sex draught. Yes, four years is a long time.

“Okay, Tonya, I’m ending this call before you make me do something stupid, like getting a stalking charge.”

“Stalking?” Tonya laughs. “I’m not advocating stalking.”



It’s almost time for dinner, and I’m ready to leave. I’m going to text Jared and tell him I found some sexy employee of his to take me home. The more I observe Jared and Sam, the more I think they’re enjoying each other’s company.

As I look around the ballroom, my eyes dart back to the corner of the room. Dad's talking to the sexiest motherfucker I've seen in my life. He's tall, probably about six feet. I watch him cross his arms over his chest. I love how his dark suit fits just right on him. He probably gets his suit tailored like Jared does. His silver watch, which he wears on his right wrist, is extra shiny because of the bright chandelier lights.

I shift in my stance. The stranger looks like a movie star with his perfect blond hair and sexy features. I continue watching the sexy guy as I bite my bottom lip. How would it feel to have him naked, leaning over me and ready to make sweet love?

Dane.

Fuck. I look away. Dane, I miss you. We were together in our junior and senior years. I wanted you to come with me to LA, but you didn't want to. I look back at the sexy stranger and take a deep breath. I miss you so much, Dane.

Dad shakes the sexy stranger's hand and walks away.

Dane, if you're listening, if you can hear me, please give me a sign or something that Tonya's right. You want me to move forward with my life.

"Ma'am, would you like champagne?"

I jump at the waiter's voice. The waiter extends the tray toward me, and I take a fluted glass of champagne. Tonya's making me go crazy. She talked about Dane, and now...

After a moment, I take a deep breath, sigh, and turn back to the eye candy. It's time to have one more attempt at networking before I go. Well, after I finish looking at this sexy motherfucker.

I look at the stranger, who is now standing alone. He places his hands in his pants pockets and shakes his head as a waiter approaches. He slowly looks to the left, which is not in my direction. I look at his brown shoes before letting my eyes travel slowly upward. My gaze lingers on his crotch. *You, my sexy eye candy, must wear briefs.* Slowly, I continue my visual treasure hunt and look at his broad chest. He must work out

three or four times a week. His arms look magnificent, even from here.

Now, for that sexy face. Hmm, blue eyes. Nice blue eyes? No, smoldering blue eyes. He looks like he sees something he likes.

Wait. Uh, my God, are you staring at me? Shit.

TREVOR

I look to my left and scan the crowd for Jared. Instead of sitting through a boring dinner, I'll leave. If I go to dinner, I'll get stuck talking to Mr. Jackson. Jared's not there. I don't see Sam. Maybe he got lucky. Knowing Jared, he's never seen a janitor's room that couldn't double as a hotel room.

As I exhale, I scan the crowd and see a beautiful woman staring at me. Nice. I like her long, wavy hair, and she's got curves in all the right places. Her black dress hugs her ample hips.

Beautiful.

She flips her black hair over her shoulder. I see her look down. I think she's looking at my feet. Okay, now she's looking at... Fuck, is my fly open? She's staring at it a little too long. Okay, now I think she's looking at my chest. Yep, good thing I worked out my arms this morning. *See these huge biceps? Want to touch them?* I smile.

We make eye contact. Her beautiful eyes widen, and her lips form a perfect little circle. I smirk and watch her quickly press her lips together and look to her left and right. She holds her fluted glass tightly with her left hand. I can't tell if she's looking for a place to sit her drink down or trying to escape the moment.

I hope it's the latter. Maybe I'll go to dinner, after all. I can arrange for us to sit together, and...

She sips her champagne, and her stare slowly returns to mine.

I wink at her. She blushes but continues staring at me.

A small group of guests slowly strolls in front of the beautiful stranger and stops. I shove my fists into my pants pockets as I wait for them to move. A couple of minutes later, the small group disperses, and I expect to see her again.

No one is there. She's gone. The space is empty.

I frown.

"You look confused."

I look at Jared as he passes by me. Sam's not at his side. I shake my head as I shrug. "It's nothing. A woman was looking at me and ghosted me."

Jared stands on my left side and glances around. He asks, "What does she look like?"

"Don't worry. She's not your sister. She's hot as hell." I chuckle when Jared flashes me an insulted look. "No, really, what does your sister look like?"

"She's beautiful and doesn't look like Dad or me. She looks like Mom."

I nod as I tell him, "I've met your mom, so I know this woman isn't your sister."

Jared lightly hits me on the shoulder. "It's a good thing that she's already running from you. She probably knows she can't live up to your Dad's trophy-wife standards."

When Jared laughs, I flash him a look that says, "Watch it."

"Come on, Trev. I know the backstory of your Dad's dreams of you being San Fran's next mayor. I'm just waiting for you to tell him to fuck off."

Dad has dreams of being the father of a politician, and it's killing me. Mom pressures me to get married and give her grandchildren, and Dad pressures me to find the perfect trophy wife to start my political career. It's stupid.

“You’re still thinking about a political career?” Jared asks.

“Yep, on my own time, though.” I clear my throat. “If I can come up with a plan to get Dad off my back, I’ll be happy.”

“First thing, first,” Jared jokes, “Find the woman who ghosted you.”

EMMA

I watch the sexy stranger stare at me. Our eyes lock, and he winks at me. I gasp and quickly press my lips together because I feel foolish with my mouth open. My face feels flushed. Am I blushing? His eyes are hooded and smoldering. He doesn't break eye contact, which causes me to look away. I look for an escape. I just need a couple of minutes to figure out what to do. When I'm at the office, I have the answers before anyone asks me, and I'm not used to feeling this vulnerable.

Not many men look at me like this. I usually get the loser types who aren't afraid of rejection. Besides, I'm not the go-getter type. I refuse to chase a man. When a man woos me, it feels so good. Dane did that with flowers and flirting and...

My eyes dart back to the stranger, and I see he's still staring at me. There's nowhere to go, so I sip my champagne to do something. He winks at me. Now, my face definitely feels flushed. Oh God, I'm blushing like a teenager. Shit. I'm twenty-four years old.

A group of people slowly stroll in front of me, blocking my view of the sexy stranger. Yes, I think I will take a minute to compose myself. It's good to prepare for a possible introduction. No, I'm not going to introduce myself to him. If he wants me, he'll introduce himself to me. Well, let the wooing begin. Maybe.

As the group slowly walks past me, I rush away.



My champagne tastes flat, and I'm trying to pretend I'm interested in the two women rambling on about how they know me. They keep interrupting each other, trying to recall some story or another, but I want to interrupt them. To hell with it, I do.

"You know me through my Dad. His name is Rick Jackson."

The two women look at each other and then at me. The woman dressed in the sparkling bronze dress says, "No, no, that's not it. Weren't you a marketing intern at CEW Enterprises?"

I lick my bottom lip and press my lips together to stifle my laugh. Oh, forget it, why be nice? Well, I'm supposed to network. Never mind.

"I never interned here." I backpedal and give her the thumbs up. "You know, I think it's time for dinner. We'll talk during dinner."

The second woman, who is wearing a white pantsuit, shakes her head and smiles. "No, no, this will haunt me for the next twenty minutes if we don't figure it out now. I know we know you. Maybe through Jared. Do you know Jared Jackson?"

I keep backing away and tell them, "I'll see you at dinner, okay?"

Before the women can speak, I turn and walk through the crowd. Tonight is a total failure. I'm supposed to network, but no one can help me. Stanley managed to introduce me to Dad. Fuck it.

What am I going to do about that sexy stranger? I don't know where he is, and I care. I don't regret leaving. I think I'll play it cool. If he approaches me, I'll ask him questions about his work. If he flirts with me, I'll flirt back. Now, if he asks to

give me his number, I'll decline. I don't take phone numbers. I give mine—if a guy is lucky.

“Miss?”

I stop walking through the crowd when someone brushes my arm and my stomach flutters in anticipation of seeing the sexy stranger. He's finally found me. As I smile, I turn around and get ready to say something flirty.

“Well, your reaction is more than I could ever hope for. Let me introduce myself. My name is Shawn.”

Shawn's not the sexy stranger from earlier. He's tall like my sexy stranger, but that's where the similarities end. He's lanky, and his black suit drapes his body. His hair is long, shaggy, and dyed a bright yellow. His green eyes narrow, and he grins at me. Yes, I'm stereotyping. He's probably a geek in the CEW Enterprises IT room.

“I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else.” I make sure not to smile because I don't want to encourage him.

Shawn extends his left hand. “What is your name?”

“Emma.”

I stroll away and stop at a table. Once I place my glass on the table, I turn and bump into Shawn. He's followed me halfway across the room. Now, he shows his toothy grin and sticks his left hand out to me.

“Emma, you are stunning.”

“Thank you.”

“Join me on a date next week?”

“No, thank you.”

“How about the week after?”

“I'm busy.” I sigh and look around, hoping that Shawn gets the point.

Shawn laughs as if I told him a joke. I don't crack a smile.

“Emma, how about this? You seem a little shy, so I'll give you my number. When you're ready, we'll go out.” Shawn

winks at me and adds, “If you call soon, I might pick up the tab on our date.”

“Don’t be stupid, Shawn,” I tell him.

He chuckles, places his left hand in his pocket, and pulls out his phone. “Whoa, you sound catty. I like catty.”

“Shawn, I don’t even know why I’m entertaining the thought of calling you by your name,” I say with a sigh. “Anyway, I’m not interested in you. I don’t want your number. Understand?”

“Give me yours.”

“I’m not interested.”

“Is your phone not working?”

I walk away from him. I hope that I will get lost in the crowd and that Shawn will just get lost. As I stroll between a couple on the left and a small group on my right, I see the two women I ran away from earlier. I detour. When I go left, I see my sexy stranger. He’s standing with someone. I move my head from the left to the right and strain to see who is with him. Is that Jared? No, I see Sam.

“We meet again.”

Shawn blocks my view of my sexy stranger. I step back and exhale. People walk around us because we’re in the middle of the ballroom. He grins at me, and I make it a point to leer at him.

“Tonight is fate. You, me, and forever.” Shawn tries to place his hand on my bare shoulder.

I step back.

“Correction. You, me, and never.” I try to sidestep him, but he blocks my path.

“You know, if you’d just believe in yourself, you’d get a lot more male attention.” Shawn points at me like he’s lecturing me.

I laugh at him, and he looks at me, clueless. So, I fill him in on the mystery. “Listen, Shawn. You’re a loser. You can’t

take no for an answer, and worse, you can't tell when a woman isn't interested in you."

"So," Shawn pauses like he's still thinking about what to say. "This is how you play hard to get?"

"No, this is me telling you to leave me alone."

Shawn points at himself and shrugs. "I'm willing to take your number. You don't need to get nasty. If you're a lesbian, just tell me, and I'll leave you alone."

"Did that dye seep into your brain? My fiancée told you that she's not interested."

I see my sexy stranger approach before his words register in my mind. He smirks and winks at me before standing at my side. I glance from him to Shawn, who takes a step back but doesn't leave.

"Hey, man," Shawn waves his hand and points to me. "Emma came onto me. She's been looking at me all night and has been all over me."

"Don't be stupid. I did no such thing." I shake my head.

Honestly, I want to deck him. Why can't I punch him? He's such an idiot. I want to show him how much of a loser he is for coming on to me and trying to make me feel like something's wrong with me because I don't want him.

TREVOR

*M*y mystery woman is quite good at disappearing. This room's crowded, and I've been through it twice. I haven't seen her once. It's been twenty minutes since she disappeared behind that group, and I think she's gone. Damn.

I pass a couple that is playfully dancing nowhere near the dance floor. I scan the crowd around me again, but the only noticeable person is some crazy-looking guy with bright yellow hair.

As I think about walking to the far side of the room, I hear, "Trev."

It's Jared. I turn and give him a backward nod as he motions for me to join him. He's leaning against the wall, looking bored.

"What happened to Sam?" I look around the area. Jared's the only one standing close to the exit.

Jared stands erect and rubs the back of his neck with his left palm. "She had to make a call. Listen, I'm worried about Emma. Have you seen her?"

"How many drinks have you had tonight?"

"Why?" He frowns.

"About two conversations ago, I told you I've never seen her."

Jared shrugs and frowns again. He says, "Yeah, I forgot that."

“I get it,” I say with a chuckle. “Sam’s fucking with your head. And yeah, go to the gutter to understand what I’m saying.”

“Fuck off,” Jared tells me, grabbing a glass of champagne from a waiter’s tray. “Coming to dinner?”

I shake my head and turn to stand next to him. “I’m about to wrap it up in a little bit. Obviously, you’re good. You’re keeping Sam entertained.”

“No mystery woman yet?”

For a moment, I’m silent. I scan the crowded room again. “I’m striking out.”

“Maybe I can help. I know everyone here. What does your mystery woman look like again?”

“I’d tell you, but our opinions of beauty are different,” I joke.

Jared laughs. “Come on, man. You’ve dated some girls who I’d have to get drunk to approach.”

After I shake my head and chuckle, I tell him, “You do have a self-esteem problem with women.”

I know Jared’s going to say something crazy, but he doesn’t. Sam joins us.

“Sam, this is Trevor, my best friend. Trevor, Sam.” Jared pointed from me to Sam and back again.

She smiles at me, and we briefly hug, and I give her a light kiss on her left cheek. “It’s nice to meet you, Sam.”

“Same here. Jared’s told me a lot about you.”

When I look past Sam, I see the crazy-looking guy with the yellow hair. He shifts to his left and reveals my mystery woman. She’s staring at him with a disgusted look on her face. I can’t tell whether she’s telling him off or about to punch the guy.

“Well, Sam, it’s great to meet you. Jared, I see someone who needs my assistance.” As I slap Jared on the back, I smile at Sam.

“Where is she?” Jared asks, but I disappear into the crowd.

“Excuse me, excuse me,” I murmur as I scoot past people, making my way to my mystery woman.

As I get closer to my mystery woman and the crazy-looking guy, I hear the guy say, “So, this is how you play hard to get?”

“No, this is me telling you to leave me alone.”

“I’m willing to take your number. You don’t need to get nasty. If you’re a lesbian, just tell me, and I’ll leave you alone.”

Shit, guy, you want a date, and you’re calling her a lesbian? She turned you down, so walk away. This cad could work to my advantage. I could introduce myself and tell him to take a hike. How, though? He’s obviously messing with her. She doesn’t want to be bothered. So, I ask him to respect her decision, or I’ll physically throw him out of the gala. No, this will definitely work to my advantage if I do something different. She’s beautiful and probably gets much-unwanted attention from cads like him. I’ll take a different approach.

“Did that dye seep into your brain? My fiancée told you that she’s not interested.”

My mystery woman glances at me, her expression unchanged. She looks like she’s ready to go into battle. She looks at me again, and her eyes widen. I smirk and wink at her before standing at her side. She looks from me to her unwanted suitor. He steps back but doesn’t leave.

“Hey, man,” He waves his hand and points to my mystery woman. “Emma came onto me. She’s been looking at me all night and has been all over me.”

Emma? Ha, beautiful name for a gorgeous woman. For my plan to work, I have to pretend I already know her name. I stare the guy down and open my mouth to say something, but she interrupts.

“Don’t be stupid. I did no such thing.” She shakes her head. Emma still looks ready to punch him. I chuckle and

place my hand on the small of her back. She moves closer to me.

“Listen, what-ever-your-name-is—”

“Shawn.”

I nod. “Shawn, we—you and I—can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

He stammers, “I-I don’t understand.”

“My fiancée never comes on to a man, nor looks at a man all night—unless that man is me. If you have any common sense, you’ll walk away with your bruised ego and forget you ever lied about my gorgeous fiancée.”

Shawn studies me like he’s not sure if I’m telling the truth. I look over at Emma and sweetly ask, “My love, did you come on to him?”

Her eyes widen, and she looks up at me. A smile tickles her lips. “Sugar, I would never. Why would I when you are so fucking hot?”

My head bounces back, and I cock my head to the side to look at her. I smirk. Fucking hot, huh? My gorgeous Emma could be playing along or could be flirting.

“Fucking hot? The way you disappeared earlier, I thought you were off to find my replacement.” I chuckle.

“See, I told you. I told you. I’m just keeping it real,” Shawn exclaims. “She saw me and was all over me.”

Emma rolls her eyes and squints when she looks at Shawn. After she turns her attention to me, she says in a low, sexy voice, “Oh, Sugar, I’m sorry about earlier. I had two terrible choices.”

I slide my hands into my pants pockets. “What? Go to the ladies’ room or run from Shawn?”

“Hey,” Shawn interjects.

We ignore him.

Emma flips her wavy hair over her shoulder and gives me a saucy look before responding, “My choices were to stand there and wait for you to come to me or to figure out how to get you to fuck me on the ballroom floor.”

“Damn,” I tell her as I feel my dick get hard. I shift in my stance. The thought of getting inside of Emma is something I want to become a reality.

Emma glances at my crotch before making eye contact with me. Her voice sounds even sexier. “You know me... Sugar. I’m timid when it comes to the first move, and going so far as fucking in public—well, that’s off-limits. So, I had no other choice but to disappear.”

“And find me,” Shawn chimes into our conversation.

I glance at him before studying Emma. Is she serious? Damn, I hope so. *I love your sassiness. You want to fuck me, but you’re interested in something more. It sounds like you love to be chased as much as I love to pursue.*

I expect her to slap me if I’ve misinterpreted her words and actions, when I tell her, “I hope you didn’t run to the ladies’ room and satisfy such a need. It would be such a shame.”

Emma leans in and presses her lips together like she was trying not to laugh. “Oh, Sugar, you know me, I never go it alone. I don’t fuck with plastic, either—just a reminder.”

I chuckle. “So noted. If my memory serves me well, I’ve been going it alone for quite some time. It feels like my gorgeous Emma hasn’t been around lately.”

She gasps and covers her mouth. When she winks at me, I laugh. “Oh, how stupid of me. How long have you felt so alone?”

As I look at the intricate gold ceiling like I’m thinking. When we make eye contact again, I make a sad face. “Before meeting you, I’d been single since Maria, and that was two years ago.”

“Okay, you dated Maria two years ago? How long have you two been engaged?” Shawn points from me to Emma.

Why the fuck are you still here? I shake my head and watch Emma look at me and lick her lips.

“Wow, Sugar, I feel so bad about making you feel that way. We’ve been together so long, and you know you can just grab me and...” Emma touches my chest. I feel the heat of her hand through my white shirt. “Do what you like.”

I grab her wrist and pull her hand up to my lips, leaving a light kiss between her index finger and thumb. “My love, you must remember, I’m still a gentleman. When I...take you, you’ll be the one grabbing on to me. You know I’m an animal in bed.”

Emma smiles. “Please, remind me sometime—if you work hard enough to keep my attention.”

“So,” Shawn interrupts. “Is this a no on you giving me your number?”

Emma looks at Shawn and gives him a brief nasty look before saying, “No, this is your answer.”

I watch Emma look at me, grab my tie, and pull my face closer to hers. My erection disappeared minutes ago, but it is back now. Emma kisses me. Her soft lips press against mine, and I hesitate until the tip of her tongue touches my lips and moves away. I deepen our kiss as our tongues play together in a French kiss. Emma presses her body against mine.

Slowly, I pull away from Emma and exhale.

Damn.

Fuck.

Shit.

Okay.

I lean back and let my eyes settle on Emma’s gaze. Her beautiful lips slowly turn into a smile. She looks down, and I notice she bites her bottom lip. Emma’s shoulders slump, and now her behavior reminds me of when we saw each other from across the room. Now she seems unsure and timid.

You are complicated. I don't need to know you to know that. Intrigued? I am. Ready to chase you? I am.

I place my index finger under her chin and force her head up so that she can look at me. As our eyes lock, I lightly move my index finger along her cheek.

“Uh, I think I’ll go. It’s finally time for dinner. You two have...fun.” Shawn quickly turns and walks away until he disappears into the crowd.

I shove my hands into my pockets and stare down at Emma as she blinks and takes a step back. What is going on in that beautiful head of hers? It looks like she is processing tons of information in seconds. She tells me, “He’s gone.”

I nod.

“You are a great kisser,” she tells me with a wink.

Rarely do I portray my emotions so liberally, but I nervously open my mouth to speak and close it. I point to myself, shrug, and chuckle. “I, well, thank you. Women don’t rate my kissing.”

Emma laughs and extends her hand toward me. “So that you know, I’m not a crazy woman roaming for men at a gala. My name is Emma.”

After shaking her hand, I nod toward her and introduce myself. “I’m Trevor. It’s a pleasure to meet you, and no, I never thought you were a crazed woman roaming around for men.”

Emma exhales and clasps her hands together like she’s relieved. She smiles. “That Shawn guy wouldn’t leave. Thank you. I kept telling him I wasn’t interested, but he wouldn’t listen.”

I shrug. “You know, there are three types of men. There are men who know they’ll get rejected and will try you anyway and men who will be perfect gentlemen. The third type wants you desperately but is too afraid of rejection to try.”

She frowns. “And which category are you in, Trevor?”

Slowly, I lean forward like I'm sharing a secret. When I'm close to Emma's ear, I answer, "I have no problem chasing and getting a woman I want."

EMMA

“*I* have no problem chasing and getting a woman I want.”

Trevor’s low and husky voice sounds so sexy in my ear. Each word he says vibrates down my spine and makes my pussy wet. My voice catches in my throat because the anticipation of another kiss takes my breath away.

I need Trevor and bad.

Trevor leans back and stares me down. His blue eyes sparkle with a devilish glint. Suddenly, I feel too young to be his prey. He’s, what? Probably thirty years old or close to it. Trevor has probably chased and caught many women.

You may have more experience than me, but I’m not going to give in easily.

I smile at Trevor, and he smirks back. When he winks at me, I do everything in my power not to giggle. I hate women who giggle when guys flirt with them. It’s too fake. Guys must see through that.

“Oh,” I pause, pretending like I forgot his name. “Trevor, I do want to apologize for earlier, when you saw me staring at you. I’m typically not so forward.”

“Forward?” He laughs. “That wasn’t forward.”

I look away. “It doesn’t matter. That’s not me.”

He glances around the ballroom. Following his lead, I do the same. The ballroom is getting less and less crowded. I guess it’s time for dinner. When I look back at Trevor, he’s

already staring at me. Trevor places his left palm on his chest and says, “I can’t believe I’ve been absent-minded. Where are my manners? Do you work for CEW Enterprises?”

“No,” I shake my head. *Please, don’t bring me down. I’m not telling you about my father or Jared.* “I’m here at the request of someone who works at the company.”

Trevor grins. “Same here. My best friend thought he needed a wingman tonight to get things going with a woman he wants. It looks like he doesn’t need me.”

“Yeah, I’m here to network, but there’s no one here. I talked to two women who think they know a man who could help me, but he couldn’t.”

“Network, huh? What do you?”

“I’m a receptionist at a medical office. It’s not a dull job because every day is different. However, it’s not what I want to do for the rest of my life.”

“I get it. There’s a major difference between a job and a career.” Trevor crossed his arms over his chest. “What’s your career goal?”

“I graduated in marketing and business. I’m leaning toward marketing.”

Trevor motions around the gala. “This is your gig, then.”

I shrug and look around the room. “Again, there’s no one to connect with. I guess I could have asked Shawn.”

“Well,” Trevor said with a chuckle, “you should narrow down your career options before networking. If you’re leaning toward marketing, that means you’re not there yet.”

A part of me wants to question his experience on the subject. He doesn’t sound like Dad. Actually, he sounds more like Jared. I shrug. Maybe he’s right. The one thing I know for sure is that I don’t want to work for Dad.

“I’m not telling you what to do. It’s just some life experience and advice.” Trevor studies me for a moment like he’s going to say something, but remains silent.

“Are you going to tell me how you acquired this life experience and advice, or are you going to let me fill in the blanks?” I ask.

Trevor raises his eyebrow before responding, “What if I let you fill in the blanks?”

I take a deep breath and exhale as I look him up and down. My purpose is to make him think I’m taking his question seriously. “Well, I like to go full-on when filling in the blanks. So, I’ll say you couldn’t decide on a major in college, and that’s when you committed a white-collar crime and didn’t get caught.”

He laughs. “Good. I thought you were going to say something crazy like I graduated early from high school, went to college, and thought I wanted to be a lawyer until I took my first drink at a frat party.”

After a long pause, I motion for him to continue, “Please, continue.”

“To make a long story short,” he says and flashes a tense smile, “I went to law school and took the bar exam. Now, I’m a tech entrepreneur.”

Although I open my mouth to ask him a question, Trevor interrupts me and rattles off some social media applications I use. I frown. “Are you telling me that you created those apps?”

“Yep. I made those apps, made them famous, and sold them.”

“When did you graduate from high school?”

“I started college at sixteen. I went to my first college party at twenty years old. Like I always say, the law is a great career option—it’s just not my career option.”

“Well, I will take your life experience and advice to heart. Thank you.”

He nods.

We stare at each other. I clear my throat and flash a smile. I’m not sure what else to do. Trevor’s gaze looks smoldering as he watches me. A grin teases his lips.

I look around the room and at the thinning crowd of guests. It seems that everyone is going to dinner. What do I say now? Maybe I should ask him some questions. How old are you? No, that would be too intrusive. Um, perhaps I should ask some other questions about his career. How did you become interested in the social media industry? Who do you know at CEW Enterprises?

After I count to three, I open my mouth to speak and close it. Trevor suddenly seems larger than life. I feel like I'm standing in front of a movie star and don't want to embarrass myself. Oh my God, did telling him that stuff about me make me seem like some clueless woman? He stares at me in a different way than Dane ever did.

Trevor smiles. His voice is husky as he says, "Well, I can't let another moment pass without telling you how beautiful you are—gorgeous, really."

"Really?" I try to make my voice sound questioning. Yes, I want him to think I don't believe him. It's not that I'm scared that he's flirting with me. I just don't want to look desperate or act like a man has never told me something positive about my looks.

"Yes, really." Trevor scratches his head and chuckles. "I know you get that all the time. I laugh because I'm thinking of our friend Shawn."

I shake my head. The thought of Shawn coming back again haunts me. "Let's not talk about him. With my luck, he'll appear."

"True." For a minute, Trevor stares at me, making it a point to look at me from head to toe and back again before he continues. "Don't worry. I'm here to save you."

"My hero."

"Well, I'll be your hero for now and something more later." He winks at me.

"If you keep winking at me, I'll assume you have something in your eye," I joke. "You're using the same eye each time you wink at me."

Trevor throws his head back and lets out a hearty laugh. “Call it a thing I do when I see a highly intelligent, gorgeous woman that I’d like to get to know better. Am I the only one who feels that way?”

“Oh, I’m sure there are many men who feel that way,” I say with a laugh. “About me, that is.”

“Let me know how many so that I can get a game plan together.” Trevor takes a step toward me.

I resist the urge to step back. Trevor reaches out to me and lightly touches my bare right arm. The touch makes my nerve endings go crazy. I want Trevor so badly. *Oh my God, just kiss me again. No, do something more.* A good fuck would be nice. We can make love later. Yeah, let’s do that.

Before I say something stupid, I need to leave. “Um, I need to leave. It was nice meeting you—and being saved by you. Maybe we’ll meet again.”

Trevor frowns, and when I take a step back, he takes a step toward me.

I let him take my hand and stop me. He smirks at me. If this goes the way I want, Trevor will ask me for my phone number. Yes, I will give him my number and try to forget him until he calls me. If he never calls me, that’s his bad luck.

“Are you going to dinner?”

“No.” I look down when he rubs his thumb against the back of my hand. It feels so good. For a minute, I let myself daydream about Trevor doing the same thing to my nipple before taking it in his mouth and sucking it.

“Well, let’s get out of here and go somewhere quiet.” Trevor pulls my hand to his lips and kisses it.

That’s not where I want your lips. Ask me for my number and call me later. I blink. Did Trevor just suggest we go somewhere?

“We could grab a bite to eat, or maybe a drink if that’s what you want,” he continues.

After I snatch my hand away, I forcefully ask, “Did you just morph into Shawn?”

Trevor steps back. He looks confused. “Huh?”

“Are you a creeper who wants to take me to a hotel room or somewhere else where we can *get to know each other better* or something?”

“I’m asking you out on a date, not being a creeper like Shawn.”

“Hmm,” I say as I take a step forward. As I point at Trevor, I tell him, “Let’s get one thing straight. I’m not the average woman you’re used to pursuing. I—”

“I—”

“No, don’t interrupt. I’m not someone who will go somewhere like a hotel room or bar to *get to know you better.*”

Trevor nods. He looks like he’s trying not to laugh. That makes me angry. He’s not taking me seriously, and I will not put up with men who do not take me seriously. I already have enough of that in my life, and I’ll be damned if I will welcome more.

“I’m not sure how many...conquests you’ve had in your life, but if you want me to take you seriously, I have rules. First—”

Trevor grabs my hand and pulls me toward the corner of the room. He moves me against the wall and kisses me. My knees almost buckle as I deepen the kiss. I slide my palms against his chest.

He pulls away. “Now, I have my own rules. I woo you, and after I woo you, I spend the rest of our relationship making you a pleased woman—physically, mentally, and emotionally.”

Okay? Okay. What just happened? I stare at him, feeling like I have a stupid expression on my face. Slowly, I close my mouth.

Trevor’s eyebrow raises as he tells me, “Proceed with your...rules.”

Shit. I don't want to talk about rules. I want him to kiss me again. That kiss was better than when I kissed him. Shit. I sound like some lovesick teenager.

"You look so lovely when you've been thoroughly kissed." He laughs.

Say something.

"Um, well, the first rule," I say as I struggle to form a sentence. I just pray I actually sound unphased by Trevor's kiss. "If you want me to ever go anywhere with you, ask for my number. I never ask for a man's number or exchange numbers with you."

Trevor leans back and places his hands in his pants pockets. "What are your other rules?"

"Slow down, Trevor. Complete the first rule before leaping to the next one." I smile at him.

Trevor grins back. "All right." I watch him remove his phone from his pants pocket. He stares at me for a long time before asking, "May I have your number?"

After a short hesitation, I rattle off my number. Seconds later, I hear my ringtone going off in my clutch purse. Trevor slides his phone back in his pocket.

"The first rule is completed. What's next?"

I smirk and tell him, "Call me and find out."

Before he reacts, I slide past him and walk away. Although I think about going to dinner, I decide to walk through the small crowd at the gala and go to the bathroom. Once inside the powder room, I grab my phone from my purse. I text Jared and lie. I want him to think I met one of his employees, and the employee is taking me home. It's easier than telling him the truth. The truth will only make Jared worry. That means he'll ruin the progress made with Sam. I don't want that. I'll take a rideshare car home and think about the career advice Trevor gave me.

In the middle of texting Jared, Trevor's number pops on my screen. I hit the decline button and continue texting Jared.

While I wait for Jared to text me back, I add Trevor's number to my contacts list.

TREVOR

I stare down at my watch as I listen to Emma's voicemail recording. This is my second call. I plan to catch Emma before she leaves or goes to dinner. Unfortunately, my gorgeous Emma doesn't want to play nice.

"Emma, I like watching you walk away because you look damn good doing it. However, I don't expect my calls to go unanswered. Please pick up next time."

Rick passes me as I slide my phone into my pocket. He looks back and turns around. He grins as he tells me, "I'm glad you're still here. I saw you talking to Em—"

"Trev," Jared interrupts Rick and motions toward me but keeps walking toward us. He looks flustered. As he walks between Rick and me, he slaps me on the shoulder. "Did you see my sister?"

I point to myself as I watch Jared stare at me. "Me? Remember, I've never met her."

Jared stares at me for a moment like he's trying to figure something out. He shrugs and says, "Oh, yeah, that's right."

He turns to Rick. "Did you see—"

"Other than when she cursed at me like I'm her friend instead of her father? Can you believe she's hiding the fact that she's a Jackson? What am I doing this for—all this if my daughter's going to pretend I'm not important?"

I watch Jared look bored with the conversation. He quickly nods and tells him, "You know how she is. Besides, she was

trying to network, Dad. It's hard to do that when your dad is a bigwig at the company."

Networking, huh? I am the only one not here to network. Fuck. Dad's going to kill me about missing this *opportunity* to network. I look around the nearly empty gala. Yep, Dad would kill me. I plan to become San Francisco's mayor someday. Dad has other plans. If he knew I was here and didn't talk to any politicians, he'd kill me.

"Dad. Dad, I'm just worried because she said she'd left with one of my employees. Before I enjoy my evening, I want to make sure she's okay."

I blink and look at Jared as he waves his hands at Rick.

Rick motions toward me and says, "Ask him."

We watch Rick stalk away. Jared looks at me, and I shrug.



"*Y*ou missed dinner. Did you have an emergency?"

I listen to Mom rattle on about how I missed dinner at my parents' place, a dinner that I was invited to attend. Almost everyone has left the gala or is having dinner now, and Emma's not around.

"Mom," I interrupt her and give the answer she desires. "I'm sorry. I'm at a gala tonight. Jared wanted me to attend for some moral support."

"Oh," Mom says, and her voice is a little too high. "Is there another reason why you couldn't attend? Trust me. I had plenty of room at the dinner table."

I stroll out of the ballroom and into the hall as I make my mother wait for the answer she doesn't want. The hallway is more crowded than the ballroom. As I scan the crowd for Emma, I put Mom out of her misery. "Sorry, Mom. I attended the gala alone."

Mom sighs. "I'd love to have grandchildren before I die."

“I’d rather not talk about you dying.”

“You’re slowly killing me. Do you know that, Trevor? Every one of my friends has grandchildren, and I don’t.”

I chuckle because it sounds like Mom’s having a tantrum. It’s not hard to envision her on the couch, yanking at her pearl necklace and pouting. I shrug, even though I know she can’t see me. “Listen, Mom, that’s not my fault. You have two children. Badger Amy about children.”

“Amy is in school and too young to have children,” Mom says, sounding horrified.

Amy’s twenty-five years old and has had more one-night stands than me. I shake my head. Instead of telling her that, I tell her, “Mom, you’re not going anywhere. You’re young and vibrant and too young for grandchildren.”

“Ha,” she says. “You sound like your father. Please remember that Issac wants you to get married, too. It’s just that he wants one of those women for you who looks pretty and says nothing.”

I know what she means, but I can’t help but joke. “I’m not into mannequins, Mom.”

“Trevor, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, Mom, I know what you mean,” I tell her. Dad wants me to marry a trophy wife who’s perfect for helping climb the political ladder. If everything went Dad’s way, Mom would get her way. I’d have a trophy wife and two beautiful kids.

I end the call and text Emma. Is texting part of her rules? I shrug. When I slide my phone back into my pants pocket, it rings. Although I hope it’s Emma, I know she’s not the type who will call a man. At least, that’s what she said.

To my displeasure, Dad’s number shows up on my phone’s caller ID. I move my head from side-to-side as I think about ignoring the call. What’s the use? Mom, who doubles as a broken record, has already given him the details of my night. I exhale and click the answer button. It’s time for the misery to begin.

“Son.”

“Dad.”

“How many contacts did you make at CEW Enterprises? I bet not many. They aren’t known for their political affiliations over there.” Dad’s voice sounds dry and bored.

“No contacts, Dad. I took the night off.”

Dad doesn’t speak for a while. I take the phone from my ear to see if he ended the call. The time keeps ticking away on the screen. So, I put my phone back to my ear and wait.

“I hear you didn’t make your mommy happy by finding a woman to fuck. How about a candidate for your trophy wife? Did you find one?”

I slide my hand into my pocket and walk toward the exit. Outside, the crisp, cold air hits my face and makes me shiver. A couple of people walk around me. “Dad, I’m not sure who is worse, you or Mom. At least I know why she’s nagging me.”

“Seize the opportunity to become the next mayor of this city, Trevor. We’ve got to get your name out there before the next election. You’re doing yourself no favors by not making contacts and not getting married.”

“First, I will be the mayor, but it will be on my own time. *We* aren’t doing anything. It’s on me.” I inhale the crisp air, but it doesn’t reach my lungs.

“Find a nice bitch to marry, and I’ll do the rest. In two years, I’ll make you mayor. Right now, a single man can’t get elected in this town.”

I laugh. “Dad, either you’re behind in the times or something else is wrong. If I decided to run for mayor, no one’s going to think I’m gay because I don’t have a woman at my side.”

Dad clears his throat. “Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Homosexual.”

I stare at the dark sky, wishing Dad was standing across from me so that I could punch him. He's met every woman I've dated. He gave me the sex talk. He caught me fucking in high school, and I get this question?

“Well?”

“Fuck off, Dad. You know the answer.” I start pointing as I talk as if he were standing in front of me to accuse. “You know what's so fucked up? I know you want to be mayor, but you're too terrified to run. Maybe you have a deep, dark secret that prevents you—”

“You're serious?” Dad asks me. He sounds angry. “You know what? Don't answer that. You were born to be a politician, but you take every crazy avenue to avoid it.”

“I was born to be happy, Dad. It's as simple as that.”

“I know you better than you do, son. You're scared. You're pretending you're planning, but you know you'll never run for mayor.”

“Dad, I—” I stop speaking when I hear dead silence. I look down at my phone's screen and see that he's ended the call.

I put my phone in my pocket and turn to search for a valet. I'll give Emma until tomorrow before I figure out my next step. Tonight, I'll go home, drink a beer, and watch some sports. A young woman dressed in yellow and black approaches me, she asks, “Did you have your ticket?”

I nod and search the inside of my suit jacket pocket for the valet ticket.

“Do you have your ticket, mister?”

“Yes,” I say with a nod, still searching for my ticket. The valet woman walks away from me to assist a couple standing by the valet podium. I look past the couple and notice Emma standing alone opposite of the door. She glances at her phone, which she's holding in her left hand, periodically.

I grab my phone and call her. Emma looks at her phone and stares at the street. I listen to her phone ring before going to voicemail. She glances at her phone again.

For a moment, I decided to leave her alone. Obviously, she's playing hard to get, or she's changed her mind about letting me get to step two. I press my lips into a thin line and glance around the deserted street. She's waiting for someone. Who? Hmm. Come to think about it, Emma never said she was single. She knows more about me than I do about her. That's not good.

Damn. What's Emma's last name again? Yep, I'm off my game. Well, the situation isn't dire. Emma's playing hard to get—maybe. That's fine. I've dealt with worse. Is she playing me?

I shove my phone back in my pocket. The idea of texting her and telling her my location crosses my mind.

Hell, if she won't answer my calls, why should I give her the heads up about where I am?

“Sir, have you found your ticket?”

I shake my head as the young woman approaches me with her hand extended. She nods and walks past me. When I glance back, I see more people exiting the gala.

The dark sky seems even darker, even more mysterious, when the street lights come on. A person strolls by me and to a car that arrives for them. I slowly close the gap between Emma and me. She doesn't notice me. Instead, she continues to look ahead.

The closer I get to Emma, the more it looks like she's lost in thought. I stand less than a half-foot away from Emma, and she continues staring at the empty street. The cool breeze blows strands of her wavy, black hair into her face. Emma doesn't move them. Instead, she lets her hair fall from her face when the soft wind stops blowing.

“Is he late?” I slide my hands in my pants pockets and wait for her to look at me.

It takes a couple of seconds before she turns and glances at me. Emma flashes me a tight-lipped smile and stares at the empty street again. “He?”

“Well,” I say. I pause to step beside her and turn to look at the street, too. “The way you’re ignoring my calls, there must be a motherfucker you’re dating.”

Emma glances at me. “I don’t date motherfuckers.”

“Oh, you’re waiting for Shawn to pick you up.”

She turns to me and looks me up and down. “Don’t be stupid. Quit fishing for information and just ask me.”

I chuckle and clear my throat. “All right. Who are you waiting for?”

“My ride.” She turns away. “Goodnight.”

There’s a long pause. Okay, let’s try again.

“Did I do something to insult you?”

“As I said, I’m not a woman who’ll follow you to some hotel or bar.”

“Yep, I got that when you turned me down. Please—” I stop speaking as the wind blows more of Emma’s hair into her face. Instead of waiting for the wind to stop, I gently take my index finger and move the lock of her hair behind her ear. Emma gives me a sideways glance. “Forgive me. I fucked up. I wasn’t going to have sex with you or force you to do anything horrible. I sincerely wanted to get to know you better.”

Emma remains silent.

“I know you’re an intelligent, gorgeous woman, and I’d like to get to know you better.”

Emma doesn’t say anything.

“Is the silent treatment the only way you can tell me you’re dating someone?”

EMMA

*A*s I wait for my ride, I sigh. It's cold as hell, and I regret not bringing a wrap or shawl with me. I thought I'd be in and out of Jared's car and wouldn't need one. Now, my bare arms feel like they're stuck in ice.

I stand close to the curb so that I can dip into the rideshare vehicle when it shows up. The night's sky has darkened since I left the gala. My mind keeps going back to one person—Dane.

My chest feels heavy, and my shoulders slump. Guilt weighs heavily on my heart. It's okay that guilt affects my body this way since I can't feel my arms. I look down at my phone. At least, my phone hasn't fallen out of my hand. It's cold, too. My phone hasn't chimed yet, which means my ridesharing driver is still en route.

Dane.

Sometimes, I feel psycho. At the gala, I faced down my father and didn't fall apart. I flirted with and kissed Trevor, all to get rid of Shawn. Now, I'm outside, alone and sad. I can't stop thinking about Dane. Why? Trevor has me thinking about Dane.

Am I ready for a relationship? It's been a while since Dane's death. How long is enough time before dating again? There's one thing I know. I'm ready to have sex. Does that make me a terrible person? I want sex, but I'm not ready for love or a relationship.

I miss Dane. I want to change everything that happened. If I could change things, then Dane would have escorted me to

the gala. He would have saved me from Shawn.

With a sigh, I glance at my phone again. My driver, who is in a red Tesla, is still minutes away.

Dane.

“Is he late?”

Trevor?

I don't turn around for a couple of seconds because I'm not ready to ignore my heavy heart and stop thinking about Dane. Slowly, I turn and glance at Trevor. I flash him a tight-lipped smile and turn to watch for my driver.

“He?”

“Well, the way you're ignoring my calls, there must be a motherfucker you're dating.”

I glance at Trevor, noting the hint of anger in his voice. “I don't date motherfuckers.”

“Oh, you're waiting for Shawn to pick you up.”

I look at him from head to toe and back again. As I roll my eyes, I tell him, “Don't be stupid. Quit fishing for information and just ask me.”

Trevor chuckles and clears his throat. “All right. Who are you waiting for?”

“My ride.” I turn away. “Goodnight.”

There's a long pause.

“Did I do something to insult you?” Trevor's voice sounds less angry and more confused.

No. It's just that he's not Dane. Right now, I need Dane. I wish I knew how to change tonight and put Dane in his place. How can I tell him that? He wouldn't understand. He'd probably tell me to move on like Tonya tells me to do. Instead of telling the truth, I lie. “As I said, I'm not a woman who'll follow you to some hotel or bar.”

“Yep, I got that when you turned me down. Please—” Trevor stops talking as the wind blows. The wind blows my

hair into my face again. I jump as I feel Trevor's index finger brush against my cheek as he pushes my hair behind my ear. My breath catches in my throat as a shiver—a sexual shiver—races through my body. It penetrates my vagina.

I give him a sideways glance when he's silent for too long.

“Forgive me. I fucked up. I wasn't going to have sex with you or force you to do anything horrible. I sincerely wanted to get to know you better.”

I don't say anything.

“I know you're an intelligent, gorgeous woman, and I'd like to get to know you better.”

I remain silent.

“Is the silent treatment the only way you can tell me you're dating someone?”

“Is there someone waiting for you at home?” I ask as a change of subject.

“Only my cat and a cold beer.”

I pressed my lips together to suppress a laugh. It lifts my heart a little. I stand more erect as I think about Trevor sitting in a living room with his cat in his lap and a beer in his hand. After a long pause, I clear my throat, trying to sound distant. “You have a cat?”

“Yep. Charlie.” He sounds proud as he proclaims, “She shows me how much she loves me by ignoring the hell out of me when I'm at home.”

A car zooms past, and I glance at him before looking in the opposite direction to smile. “You should be used to being ignored, then.”

“Hmm, by Charlie's standards, you must love the hell out of me, too.”

Oh my God, you're killing me. I look at Trevor and bite the inside of my lip until I can successfully stifle my laughter. I tell him, “No, I'm telling you goodnight. Now, goodnight.”

Trevor chuckles. He remains silent for so long that I look at him. Our eyes meet, and I feel lured to him. Trevor gazes at me like I'm his prey, and it makes me feel an intense longing to run until I decide I want him to capture me. His eyes become hooded and mysterious. It makes me wonder if he's trying to figure me out or undress me in his mind.

Dane.

I inhale, exhale, and turn away. Now more cars are passing by us, but my rideshare app hasn't sounded yet. Although I try to think about Dane, he's disappearing from my memory. Instead, I want to get to know Trevor better. I want to date. I want to stop wishing for Dane's return. Am I ready to start anew?

"Trevor," I tell him as I glance down at my phone. My driver should be here in minutes. "I'm waiting for my rideshare vehicle."

"Which one?"

"One you know."

"I know two."

"It's an easy choice." I glance at him and smile. When he doesn't respond, I tell him, "Why don't you go home or find that friend you discussed earlier?"

"I'm not going to let a beautiful woman wait outside alone."

He unbuttons his suit jacket and shrugs it off. I jump as he drapes his suit jacket around my shoulders. I grab his suit jacket and pull it closed. It feels like a warm blanket. "I'm not cold."

"Good. I didn't see the goosebumps on your arms, either."

My shoulders slump, and I roll my eyes and look at him. "Shut the fuck up."

Trevor laughs, and I can't stop laughing. My phone dings, and I see my driver heading toward me. I smile and shrug off his jacket, extending it toward him. "Thank you."

He looks at the car now parked in front of us. My driver opens his door, but Trevor holds his hand up to stop him. Trevor opens the backdoor for me. I don't slide into the car until he takes his suit jacket.

"Give me a call tomorrow, and I might answer." I wink at him.

"I'll remember that." Trevor winks back.

I settle in the middle of the back seat and wait for Trevor to close the door. Instead, he slides into the car next to me and slams the door. I frown and look at him.

"What are you doing?"

"Sitting next to you."

"Don't be stupid," I tell him. "You know what I mean."

Trevor grins and doesn't say anything as the driver locks the door and drives down the street. I stare forward, but I feel Trevor staring at me. Although I tell myself not to do it, I glance at Trevor. He's still looking at me. His blue eyes are smoldering. I press my lips together to stop a smile.

"Where do you live?" Trevor asks me.

When I tell him, he raises his eyebrows and exhales. "Okay."

I look at him and say in a huff, "It's not like I live in the ghetto."

"Yep. Well, I need to do something about that."

I glance at him.

Listen, Trevor. I pay my way. I don't depend on Jared or Dad. Yes, they are wealthy, but I'm not. I'm not in the trailer park, but even if I were, I'd be proud to be there because I'd be working hard to get a better life. Current circumstances aren't lifelong destinations. That means I...

I exhale loudly and cross my arms over my breasts. I don't tell Trevor what's on my mind. If I decided to explain, I'd have to explain Jared and Dad. I'm not ready for Trevor to know Dad's position at CEW Enterprises. Instead, I ask, "How

are you getting home? You can use my rideshare app if you want.”

Trevor grabs my hand and kisses it. When I look at him, he says, “It’s my responsibility to worry about how you get home, not vice versa.”

I bite my bottom lip as my stomach flutters. Trevor lets go of my hand when the car slows to a stop. Our driver exits the vehicle and opens the backdoor. Trevor leaves the car, and I slowly exit, too. I walk up my narrow stairs and stand on my tiny porch to fish out my phone from my purse. As soon as I find it, I give my driver five stars and a tip.

“Your keys.”

I look up at Trevor and see him on the top step with his hand extended. He’s now wearing his suit jacket. He has loosened his tie.

“Is that a question or a statement?” I ask with a shrug.

“Quit being a smart ass,” Trevor says in a huff and joins me on my tiny porch. “Hand me your keys.”

I fish out my keys and hand them to him. Trevor passes me and holds up the four keys. He looks at me, and I ask, “What?”

“Do you want me to try each key, or do you want to give me the heads up on which one opens your front door?”

Instead of answering him, I cross my arms over my chest and stare at him. Trevor turns to the door and tries each key until the lock turns. He enters and leaves the door open. It takes minutes for Trevor to emerge from my apartment.

I can’t help but joke. “Are you done with your nosiness?”

“Your place is safe.” He places the keys in my palm.

Trevor watches me throw my keys back in my purse. I rock back and forth as I avoid his gaze. This is the part where I thank him again, and he leaves, but I don’t want him to go. He slides his hand against my upper arm, making me shiver. His hand moves to my chin, and his thumb rubs the edge of my jawline. I lick my bottom lip and force myself to look at him. I see him lick his bottom lip and lean forward.

I tilt my head back, and my lips part. My breath catches in my throat because I can feel a ghost of his lips on mine. Oh my God, I need to taste Trevor again. No, I need him inside me. Fuck. Should I go against all my rules, invite him in my home, and demand that he fuck me?

Trevor's lips brush against my left cheek, and he pulls away. I look down, disappointed that he chose to be a gentleman. As I clear my throat, I look at him.

He briefly smiles before he requests, "Sit with me until my car comes?"

I watch Trevor's hand drop to his side. He steps back and turns away from me. Slowly, he pulls his phone from his pants pocket. I study him as he takes a step forward, turns, and takes a step in the opposite direction. I imagine him pacing in a boardroom, taking wide strides as he waits for his caller to answer. However, my porch is so small that we look like a crowd standing here.

"Why don't you just use my app? Don't you have a—"

Trevor turns away, speaking into his phone. "Yes. Don, my car is at the gala I attended. You know where my extra set of keys is. Pick it up and meet me here."

When I walk to my opened front door, Trevor turns and, within a couple of steps, closes the gap between us.

He looks to his left like he's torn between listening to the caller and stopping me from leaving. I step forward and touch his chest to get his attention. I motion to him that I'm going to my apartment to change, and I'll be back. Trevor frowns, and a second later, he nods before giving me a thumbs up.

Once I enter my tiny living room, I kick off my high heels and go upstairs. My bedroom is the tiniest room in my apartment. It's bigger than a kitchen nook but not by too much. I close the window and pull down the blinds before undressing. My bedroom is simple. My full-sized bed stands against the center wall, my dresser stands on the opposite side, and a flat-screen is mounted to the wall. I keep it simple because I plan to move by next year.

My heart pounds and stomach flutters as I think about Trevor, who is likely still standing on my stoop. I can't deny that he's an old-school gentleman. Dane never checked my apartment or accompanied home.

Quickly, I grab some sweatpants and a t-shirt and get dressed. I slip on my fuzzy socks and walk to the bathroom, which is across the hall. I remove my makeup and wash my face. Before leaving the bathroom, I put my hair in a ponytail.

As I walk downstairs, I bite my bottom lip because a thought occurs to me. Should I have removed my makeup? Shit. I prefer the natural look, but I never think about my looks anymore. Do I look better with makeup? Will Trevor think I look better with makeup?

Trevor stands in the doorway, still on the phone, watching me. I hold on to the rail to make sure I don't fall. He's making me nervous as fuck because he's devouring me with his eyes. Shit. Am I imagining things?

"If you don't stop talking, man, you'll never get over here," Trevor says as I reach the bottom of the stairs. He scratches the back of his neck and turns away from me. He sits on the top of the stairs and slides his cell phone into his pocket.

I leave my front door slightly ajar and join him on the steps. "I thought you'd be gone by the time I finished changing."

Trevor looks at me and asks, "Are you disappointed?"

"If I didn't want to join you, I would've taken longer."

He stares ahead. My apartment is on the street with an incline. Thus, cars like the one passing us always drive slower than they do on any other road.

Trevor smiles. "That's encouraging."

I press my lips together. Was that a snide remark or Trevor's opinion of me playing hard to get? I study him. Although I could make a big deal about the comment, I shrug. Let's see where the conversation goes.

“I’m sure I won’t keep you long,” Trevor says, interrupting the silence.

As I cross my arms over my knees, I decide to tell the truth. “I don’t mind the company. It’s still early.”

Trevor chuckles and looks at me for a long time. I blink and look away as he comments, “I didn’t think you could look more beautiful than when we first met.”

“How many drinks did you have at the gala?” I point to my face. “I’m not wearing makeup.”

“And you’re gorgeous as hell.” Trevor leans back and nods at me. “This is how I love seeing my women.”

“Not dolled up?”

“Nah. If a woman looks gorgeous while chilling in regular clothes, that’s a huge plus.” He looks away. “I’m not the type of man who likes an image.”

“An image?” I turn to face him.

He nods. “It pisses me off when I have to wait around for a woman to put on her makeup and fancy clothes and shit like that. I know how beautiful she is. She doesn’t have to dress up for the world.”

I place my palm against my face and put my elbow on the ground. “Here’s a little FYI. Women typically dress for other women, not for men. That means they are competing against each other for phantom attention.”

“Interesting.”

“I don’t see the point, though.” I half-shrug. “I don’t care what other people say or think about me.”

“Really?” Trevor sounds intrigued as he sits more erect and places his elbows on his knees. He looks back. “I haven’t gotten there yet.”

“Trust me,” I tell him, “It wasn’t easy. I spent four years trying to get the disgusting shit Dad kept telling me out of my head.”

We look at each other. Silence captures us as we stop talking. I want to look away, but looking into his blue eyes feels like falling in a warm pool. I bite my bottom lip and study Trevor. It feels like I'm missing something.

Trevor looks away. I wait a couple of minutes before I sit up and place my palm on his lower arm. He grabs my hand and kisses my palm.

TREVOR

“*Y*es. Don, my car is at the gala I attended. You know where my extra set of keys is. Pick it up and meet me here.”

I turn to the front door and see Emma standing at the entrance of her apartment. I close the gap between us. I intend to stop her from leaving, but Don won't shut the hell up.

“Yeah, and while I have your attention,” Don rambles on, “let's talk about buying that social media app instead of creating one that competes with it.”

Don is my assistant, but he acts more like a business partner. I raise my index finger to tell Emma to stop, but she steps in front of me and places her hand against my chest. I stop breathing and listening for a second as I talk my dick out of it's growing erection. Damn, it's been too long since I've made love to a woman. Oh, damn, it's been a while since I fucked a woman, too.

Emma steps back, makes these big, sweeping gestures, and points to her apartment and herself. I frown, but seconds later, I understand what Emma's saying. She's going to her apartment to change her clothes. I nod and give her the thumbs-up sign.

“Are you even listening to me, bro?”

“Nope.” I walk around the small porch, feeling like a caged animal. Before Don can say anything, I tell him, “Listen, motherfucker. Grab my keys and take as long as you can to get here.”

“Take a long time? Are you with a woman?”

“You sound like you’re back in high school.”

Don lets out a loud, cringe-worthy laugh. “Bro, you’re deflecting. Is she hot?”

I shake my head, wishing I could shove him right now. I scratch my temple before I yank at my tie. “Just do what I tell you. Make it close to an hour or so if you can. She’s changing.”

“Changing?”

“Yep. If I’m lucky, Emma will come down in jeans or shorts and a t-shirt or something.”

“Shit, bro, what if she changes into a dress?”

I’ll be disappointed, but nothing will stop me from making Emma mine. Instead of telling the truth, I tell Don, “Just get my car, man. I’ll talk to you when you get here.”

I slide my phone into my pocket and untie my tie. Slowly, I unbutton the top two buttons of my dress shirt. It seems like Emma left hours ago, so I look at my watch. She left fifteen minutes ago.

Instead of pacing back and forth, I stand in front of the opened front door and stare into Emma’s apartment. Although I’d love to go inside and explore her apartment like a visitor at a museum, I resist. When I went inside earlier, it was only to do a security check. That means I just walked around in a defensive posture, ready to fuck someone up as I briskly went through Emma’s place.

My phone rings. I pull my phone from my pocket. It’s Jared.

“What’s up, man? Has Sam given you some yet?”

He sounds out of breath. “Have you seen my sister?”

“No.”

“Dad said he saw you talking with her. I just want to make sure she didn’t leave with some of my rogue employees.”

I'm staring down at the step between her porch and her apartment's entrance when I hear squeaking. I've listened to the sound before, so I look at the stairs. The top stair squeaked when I stepped on it earlier. It also squeaked when Emma stepped on it as she walked upstairs.

I consume every inch of her body with my eyes. Hot damn, yes. Emma's dressed in a t-shirt, sweatpants, and socks. Her wavy hair is in a ponytail. Just what I want to see.

"No, man. I didn't talk to your sister. The woman I'm talking to now took a rideshare home."

"Oh," Jared says. His voice seems suddenly distant, so I assume he's talking to Sam or someone else.

"Hey," I shout to get Jared's attention.

"What?"

"What's your sister's name again?"

There's a long pause because it sounds like Jared's talking to someone else again. When he doesn't respond, I end the call. Just when I slide my phone in my pants pocket, it rings again. This time, it's Don calling.

"Bro, you think you need an hour? I've already got your car."

"If you don't stop talking, man, you'll never get over here," I say as Emma reaches the bottom of the stairs. I scratch the back of my neck and turn away from her. This time, when I end the call, I put my phone on silent. I sit on the top of the stairs and slide my cell phone into my pocket.

"I thought you'd be gone by the time I finished changing."

Emma sits next to me. For a minute, I tense as I search the tone of her voice for the meaning behind her question. Emma's hard to figure out sometimes. The shit she says drips with sarcasm, but I'm not sure if there's any hint of truth or raw emotions. So, I look at her and ask, "Are you disappointed?"

"If I didn't want to join you, I would've taken longer."

I look at the street ahead. A car passes us, slowly traveling down the road. I smile because I determine that she was joking. “That’s encouraging.”

There’s a long silence.

“I’m sure I won’t keep you long.” I rub my nose with my index finger.

Emma crosses her arms over her knees. “I don’t mind the company. It’s still early.”

I chuckle and look at Emma for a long time. She blinks and looks away from me as I say, “I didn’t think you could look more beautiful than when we first met.”

“How many drinks did you have at the gala?” Emma points to her face. “I’m not wearing makeup.”

“And you’re gorgeous as hell.” I lean back and nod at her. “This is how I love seeing my women.”

“Not dolled up?”

“Nah. If a woman looks gorgeous while chilling in regular clothes, that’s a huge plus.” I look away. “I’m not the type of man who likes an image.”

“An image?” Emma turns to face me.

I nod. “It pisses me off when I have to wait around for a woman to put on her makeup and fancy clothes and shit like that. I know how beautiful she is. She doesn’t have to dress up for the world.”

Emma shifts her position by placing her palm against her face and her elbow on the porch floor. “Here’s a little FYI. Women typically dress for other women, not for men. That means they are competing against each other for phantom attention.”

I move my head from left to right. It sounds true, but I’m not going to debate it. “Interesting.”

“I don’t see the point, though.” She half-shrugs. “I don’t care what other people say or think about me.”

“Really?” I sit more erect and place my elbows on my knees. I look back at Emma. “I haven’t gotten there yet.”

“Trust me. It wasn’t easy. I spent four years trying to get the disgusting shit Dad kept telling me out of my head.”

We look at each other. Silence kidnaps our conversation because of me. Although I stare at Emma, my mind is at my parents’ house. Emma’s dad told her some disgusting shit. Well, Dad is just as fucked up. I watch Emma bite her bottom lip and study me. She looks nervous, but seconds later, she stares at me in concern.

I look away. It’s fucking stupid to say I have a daddy issue. So, I try to think of something else to say, but nothing comes to mind. Emma sits up and gently places her palm on my lower arm. I grab her hand and kiss her palm.

“You know,” Emma breaks the silence again as she places her chin on my shoulder, “I left for LA when Dad hit me during an argument. The fucked up part is that I don’t remember exactly what the argument was about, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Why doesn’t it matter?”

“It doesn’t matter because I know the topic was the same old thing. I’m not good enough, and Dad is disappointed in me.” Emma sighs. “Honestly, I’d rather not go into the details about the type of shit he says because what’s important is that I got away from Dad long enough to work on shit.”

“Well, it’s not like I can flee the city for a while.”

Emma slides her arms around my arm and leans back. “I’m no therapist, but I’ll take a stab at it. Does your dad tear you down?”

“Yep.”

“You never meet his expectations?”

I move my left hand from side-to-side. “Right now, Dad has this dream of me becoming mayor—”

“Of this city?”

“Yep, you’re looking at the next mayor of San Francisco.” I chuckle.

“But you don’t want to, huh?”

“It’s not that.” I shake my head. “I plan to run, but on my schedule.”

“You told him that, right? He doesn’t listen, though.”

I lean back, and Emma stops hugging my arm. “He knows, but he has his schedule—a schedule that includes me getting a fucking trophy wife.”

Emma laughed. “What the fuck? You’re serious. Shit. Does your dad know trophy wives are usually part of a fake marriage?”

I stare at her for a long time with a grin on my face. I’ve discussed this with Amy, my sister, and my ex, Maria, and they both tell me that love comes later. I don’t believe in marrying the *perfect* woman and hoping to fall in love with her later.

“Dad doesn’t give a shit. He has this fucking idea of being Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.” I pause when Emma looks at me in confusion. “He was President Kennedy’s father. Dad thinks he’ll be some great political patriarch, and I’m his golden ticket.”

She leans back and crosses her arms over her breasts. “Well, that answers my next question.”

“What was your next question?”

“Why doesn’t he run for political office himself?” Emma stares me down like she is pissed. “You need to do something. Don’t be stupid and let him force you to find some trophy wife.”

She sounds like Jared. I chuckle. “That’s easier said than done. I did that tonight, and now Dad believes I’m gay.”

She pressed her lips together. I guess to stop laughing. “I don’t want to joke about your dad if he has some mental issue or mental deterioration or something.”

“He’s well.”

“Well, he’s stupid as hell.”

I shrug and grin. Instead of agreeing with Emma, I tell her, “You love that word.”

“Stupid?”

“Yep.”

Emma shrugs and smiles. “It’s my catchphrase. If we’re going to get to know each other, you’d better get used to it.”

I chuckle. “Noted.”

Silence creeps through our conversation as I think about Emma’s possible new perception of me. Does she think I’m a weak man because of Dad? Hell, I think I’m a weak motherfucker because I can’t put Dad in his place. Damn, do other adult kids have this problem with their parents?

“You know what you need to do?”

After a long moment, I study her and ask, “What?”

“Teach your father a lesson. Play a trick on him like—I don’t know.” She places her palm under her chin and elbow on her thigh. “Do something.”

“Would you play a trick on your father to make him understand he needed to leave you alone?”

She plays with her ponytail and looks like she’s pondering the question. After a long time, Emma says, “My daddy issues escalated when there was physical violence. So, I’d say no. I had to leave—and I keep my distance now—as self-preservation.”

I nod. Damn, she’s smart. “Well, I don’t know what I could do.”

Emma rubs my upper arm and says, “If there is any way I can help you, let me know.”

We stare at each other. I don’t confuse Emma’s stare and smile for anything other than what it is—supportive. It kills me. I break our eye contact and lean forward. Slowly, I close

the distance between us until I can feel her breath on my lips. When Emma doesn't lean back, I brush my lips against hers. I attempt to remind her why I'm here, and it's not to help me resolve my problem with Dad.

Our kiss is light. No tongue. I wait for Emma to pull away, but she presses her lips against mine again. Her hand caresses my cheek. Emma deepens the kiss. Her tongue slides in my mouth, but I pull away. Once I do, I instantly regret the move.

When I make eye contact, I realize she is staring at me with a questioning look. "I have to complete rule one before we kiss again."

She frowns. Seconds later, Emma's expression changes like a fog lifted and she heard what I said. "That's fair."

There's silence again. For whatever reason, Shawn pops in my mind. I rub my eyes and smile.

"Maybe you have a point," I tell Emma. "We make a good team."

"What am I missing? We haven't had sex."

My head bounces back as if she'd punched me. I look at her, "Excuse me?"

"You said a good team. We haven't had sex."

I shake my head, still trying to understand.

My reaction must anger her. She inhales and exhales like she might to calm herself. After a moment, she comments, "Okay, my mind goes into the gutter every once and a while. I defer to your non-sexual mind."

"No matter how long we know each other, I'll never get the correlation between team and sex." I can't help but rib her about it, "Making love isn't a team sport."

Emma raises her right eyebrow and tells me, "Obviously, you're not doing it right."

I chuckle. "Is that so?"

"Yes," she says with confidence.

“Hmm, and you’re not talking about orgies or threesomes?” She moves away from me and stares at me like I’m tainted. Her reaction makes me laugh. “I’m clean, and I don’t participate in orgies or threesomes.”

Emma wrinkles her nose and gives me a disgusted look. “How do I know you’re not a ball of disease?”

“Ball of disease?” I chuckle. “Well, with orgies and threesomes off the table, contradicting your claim is simple. I’m the star of the show. So, as long as we’re making love, you won’t think about anyone else.”

She bites her bottom lip, and her eyes widen. I wonder what she’s thinking. A second later, she tugs at her ponytail and says, “Um, okay.”

I brush my index finger against her cheek, and she looks at me. My voice softens as I tell her, “Lovemaking isn’t about a team sport. It’s two simple things. We communicate how much we love each other, and I make sure you have the time of your life.”

“Time of my life, huh?”

“Yep,” I boast. My euphoria is short-lived when I see Don parallel parking across the street. When he waves, Emma looks at me.

“Is your ride here?” she asks.

I nod and frown. After a sigh, I sadly say, “Yep.”

Emma stands and crosses her arms. I take my time to rise. She walks down the stairs and to the sidewalk. Shawn pops into my mind again before something occurs to me. Emma and I did a great job convincing Shawn that we were together. Why can’t we do the same thing with Dad? I could invite Mom and Dad to dinner, and Emma and I will convince them we’re together.

Slowly, I take my time to join her on the sidewalk. It would be a chance to get to know Emma better—and on my terms instead of her rules.

“I think you can help me with my situation with Dad.”

Emma smiles. "I'll be happy to help. What do you need me to do, call him stupid to his face?"

"No, pretend to be my future wife." I smirk.

EMMA

Trevor's index finger brushes against my cheek and makes my body warm with anticipation. I look at him, and my heart skips a beat. His voice softens, and he tells me, "Lovemaking isn't about a team sport. It's two simple things. We communicate how much we love each other, and I make sure you have the time of your life."

Sex is a team sport because two people are connecting and making each other feel good. To achieve that ultimate moment, each person works together. I planned to explain that to him, but his explanation makes me fantasize. What does that feel like—sex with Trevor?

"Time of my life, huh?" I stop thinking about taking his clothes off when I notice him looking at me.

"Yep."

I roll my eyes because he sounds like he's bragging. A car slows to a halt across the street. I stifle a gasp because it's a Rolls-Royce Sweptail. It's the same car Jared drives, but it's black instead of red.

The driver rolls down the window and waves in our direction. He looks like he's my age or maybe a year younger. He wears his baseball cap backward, and he has a goofy expression on his face. He smiles in our direction. I look at Trevor and see him frown and nod.

"Is your ride here?" I ask.

"Yep."

I stand and cross my arms, but Trevor doesn't move immediately. He looks like he's thinking about something. Although I guess I should wait and let Trevor accompany me down the stairs, I walk down the stairs to the sidewalk.

What is Trevor thinking? He slowly walks down the stairs and joins me on the sidewalk.

"I think you can help me with my situation with Dad."

I smile. "I'll be happy to help. What do you need me to do, call him stupid to his face?"

"No, pretend to be my future wife." He smirks.

Umm, what?

I open my mouth to speak. I planned to tell Trevor I'd be happy to do just that, but his words slowly seep into my mind. I close my mouth and stare at him when I understand how he wants my help. I feel my eyes widen as I stare at Trevor's sexy smirk.

I cock my head to the side and continue staring at him.

"We made the perfect team earlier when we convinced Shawn we were together. You were actually very convincing." Trevor rubs his thumb against his bottom lip.

"Trevor, I'm not ready to be anyone's wife." I shake my head because I hear my words, but they're not what I want to say. I was thinking about saying something about how his idea is crazy. Honestly, I want to provide moral support, not be a supporting actress in a family drama.

Trevor nods. "Yep?"

I shake my head. "Nope."

He crosses his arms across his chest. "Why?"

"I'm not an actress. I don't act."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I told you. I'm a receptionist."

Trevor slaps his hands together. "Perfect. You'll pull it off."

I put my hand on his shoulder. Maybe he's had too much to drink. "I said re-cep-tion-ist."

He shoves his hands in his pockets and takes a deep breath. He looks impatient as he exhales. "Do you act when you're at work?"

"Well," I pause. There's no way I can say no. Part of my job is being kind and maintaining my coolness when I want to curse out a motherfucker. That fact doesn't make me an actress or even someone with acting talent. "Yeah, but..."

"And you did a fantastic job with Shawn. The fucker thought we were getting married." He grabs my waist and pulls me to him. Before I can dispute his claim, he continues, "All you have to do is act the same way with Dad, and you'll help me get leverage in my situation."

I nod but say, "That was a couple of minutes. You're talking about how long?"

"One dinner party. We can fool Dad one time, and I'll be grateful."

"I just don't know if I can pull it off. If you'd told me beforehand what would happen with Shawn, I would have freaked."

Trevor nods as if he understands, but he says, "How about this, I will host a dinner party, and we will pretend we're engaged. If it works, we'll do the same thing at a party with my dad."

"Like a dress rehearsal?"

"Like a dress rehearsal."

I press my lips together as I think about it. Trevor helped me. Why shouldn't I help him? Slowly, I nod.

Trevor nods. "Is that a yes?"

"Yes, it's a yes."

He pumps his fist in the air and grins. Quickly, he pulls me against him, and he kisses me. The kiss is so quick that I hardly have time to enjoy it.

“Tomorrow,” Trevor tells me. “Answer your phone, or you’ll find me sitting on your doorstep.”

I watch him walk toward the street. “You’re calling me about the dinner party tomorrow?”

“Nope, I’m completing your first rule.”



“Emma, before you leave, can you schedule an appointment for Mrs. Shaw?”

I looked from my ringing phone to my boss and the elderly, nice Mrs. Shaw. It’s almost time for me to leave work. I’m standing at my cluttered desk with my purse on my shoulder and phone in my hand.

My boss gives me that snobby look of fake pity as she says, “I know you’re about to leave soon. Thank you.”

I stare down at my phone. It’s Trevor.

“Mrs. Shaw, can you sit over there for a minute?” I ask as I point to the left side of the room. The office is medium-sized with two rows of chairs to my left. My desk is opposite the office door. Behind me are two other doors on the opposite side of my desk. My boss walks to the door behind me. That’s her office.

If I don’t take Trevor’s call, I know he’ll think I’m playing games. I’m not. Although I’d love to see him sitting on my doorstep when I arrive home. I can’t take personal phone calls at work, either.

Mrs. Shaw doesn’t move. I smile at her, and she smiles back. She can hear me, but she continues to stare at me. I place my purse on my desk and sit down. I’m tempted to dump my phone in my purse and attend to Mrs. Shaw. My phone stops ringing. I glance at Mrs. Shaw and quickly text Trevor.

“I’m still at work. Can’t talk. Please call back in fifteen minutes.” I leave a ton of emojis, too.

My phone sounds. I ignore it and attend to Mrs. Shaw.

“What day do you want to come in?” I open my laptop and hit the power button.

Mrs. Shaw shrugs. “Ah, I’m thinking next Thursday, but I don’t know. Maybe next Friday. What days do you have available?”

My laptop reboots. I sigh as I watch my laptop indicate the percentage of applications rebooting. This is not happening to me. I glance over at the digital clock. In fourteen minutes, Trevor will call me.

“You know what? Why don’t you give me all the dates available, and I’ll tell you which day I want?” Mrs. Shaw smiles at me.

I want to flash her my middle finger, but I fake a smile at her. “I can call you tomorrow, Mrs. Shaw. I will go over all the available appointments with you.”

Mrs. Shaw gasps and grins. “Oh, that’s so nice. You’d do that for me?”

Of course, Mrs. Shaw, it’s no problem. I’d rather throw you off the Golden Gate Bridge, but I won’t tell you that. Instead, I nod. “Yes, Mrs. Shaw, I’d be happy to do that for you.”

“Well.” Mrs. Shaw nods, giving me hope. “I’d love to do that.”

I sigh and smile. *Thank you, Mrs. Shaw. I take back the desire to throw you off the bridge.* “Thank you, Mrs. Shaw.” I lower my laptop screen.

“But, I’d rather just make my appointment now.” Mrs. Shaw grins at me.

In about ten minutes, Trevor will call, so I need to get out of here. I take a deep breath and bite the inside of my cheek. It’s an attempt to stop myself from cursing at her. Now, my desire to escort her to the Golden Gate Bridge grows stronger. Honestly, I can see myself—okay, no. I stop envisioning the moment. It’s mean. I still hate Mrs. Shaw right now, though. Shit.

After I type in my login credentials, I glance at the clock. Shit, in seven minutes, Trevor will call. My laptop isn't my friend right now. I click on my scheduling application, and it slowly loads.

"I can tell you right now that morning is free all next week." I glance at Mrs. Shaw. She's now pushing buttons on her flip phone.

Mrs. Shaw remains silent.

My appointment schedule is now running. "I have Thursday afternoon free."

It's now five minutes before he calls.

Mrs. Shaw keeps pushing buttons on her phone.

"Well, Mrs. Shaw?"

"Um, I'm thinking. Give me a minute, please."

No, you're fucking pressing buttons, Mrs. Shaw. Tell me what fucking day you want so that I can answer Trevor's call. I exhale. "If you need a minute, I'll call you tomorrow."

"No, wait. Hold on," she says.

I probably have five minutes, which is plenty of time. So, I wait. Mrs. Shaw flips her phone close and stares at me. I frown when she doesn't say anything. When I motion for her to speak, she says, "What about Friday?"

My digital clock is my nightmare. It's three minutes—three minutes until Trevor calls. I glance at Friday's schedule. "It's the same thing. Everything is available in the afternoon."

"How about earlier in the week?"

My shoulders sag. This woman will be the death of my potential relationship with Trevor. He's going to dump me before our first date. Is Mrs. Shaw driving me insane? Probably. No, that's an affirmative.

"The same, Mrs. Shaw. Do you want Thursday or another day? You have sixty seconds before my laptop shuts down because the office is officially closed."

It's a lie. A grocery clerk once said her register would close if I didn't make my purchase five minutes before the store closed. Maybe Mrs. Shaw will believe it.

"Uh, well, I don't know. I go shopping on Monday and get my hair done on Wednesday." She shakes her head before saying, "I'm meeting my grandson for lunch on Friday."

Oh, fuck. I glance at my purse. It's now been sixteen minutes, one minute past the fifteen-minute deadline, and my phone hasn't sounded.

Mrs. Shaw doesn't say anything. Instead, she flips her phone open and pushes buttons again. She closes it and looks at me. "What about Tuesday? That day may be good for me."

I nod, but instead of turning back to my laptop and looking at the schedule, I stare at my clock. More than five minutes have passed, and no phone call. I wonder what Trevor texted. He may have told me that he'd call me later. I can only hope.

As I clear my throat, I turn my attention to my laptop and type Mrs. Shaw's name into the schedule. "Mrs. Shaw, I've scheduled you for Thursday at three o'clock in the afternoon."

She looks at me and frowns. After a moment, she grins and says, "Oh, that's great."

I glare at her as she walks out the door. My phone falls on my desk as it slips out of my hand after I pull it from my purse. No messages. No texts.

What do I do? Of course, I could break my rule and call Trevor. After all, it is my fault. I could have answered his call at the gala. Shit, if I'd known this would happen, I would have answered his call. Fuck, what am I thinking? I would have done the same thing.

I grab my phone and purse and leave work. Should I call Tonya? I could ask her if I should call Trevor. I walk down the steps as my phone rings. It's Trevor.

"You're a tough woman to track down. Your boss has three offices in the city."

My heart skips a beat as I look around. I frown. “Are you here—at my job?”

“Straight ahead.”

Trevor stands next to his car. He’s dressed in jeans, tennis shoes, and a t-shirt. He looks sexier now than when he wore a suit and tie at the gala. We smile at each other.

“Trevor, I think you’re stalking me.”

“Emma, I think you’re focused on the wrong thing.”

I laugh.

“What’s your next rule?”

“You ask me out.”

Trevor dodges a couple of cars as he crosses the street. “How about we go on a date on Friday?”

“Today’s Monday.”

He closes the gap between us and ends the call. After Trevor slides his phone in his pocket, he asks, “What does that have to do with going on a date Friday?”

“It means I’m an adult and can go on a date during the week.”

Trevor winks at me. “I’m glad you’re as eager as I am to go on a date.”

“Will this be the dinner party rehearsal you discussed last night?”

“No.”

“Good,” I say.

“Does that mean, yes?”

“Yes.”



say great to the date.” Tonya pauses and scratches her head. “I’m not sure about the dinner party, though.”

“Trevor told me that our date would be casual. So, I’m wearing black jeans, a blue silk blouse, and flats. It’s Tuesday afternoon, and I’m standing in the bathroom, looking in the mirror. I’ve changed my hairstyle three times. First, I thought I should wear it down. That was before I realized Trevor’s already seen it like that. Second, I styled my hair in a ponytail. Of course, he’s seen my hair like that, too. Tonya suggested a messy bun, so that’s how I have it now.

I like how Trevor stared at me when I wasn’t wearing makeup. So, I decide to go on our date without makeup.

Tonya, dressed in jeans, a long shirt, and sandals, leans against the bathroom door frame, staring at me. She frowns. “I’m not saying that you can’t do it. I’m saying how long can you act?”

I pull more hair from my bun to make it look messier and look at Tonya in the mirror. “Trevor seems to believe I’d be good at it. I mean, I didn’t break character when we tried to convince that low-life, Shawn, that we were engaged.”

“True. I’m just saying,” Tonya pauses for a long moment. “Yeah, maybe you can do it.”

I turn to Tonya and cross my arms over my chest. “If I can get Trevor to add you as a guest, do you think you’ll attend? I just need a familiar face.”

“If you need a familiar face, ask Jared. If you think you’ll have a breakdown, I’ll be there.” She shrugs. “Personally, I think you don’t need Jared or me there.”

“Why?” I walk past her.

“When you’re acting... Remember, the only time I ever act is when I’m with my birth family because—”

“I hate those bitches,” we say in unison and laugh.

Tonya met her birth family years ago. They sought her out, not vice versa. She gave them a chance, but things haven’t worked out like they do in movies. The way she handled her situation helped me get through my crisis with Dad.

“I’m just saying that it’s a lot easier when my best friend isn’t there to help me. You start to want that person to run interference for you, or you want to break character.”

I shrug. “True.”

We walk to the living room. I spend time transferring my belongings from my work purse, a big bag, to my clutch purse. It’s easier to carry a smaller purse.

Tonya flops down on the stuffed couch next to the far end of the wall. “Now, tell me the most important info about this guy, Trevor.”

“Um, he’s sexy as hell and a great kisser. He’s rich. He has the same car as Jared.”

“Damn, he’s loaded.” Tonya clasps her hand. “Now, what does he do?”

“He’s a tech guy.”

“Why was he at the gala?”

“To help a friend.”

“A friend?” Tonya taps her fingers on the armrest. “What friend?”

While zipping my clutch purse, I stop, look at her, and frown. “I don’t know. I can’t remember. Wait, did he tell me?”

There’s a knock on the front door. We look at each other and glance at the door like the grim reaper is coming for us. Tonya leans forward and whispers, “I think he’s early.”

“I know he’s early.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What should I do?”

Tonya leans back and shrugs. “Answer the door?”

I sit on the couch. “What if I’m not ready to answer the door?”

“Well,” Tonya says as she points to herself, “I’m not answering the door. He may think I’m the maid.”

“Don’t be stupid. Trevor’s not like that.”

She smiles. “Yeah, well, I just don’t want to get up.”

I shake my head and smile at her. “I hate you sometimes.”

“I am just saying, you say the nicest things to me sometimes.”



I suspect Trevor’s more adventurous than he is tonight. Honestly, I thought he’d have some game or party for us to attend. He didn’t. Instead, we went to the movies and had dinner.

For me, dinner is boring. Trevor continuously asks me questions about my wishes, career, dreams, and family. I dodge the questions about the latter because I don’t want to talk about Dad or Jared. I have no problems with Jared. He’s an obsessive big brother, and I’m not ready to scare off Trevor. Yes, Jared can be a bitch sometimes about who I date.

Would Jared like Trevor? I don’t think so. They seem alike, but I don’t think they’d get along. In my opinion, they are both alpha males. So, Jared wouldn’t like me dating Trevor—and the fact that he’s older wouldn’t help, either. Jared would probably claim that Trevor’s taking advantage of me. I wonder how old Sam is. That’s an answer I need to know. If Jared objects, then I could use that fact to get him off my case about Trevor.

The evening air is as cool as it was the night of the gala. The only difference is that our slow stroll keeps me warm. I warm my hands by wrapping them around my latte. Trevor places his arm loosely around my shoulder and holds his iced coffee in his other hand. We walk in silence. The street lights are bright, and the sky is a purplish-pink.

I bite my bottom lip and glance at Trevor. He stares straight ahead. Should I start a conversation?

“I forgot to tell you that I love your hair,” Trevor breaks the silence.

“Thanks,” I tell him before I sip my latte.

We stop talking. Also, we stop at a crosswalk. I glance from left to right and decide to jaywalk. Trevor holds me back. He leans down and whispers in my ear, “What’s the rush?”

“Um, no cars are coming, so what’s the sense in waiting?”

“Maybe so you won’t get struck by a car,” he dryly says as the crosswalk light changes.

We cross the street and continue walking to his car. “You assume a car will come out of the blue.”

He laughs. “I’d rather assume the worst and have the best happen than vice versa.”

“I guess.” I nod and chuckle.

TREVOR

I have no complaints about tonight. It's not my idea of a date since I'm not a traditional date night kind of guy, but I typically don't go on a date during the weekday, either. My original plan was to wait until the weekend and take Emma to San Jose. I've always wanted to take a woman to the Winchester Mystery House, and Emma would have been the perfect date. I had already set up the date and dinner at the historic house before Emma insisted on a weeknight date. We'll still go there. Maybe after the dinner date next week.

I clear my throat as we leave the coffee shop. I know more about Emma, even though she dodged many of my questions about her family. I frown. What's up with her family? Her father's a dick. I get that. What about her other family members? Are they crazy or enablers? That's the only issue I see with dating Emma. I want a heads up with her family so that I know what I'm dealing with in any future relationship.

The night air is cool, and the breeze is gentle. The weather is a nice change of pace from the cold movie theater and hot coffeeshop. I place my arm loosely around Emma's shoulder. Her lavender perfume wafts in the air, and it's addictive. We walk in silence back to my car. She holds her latte with two hands, which changes my mind about walking to the nearest park. If she's cold, I'm not going to make her colder by strolling around in a park.

I sip my iced coffee and see Emma look at me as she bites her bottom lip. The bright street lights and purplish-pink sky

make the night cozy.

Damn, I forgot to compliment her earlier. She's dressed beautifully, and I love her hair. It makes me want to kiss her and mess it up even more.

"I forgot to tell you that I love your hair," I break the silence.

"Thanks," Emma sips her latte.

We stop talking, and I can quickly tell the conversation is going nowhere. Maybe we're all talked out.

We stop at a crosswalk, and I stifle a yawn. I've got a couple of meetings in the morning, which I now regret not pushing back. A couple of hours more sleep would be nice tomorrow morning. Since the gala, I've been running on four, maybe five, hours of sleep as I try to get the bugs out of my latest app.

I see Emma glance from left to right before she takes a step into the street. I tighten my arm around her shoulder to stop her. I'm not the jaywalking police, and I jaywalk all the time. Am I missing something? Perhaps she's tired of me already.

I lean down and whisper in her ear, "What's the rush?"

"Um, no cars are coming, so what's the sense in waiting?"

"Maybe so you won't get struck by a car," I dryly say as the crosswalk light changes.

We cross the street and continue walking to my car. Emma tells me, "You assume a car will come out of the blue."

I laugh. "I'd rather assume the worst and have the best happen than vice versa."

"I guess." She nods and chuckles.

More silence descends as we drive to her apartment. This time, I don't try to start a conversation. I let the silence linger like a bad odor in a beautiful room. Emma does give me some encouragement because she glances at me periodically as we drive. She slides her fingertips across my forearm when I place

it on my armrest to wait for the light to change. I look at her and wink.

I slow my car to a halt in front of her apartment, and Emma reaches for her handle. She pulls at it, but I haven't unlocked it yet. After a moment, she looks at me and raises an eyebrow.

“Well?”

“Emma,” I chuckle. “Can I park first?”

She looks around, and I guess she notices that the car is in the middle of the street. I point to the driver in front of us. He or she is taking their time to pull away from the parking space I want. Emma nods.

“A word to the wise,” I tell her. “I'm not the type of person who will let you out in the middle of the street. You should know that by now.”

Emma purses her lips together and stares out the window before she looks at me. “Forgive me for not looking around.”

“I'll translate that sentence into the truth. The men you've fucked around with before meeting me weren't gentlemen.”

“Don't be stupid.” She sits back in a huff and presses her lips together.

I chuckle, which makes her laugh. “Another FYI, I always open the door for you. The only time you touch that handle is in an emergency.”

She looks at me and salutes.

The other driver finally leaves the parking space, and I parallel park. I exit my car and walk around to open Emma's door. She swings her legs out of the car, and I grab her coffee to ensure she gets out of the vehicle safely.

After we reach her porch, she hands me her keys, and I hand her the coffee. I open the door and take a thorough look around her place. When I walk to the front door, she enters. I exit and lean against the outside wall, peering into her apartment.

“I had a good time tonight.” I let my gaze linger on Emma’s face.

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t be stupid. That wasn’t your type of date. I can tell.”

I shrug. “Did you enjoy it?”

Emma smiles. “Yeah.”

“Mission accomplished.” I wink at her.

She nods.

The silence is back.

Emma looks away. I reach up and caress her cheek, and we make eye contact. She steps outside and turns to me. I’m not sure who leans forward first, but we kiss. My hands cradle her face, and I deepen the kiss. Emma lets out a moan and places her hand on my chest. I feel her coffee cup against my lower stomach and pull back.

“I’ll call you later,” I say as I rub my thumb against her lower lip. “Unless you tell me now that I can start planning our next date.”

Emma smiles and nods. “I’d like that.”

Quickly, I kiss her again. “I’ll text you about the dinner party. I’m thinking of setting it up for next week.”

“Okay.” Emma nods toward her apartment. “Would you like to come in?”

I’d love to come inside your apartment, but I know my intentions aren’t good. Although I’m a gentleman, I’d plan to leave in the morning and after I thoroughly satisfy you. Unfortunately, I’m not that good of a guy when it comes to wanting to have sex with you.

“I’d love to, but I have a meeting early in the morning.” I lean forward and kiss her on her lips.



rub the back of my neck and listen to Jared bloviate about his latest date with Sam. *Man, I love you to death but shut the fuck up for a minute.*

It's hot today. My blue polo shirt is sticking to my chest, and like a dumb ass, I'm standing outside on my cell phone. I slide my hand into my pants pocket and wait for Jared to take a breath.

I stand outside of a coffee shop where one of my partners wants to meet. "Jared, you fucker, shut up for a minute."

"Well," Jared says. "Someone didn't jerk off this morning."

I pinch the bridge of my nose with my index finger and thumb. "Listen, I'm having a dinner party Friday night. I need you there. It's at my house."

"Since when do you host dinner parties?"

"It's a hoax. I need to fool my father into thinking I have a trophy wife candidate."

Jared chuckles. "I don't think it will work. Your dad's great at seeing crazy shit. Remember, in college, our underage drinking, he figured that out and told my dad."

"Yep, I remember, but what parent can't figure that shit out." I take my hand from my pocket to wave it around. "I'm getting help."

Jared paused. "Ah, your beautiful mystery woman is helping, huh?"

"Yep," I smirk. "It's her thinking that this will get Dad off my back. If I have some potential trophy wife, Dad will give me some time to become mayor."

"I like the idea. You know, I think you should tell your dad to fuck off."

"Anyway, can you make it? Bring Sam."

"Yeah, sure. I'll be there. Let me check with Sam because I can't speak for her." Jared pauses. "I can't wait to meet your new fake trophy wife."

“She’s great.” I smile and laugh. “Very beautiful and feisty.”

“Feisty, huh?” Jared asks. “That’s a new one.”

My partner approaches me, and I point to the coffeeshop and hold up three fingers. She nods and walks past me.

“How’s your sister? Did you find the guy she left with at the gala?”

“No. Other than taking a poll here, I’m not sure what to do. No one’s talking.” Jared sighs. “I spoke to her, however. She’s alive and well.”

“Hey, when will I get to meet her finally?” I ask as I stroll to the coffee shop.

“Never.” He adds, “I know your ass. Have sex with my sister, and I’ll fuck you up.”

“I’m a good guy,” I say with a laugh.

“No doubt. I’d pick you to save her any time, but I’d never leave you alone with her. I know your history.”

“On that note, I’ll leave your ass alone. I’ll text you the information about the dinner party later today.”



The dinner party is today, which means I wish it were tomorrow. At least a part of me does, anyway. The other part of me wants this over with immediately. I’d rather spend my free time wooing Emma.

I clear my throat and stare out of my bay window in my dining room and look at my panoramic view of the Golden Gate Bridge. I live in Pacific Heights. It’s not always as warm as other parts of the Bay area, but it’s a beautiful area. I’ve lived here since my early twenties after I made my second million dollars.

The night sky is still a light blue, but there's a hint of pink still settling on the horizon. Don should be here at any minute with Emma. I thought about picking her up, but I need to make sure the caterer does everything perfectly.

I turn from my bay window and look at the dining table. The minimal setting is perfect. In less than an hour, my guests will arrive. Besides my parents, Emma, and Don, I've invited Jared, Sam, Maria, and Amy. Since Maria and I decided we were better as friends than lovers, I decided to ask her to dinner. Emma doesn't seem like the jealous type, so I'm positive there won't be any tension between her and Maria. Amy's a brat, and I love her. She's my younger sister, and I trust her judgment. Besides, Amy will run interference if things go south. She's the only one besides Jared who knows the deal.

I loosen my beige tie and tighten it again. After a long sigh, I turn back to the bay window. The caterer walks in and out of the dining room.

Nervousness is not my thing in business or pleasure. I thrive on positivity, confidence, and yep, cockiness. However, thinking of Jared's words about Dad, my guts fall to the floor, and I feel queasy. Damn, what if Jared's right about Dad. I'll never hear the end of it. Of course, I could spin it and... Maybe not.

"Is everything to your liking, sir?"

I glance back at the caterer and nod. "Perfect. Thank you."

A car door slams, and I see Don, dressed in a suit, rush around my Sweptail and open the left backdoor. Emma emerges, and I smirk. She looks gorgeous in a black and white striped, sleeveless dress that stops at her knees. Her hair is styled in a twist instead of down. When she looks up at my place, I see she's wearing no makeup. Beautiful.

I walk into the living room and welcome Emma into my home. Don closely follows after he closes the front door. Although I open my arms wide to hug her, Emma sidesteps me and looks around my place.

I joke, “You’re welcomed to inspect my place if you’d like.”

She swirls around and looks at me as I turn to her. “Where’s your cat?”

“My cat?”

“Your cat,” she says more forcefully. “You claim you have a cat. I want to meet your cat. I can’t be your fiancée and have never met your cat.”

I shrug. Honestly, I’m relieved I assumed wrong. “Charlie’s upstairs in her room.”

Emma looks at me for a moment. “Her room?”

Instead of replying, I lean forward and grab her hand, and we make our way upstairs. As we stroll past each room on the second floor, I stop and let her go inside. When I point to my bedroom at the end of the hall, Emma pulls her hand away and strolls to it. She opens the door and peaks inside.

After a couple of minutes, Emma closes the door and turns to me. She says, “Don’t be stupid. I did that for research purposes.”

“Of course, you’ll need to tell them how you wake up in my bed each morning. You just want to see how my bedroom looks.”

“I’ll let you keep thinking that. Where’s Charlie?”

We walk to the closed door, and I slowly open the door. Charlie, a chocolate Maine Coon, sits on her fur pedestal, licking herself. She pauses for a second, looks up at us, and continues cleaning herself.

“Can I pet her?”

I nod and watch Emma slowly approach. Charlie looks at Emma and accepts her gentle touch. When I hear Charlie purr, I tell Emma, “She likes you.”

Emma rubs Charlie’s ear and her stomach when she stretches. “Aw, I like you, too. You’re beautiful, and I like your room.”

I beam like a proud pet dad. Charlie's room is ever-evolving, depending on when I go into the grocery store pet aisle or go to the pet store. Her latest addition was a third, more massive pink pet bed in the corner of her room next to her food tray and fountain water bowl. On the opposite is her full-sized day bed with pink sheets. She has toys all over the place. Yesterday, I forgot to pick up her toys when I cleaned her litter box.

"Okay, see you later, Charlie," Emma says as she walks toward me.

"Do you allow her out of her room?"

"Yep," I say as we walk downstairs. The front door closes, and I see my parents walk into the living room. I ask Emma in a low voice, "Are you ready?"

Emma stops, peers into the living room at my parents, and says, "Yes."

When we reach the first floor, Emma walks ahead of me and into the living room. Her voice is higher than usual as she comments, "We really need an entire remodel of this place if you're going to get elected as mayor, darling. It must look spectacular if we're going to welcome press in here. Let's not touch Charlie's room yet."

Dad turns around. I watch his expression as his eyes widen, and he smiles. He gives Emma a head-to-toe look before he looks at me. Before he can speak, Emma turns to me and says, "I understand you hate how late I am when I get ready, but did you have to rush me out of the bathroom before I could put on my makeup?"

Damn. Fuck. Speak up.

I stare at Emma like I've never seen her. She's crazy good at acting, and she's terrifying me. I've run away—literally—from women who talk like that.

"Darling, really, can you hear me, or are you ignoring me like usual?" Emma turns to my parents. "I swear, the only other time I get that look is when I'm pushing him to seize the moment and start his campaign now."

Dad opens his mouth to speak. His surprised expression looks like it's chiseled on his face.

I look at Mom. She has an opposite look on her face. Either she's about to take a shit, or she's disgusted by Emma. I'm not worried about the latter. When the gig is up, I'll let her meet Emma—the *real* Emma. Although, when Mom pushes up her graying blonde hair, which is in a neat, loose bun before clenching her ruby necklace, I do start worrying.

“Mom, are you sick? You know where the bathroom is,” I finally say.

Mom lets her necklace drop and extends her hand. “Poppy. That's my name.”

“Emma,” Emma says and shakes Mom's hand. “That's my name.”

Mom quickly lets Emma's hand go and rubs her hand on her black dress. I look at Emma. It's the only time I see the real Emma because she bites her bottom lip, stares at me, and looks worried. Quickly, I rub her back, and I feel her tense body relax.

“Here, let me give you a hug.” Dad hugs Emma before anyone can react. “Welcome to the family.”

“She's not in the family yet.” Mom points at Emma's left ring finger.

Don, who's been standing next to the door, watching us, quickly interrupts. “That's on me. I forgot to give this to you earlier.”

Dad steps next Mom and Emma turns to Don as he hands her the diamond engagement ring I told him to purchase earlier today. The dumb ass was supposed to give her the ring when he picked her up.

“Don, really, please don't make these mistakes again.” Emma quickly says, “I told Trevor last week I wanted extra diamonds on my ring. I didn't think it would take so long.”

Damn, she's good at this. Oh fuck, I'm bad at this. What the hell do I say? I need to step up my game.

“I’m sorry, dear, I didn’t think Don would take so long. I hope it looks the way you want it to now.”

Emma snatches from Don and puts it on her finger. “Yes, better. I’ll probably need more diamonds before you announce your candidacy. You know, people will be looking at me.”

Dad points to Emma and smiles. “You are too good to be true.”

“She is,” Mom says but closes her mouth and walks to the dining room in a hurry.

“Ignore her,” Dad tells Emma as he waves his left hand. “She wants grandbabies, so she’ll come around.”

“Dad, let’s go to the dining room with Mom. I’m sure Amy and everyone will be here soon.”

Dad nods and briskly walks toward the dining room before he stops. He walks back and extends his hand to Emma. “Please, join me.”

I sent Emma a short cheat sheet of things for her to remember about us—like how we met and so on—and I hope she remembers everything. Don heads to the front door, and I follow him.

“Bro, she’s killing it with your dad.” Don laughs. “You’re killing it, too, but in a different way.”

I shake my head. “Thanks for telling me what I already know.”

He opens the door and starts speaking, but Amy enters.

Don leaves without saying what he was going to say. Amy kisses my cheek and hugs me. “Where is our superstar actress?”

I point toward the stairs. “Charlie’s upstairs.”

Amy playfully punches me. “You know whom I mean.”

“Here’s the deal. Mom hates her. Dad loves her.”

She shrugs off her jacket and says, “She’s doing a great job. Mom likes everyone, and Daddy can’t stand anyone.”

“Charlie likes her, too,” I tell Amy as I take her jacket.

Amy shakes her head and sighs. “Now the pressure is on for me to like her. Wait. Should I like or hate her tonight?”

“You want a call from Mom about Emma?”

She snaps her fingers and says, “I’ll hate the hell out of her.”

“Good choice.”

EMMA

Poppy quickly lets my hand go and rubs her hand on her black dress as if my hand was dirty or sweaty. I look at Trevor. Moments ago, I was on a high. I was feeling this acting thing. Earlier, I decided to put my best uppity self forward. I'd seen plenty of women boss their boyfriends around like a true bitch. It thrilled me when Issac fell for it hook, line, and sinker. Now, I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing. Tonya's right, I think. It may be too tough for me to pull off. I care what Poppy feels about me.

I bite my bottom lip, stare, and give Trevor a worried look. I want to apologize to Poppy for being such a bitch. I want her to know that this is not me. However, I must remind myself that I'm not here to convince her of anything. Trevor and I need to convince his dad.

When Trevor rubs my back, I relax. If that's Trevor's way to tell me everything's okay, then I'll accept that.

"Here, let me give you a hug." Issac hugs me. Although I tell my body to relax, I instantly tense. His hug smothers me. "Welcome to the family."

Issac lets me go.

"She's not in the family yet." Poppy points at my left ring finger.

Don, who's been standing next to the door, watching us, quickly interrupts. "That's on me. I forgot to give this to you earlier."

Issac steps next to Poppy, and I turn to Don as he hands me the diamond engagement ring. I try not to gasp and jump up and down like a fool. It's not even my engagement ring, and I want to keep it. The ring is massive, with one huge diamond and three additional diamonds.

One, two, and three. I take a deep breath and tell Don, "Don, really, please don't make these mistakes again. I told Trevor last week I wanted extra diamonds on my ring. I didn't think it would take so long."

Trevor frowns, and I think he's going to forget this whole show and leave. He's had one of those deer-in-the-headlights looks for a while now.

"I'm sorry, dear, I didn't think Don would take so long. I hope it looks the way you want it to now."

His reaction gives me more incentive to act like a bitch. I snatch the ring from Don and put it on my finger. "Yes, better. I'll probably need more diamonds before you announce your candidacy. You know, people will be looking at me."

Issac points to me and smiles. "You are too good to be true."

"She is," Poppy says, then closes her mouth and walks to the dining room in a hurry.

"Ignore her," Issac tells me as he waves his left hand. "She wants grandbabies, so she'll come around."

"Dad, let's go to the dining room with Mom. I'm sure Amy and everyone will be here soon."

Issac nods and briskly walks toward the dining room before he stops. He walks back and extends his hand to me. "Please, join me."

I take his hand, and we go to the dining room. The dining room is a beautifully decorated place. It is black and white with red plates. Everything is so formal and not what I would envision to be in Trevor's place. It reminds me of the gala because of the grandeur.

“Sit next to me.” Issac pulls out the chair closest to the door.

I sit, and he takes a seat next to me. At this moment, I realize that Issac isn't geeky Shawn. This is going to take much work not to fuck up. I'm glad Jared and Tonya aren't here. I could never pull this off if either one of them were here.

“How did you meet Trevor?”

Good. Trevor gave me notes about this moment. “We met at a gala last year. I decided Trevor had potential and demanded we go on a date. Unfortunately, he thought he might reunite with Maria and turned me down.”

Issac leans back and stares past me. “Hmm, pity.”

I try to change the subject. “Trevor tells me you want him to run for mayor next year.”

“Yeah, but he's stubborn.” Issac looks dismayed.

I seize the moment. Trevor's not here, but it doesn't matter. I'll tell him later—or maybe, with any luck, Issac will say it to him.

“Please, don't tell Trevor I've told you any of this.” I lean toward Issac. “I have a plan for him to run next year. Every time I mention it, he mentions you and wants to wait.”

Issac leans back and stares past me. It looks like he's thinking, “Yes, yes, I can see that.”

“How about this? We...” I say and pause to point to him and myself. He makes eye contact with me, and I continue, “We need to work together. You let me work on Trevor, though. I fear if you don't, I can't rush our marriage and his mayoral run.”

Issac crosses his arms over his chest and stares at his lap. He doesn't say anything.

Poppy walks into the dining room from a different door, one that looks like it leads from the kitchen I see as I lean back and look at the door as it swings. She sits across from me and scowls.

“Well, talk about this later.” Issac taps my upper arm.

I nod.

“Amy and Maria have arrived,” Trevor announces as he enters the dining room with two women.

I press my lips together and stare at the second woman who enters. She’s curvy and shorter than me, and her skin is a darker hue than Tonya’s. She isn’t wearing makeup. I love her pale yellow dress. To me, she looks like a model or a famous actress.

Trevor places his hand on the first woman’s upper back. She’s a lot taller than Trevor but has similar features. Her black hair rests on her shoulder, and she’s wearing a pink silk jersey dress. I love her high heels. Her makeup is perfect.

“Amy,” Trevor points to me, “Please meet my fiancée, Emma.”

She walks over and kisses Issac on the cheek. When she looks at me, she flashes me a tense smile. “Nice to meet you, Emma.”

Amy walks to the other side of the table and sits next to Poppy.

“Emma, please meet Maria.” He and Maria walk over to me. His hand is on her lower back as she extends her hand to me.

“It’s nice to meet you, Emma.”

I shake her hand and force myself to smile. To say I’m intimidated is an understatement. She’s gorgeous and looks like someone Trevor would date. I want to continue in my acting role as a bitch, but I can’t. There’s no way I’m going to let Trevor think I’m jealous of his ex-girlfriend.

“It’s nice to meet you, too.”

Trevor leans over and says something in Maria’s ear. Her smile widens as he walks to the head of the table. Maria’s attention turns to Issac. “I’m so hurt, Issac. You haven’t said hello.”

Issac chuckles and stands. He greets her with a quick hug and quickly sits. Maria rolls her eyes before she waves at Poppy. Poppy waves back like she's trying to land a plane.

Maria pats Issac on the back and tells him, "Why don't you sit at the other end of the table, Issac? Let Trevor's present and past sit together."

He looks from Maria to me and back again. He doesn't move. When Trevor motions for him to move to the opposite side, he shrugs. "I guess."

Issac moves to his new seat. Maria sits down in Issac's vacated place, and Trevor gently pushes her chair toward the table.

Maria slightly leans toward me and says in a low voice, "No one should have to eat next to the devil."

I press my lips together so that I don't smile. Trevor sits at the head of the table and winks at me.

"So, Trevor, I hear Emma's on my side with the mayoral run."

Trevor crosses his arms over his chest. "Yep. It looks like I can't win. I'd rather follow your golden rule of planning a wedding before a mayoral run, but..."

Issac taps on the table.

I take a deep breath. This is my turn to chime in and tell Trevor, "We can do both. However, if you continue to be so stubborn, I may refuse to marry you."

"Maybe that would be a good idea," Poppy announces in a huff.

"I agree," Amy quickly adds in a rush.

Issac taps his hands on the table. "Now, now, let's not all get excited and say the wrong things."

"Dad," Trevor chimes in, "I'm telling you, I'm not ready for a mayoral run. Emma made it sound doable sooner than later, but I don't know now."

Issac raises his hand, and he stammers as he says, “Listen, we need to take a breath and think about this. Maybe I’ve been putting too much stress on you. After all, you’ve completed the first task.”

A woman walks from the kitchen and pours water in each of our wine glasses. Trevor’s phone rings, and he leans back and pulls his phone from his pocket. He says after a moment, “Yep.”

“I’m looking at next year.” Issac looks at me. “If you can get married, and if he starts his run, he can get everything done.”

“Issac,” Poppy hisses.

Although I want to look at Poppy, I stare at Isaac and tell him, “Only if you stop pressuring Trevor. I can’t be a trophy wife if the winner won’t decide because of Daddy. Do we follow each other?”

Issac leans back and stares at me for a long time. He takes a deep breath and holds it before exhaling. “Yeah, you may be right, but only if you... No, you’re right. You’re right.”

Trevor clears his throat before saying, “It looks like we can eat dinner. My last two guests are not coming.”



I want to vomit up all my food and call it a night because I’m incredibly nervous. Right now, I’m holding my breath as I watch Poppy hug Trevor like I will kidnap him later. Issac extends his hand to Trevor, who shakes his father’s hand.

“I expect you to bring Emma to my party next week.” Issac points at me but continues looking at Trevor.

Trevor nods. “Yep. I plan on it.”

“Good.” Issac slaps Trevor on his back and follows Poppy out the door.

After Trevor shuts the door, he fist pumps. “That went better than expected.”

I exhale. “It makes that party a formality.”

He strolls toward me and says, “Don’t take this wrong, but you can be a perfect bitch.”

After I nod, I laugh. “That’s a compliment.”

There’s silence.

We stare at each other.

Nervousness grows inside me for another reason. It’s the way he’s staring at me. His blue eyes are smoldering again. Trevor licks his bottom lip and brushes my cheek with the back of his hand. I shift my weight from one side to another.

“Thank you,” he says. “Tonight was perfect. I think Dad is scared shitless that I’ll lose my trophy wife if he keeps pressing me.”

My breath catches in my throat. When I speak, I sound breathless. “I’m so happy to help.”

He looks down. “I guess we should get going.”

I blink. “Going?”

“Yep, I want to get you home.”

My shoulders slump. “I’m not ready to go home yet.”

Did I just say that out loud? Yes, I did. Trevor’s eyebrow raises. He steps back, grabs my hand, and kisses it.

“I’d like that.” He lets my hand go and continues, “Why don’t you make yourself comfortable in the living room? I have to open Charlie’s door and make sure the caterer doesn’t need anything else.”

“Sure.” I watch him take the stairs two by two. Charlie slowly walks downstairs, and Trevor follows.

I walk into the living and sit on the black couch and remove my heels. After a long time, I hear the backdoor close, and Trevor emerges from the back of the house. He removes his tie and tosses it on the loveseat to the left of the couch.

Trevor slides next to me on the couch and grabs the remote from the living room table. I watch him kick off his shoes and start changing channels.

“Movie or reality television?” Trevor asks as he glances at me. “No Lifetime, though. They show some crazy shit on that channel.”

I place my elbow on his shoulder and look down at him. “Well, no ESPN. I hate watching highlights of stuff I chose not to watch.”

“Fair.” He places his hand on my knee. “Movie or reality television?”

“Negative to reality television. There are too many shows—unless it’s a medical show. I like those.”

He presses numbers on the remote. “I like reality shows. I get my inspiration for apps and shit.”

“No reality television, then. No work allowed.” I smile.

“Yes, ma’am.”

We don’t speak while he continues flipping through channels. I look away because the constant flipping through channels is making me dizzy.

“Okay, find something, or I take over,” I tell him.

Trevor picks a movie on HBO. As the beginning credits roll, he drops the remote next to him. During the film, we move several times as we try to get comfortable. By the middle of the movie, Trevor’s resting behind me. We’re stretched out on the couch, and Charlie sits on top of it.

I miss the end of the film. I don’t know when I fell asleep or when Trevor fell asleep. When Charlie steps on me, I startle awake as I watch her hop on the floor. I wipe my mouth to make sure there’s no drool and look back at Trevor. He’s asleep with his eyes closed and mouth open. His arm is under my neck. I rub my eyes before I look down at my left hand, which is against his hip—the engagement ring sparkles in the darkness.

Slowly, as to not wake him, I sit up. It doesn't work. Trevor stirs. He moves his arm around my waist and groans, "Where are you going?"

"Nowhere," I tell him. "I can't remember where anything is in this house."

He rests on his back and yawns. "Charlie will show you."

I stretch before I return to resting on my side and looking at television. There's another film playing. It's one of the movies I saw when Tonya and I attended the Santa Barbara Film Festival a couple of years ago. The film, in my opinion, should have won.

Trevor skims his fingertips along my arm, and my heart skips a beat. When I look back, he's staring at me. He kisses my shoulder and says, "I need to take you home."

I turn onto my back and lift my head so that our faces are inches apart. Slowly, I kiss him softly and move my face away from his.

Trevor clears his throat.

I kiss him again. This time, I deepen the kiss. Trevor pushes me back on the couch and rubs my shoulders before moving his hand to my chin. He breaks the kiss.

"I'm a gentleman." His eyes search mine. I guess he's looking for some indication of what I want.

Instead of telling him and causing him to interrogate me to make sure that I won't change my mind, I place my hand on the back of his neck. I pull his face to mine and kiss him. Slowly, I break the kiss and look into his eyes.

Trevor bites his bottom lip and rubs his thumb against my cheek. When his thumb moves to my bottom lip, I playfully bite it. I close my lips around his thumb and suck it. He pulls his thumb from my mouth and kisses me as I grope for his shirt. Once I find his shirt, I pull it from his pants and slide my hands on his bare skin. My palms move to his back as his tongue slides deeper into my mouth.

I unbuckle his pants, but before I can unbutton his pants, Trevor pulls back. He stares at me. His expression is a mixture of confusion and hope. Trevor asks, "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Make love to me." I yank at his pants to show him that I know what I want.

Trevor grins as I unzip his pants and snake my hand inside his boxers. He groans.

I love the feel of his dick's girth, and can't wait to feel it inside of me.

"Damn." Trevor grabs my wrist to make me stop stroking his cock.

I slowly pull my hand from his pants as he leans back. We stand, and Trevor walks around me. After he grabs my hand, we make our way upstairs to his bedroom.

His bedroom is beautiful, with dark wood furniture and a California King bed. He has a large flat screen mounted to the wall across from the bed. Pictures of Amy, Charlie, and his parents are scattered around his bedroom.

Trevor dims the lights before standing behind me. This is the first time since our makeout session on the couch that I'm nervous. His warm hands feel excellent on my bare shoulders. He massages my shoulders before he kisses the side of my neck.

I turn around and face Trevor. Before I can say anything, he leans down and kisses me hard. His palms move to my ass and pull me against him. I feel his growing erection, and it makes my pussy wet. The desire I had in the living room for his dick now turns to sexual anticipation. I can almost feel his cock driving hard inside my vagina.

I'm the first to move away. As I grab Trevor's hand, I take steps back until I feel the bed behind me. "Take me."

He chuckles and says in a seductive voice, "Take you, huh?"

I follow Trevor's every move as he slowly undresses in front of me. Fuck, he's hot. He throws his shirt on the floor. He

has a hint of chest hair, which I like. Okay, right now, he could have a ton of chest hair, and I'd like that, too. I just want to get to the good part.

He pushes his pants down and removes his socks before approaching me. I stare at his boxers, feeling disappointed as he leans over and kisses my bare shoulder. Trevor leaves a trail of wet kisses on my shoulder and neck before he whispers, "You've got to do some work."

I rub on his chest and lean back as I grab the edge of his boxers and pull them down. His dick pops out at me. He looks thicker than what I felt earlier. Oh God, he's going to stretch me beyond capacity.

Trevor steps back and finishes removing his boxers. He leans over me. "How do you take that thing off?"

"It's a dress, not a thing."

"Let's identify objects later," he says as he caresses my back.

I lean back and push my breasts forward and smile, "Just pull it down."

"No zipper."

"I'm confused. Do you talk this much when you're close to making love?"

Trevor laughs. "Yep, it's called nervous anticipation and thinking with the wrong head."

He kisses the top of my left breast, and I gasp. I watch Trevor pull the top of my dress down and quickly take my nipple into his mouth.

"Oh," I moan and run my fingers through his hair.

He continues sucking my nipple as he pushes me onto my back. Trevor straddles me and pulls back. His hands roam my breasts, and I arch my back. His palms travel to the waist of my dress, and he yanks it down until I wiggle out of it.

Trevor leans back and surveys me. He smirks when he looks at my white, lacy panties. Slowly, he backs up and leans

forward. Trevor kisses each breast and licks my nipples before kissing my stomach. Each time he moves lower, his palms move to my hips and roam over my stomach.

Once he arrives at my panties, he kisses the area above my pubic hair. "Open your legs."

I move my left leg out, and he kisses my inner thigh. His index finger slides over the top of my panties. I gasp when I feel his finger rub my core. Briefly, I close my eyes and hope he doesn't comment on how wet my panties are.

He dips his index finger into my panties and rubs my clit. I move against his finger, my pussy getting hotter and hotter.

"Oh," I moan when two of his fingers slip inside my vagina. Trevor fingers me fast, but not as fast as I move my hips. My climax mounts higher and higher as I close in on an orgasmic release. "Mmm, fuck."

Trevor stops.

I open my eyes and look at the ceiling. Did I miss something? I look down at a smirking Trevor. He sits up and slides my panties off. I watch my panties fly into the air behind Trevor. Yes, I'm in sexual agony. My body's ready for the rapture of my life, and I'm stuck with sexual need. I cover my face with my palms. I'm so horny, it hurts.

"This is why sex is a team sport," I say.

Trevor pinches my thigh lightly. "Come on, don't give up so soon."

As I sit up, he does the same. I turn so that my back is against the headboard. Trevor moves toward me and kisses my breast. He looks up at me. "I take it you're not a virgin."

I shake my head.

"Is there anything you don't like to do?"

"Don't like to do," I say, trying to think of sex stuff. After a long time, I give up and tell the truth. "I'm not that proficient in sex."

Trevor moves away and kisses my knee. “That’s a good thing for a woman, trust me.”

With his face inches away from mine, he says, “Don’t worry. I’m a great teacher.”

I close my eyes and concentrate on the sexual high I’m on after he kisses my neck. Trevor moves his lips to mine, and we kiss each other. I widen his legs and move between them before I break the kiss. My right hand finds his semi-hard cock, and I massage it. His dick stiffens.

We change positions, with him leaning his back against the headboard. Trevor leans to open his nightstand drawer and retrieves a condom. I watch him rip the foil open and go about putting the condom on his cock. He tells me, “Hop aboard.”

I straddle him, but I don’t make eye contact. If he wants to have sex with me riding high, I’m going to disappoint both of us. Trevor moves his hand between my legs, and his middle finger slides against my clit, giving me a rush of sexual desire. With his other hand, he massages his cock.

“You’ve never made love this way?”

I shake my head and slowly make eye contact with him. Trevor leans forward and sucks my nipple until I moan. He lets my nipple fall from his mouth and says against my skin, “I want you to take what you want.”

Trevor leans back and tells me what to do. After a moment, I grab his hard dick and slide it into my vagina. I close my eyes and immerse myself in the moment. His cock stretches my vagina in a way I’ve never felt before. The first time I made love to Dane, I thought he was huge. Now, I know differently because of the way my pussy must stretch to accommodate Trevor’s dick.

Trevor slowly pushes my hips down, and I move up. I watch his eyes fall to half-mast. As my slow up and down motion becomes a deep bounce, I grab onto his shoulders. The more his cock goes in and out of my pussy, the wilder the ride becomes. Trevor flexes his hips, making my penetration deeper and lovelier.

“Oh, damn,” he groans. “Oh, fuck.”

I move faster and faster, getting drunk off the moment. My ecstasy washes over me as my climax makes me soar into outer space. I stop, but Trevor keeps going. His hips pump his cock into my pussy, making me hot again. I throw my head back as Trevor puts his face in my tits. The bed squeaks, and we go wild with need. Up and down, fast and faster. We don't work together. Instead, we give as good as we get.

My head swims. Before I know it, I'm no longer on top. I'm on my back, and we're in the missionary position. Trevor leans over me, now the jockey in our lovemaking sessions. He completely controls my body in the most perfect way possible.

I move my hips, and my climax mounts higher and higher. Trevor grunts before clenching his teeth. Another climax washes over me, and my body goes limp with satisfaction.

“Damn,” Trevor says as he slowly pulls out of me. He rolls over to the other side of the bed, rips the condom off, and throws it into the trash can close to the nightstand. He rests on his side and pulls me close to him.

TREVOR

We stopped by Emma's apartment to grab enough clothes for the weekend. It was an impromptu decision for us. Emma didn't want to spend the weekend at home, and I didn't want her to leave my house. I expected her to grab everything she owned. Okay, I expected her to be like almost every woman I dated—except Maria—and bring all her belongings for the weekend. She didn't. That impressed me.

"Are we going on the date we discussed last week?" Emma asks as we stroll through my neighborhood, eating ice cream.

Damn. I forgot about that. I take my phone out of my jeans pocket and text Don to postpone the date I planned for today.

"Well?" Emma asks as she adjusts her sunglasses.

"Uh, yep, we are," I add after taking a bite of my ice cream cone. "Just not today."

"Somehow, I feel cheated."

I glance at her and smirk. "I'll make it up to you later."

She shakes her head. "Whatever."

We walk to the park and sit on a bench. I place my arm around her and finish my ice cream. Emma slouches down and pushes her spoon deeper into her ice cream.

"Where are we going?" she asks.

"After this," I say, "home."

“Don’t be stupid.” She looks at me. “On our date. Where are we going?”

“Somewhere in San Jose, and that’s all I’ll say.” I watch a couple of teenagers walk past us.

“San Jose. Are there no good places here?”

“Plenty, and we’ll visit them.” I scratch the top of my head before I caress her shoulder.

There’s silence.

“What do you think will happen at Issac’s party?” Emma glances up at me before eating a scoop of ice cream.

I exhale. Emma’s question makes me nervous because it makes me think she’s having second thoughts. I stare at her for a long moment.

“Having second thoughts?”

She doesn’t reply.

I frown. “You did a great job last night. In fact, better than I thought you would. I was the one who looked like an idiot in the beginning.”

Emma sits up and stares ahead. From her profile, I can tell she’s deep in thought. When she finally breaks the silence, she says, “Yes, last night was easier than I thought, but we didn’t do too much. I feel like I said enough for your mom to hate me and your dad to get off your back.”

“Mission accomplished.”

She looks at me. Her expression seems troubled. “I don’t want your mom to hate me—your sister, either.”

I raise a finger. “One, Amy knows what’s going on. She likes you and didn’t want to show it because Mom likes to gab and bitch a little too much about someone she doesn’t like.”

Emma opens her mouth to speak, but I interrupt. “Second, Mom is not the one we want to focus on. It’s Dad. When this is all over, you, me, and Mom will have lunch.”

“Promise?” She leans back.

I lean forward and kiss her. We stare at each other, and I tell her, “I promise.”



The early morning sun streams in my bedroom, and I do my best to keep from coming. On a usual Sunday morning, I’d be cleaning Charlie’s bedroom. Instead, I’m making love to Emma.

I lean over her, pumping my cock into her pussy from the back. Emma, on all fours, moves her hips back and forth, driving me even crazier.

“Oh, yes, Trevor!”

Damn, I didn’t need to hear that. I lose it. I convulse as I come and hold Emma’s waist as she stops moving. It takes a moment to catch my breath. I pull out of Emma, and she moves on to her back and lets out a sigh.

Charlie walks into the room and jumps on the bed. As I remove my condom and throw it in the wastebasket, Charlie rubs against my back. When I try to lay down, Charlie curls up on my pillow. Although I want to go to sleep, I’ve lost my space to Charlie. So, I stand, pull the sheet over a sleeping Emma, and leave the bedroom.

My phone rings, causing me to turn back to my bedroom and grab my phone from the nightstand.

It’s Jared.

“What’s up?” I enter the bathroom and put on a pair of shorts.

“I should be asking the same thing.”

I stroll downstairs to make brunch. “The dinner was great, last night was even better, and today’s on par to become outstanding.”

“Fuck, your mystery woman gave it up that fast?” Jared chuckles. “You beat your personal best. What? A week or so.”

Usually, I'd join in with the joke. Today, I'm not interested. Emma's not something to do. She's something special. Honestly, I would have waited a couple a months more before we made love, but hell, I'm a man, and it's not like I didn't want to make love with Emma. She understands what she's getting into with having sex so soon. Emma's an adult and has been in a relationship before.

I know that sooner rather than later, we'll go through a no-sex period. It happens when sex comes before a relationship matures. Even Maria wanted to get to know each other before we resumed our sexual relationship. We did. I frown. Of course, we learned that we were better as friends than lovers during that time.

“Are you there?”

“Yep.” I clear my throat. “She's not like that. The other night wasn't planned—by either one of us.”

“Hey, what do I know? Women seem to open their legs when they meet you. Later, they want to get to know you.”

I rubbed my eyes. “How's Sam?”

“Good.”

As I open my refrigerator, I scan the contents. Not much is there. I slam it close.

“Oh, and fuck you, too,” I tell Jared.

“What did I miss?”

“You had Sam call me to apologize for not attending the dinner.”

Jared laughs. “Look, we were on our way. Shit happens when you take a shower together to save time. She called because I was asleep.”

“Yep, well, you're still a douche ball, you fucker.” I chuckle.

Emma walks into the kitchen, wearing one of my dress shirts. I wink at her.

She smooths her wavy black hair. “I thought you’d have some breakfast made by now.”

I pull the phone from my ear. “Damn, I thought you were making brunch.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Emma laughs. “You’re trying to impress me this weekend.”

“Sure,” I say, placing the phone back to my ear.

“Shit,” Jared exclaims before he clears his throat, “Your new woman sounds like she’s tough to please.”

“Yep, a little.”

After a long pause, Jared sounds concerned as he comments, “She sounds like my sister.”

“You’re obsessing about your sister,” I say.

“Hey, let me talk to you later.”

“Yep.” I end the call and kiss Emma. “We’re going out to brunch. There’s nothing in the refrigerator.”

Emma pushes me aside and looks in the refrigerator. She says in a huff, “Please, there’s plenty of food in here.”

I frown. Obviously, we see two different things.

“If you can make something out of the contents of the refrigerator, go ahead.”

“Fine.” She waves her hand. “Go upstairs and do something useful. Don’t interrupt Charlie, either. She’s napping on the bed.”

I pump my fist. “That makes it a fine time to clean Charlie’s room.”

Emma laughs as she takes items from the refrigerator. For a second, she looks at me and asks, “What are you going to do when you have children?”

“About what? Children?”

“Yeah, I instantly fell in love with Charlie, but I fear for your children.” Emma laughs. “You may ignore them for Charlie’s whims.”

I wave my hand. “Fuck that shit. My kids will know the deal.”

Emma laughs as I walk to the stairs and go to Charlie’s bedroom.



“*Y*ou’re sure you don’t want to stay?”

It’s Sunday evening, and Emma’s bag is in my car. We’re sitting in an outdoor patio restaurant, and I’m signing the receipt. I look at Emma as I put my credit card back in my wallet.

She shakes her head as the waitress picks up the merchant’s copy and leaves my copy of the receipt on the table. The night sky is cloudy. It’s probably the smog from Los Angeles traveling north. Maybe it’s going to rain. Damn, I’m thinking of anything not to argue over whether she stays at my place or not.

Most women want to stay at my place after a weekend of lovemaking. Emma’s declined twice. I lean back in my chair. “Why?”

Emma glances around the crowded patio and places her chin on her palm. The place is a little too crowded, and the restaurant isn’t to my liking, either. More college kids are here and sitting in large crowds. The more they drink, the louder they get. I don’t want to piss on anyone’s fun, especially a college student’s because I was there once, but I’m not into hearing it. I’m starting to hate Emma’s neighborhood.

“Is there a reason you don’t want to stay, or are you still thinking of one?” I clear my throat after noticing the edginess in my voice.

She shrugs, still not looking at me. “No reason. I mean, other than work.”

“It’s not that far away from my place. I can drop you off and pick you up from work, or have a driver do it.”

Emma leans back and shakes her head. “Nah, I need to get back home.”

“How about you stay home tonight and come back tomorrow?” I suggest as I grab the customer’s copy receipt.

She looks at me and says, “You act like you’re about to lose your nightlight.”

I lean forward. “You are a gorgeous nightlight.”

Emma smiles. Instead of responding, she stands and grabs her clutch purse. I stand, too. The crowd of college kids at the table next to us start singing Maroon 5.

“It’s time to go,” I mumble and grab Emma’s hand.

“At least they are on key.” Emma gives them a thumbs up as we walk past them.

I tell her, “Don’t encourage them. Hell, half of them probably live close to you.”

Once in my car, the silence is loud. During the drive to her apartment, I try to think of something to say. I glance over at Emma a few times to gauge her attitude. Her expression is blank. No help there.

The drive from the restaurant to Emma’s place is too short. I park in front of her apartment, exit the car, and walk around to open her door. As soon as I close her door, I open the trunk of my car and grab her overnight bag.

We stroll to her apartment, and once at the door, she hands me her keys. I do my thing. The only difference is that I drop her bag by the door before I look around to make sure her apartment is safe. When I return to the front door, Emma’s standing in the doorway. She grabs the edge of my black t-shirt and pulls me closer. We kiss. Emma pulls away before I can deepen the kiss.

I give her keys back and move to the side. She grabs the edge of my shirt again, but this time, she steps in front of me. Emma tells me, “You can stay here if you want.”

She kisses my chin. I capture her face in my hands and give her a hard kiss. “Maybe later this week.”

It's probably me, but she looks relieved.

“Well, tell Charlie that I miss her already.”

I nod and swat her on the behind. “I'll probably text you tomorrow.”

We stare at each other until I wink at her.

I leave her apartment and walk to my car.

EMMA

“*Y*ou’re sure you don’t want to stay?”

It’s Sunday evening and my bag is in Trevor’s car. We’re sitting in an outdoor patio restaurant near my apartment, and Trevor doesn’t look happy. He looks at me as he puts his credit card back in his wallet.

I shake my head as the waitress picks up the merchant’s copy and leaves Trevor’s copy of the receipt on the table. The night’s sky is cloudy, and the air is muggy. My gold t-shirt is sticking to me. I can smell the wetness in the air. Before we left Trevor’s place, it rained.

This is the second time he’s asked me to stay at his place tonight. I’d love to stay, but this inkling I have tells me to decline. Besides, I’m sure I’m not the first woman to stay at his place for the weekend. Why should I do what every other woman has done?

Trevor leans back in his chair. “Why?”

I glance around the crowded patio and place my chin on my palm. The place is a little too crowded tonight. I’ve been to this restaurant many times, and I like it a lot. It reminds me of an Irish pub. That’s why I suggested it.

As soon as we entered the restaurant, Trevor glanced around. He didn’t hide his disgust. I guess he’s beyond this type of crowd. Many college kids are here and sitting in large groups. He suggested the patio area.

“Is there a reason you don’t want to stay, or are you still thinking of one?” Trevor clears his throat.

I notice the sarcasm in his voice but ignore it. I shrug, still not looking at him. “No reason. I mean, other than work.”

“It’s not that far away from my place. I can drop you off and pick you up from work, or have a driver do it.”

I lean back and shake my head. “Nah, I need to get back home.”

“How about you stay home tonight and come back tomorrow?” Trevor grabs the customer’s copy receipt.

This is interesting. I could be wrong, but Trevor’s acting like a child. Maybe more women need to reject his offer to stay longer at his place. Slowly, I turn and look at him and say, “You act like you’re about to lose your nightlight.”

Trevor leans forward. “You are a gorgeous nightlight.”

I smile. Shit, that was smooth. Instead of responding, I stand and grab my clutch. Trevor stands, too. The crowd of college kids at the table next to us start singing Maroon 5.

“It’s time to go,” Trevor mumbles and grabs my hand.

“At least they are on key.” I give them a thumbs-up as we walk past them. They cheer and sing louder. I laugh.

“Don’t encourage them. Hell, half of them probably live close to you.”

I press my lips together. Ouch. *How uppity of you, Trevor. You come from money, and so do I, but I’m not full of myself.*

Once in Trevor’s car, we don’t talk. During the drive to my apartment, I consider breaking the silence. A few times, I see Trevor glance over at me. He looks like he’s trying to figure out something about me. I continue staring straight ahead. I hope my expression doesn’t show the heaviness in my heart. I need some space from Trevor.

The drive from the restaurant is short. Trevor parks in front of my apartment and walks around the car to open my door. I watch Trevor open the trunk of his car and grab my overnight bag. Although I reach for my bag, Trevor keeps it.

We walk to my apartment, and once at the door, I stop. By now, I know the deal. I hand Trevor my keys and let him do his thing. The only difference is that Trevor drops my bag by the door before looking around to make sure my apartment is safe.

When he returns to the hallway, I'm standing in the doorway waiting for him. I walk further into the hall. Trevor stands in front of me and looks at me with a frown. I grab the edge of his black t-shirt and pull him closer to me. We kiss, but I pull away before he can deepen the kiss.

He gives me back my keys and moves to the side. I grab the edge of his shirt again, but this time, I step in front of him. After a long sigh, I look away. Guilt hits me. Am I mistreating Trevor? I throw him an olive branch. "You can stay here if you want."

I kiss his chin and look at him.

Trevor stares at me, and after a moment, his expression softens. He captures my face in his hands and gives me a hard kiss. "Maybe later this week."

I flash him a smile. At least I made him feel better. I tell him, "Well, tell Charlie that I miss her already."

He nods and swats my behind. "I'll probably text you tomorrow."

We stare at each other until he winks at me. Suddenly, I'm at the gala again, staring across the room at Trevor. For a brief time, that feeling I had then overtakes the sadness I feel now. I watch Trevor open my door and leave my apartment.



Last night I found an old picture of Dane. Okay, I didn't stumble upon it. I looked for it. After Trevor left, I roamed around my apartment, wishing I was at Trevor's place. I do miss Charlie. We get along well. She curls up in my lap while I watch television in the living room or in Trevor's bedroom. I asked him if I could feed her in the

mornings—he feeds Charlie twice a day—and Trevor agreed. Yes, it was fun doing such a task. I always wanted a pet growing up, but Dad would never indulge.

The picture I found of Dane is my favorite. His flaming red hair looks even redder with the sunlight behind him. His green eyes sparkle with this beauty and amazing optimism that I loved so much. There wasn't any mess that Dane thought couldn't become perfect. Yes, he was always a cup half-full type of person. In my photo, he's smiling. His lopsided grin always made my smile even wider. Sometimes, when he wore his favorite 49ers baseball cap, he looked like a mischievous kid, but Dane was always a good guy who'd help anyone in trouble. That's why I don't understand why those guys killed him. From what the news reported and what the police said later, Dane complied with all of their demands. They got his money and class ring. Why did they take his life?

My heart felt heavy Sunday night, and I couldn't tell why. I could tell Trevor knew something was wrong. I didn't want to stay at Trevor's place and didn't want him to stay here. I just wanted to be alone. Even with Trevor around, I felt like an invisible stranger in a crowded room.

It wasn't until I searched through an old box I didn't open when I returned from Los Angeles that I realized why I feel this way. I miss Dane. No, I feel like I just cheated on Dane.

My heart aches for Dane, but in a different way now. I mourn his death and wish he was still here. Dane's laugh and his goofiness used to warm me and repel me from other men. No man was like Dane. No matter how many years pass, I'd rather live with Dane's memory than another man.

Trevor.

From the moment I saw Trevor across the room at the crowded gala, Dane began fading from memory. With each moment I spend with Trevor, Dane falls into my past. Each time Trevor touches me, kisses me, or makes love to me, I come alive, and Dane disappears even further. If not for the picture, I wouldn't remember him at all. That's what makes

my heart so heavy. It feels like Dane is in the other room when I'm with Trevor, and I am cheating on him.

Now, those things just make him feel like an old movie star in a bygone era. Somewhere between coming back here and meeting Trevor, things changed. Now, I don't mourn him as my lover. I'm fine with Trevor as my lover. I want to live again.

I guess the best way to explain it is this. The more time I spend with Trevor, the more Dane doesn't feel like a saint or perfect lover by which to compare all imperfect potential lovers. Instead, he feels like an old boyfriend. The guy who I will always love. The one who taught me so much, but the one I wasn't meant to stay with for the rest of my life.

I should feel this huge soaring emotional thrill because I'm in a new relationship. I will not lie. I feel that raw, uncultivated, and pure emotion within me. However, that same beautiful emotion causes me to feel a new, worse emotion. It's something I didn't expect. Guilt. It's this heavy burden because Dane's not here and I'm enjoying myself. He's dead, and I feel so alive. The guilt makes me think about what-ifs and why-nots, instead of living in the present and enjoying the moment.

Am I guilty?

Every time this feeling comes up, I want help getting rid of it. I need to talk about it or lessen it in some way. I can't do this alone, but I don't want to involve Trevor. It's not his issue. It's mine.



“Are we still best friends? I'm just saying, if I went to a dinner party with my fake man, I'd call you.”

I let out a short laugh as I adjust my sunglasses. It's slightly overcast, but Tonya and I are sitting in the park where the sun beams down.

It's after work, and I called Tonya for a chitchat.

“Well, it went great. I totally fooled Trevor’s dad. That made us happy.”

Tonya claps. “I feel a *but* coming.”

I try not to smile when I say, “We had sex that night.”

Although I don’t expect Tonya to scream in happiness, I didn’t expect her to stare at me like I’m a rude stranger.

“You’ve known him how long?”

Shit. I move my head from side-to-side for something to do. Honestly, I try to hold back tears. “Yeah, I know.”

“It’s your body and your choice, but I...” Tonya pauses. “Well, I just thought we made a pact never to be one of those girls who sleeps with a guy she barely knows.”

“Yeah, I know.” I nod. “It happened, and I don’t regret it. And yes, I initiated it.”

Tonya raises her hands. “I’m not judging.”

“I feel terrible.”

“Sex regret?”

“Not even close.” I cover my eyes with my right hand for a moment. “It’s Dane. For the first time, I don’t miss him as much as I used to.”

“Getting dick on the regular will do that to you.” Tonya grins at me.

I flash her the middle finger, and she chuckles. “I’m serious. It feels like I’m cheating on him. Am I crazy?”

“You’re not crazy,” she says as she shakes her head.

“I found a picture of Dane last night and put it in my purse.”

Tonya stares at me for a long time. “There’s a huge difference between wondering if you’re crazy and trying to drive yourself crazy. I’m just saying. You are searching for trouble.”

“I’m searching for trouble, huh?”

She nods. “Obviously, you’re ready to move forward. Dane’s been dead for a while, and it was bound to happen, Em.”

I press my lips together and stare at my lap. “You think I’m ready?”

“You had so many guys trying to get your attention when we lived in Los Angeles, and you didn’t notice,” Tonya tells me. “It’s not because you were clueless. You weren’t ready.”

Slowly, I nod. That makes sense. Seeing Trevor from across the room did make me feel like I’d come back to life. I wring my hands. “Now that I’m ready, how do I get rid of the guilt?”

“Don’t stress about it. Go with the flow with this guy...” Tonya struggles to remember his name.

“Trevor.”

“Yeah, and go to that other party and act like you’re about to marry the guy.” Tonya sits erect. “I think you reassess after. Your relationship is new.”

Minutes pass. We don’t speak because I’m lost in my thoughts. Trevor comes to mind before Dane. I wonder if he’s ever dated a woman who lost her boyfriend. Would he agree to take it slow after we attend Issac’s party?

Hell, will he even want me after the party? I shake my head. Self-doubt is shitty.

“No,” Tonya stares at me. “You don’t agree.”

“Yes, I do.” I cross my arms over my breasts. “It’s just that...”

Instead of continuing to explain, I stand. It’s time to go. Maybe I should ask Jared for advice, too. Tonya always has excellent advice, but I may need a male’s perspective. No, he’ll tell me something stupid so that I stay away from Trevor. Sometimes, Jared gets in his big brother moods and goes way too far. I think if Jared ever found the right guy for me, he’d hide him away so that I wouldn’t find him.

“Em, please be careful. You need to have fun. Don’t let Dane’s memory get in the way, and don’t put too much pressure on yourself.”

I look at Tonya and say, “I promise.”

TREVOR

Emma and I have texted briefly but haven't made plans for a date. I assume that she wants to wait until Dad's party. It makes sense, I think.

I still believe everything is going fine. Maybe her father's giving her trouble or something. If her distance persists, I'll drop by her apartment and talk. For now, I'm sitting at home, being ignored by Charlie. It's after work, and a sports channel is on television.

Charlie walks past me, doubles back, and jumps on the couch where I'm sitting. She curls up next to me. It's only when my phone rings that I realize Charlie is lying on my phone. I move her, and she swats at me and returns to her resting position. I'm able to steal my phone back.

I answer my phone. It's Jared.

"What's up, buttercup?"

I laugh. "Unless you meant to call Sam instead of me, you had to jerk off this morning."

"Fuck off," he tells me with a laugh.

Silence suddenly overshadows the conversation, which surprises me. It's a rare occurrence. In fact, silence in a conversation with Jared is so rare, it feels like I've stared into an eclipse without wearing protective lenses. When the silence persists too long, I try to think of something to say.

"I'm all for breathing on the phone, but I'd like to do it with some hot chick on the other end." I chuckle.

Jared remains silent.

“Is something wrong between you and Sam?” I ask.

“Did you leave with my sister the night of the gala?”

I frown and place my elbows on my knees. Where the hell did that come from?

“Damn, Jared, you’re becoming obsessive about this sister of yours.”

“I take it as a yes.”

“Come on, Jared. I’ve been telling you the truth all along. I don’t know your sister and didn’t meet her that night.” I throw my hand in the air.

Jared doesn’t say anything for a long time.

“Listen, man. Jared, am I missing something? This can’t be about your sister.”

“We’ve been friends forever, man, and we know each other too well. That’s why we agreed not to date each other’s sisters —”

I interrupt him. “Damn, Jared, don’t recount the past like I wasn’t there.”

“Man up, motherfucker, and tell me the truth. She left with someone at the gala, and it wasn’t anyone who works for me.”

I stand. “I’ve told you a thousand times I didn’t meet your sister. Em—”

“You know, tell me the truth or—”

“What?” I shout. “You’re going to end our friendship or fuck me up? What?”

Charlie jumps down and stands in front of me like she’s ready to fuck someone up.

“Calm the fuck down,” Jared says after a while. He lowers his voice and says, “I just want the truth.”

“You keep accusing me of fucking with your sister, but you won’t even tell me her name.”

“You sound like you’re trying to get away with something now. I don’t want to believe what Sam’s saying, but she’s making sense.” Jared groans. “I’ve told you her name plenty of times.”

“No, you haven’t.” I shake my head. Charlie sits at my feet for a couple of minutes before walking out of the room. I don’t have time for this shit. I end the call.

There’s a knock on the door as I toss my phone on the couch. My phone rings again. It’s not a contest which one I’ll answer. I walk out of the living room and to the front door. Part of me hopes that Emma is dropping by to surprise me. The reality is that Jared’s probably outside, ready to fight because he believes Sam over me.

I open the door and find Dad grinning back at me. When I step back, he walks into the house and to the living room. He paces.

“Oh.” Dad pulls a toy mouse from his pocket. “Thought I should give you this.”

When he tosses it to me, I catch it and say, “Why are you buying gifts for Charlie?”

“Tell me the truth about Emma. Is she real or some fake engagement to get me off your back?”

I frown and stare at him for a long time. He gives me a challenging stare back. Our eyes clash, and Dad looks like he’s right to call me out on the issue.

“Dad, you’re not that important in my life to hire some woman to pretend to be my fiancée.” I hope my tone didn’t sound like I’m lying. After a couple of seconds, I toss the toy mouse on the floor. Charlie will find it later.

Dad’s expression doesn’t change. In fact, he stares me down. He’s silent for a long time before saying, “Tell me the truth. Poppy believes you’d never date someone like Emma, and Jared believes you’re doing his sister.”

I blink as I try to figure out what the hell is going on. After raising my hands in a surrender pose, I ask, “What the hell are

you talking about, Dad? I get Mom because she doesn't like Emma, but where does Jared come into it?"

Dad stares at the window and says, "I called Jared the other night to see why he didn't show up at the dinner. Poppy thought he didn't like Emma, and that's why he didn't show up. Listen, son. I love Emma—we're on the same team—if she's real."

I step back and briefly cover my face with my hands. "Emma's real. We have a real relationship."

"Jared hinted that I should let you live your life so that you'll stop making stupid decisions. He says that he hasn't met Emma. When I described her, he said she sounds like his sister." Dad briefly raises his hand and continues, "That indicates to me that you and his sister are scheming to make a fool of me."

"Dad—"

"Son—"

"Dad—"

"No, shut up when I'm speaking—"

"Shut the fuck up, Dad!"

Dad stares me down and doesn't speak.

I return his challenging stare and shake my head. This shit is crazy. I don't understand what's going on because Jared's supposed to be my best fucking friend. He's stabbing me in the back. Now, he has Dad thinking Emma's a fake. Everything was going great. What happened?

"You've got it all wrong. Emma and I are together. She's been preparing me for a mayoral run, but I'm resistant because of you." I point at him and tell him the truth, "You have your political agenda to make yourself happy. I'm not going to run for mayor to satisfy you."

Dad shakes his head. "You're fucking ridiculous. I hope you know that, son."

"It takes one to know one, Dad."

He chuckles, but he doesn't sound amused. "Son, be honest. Right now. Tell me the truth."

"Why the hell is everyone thinking I'm lying to them?" I throw my hands in the air. Damn, I'm lying right now about my engagement to Emma, but shit. My anger is coming from Jared's accusations rather than this moment. "Emma and I are getting married. If you fucking stop pressuring me to run, Emma's encouragement will get me there."

Dad approaches me.

"Since you're suddenly best friends with Jared, you fucking tell him I'm not banging his sister. I don't know his sister, and she's not pretending to be anything to me." I point at him. "And you, Dad, fuck off."

My phone rings again.

"Son," he says. He pauses for a long time and then points his index finger at my chest as he says, "You always redirect your lack of self-confidence at me instead of seeing how you're holding yourself back. Get some gonads and work with my people to start your run."

Dad walks to the door. When he opens it, I turn to face him. He nods at me. "Don't be a bitch and skip out on my party. It will disappoint your mom."

"Emma and I will be there."

He nods. "Good. I've changed the theme of my party. Be prepared to announce your run for mayor."

"Dad—"

He leaves and shuts the door behind him. I shake my head and walk into the living room. Charlie walks into the living room and stops in front of the toy. She sniffs the toy mouse and continues to the couch.

"Damn."



mma wants me at her apartment after we go on our date on Friday. I'm not in the mood, but I invite her to my place. We decide to stay at our respective places after our date. That makes me feel worse about the situations with Dad and Jared.

It's Thursday night, and I'm standing in front of Emma's door with a single rose. Why? I'm feeling like shit, and want something to go right. Besides, it's better than a text.

Emma opens the door. She looks beautiful, as always. Her hair is in a ponytail, and she's wearing a 49ers jersey and shorts. She frowns at me before she smiles. However, her smile doesn't reach her eyes.

"A rose?" she asks. "It looks like you've been watching too much reality television this week."

I chuckle and hand her the rose. "I've got a full slate of meetings tomorrow, and your neighborhood is nowhere near them. However, I'm here to spend the night."

Emma laughs. "Aw, how's nice—not really. It sounds like Charlie kicked you out of the house."

"Yep, well, she should've worked her magic so that you would come to our place." I follow her to her living room. "We have a problem."

She goes into her kitchen, and I flop down on the couch. Emma calls from the kitchen, "Is it business or family?"

"Family," I call back.

Emma emerges from the kitchen with the rose in a vase. She places the vase on the small living room table. Emma tells me, "I've got my own family problems. My crazy brother keeps hounding me about some trivial shit." When I frown at her, she sits next to me and waves her hand. "It doesn't matter. He's not as crazy as Dad. I handle my brother by dodging all his questions."

"He reminds me of my best friend," I pause and shake my head. Fuck Jared. I need to prepare Emma for what may happen at the party. "Things took a turn for the worse the other day. Dad thinks we have a fake engagement."

Emma looks horrified. “Did I do something wrong? I thought he believed us.”

“He did, but something else happened—that and the fact that Mom dislikes you more than I realized. He’s planning to announce my mayoral run at the party.”

She stares at her lap, and her shoulders slump. I rub her shoulder and lean over to kiss her neck. “Emma, you did nothing wrong.”

“I’m disappointed nonetheless.” She looks at me. We share a long kiss as Emma rubs her hand on my upper thigh. After she pulls away, she grins. A sparkle in her eyes makes me smile.

“What?”

“We’ll continue with our plan as is,” She tells me. “The only change is that we do something different, like leaving before the announcement or putting pressure on Issac to stop him—maybe we argue.”

I nod as I think about the alternatives. “This could work.”

“Yeah, it would work.” She adds, “I’ll be honest and tell you that I’m nervous about PDA in front of Issac and your mom. They may be scrutinizing us, but I know we can do it.”

I brush her cheek with my index finger. “You’re making me think that this is a bump in the road.”

“If you don’t want to run yet, we’re not going to let you.”

“Well, I guess I should get out of the way and let you run this show.” I kiss her.

“I did that when you interrupted Shawn and me.”

“True.”

I kiss her again, and this time, she deepens the kiss. I slide my hands under her t-shirt and massage her breast. She moans. Slowly, I move my head lower and lift her shirt higher. Emma leans back and runs her fingers through my hair. We slowly make love.

EMMA

*T*onight is the night my life will change forever. Okay, I'm a little bored and being overly dramatic.

I'm attending Issac's party, and I'm scared to death. The other night, I did a lot of tough-talking with Trevor. I just wanted him to know I'm supporting him. I've got his back with his dad like he had my back with Shawn.

I'm not sure I can do this a second time. Poppy hates me, and from what Trevor told me the next morning, she's leading the charge to get rid of me. I wish I could tell her the truth. Maybe Trevor should tell her the truth before the party.

The limo is dark, but I can still see Trevor's profile. He looks worried. We dressed at his place. He's wearing a tux, and I'm wearing a black and gold dress. I decided to wear my hair down. My high heels are killing me already.

I grab his hand and place it between my hands. He glances at me and flashes a smile before looking out of the window again.

"I think it will help if you tell Poppy about what we're doing." I cock my head to look at him.

Trevor doesn't look at me. He dryly says, "No."

"I think it's a good idea because she's the one who is so negative. She knows you, and she knows you'd never go for someone I'm playing the part of."

He glances at me. “No. We—you, me, and Mom—will have lunch sometime soon. I’ll tell her then.”

When I open my mouth to speak again, the limo comes to a halt. Seconds later, the limo driver opens Trevor’s door. He exits and leans forward to grab my hand. The driver closes the door behind us.

We walk hand-in-hand into the large party room that is as crowded as the CEW gala was. I survey the room, looking for anyone I know. I exhale, and my shoulders slump when I don’t see anyone I know.

A waiter approaches us and asks if we want champagne. We decline. Trevor steps in front of me and cradles my face in his hands. He looks at me with such a serious, worried expression that my heart breaks.

“No matter what happens,” he says as he lowers his face to mine, “thank you for helping me with this shit.”

The music starts. Musicians sit in the corner and play music. Instead of telling him that he’s welcome and stressing that everything will be fine, I kiss him. Trevor deepens the kiss, and I close my eyes. Tasting Trevor makes it easy to block out all of the noise and people in the room.

Someone clears their throat, but it sounds so distant that we don’t stop kissing. When the person loudly coughs, Trevor ends the kiss. Instead of looking at our intruder, he continues staring at me and says, “Dad.”

I move my face out of Trevor’s hands as I gasp and turn to Issac. He’s smiling. Poppy’s giving us a distasteful look.

How do actors suddenly become their characters?

I take a deep breath and become the bitch I’m not. After giving Trevor a dismissive stare, I look at Issac. The dismissive stare isn’t the hard part. I don’t like Issac. It’s what’s next that I have a hard time doing. “I hear you fucking with my future, Issac. Tonight, you want to announce some run—”

“It’s my decision.” Poppy interrupts. “I figure you wouldn’t mind if Trevor runs for mayor before you get

married. If you love him, it doesn't matter, right?"

Oh, please forgive me, Poppy. I'm not this person.

I place my hands on my hips and say, "Love and politics don't mingle. Trevor needs a wife at his side. No matter what, voters still expect a presentable candidate."

"Poppy, that makes sense." Issac nods. "That's what I've been telling her all week."

Poppy steps forward. "Well—"

"Mom," Trevor interrupted her. He raises his hand and slightly leans his head forward. His expression is so serious that it feels real. "I'm happy."

"Happy?" Poppy points at me. "With her?"

"Yep." Trevor nods.

"Damn right." I nod.

Poppy reaches for her necklace and yanks at it. "This is severely devastating. I wasn't fond of Maria, either, but this one..."

Trevor places his arm around my waist. "There's no 'this one' Mom, Emma's my fiancée."

"Run for mayor before you get married," Poppy angrily suggests.

I look at Trevor and wonder who should take the lead on this wrinkle in the plan. When he shakes his head, I decide it's my job to do the dirty work. So, I turn to Issac and tell both of them, "If you want him to run before I secure my second ring, I will leave. Find someone else. I'm out of here."

Issac grins and raises his hands. "Now, now, let's not go overboard here. When everyone keeps their emotions in check, we'll find some middle ground."

"No, no middle ground," I shake my head. "I get my second ring before Trevor runs for mayor. Isn't that right, Trevor?"

Trevor nods.

Poppy's hazel eyes widen as she stares at Trevor. "You can't mean that. Trevor, you'll be miserable and divorced. Please announce that this...this thing is a sham and that you're not really with this...witch."

"Mom," he says harshly. "You are talking about my future wife. Don't you dare disrespect her."

Issac smiles at me, and I look around. He does the same. His smile quickly fades when he looks around. Some people are looking at us.

"Let's table this," Issac tells us before smiling at a couple walking past us.

I point at Isaac, and I hope I'm not going too far when I say, "Make it happen, Issac. I want this run tabled until my wedding, or I leave Trevor tonight."

I've seen all the movies with a bitch as the lead character. They all walk off after their big moment. I guess I better do the same.

"Emma," Trevor shouts as I rush away. I mingle in the crowd and try to shift and move my way through the guests. Once I make my way to the other end of the room, I search for the bathroom.

"Excuse me," I stop a waiter.

"Would you like a drink?" The waiter asks.

"No, where is the bathroom?"

"Oh, over there." The waiter points to the left.

"Thank you," I tell him and walk to the bathroom. Inside the powder room, I retrieve my phone from my clutch and text Trevor. I tell him I left for dramatic effect. He texts back a thumbs-up emoji. For a moment, I close my eyes and lean my head back. I take a deep breath.

"Don't do it," I hear someone say.

I frown and open my eyes. When I look at the powder room door, a woman rushes past me and enters the bathroom. My body's tense. I move my neck from left to right to ease

some of the tension. I wish Trevor and I could leave now. I'd give anything to return to Trevor's place, eat ice cream, and curl up with Charlie.

"Mama, I'm telling you to leave it alone."

My breath catches in my throat as I watch Poppy and Amy rush into the powder room. Poppy turns back to Amy and says, "Over my dead body will my son marry that bitch."

Amy and I make eye contact when she looks past Poppy. After a moment, Poppy turns around and sees me. She looks at me with a disgusted expression. Amy stands behind her and mouths, "I'm sorry."

I look down at my phone because I'm tempted to text Trevor for help. What can he do? He can't come to the women's restroom. Instead, I slide my phone back into my purse and press my lips together. What do I do?

Poppy walks over to me. "Cat's got your tongue? Can't whine and bitch like earlier?"

"Mom," Amy scolds.

I raised my hand to stop Amy. The gig is up, right now—or at least with Poppy. If I have a future with Trevor, I must tell the truth. More importantly, for tonight to work, I must tell Poppy the truth to get her on our side.

"I'm sorry I'm acting like such a bitch, but it is to help Trevor." I lower my voice just in case someone walks by, someone who might relay what I say to Issac. "When Trevor and I thought this up, he never thought you'd have a problem with it."

"Oh, please," Poppy says in a huff.

I cross my arms over my breasts. "I thought it would help Trevor."

"Mom, she's telling the truth." Amy clears her throat. "Trevor told me everything before the dinner party last week. You know how Daddy is. He's not going to stop until Trevor does what he wants. I thought it was a good plan."

Poppy glances back at her. Her expression is one of disbelief.

“I’m telling you the truth. You and I are on the same side, and we’re rooting for Trevor to settle down and run for mayor when he wants to do so.” I pause and clear my throat because of the flutters in my stomach. “I hope that’s with me, but if it’s not, then that’s fine, too.”

Amy says, “I don’t know the status of their relationship, Mom. What I do know is that Trevor really likes her. You should give her a chance.”

Poppy shakes her head.

I sigh. “Mrs. Poppy, really, I understand that none of this makes sense, and Trevor promised me that we get together for lunch and tell you the truth—”

“That sounds like him,” Poppy mumbles.

“I don’t want you to give me a chance tonight,” I stress. “I need you to give Trevor a chance tonight and not ruin this. Tell Issac you won’t push the mayoral run before the marriage.”

Poppy steps away. She turns and leaves the powder room. Amy and I stare at each other. She flashes a half-smile and crosses her fingers.



Trevor and I wait and wait and wait some more during the party for Issac to announce the mayoral run. By the end of the night, I believe we’re both going mad. So, I drag Trevor out to the dance floor to expel some energy. He smiles at me. I don’t smile back, which causes him to frown.

“Remember, I have to act like a bitch. I don’t think a bitch smiles when she’s not getting what she wants.”

Trevor nods. “Good point.”

As we dance, I think about what happens after this night ends. Do we continue dating? We haven’t had our second date

yet. I press my lips together to stop myself from asking the question. Tonight is about fooling Issac.

Poppy. Shit.

“I need to tell you something.” I look up at Trevor.

He looks at me with a questioning look. “What?”

“Your mom cornered me in the powder room. I told her what we were doing.”

“Hmm,” he says and looks around the room. “Makes sense now.”

“Do you think she’s keeping Issac away from us?”

“Maybe.” Trevor smiles down at me. “We’re leaving soon.”

“Good.”

After the song ends, Trevor leads me away from the dance floor. We keep walking until Trevor finds Poppy and Issac. Although Poppy’s eyes narrow on me, she doesn’t speak.

“Dad,” Trevor looks at Isaac. “We’re leaving.”

Issac leans over and kisses me on the cheek. Then he stands erect. “I look forward to the wedding before the mayoral run.”

I smile. “I’m happy that you see my point.”

“I will not tell Trevor what to do with his life.” Poppy stares me down. “However, I will agree not to push for things to accelerate prior to...whatever.”

Trevor smiles. He leans down and kisses his mother.

Issac studies me. I nod to him and say, “I envision walking down the aisle in six months, which will put us on track for what we want.”

Issac nods and smiles. “Sounds good.”

“Whatever dear Emma wants,” Trevor says before he kisses my temple.



I stroll into Trevor's place, feeling like I live there. Trevor turns on the lights in the living room and kitchen. He stuffs his bowtie into his pocket and unbuttons the top buttons of his shirt.

"You have made me a pleased man, Emma." He grabs my hand and pulls me toward him. "Thank you."

"I think I got you six months."

Trevor shrugs. "You bought me more time. I can keep dangling you in front of Dad like a carrot with a horse. If he starts talking about it, I'll claim we're breaking up."

I frown. Trevor kisses me hard and walks upstairs. I watch him disappear and wonder what just happened. Does that mean we're finished?

"Emma, are you sleeping downstairs or what?"

"Don't be stupid, Trevor."

"Damn, I'm ready for bed. Let's go."

I slowly make my way upstairs and hear scratching on Charlie's door. Instead of going to Trevor's bedroom, I walk to Charlie's room and open the door. She rushes out of her room and downstairs.

TREVOR

*M*y gaze connects with Emma's stare as we catch our breath after lovemaking. It takes a long moment for us to recover. I want to roll over and go to sleep. However, I pull out of Emma and walk over to the wastebasket. As I stand there, my body tingling and relaxed as hell, I remove the condom. I glance over at Emma as she stands, turns, and pulls down the bedsheets. I watch her ass as she crawls to her side of the bed and lies down. She may have her eyes closed, or maybe she's staring out the window. I'm not sure because she's not facing me.

"Are we going on a date tomorrow night?" Emma sighs.

I smile because I love how she sounds so satisfied. In a couple of minutes, Emma will do what she always does and curl against me. In the morning, I'll wake up with her head on my chest and her arm wrapped around my waist.

I join her in bed. Charlie comes to mind. She's nosy as hell, so I'm surprised that she didn't come in here during our lovemaking session. I groan. "Damn, I forgot to open Charlie's door."

"I did it already." Emma glances back at me. "So, are we going on a date?"

I lean against the headboard and grab my phone before saying dryly, "We'll see."

A date? We're dating. *You don't need to treat everything we do as a date.* Sleep is my best friend right now. Although I should accommodate Emma and talk about our next date, I'd

rather sleep. In the morning, I'll check on our plans for San Jose. If it is a go, we'll drive there. If Don tells me he couldn't schedule a new time, we'll go somewhere else. I rest on my back and fall asleep within minutes.



The first thing I notice is the sunlight is too bright this morning. That means I forgot to close the curtains last night. I inhale and exhale. I'm sleeping on my stomach, which is something I do when I'm alone. My back hurts. It feels like there's a boulder on my back. I wince. Yep, something is wrong. Charlie's sleeping on my back.

When I move, she jumps onto the floor. I check the clock and curse. It's late afternoon, and I've overslept.

I roll onto my back. There's a nagging feeling that I'm the only human in my place. However, I'd like to believe Emma is downstairs, making brunch or watching television. Unfortunately, I know I'm lying to myself because she knows to feed Charlie first thing in the morning. People without pets are like people without children. The mundane tasks like feeding are fun to them.

"Give me a minute, Charlie," I scold after she trips me up for the third time as I make my way to the bathroom.

The fourth time she trips me up, I go to her room instead of the bathroom. I've got to piss bad, but shit, I'll never make it if I don't feed Charlie first.

"There," I tell Charlie as I place her food in her bowl. "Are you happy?"

She ignores me and starts eating.

I start my slow journey to the bathroom and take my morning piss. I know that Emma's gone. As I wash my hands, I look around the bathroom for her belongings.

Nothing.



A couple of hours have passed since I woke up without Emma. I hope that she'll call. Maybe something happened to her Dad and brother, and she can't shoot me a text.

I'm a patient man and won't jump to conclusions. Emma played me. She wanted sex, and that's it. No, maybe that's not correct. Last night, she asked about going on a date. I don't see the importance of going on another date. A long, unplanned weekend is better than some planned event. Besides, after last night, I really want a lazy Saturday.

Jared would tell me that I am an idiot. A woman usually isn't upset about the things she discusses. If Jared is right, that means Emma asked about a date, but she wanted to ask a question about something else. What was that something else?

I step out of the shower and dry off with a towel before getting dressed. My phone rings, which reminds me I left my phone in my bedroom. I rush from the bathroom to the bedroom and grab my phone. When I stare at the caller ID, I'm angered. Don is calling. I've been officially ghosted.

"What?"

"I finally got you."

I motion for him to continue even though he can't see me.
"What, Don?"

"The mystery house place can't schedule you for a private tour because they have a wedding. The three weekends are booked, too. What do you want me to do?"

"Hold off for now."

"Will do." Don ends the call before I can say anything.

I toss my phone onto the bed, and it rings again. This time I hesitate to pick up my phone.

Emma? No. Mom.

“Hello, Mom.” There is a pregnant pause. The pause is so long that I think the call dropped. “Hello?”

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“There’s no engagement?”

I sit on my bed and place my left elbow on my knee. “Emma told me what happened.”

“When you dropped her off at home?”

“At the party.” I shake my head. This fucking phone is annoying me. “FYI, after the party, we came back here and made love.”

Although I expected Mom to sound disgusted, she laughed. “That I’m sure of, son. I’m never surprised about how quickly young women will open their legs for you.”

I cringe.

Mom asks, “What is she like?”

“Emma’s the total opposite of the person you met.”

There’s a pause.

“Tell me what you want, Mom. Emma and I are dating, she’s not a bitch, and we’re not engaged.” I say, “I told her that I’d invite you to lunch and explain the entire thing later.”

“When are you going to settle down, Trevor? I don’t care whether you run for mayor. I want grandkids.”

“Mom,” I pause and rest on my back as I stare at the ceiling. Why not change the subject? “Is Dad happy with Emma?”

She says in a huff, “Of course. He won’t stop talking about your trophy whatever. Issac thinks she’s a real go-getter.”

I’m ready for this conversation to end.

“I don’t like all this lying and playing games, Trevor. If you know what’s good for you, be honest with Issac. He’ll listen.”

The smell of Emma's perfume and sex is on the sheet next to my face. This is sick. I'm getting a hard-on from the smell while I'm talking to Mom.

"This is fucking crazy, Mom. Do you know how many times I've talked to that man? This worked out quite well."

Mom sighs. "I know you're right, and this was the best way. He hasn't talked about it all day. Part of me feels that he just doesn't want you to be happy. What father wants his son to marry a trophy wife?"

I rub my nose. "Yep. He's using me to get into politics."

"More like to get back into politics," she corrects.

Her words vibrate through my mind like a bouncing ball in a room. "Excuse me?"

"Issac's going to kill me for telling you this, but when he was younger, he tried to run for mayor." Mom pauses for a long time, which makes me sit up. "It was before we met. He launched a pretty good campaign and fell in love with a young girl in the political scene. To make a long story short, they were caught doing drugs, and it made the news."

At first, I laugh. That doesn't sound like Dad, but I hear Mom say, "Trevor, it's not funny."

I bite my bottom lip to stifle the laugh. "Come on, Mom. I'd know something like that. I've done an internet search on Dad many times, just for fun."

"Oh, please, Trevor. Everyone in the world knows the juicy shit is found in newspapers, mostly on Soundex."

"He was doing drugs, huh?" I chuckle.

"Trevor stop that. It's not funny. Sex, drugs, and politics don't mix."

"Damn, Mom. Tell Dad that."

After a pause, she says, "I know. Now that you know that, quit scheming."

"Sure thing, Mom."

“I love you, Trevor.”

She ends the call before I can tell her the same.

I immediately call Emma while I’m not thinking about it. The call goes to voicemail.

“Emma, please call me because I’m worried. It doesn’t make sense for you to leave in the middle of the night. If something is wrong, text me or something.” I exhale. “Please, call me back, Emma.”



The evening sky makes the house darker than usual. I’ll turn the light on some time. In about five hours, it’ll be twenty-four hours since I’ve seen Emma. There’s still no call.

I sit in a darkened living room with the television on and the phone in my hand. I’ve let anger swell through me all day. No emergency can be so bad that she forgets to call me. It’s fucked up and ridiculous.

The fact that I’ve called three times in the last three hours reminds me of when we first met. Emma has no problem ignoring phone calls.

“Emma,” I say after the call goes to voicemail. “I’m not sure what the fuck I did wrong, but you have no right to leave in the middle of the night like some paid tramp. Give me a call or answer my damn call.”

I end the call and throw my phone on the couch. After a moment, I slouch and look at the ceiling. What the fuck am I missing? Maybe I should call Amy. She and Emma are close to the same age. Perhaps she’d know what’s going on with her. Damn. That makes me sound like I’m a dirty old man. I can’t understand a woman who is four years younger than I am.

Before I talk myself out of it, I grab my phone and call Maria. She answers on the first ring.

“You are dating Emma, so this isn’t a booty call. What’s wrong?”

“Normally, I’d laugh at your crazy shit, but I’m not in the mood.” I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“All right,” she says slowly. Now, she sounds concerned, “Okay, baby, tell mama your troubles.”

After a long pause, I explain. “Last night, we got back from Dad’s party, where everything went great. We made love, and in the morning, she’s gone.”

“I’m not being intrusive, but was it the first time you had sex?”

“Nope”

“Were you having sex when you hosted the dinner party.”

“Nope. It happened that night.”

“Hmm.”

I don’t like the sound of that. Now, I know I’m missing something. “So, how did I fuck up this time?”

“I’m not sure yet.” Maria asks, “Did you argue?”

“Nope. She asked about going on a date.”

When Maria didn’t say anything, I sat up and ran my fingers through my hair. Shit.

“Well, this is my personal opinion, but I believe that she may think you’re not interested in her.”

“I don’t get that. I’ve done everything right.”

“How many times have you rescheduled a date?”

“I never have.” Yeah, I’m defensive, and I know it. I’ve learned from my mistakes with Maria and all the rest. “I swear, I haven’t been working too much, at least not enough to keep rescheduling dates.”

Maria hums a moment before saying, “Somewhere, there’s a violin playing.”

I hate you, Maria. Maybe. I don't know. No, you're not right. “We’re not talking about us?”

She laughs. “Don’t go there. You know I’ve moved on, Trevor. What I’m saying is that there’s some miscommunication. I wasn’t there, but if that’s the last conversation you had, and she disappeared...”

“Yeah, well,” I tell her. “That you for the advice.”

“Hey, I thought you’d be ending the relationship because you’re dating Jared’s sister.” She laughs.

I shake my head. “Not you, too. Did he call you?”

“Jared?”

“Yep.”

“No.” She laughs. “Trevor, take a moment and figure it out before you start causing a scene. You know you can do that.”

EMMA

Dane would have loved this weather. Today, the bay area feels more like SoCal. It's so hot and steamy that the cool seems to stay trapped on the Golden Gate Bridge. He loved super warm weather. The trip we took to Seattle during our senior year, he wanted to cry because we had to nearly constantly endure the weather he hated most—rain.

I press my lips together and look down at Dane's headstone. Now, I wish he was here for different reasons. It's crazy. Dane would tell me what to do about Trevor. Of course, that would also mean that we weren't together.

Dane's grave sits on top of a hill near a beautiful, large tree. The area reminds me of Dane so much. He was such a towering figure and warm presence in my life. I would never describe Dane in a way that I would describe Trevor. Dane was beautiful. Trevor's sexy and handsome and fucking hot. He's a grown man.

That fact makes me think of the last time Trevor and I made love. Dane flashed in my mind and made me wish he was here. What would he be like at twenty-four or at Trevor's age?

Dane should be alive. The fact that he's not and that I met Trevor makes me understand that life moves on without us. I'd been hiding from life ever since Dane died. Tonya's right when she said guys have approached me or been interested in me. Sometimes I've seen it, and all of the time I've ignored it. No good man can compete with a ghost.

However, time moved on, and I grew older. New love finds people, no matter that they're in love with a lover who has died. Am I ready to move on? Mentally and physically, I thought I'd let Dane go. Now I'm hanging on to him because I feel guilty.

The time I've spent with Trevor makes me feel good, even though he doesn't want me around. I sigh.

"Dane, I miss you, and I wish you were here." I kneel closer to his headstone and stare at it. "You were my first, and until Trevor, my only lover. I feel guilty moving on, even if it's not with Trevor."

I push my hair over my shoulder and feel tears stream down my face. An older man with flowers slowly walks past. I watch him until he disappears from my vision. After a moment, I turn back to Dane's headstone.

"I met this guy named Trevor. I guess it's too late to tell you because I've mentioned it once or twice already. Um, I came here to say that I, well, I don't know what to say. You died because I was late." I wipe my face. "So, I guess I should say I'm sorry that you met me. You'd be alive today, I guess, if you hadn't"

"No, that's not right."

I gasp when I hear the voice and look around. My focus is on talking to Dane, so I don't hear Tonya walk up and stand behind me. Quickly, I stand and turn to look at her.

"What are you doing here?"

Tonya wipes my tears away with a napkin before handing it to me. She stares at me with such concern that it makes my tears flow faster. I hug her and sob.

"It's okay, Em. He's gone, and you're not responsible. It's not your fault, but the fault of the assholes who killed him." She pats my back.

"Why was it so easy to move past what happened with Dad, but I can't stop feeling guilty about Dane?" I move away from Tonya. "I mean, after his death, I felt guilty because I

was the reason he died. Now, I feel guilty because it feels like I'm cheating on him. I feel like a yoyo."

Tonya places her hands on her hips and looks down at Dane's headstone. "Your dad is still alive. Dane is now this huge figure who is forever perfect in your mind. He can do no wrong now because he's dead, and that's what makes you feel imperfect."

I shrug.

"Em, you're looking for perfection. You want something to make you feel okay, and holding on to Dane does that for you—or did until now."

That sounds true. I take a deep breath and exhale. I clear my throat and look at Dane's headstone. "It hurts more now that I'm ready to leave him in the past. I'll always remember him, but I'm ready to go forward."

"I've known many people who have spent their entire lives devoted to their dead spouse. They don't live, date, or try to be happy." Tonya shrugs. "You're doing something that you must do, and that is something great."

Although I try to smile, I fail. I stare at Dane's headstone for a long time. It feels okay to move forward. Slowly, the guilt holding my shoulders down seems to disappear, and I stand taller. I frown. "How did you know I was here?"

"When you suggested lunch, you sounded distant." Tonya shrugs. "I figure you were thinking about Dane."

"Did you drive?"

She nods.

"I'll meet you there, then?"

Tonya nods and backs away. "Promise? I don't want you to change your mind and stay here all day."

"No, I'm not." I fish my phone out of my huge purse and tell her, "I think I should do something I thought I'd never do."

"Take a job at your father's company?" She smiles.

"Funny."

She throws her hands in the air. “Okay, call Trevor.”

I press my lips together for a moment and think about the move. I don’t know if I’m making the right move. What happens if I call Trevor and he’s angry? This isn’t like when we met and when he went overboard about completing my first rule. The only thing I know is that I can’t keep thinking the worst. If he doesn’t want to date me, I have to let him tell me that. If he does, it doesn’t mean I’ll hide again until some external event forces me to live again. Once Tonya walks away toward the cemetery exit, I call Trevor.

I think Trevor answers, but no one says anything. Thus, I think it went to voicemail. “Um, this is Emma, Trevor, and—”

“I know who this is,” he interrupts.

My heart sinks when I hear his harsh tone. “I know—”

“You know what I know, Emma? You need to grow up. You leave my bed, and you don’t even feel the need to answer my call.”

I inhale and say in a rush, “I know I was stupid and leaving, but I was just confused. You don’t want to date me, but you want me in your bed.”

“Don’t even go there, Emma.”

“Don’t go there?” I throw my left hand in the air. “Trevor, every time I ask about going on a date, you blow me off, but you—”

“I’m not blowing you off. Fuck, Emma, we’re dating now. How many fucking dates does it take to know we’re dating?”

“Don’t yell at me.”

“Quit being stupid.”

“Don’t call me stupid!”

Trevor laughs. “Isn’t that something. You don’t like hearing your phrase or some version of it. You had no right to fuck and go like that. Damn, you could’ve called me, Emma.”

“Trevor, I’m calling now.”

I hear him exhale and say, “Why now? You need some dick or something?”

“Don’t be stupid, Trevor.” I take a step back because it feels like he just punched me in the heart. Although I tell myself not to cry, I can’t stop myself from sobbing. “I am standing here in a cemetery because I’ve felt guilty for my boyfriend’s death. I worked hard to become who I am, and I’m not a child.”

“Listen—”

“I’m calling you because I wanted to apologize, and I wanted to see if what I assumed was true is true,” I tell him as I wipe my tears away.

“What did you want to know?”

“If you were going to break up with me after Issac’s party. That’s what—”

Trevor interrupts me, “Yep, you’re right. We’re done. The fucking best to you.”



Tonya and I meet for lunch, but we take the food back to my apartment. I can’t eat, and it’s not because I want to cry. I do want to cry, but it’s hard because I’m too upset. I can’t do it.

At my apartment, I sit on the floor, and Tonya sits on the couch. She eats her sandwich, and I drink my soda. I haven’t eaten all day. My emotions keep me from wanting to eat, but my body is feeling it. My empty stomach cramps.

I rub my eyes.

“So,” Tonya says. “Start over again. What happened?”

“Issac’s party went well, and we accomplished our missing of getting him to back off Trevor.”

Tonya waves her hand and looks perturbed. “I know all that. Get to the important part.”

“He commented that if Issac puts pressure on him, then he’ll claim we’ve broken up or something like that,” I search my mind and try to figure out if it happened like that. I shrug. “That’s when I asked when we were going on our date. After sex, he ends up telling me that maybe we’d go on a date.”

She sips her soda. “You leave the next morning.”

“A couple of hours later.”

“Oh,” Tonya shakes her head. “No way. That’s crazy. You can’t do that to a man. They are like overly-emotional babies when it comes to that shit.”

I put my face in my hands. “Are you saying I reacted terribly?”

“You overreacted.” She places her soda on the living room table. “I’m just saying, wake him up in the middle of the night or wait until morning. You can’t ghost a dude for how many days?”

“About a week.”

“Shit, girl, you should have seen that phone call coming.”

I wipe my face with my palms. “I don’t know. I thought Trevor would do what he did last time when we met.”

“You mean hunt you down like prey?”

“Yes.” I throw my hands in the air. Finally, someone understands.

“No.” Tonya shakes her head.

I shake my head and ask, “Why?”

Tonya sighs. “Men are like hunters. When they want you, they go the extra mile to get you. When they have you, not so much.”

“What about when they are mad at you?”

“Not at all.”

I take a deep breath and exhale. This foolish feeling replaces the guilt I felt about Dane’s death. It’s crazy because I feel like I’m in college when I should be in grade school.

Many twenty-four-year-old women have had a lot more relationships than I've had.

I weakly defend myself. "One time, Dane was mad at me and tried to make it right."

"Dane was a teenager. A man won't do that unless they want to keep the peace. Wait, no, a man won't do that even then." She waves her hand. "Don't quote me on that."

I lick my bottom lip. "What happens now?"

Tonya shrugs. Her expression turns somber when she finally answers, "Give him some time or maybe forget about him? I don't know."

For a moment, I sit cross-legged and change my mind when it starts hurting. I stretch my legs. "What would you do?"

She takes a deep breath and wipes her hands with a napkin. "Well, I would concentrate on myself and hope that he calms down and wants to talk about things."

I nod. "That makes sense."

TREVOR

*M*y office is the largest one on the floor of the corporate building. I sit in my leather chair and swivel around to look out the large window overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge. I rub my face with my palms before I take my tie off and put it behind me. The hot weather gives me second thoughts about leaving work. I finished all my work for today, but I'm not sure if I want to go. I hate hot weather. Besides, the only thing I'll do is go home and nag Charlie when she ignores me.

It takes a moment for me to drag myself out of my chair. I stand and grab my briefcase but leave my tie where it landed on my telephone. As I walk outside, the heat slaps me in the face and takes my breath away. I almost go back inside and wait until the sun goes down. Yet, I keep going. I walk to my car, throw my briefcase in the passenger seat, and get in the driver's seat. Before I start the car, I put my phone in the cupholder. That's when it rings.

I slam the door before grabbing the phone. If I'm lucky, it will be Don telling me a company will buy my latest app. It's not. Instead, I see Emma's name on the screen.

Briefly, I close my eyes and exhale. The relief of knowing Emma's okay makes me send a silent prayer. Normally, I take those seconds to formulate a game plan of how I want to address the situation. Worry has disappeared, but I'm fucked mentally. She left me and hasn't returned my calls. I don't know whether she's playing games or something happened. For a moment, I let my phone ring. Maybe I'll give myself

five minutes to formulate a game plan and call Emma back. Will Emma answer my call? Damn. I have to seize the moment.

With a sigh, I grab my phone and answer her call. However, I don't say anything right away. Keep calm. Don't lose it.

Emma sounds hesitant. "Um, this is Emma, Trevor, and—"

"I know who this is," I interrupt.

"I know—"

Damn, we both know who is on the phone. *What you don't know, Emma, is how fucking worried I was. Did I make love to you too rough? Was there something Mom said at the party? Did I fucking hurt you in some way that scarred you for life? Those are the fucking things I want to know. Emma, I'm dying because I miss your ass so much. You have me thinking Charlie's mad at me for making you leave.* Damn. I don't need this shit.

"You know what I know, Emma? You need to grow up. You leave my bed, and you don't even feel the need to answer my call."

Emma says in a rush, "I know I was stupid for leaving, but I was just confused. You don't want to date me, but you want me in your bed."

My head bounces back as her words flip a switch within me. I've heard that shit too many times in past relationships. The phrases and explanations vary.

I work too much. My mistress is my work. I'm cheating a woman with work. I need to spend more time wining and dining with a woman.

Be fucking original, Emma. Those who came before you played a better game with the shit you're pulling.

"Don't even go there, Emma."

"Don't go there?" She scoffs. "Trevor, every time I ask about going on a date, you blow me off, but you—"

I hit the steering wheel with my fist. My frustration grows. I'm not mad at Emma, but at myself—no Maria. Damn, she's right. That doesn't eliminate my frustration. *You're not stupid, Emma. You know how relationships work.* "I'm not blowing you off. Fuck, Emma, we're dating now. How many fucking dates does it take to know we're dating?"

"Don't yell at me."

"Quit being stupid."

"Don't call me stupid!"

I laugh. "Isn't that something. You don't like hearing your phrase or some version of it. You had no right to fuck and go like that. Damn, you could've called me, Emma."

"Trevor, I'm calling now."

I exhale and say, "Why now? You need some dick or something?"

"Don't be stupid, Trevor." Emma sobs. "I am standing here in a cemetery because I've felt guilty for my boyfriend's death. I worked hard to become who I am, and I'm not a child."

I stop breathing for a second. It feels like Emma punches me in the gut. She's in a cemetery. So something happened? I wave my hand, instantly forgetting that Emma's not sitting across from me. I'm suddenly out of the loop, and I can't stand it. I know about her career plans, dreams and that she's not a fucking virgin. How many men has Emma dated?

"Listen—"

"I'm calling you because I wanted to apologize, and I wanted to see if what I assumed was true is true," Emma tells me.

I roll my eyes and forget my last question when I hear her previous statement. She's pulling this sorry, not sorry bullshit. *I make love to you, and you assume some dumb shit that makes you leave?*

"What did you want to know?"

“If you were going to break up with me after Issac’s party. That’s what—”

“Yep, you’re right. We’re done. The fucking best to you.”

I end the call and sit in my car and shake my head. This is fucking ridiculous. I throw my phone to the passenger’s side of the vehicle. I didn’t handle that correctly. What I said was not what I was going to say. Damn.

When am I going to find a woman who isn’t complicated enough to leave me single?



“*W*hat are you going to do about the private tour? They called me back with more open dates.”

I listen to Don, not wanting to pay attention to his question. That damn date idea will be the death of me. We sit in the work conference room shortly after a client leaves. I sit at the head of the table and stare down at a multi-million dollar check. We’ve sold a social media start-up Don developed last year. It was actually his baby from start to finish. Even though he’s my assistant, with a twenty percent cut, he’ll have enough money to start a company.

I lean back and stare at the ceiling. “You’re, what, twenty or twenty-one?”

“I’m twenty-two,” Don says.

“You’re about two years younger than Emma.”

“Bro, I don’t want your leftovers.” Don quickly says, “And I don’t date older women.”

I look at him. “Shut the fuck up and wait until I finish.”

Don chuckles. “You know, Nana says the same thing.”

“Damn, you made me forget my question.” I tap on the table with my index finger. “I am trying to figure out what’s up

with Emma. She... It's a long story. Emma thought I was going to dump her, and she left."

"Some girls don't ask questions. You know, it's like an overreaction sometimes. Bro, Nana always tells me communication is the key to all relationships."

"Overreaction, huh?" I lean back. "No matter what, I'm fucked. I feel terrible about how I broke up with Emma. I don't act like a bitch and scream and shout and shit."

"Fuck, bro. It sounds like you went to overreaction city, too."

"Hell, you tell me what you'd do when you sleep with a woman and wake up alone—no call, no letter, nothing." I shake my head.

Don shrugs, and says, "Hell, that sounds like a good thing, but I'm twenty-two."

I nod. Yep, when I was twenty-two, I was in my fuck and go phase. I thought Jared was crazy for sleeping in the same bed after fucking a girl.



I adjust my sunglasses as I stroll into the patio at Jared's place. Jared is resting on the patio, wearing his headphones and mouthing words to something. I've always liked Jared's place. He lives outside of the city and purchased more land than the three houses on my street have combined. The interior of his house always looks like one of those homes on property shows—no family pictures or anything personal.

I stand near Jared and wait for him to notice me. It's an overcast day, and I suspect he won't see me for a while. Now he's pumping his fist in the air as he lip-syncs.

Jared looks startled as he jumps up and looks over at me. He takes his headphones off and spits, "Fuck, man."

I laugh and point to the driveway in the far distance. “I used the key you gave me to get in the driveway.”

“Shit, call me next time.” He moves to the edge of the lounge chair.

We enter the kitchen and walk to his living room. Usually, when I’m here, we play video games until one of us owes the other a couple of thousand dollars.

“I need some advice.”

“On?”

“I got dumped, and my girl called me to explain, and I dumped her.”

“What? There is one dumper and one dumpee—that’s it.”

I flop down on the white leather couch and slouch down. Instead of explaining, I rubbed my face. “What now?”

“First, I need to know what happened.” Jared walks to the kitchen and returns with cans of soda.

“Things happened fast, and we slept together, and you know sometimes dates don’t come before sex.”

“Man, listen, did you drink before coming here?” Jared pops the top can and gulps soda.

“I don’t want to feel like a douchebag.” I look over at him as he sits next to me. “I feel like a dumb fuck. All I had to do was take her on a fucking date, and we’d still be dating.”

Jared motions at me. “Rewind, motherfucker.”

I open the soda can and listen to Jared’s loud belch. “Emma asks me when we’re going on another date, we make love, and she leaves in the middle of the night.”

“Well—” Jared cocks his head and stares at me. “Emma?”

“Yep, that’s her name. She’s sexy as hell, sassy, and great in bed.”

Jared stands and places his soda on his glass table. He moves to the left, turns, and looks at me. For a long time, he studies me. He asks, “What’s her last name?”

I stand and pull my phone from my jeans pocket. “Are you okay? I have a picture of her.”

As I scroll through my pictures, I feel stupid for not deleting them. I shake my head. I think this is the best picture of Emma. We were cleaning Charlie’s room, and she stopped to watch Charlie stare out the window. I told Emma she could stare all she wanted, but she’d never figure out what captured Charlie’s attention.

Jared leans forward and stares at the picture. When he stands erect, I expect him to remark on how stupid I am for letting her go. Instead, he punches me in the face. I fall back against the sofa. My soda flies out of my hand, and my phone hits the glass table with a thud. When Jared lunges for me, I hold up my hands in a defensive posture. He grabs my shirt and pulls me into a standing position. As he tries to hit me again, I move to the left.

We tussle for a moment as I yell, “What are you doing?”

“I told you to stay away from my sister. You fucking lied to me. You asshole!”

I push him away. “Emma’s not your sister.”

“The hell she isn’t. The girl in that picture is my fucking sister, Emma. You idiot. We look alike.”

After I rub my face, I tell him, “I would never call you sexy.”

He lunges at me again, and I pull my fist back, ready to defend myself.

“You fucking lying ass. You slept with my sister.” Jared covers his face.

“I refuse to believe Emma’s your sister,” I tell him, which is true. They’re not related. I’d never find Jared’s sister anywhere near attractive.

Jared grabs his phone from the table, punches a few buttons, and shows me a picture on his phone. I’m going to be physically sick. Fuck, I don’t believe this. Emma’s smiling face is staring back at me. That picture doesn’t look like mine.

I'm not looking at sexy, saucy Emma—she has braces and frizzy, wavy hair. She looks like Jared in that photo.

I step back. My jaw hurts even though Jared punched me in the mouth.

“You just signed your death sentence, fucker.”

It takes me a moment to find my phone. I guess, after my phone hit the glass table, it went under the couch. After a sigh, I tell him, “I didn't do it on purpose, and Emma doesn't look like you.”

Jared stares at me and shakes his head. “We promised each other. We'd never touch each other's sisters.”

“As I said, I didn't know, and she didn't introduce herself as your sister. She hasn't told me anything about you.” I check my phone to make sure the screen isn't cracked. The screen is perfect.

“I doubt that.”

“It's true.”

“So, you hurt her.”

“It wasn't on purpose.”

Jared waves his hands. “Don't tell me the details. If I know anything, I'll fuck you up.”

I nod. “Fine.”

As I walk to the front door, Jared asks, “Where are you going?”

“Home. You're going to kick my ass if I tell you anything.” I rub my face and exhale. “I'll be honest with you, Jared. I don't know what would happen between us or if I would break her heart, but I want something with her.”

“Let's go, and we're taking my car.” Jared grabs his phone and stalks past me. “I refuse to believe that Emma would hide her family from you. That would mean she knew who you were.”

EMMA

It's late afternoon, and I'm feeling a little better after my conversation with Tonya. She left a couple of hours ago, and I've been alone ever since. Hell, who am I going to hang out with, Jared—Dad?

After taking a long shower, I change into my 49ers shirt and shorts. It's too early to wear the clothes I'm going to sleep in later. So, I keep my sports shirt on and put on jeans instead. I twist my hair and put a clip in it.

Someone bangs on my front door, which scares me. No one bangs on my door. I walk to the front door and look out the peephole. My heart skips a beat because it's Trevor. I watch him for a while and see him continuously turn to his left.

"Calm down, calm down," I tell myself. After taking a deep breath—twice—I grab the doorknob, twist it, and open the door.

"I'm sorry. Whatever, I did—or didn't do—I never meant to tell you it was over," Trevor says as he waves his hands.

He looks sexy, but I notice a spot near his lip. It's a horrible bruise. So, I hear his words, and they make my heart soar, but all I can ask is, "What the fuck happened to you?"

"You didn't tell me your brother would kick my ass." He stomps in my apartment.

I turn to face him. "Don't be stupid. My brother's an obsessive idiot, but he would never hurt you."

“Want to bet?” I gasp as I hear Jared’s voice behind me. He’s now standing in the doorway, staring me down.

“Jared, what are you doing here?” I ask.

He rushes into my apartment. I close the door behind him. Jared turns and demands, “Did you or did you not tell this fucker that I was your brother?”

I take a step back and cross my arms over my breasts. This moment brings me back to grade school when I annoyed Jared too much. I clear my throat and tell him, “I told Trevor I had a brother.”

“But you didn’t tell him my name?”

“Of course not. I met Trevor at the gala.” I throw my hands up and continue, “Why would I tell anyone who I was when I was trying to network?”

Jared shakes his head as Trevor shoves him. “I told your ass. You two are related? You wouldn’t tell me her name, and she wouldn’t tell me yours.”

I laugh but stop when Jared glares at me. “I agree with Trevor.”

“You would.” Jared throws his hands up. He looks at Trevor. “Give me a minute with my sister.”

Trevor points to Jared. “See? All your fault.”

Jared flashes him the middle finger. “Give me a minute with Emma.”

He nods and takes a couple of steps back. “I’ll hang out in your bedroom.”

I give him a reassuring smile. “Okay.”

Jared covers his eyes. Once Trevor is upstairs, Jared grabs my arm and pulls me further into the living room. “Sit down.”

I sit on the couch while Jared stands in front of me.

“There’s so much I want to say, but I’m trying to limit myself.” Jared says, “You’re an adult, and I know you’re in control of your destiny, but you don’t want a man like Trevor.”

“Why not?” I lean forward. “Does he have an STD or something? I already slept with him.”

“I don’t have any STDs!” Trevor yells.

Jared looks past me and screams, “Stop listening, fucker.”

“Okay, motherfucker!”

Jared stares at me. “I’m not saying that. What I’m saying is that Trevor’s had a lot more relationships than you. Emma, you deserve someone like Dane, someone who will treat you well and—”

“Dane’s dead.” I walk around him and into the kitchen.

He follows me. “I know, but some young man like him.”

“Trevor’s only four years older than me.”

Jared nods. “Yeah, I know. I’m telling you... Ah, Trev and I promised each other that we wouldn’t date the other’s sister.”

“When was this?”

He crosses his arms over his chest and leans on the kitchen counter. “Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

Jared scratches the back of his head. “In college.”

“Oh, when Mama used to complain that you’d get killed slipping in and out of beds.” I act surprised.

As he shakes his head, Jared tells me, “Don’t focus on me. You are a beautiful woman who can have any man. When Trev tries to get back with you, resist.”

I shrug. “I’m missing something because all I hear is how you want to control my life. When you asked me about Sam, I told you to go for it. Now, you want to tell me that you know better about my life.”

“You’ve got it wrong, sis. I’m telling you to pick someone else. You don’t know Trev like I do.”

“I don’t want to know Trevor like you do.”

We stare at each other for a long time until he looks away. Jared stands. “You’re thinking with your...”

“What? My pussy? My vag—”

He yells, “Stop that shit.”

“Jared, I’m young, but I’m an adult. You didn’t save me from Dad or stop me from going to Los Angeles.” I point at him. “I’ve been making my own decisions for a long time.”

Jared places his hands on my shoulders and says, “I get it, but love is different from life.”

“Let me make my own mistakes, Jared. I need my big brother, not a cockblocker.”

He throws his hands up, looking like I’m torturing him. “This is what happens when you’re around Trevor. You sound like a drunken sailor.”

“Don’t be stupid. I’ve sounded like this ever since I turned sixteen.” I wink at him.

“Don’t wink. Trevor winks.” He walks past me and back into the living room. I follow him.

Trevor’s sitting on the couch.

“I told you to give me a minute,” Jared huffs.

Trevor nods. “I did. When you went into the kitchen, I came downstairs. Do I have to go back upstairs, or are you finished, cockblocker?”

“I’m out of here. You two deserve each other.” Jared stomps to the door. As he opens the door, he looks back and says, “Hurt her, and I’ll kill you.”

Trevor looks down.

When the front door slams, Trevor and I are alone. He’s still staring down. I move between the couch and the living room table. Although I consider sitting next to him, I sit on the table and stare at him.

“Does it hurt? Your face.”

“Yep.”

There's a long pause.

"Do you want some ice to put on it?"

Trevor glances at me. "No."

This time, the silence between us is longer.

"I'm not sure what to do or say," I tell him. At this point, the silence hurts my ears.

Trevor takes his time to speak. Slowly, he looks at me and says, "First, before we go any further, I need to say sorry. I didn't handle that phone call well. I ranted, and I never rant."

I open my mouth to speak, but he raises his hand to stop me.

"Emma, I don't act like that. I was hurt when you left and worried when you didn't return my calls, but that's no excuse for me acting like a bitch."

For a moment, we look at each other, and I'm at a loss for words. As I think about the phone call, I want to cry. It's not because of what was said, but because of where I was. To be at Dane's gravesite and have that conversation, it made me realize that Dane was dead. He was there and couldn't help me. It's time to move forward.

I move my head from side to side in an attempt not to cry. Trevor leans forward and rubs his palm against my cheek. I cry.

"I'm sorry."

As I clear my throat, I shake my head. "It's not the conversation."

"What?"

"I..." it takes me a moment to say anything. "Dane was my boyfriend until some years ago when he died. I haven't been in a relationship since. So, the conversation just occurred at the wrong time."

Trevor clears his throat. "How did he die?"

“I decided to take the Amtrak instead of driving to meet him, and he was robbed and killed while he was waiting for me.” I look at him. “It’s taken a while for me to move forward.”

“Was he your only lover?”

I nod.

“Did he take you on many dates?” He leans back.

Before I nod, I wipe my cheeks. “Yeah, but we were together for a long time.”

He looks down.

Okay, this is my turn to apologize. With a heavy sigh, I begin, “I’m sorry. I felt like you were more interested in getting Issac to stop harassing you than dating me.”

Trevor leans back and frowns at me. “Why would you think that?”

“Whenever I asked you about going on a date, you gave me some vague answer. We spent more time at each other’s places than going out, and I know our first date was a bore for you.”

“It was a bore for me because it was on a weekday.” He throws his hands up and looks frustrated. “I had this great first date planned in San Jose, and we’d get to know each other during the long ride, but—”

I interrupt him. “I wanted a weekday date.”

“Every time I tried to go on that date with you, something happened. The place had a wedding, or we decided to do something else.”

As I watch him, I lean back. Embarrassment washes over me as I envision Trevor trying to plan the perfect date. I bite the inside of my cheek. “That night, you were so flippant about our next date, even after we had sex.”

“Damn, Emma, I wanted to make love and go to sleep. I wasn’t flippant.”

I shrug and give him a challenging stare.

He looks away. “We’ll agree to disagree.”

“Thank you.” I smile.

Trevor doesn’t smile. “You fucking hurt me when you left in the middle of the damn night—”

“Like a paid tramp.” As I study him, I squint and ask, “How many paid tramps have left your bed in the middle of the night?”

“Not as many as Jared’s had.”

His comment hangs in the air like it’s suspended in time.

I shake my head. “Can we date now?” When he stifles a laugh, I cringe. I sound like a child. “You know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean, Emma.” He caresses my knees. “I’d like credit for stupid shit like movie night at home and making dinner for you. I want it to count as a date night.”

“Are you that against going out?”

Trevor leans forward and kisses my neck. “What can I say? Sometimes I like to chill at home.”

“We’ll compromise.” I run my fingers through his hair.

He looks at me. “No weekday dates. They suck.”

“I agree.”

Trevor fist pumps. After he clears his throat, he looks serious as he says, “We need to talk about our expectations for this relationship. It looks like we have some differences.”

“Like?”

He rubs his temples. “I’m more into wanting marriage and family. We’re not that far apart in age, but I’m done with the late-night parties and all that.”

“Marriage and family?” I bite the inside of my lip. Marrying Trevor seems like an overwhelming thought right now. I want to date him and build my career. I hesitate before explaining, “I don’t think I’m ready for all that yet.”

“I’m not saying I want you to be,” he says. “The point is that we may have some tough times ahead. I’m not saying

your desires are wrong or vice versa—nor am I proposing to you right now.”

“I get it.” Honestly, it feels a little disappointing that we’re on different paths right now. “What about Issac? He’s going to expect us to get married.”

Trevor smiles like he knows a secret. “Don’t worry about that. I’m in complete control of the situation, thanks to you.”

Neither of us speak for a long time, but I’m not lost in my thoughts. We stare at each other until Trevor leans forward and kisses me. He says against my lips, “No pressure. The point of a relationship is to see where it goes.”

I rub my nose against his nose before I kiss him. Trevor deepens the kiss before I move back. “Promise that we won’t stop talking.”

“I promise.” He stands and looks down at me. “You must resist making assumptions about what’s going on in our relationship.”

“Yeah, I know. I promise.” I chuckle and look down. “That wasn’t my best moment.”

“We’ll have a lot of best moments.” Trevor caresses my cheek.

As I press my lips together, I grab his hand and pull him toward the stairs. When Trevor resists, I turn around and look at him. “Let’s go to bed.”

“I’m going home.”

“Home?”

“Home,” He says more forcefully. “Sex confuses things. So, I’ll go back to being a good boy for a while. We’ll let our relationship mature first before taking the next step.”

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out because I’m in shock. Some things go through my mind. I don’t try to hide my disappointment. It’s not fair. I want him to stay, but I press my lips together and say nothing.

“Yep, I can’t believe I’m saying it, either, but it’s the best thing to do if we want to see where this goes.”

I know he’s telling the truth. I’d be saying the same thing if I didn’t want Trevor inside me so bad. “How long should we wait?”

“We’ll see.”

“Can we make it?”

“Yep,” Trevor says with a chuckle. “We’ll make it.”

We kiss, but neither of us deepens the kiss. Trevor takes my hand in his, and we walk to the door. After he opens it, he kisses me again. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Answer the damn phone, please.”

“Yes, sir.” I kiss him.

TREVOR

Jared bangs on Emma's door and moves to the side like he's the police during a raid. He crosses his arms over his chest and glares at me. I shake my head. My face hurts like hell. "I told you, Jared. She didn't tell me."

He shrugs and maintains his defensive stance.

We wait until Emma opens the door. I try to figure out what to say. The longer I wait, the more I think about pleading my case before speaking about the phone call. When the door opens, I'm at a loss for words. Emma's gorgeous in her t-shirt and jeans. I feel like a desperate man on an island.

"I'm sorry. Whatever, I did—or didn't do—I never meant to tell you it was over," I say.

Emma looks at me and smiles. However, her smile quickly disappears, and she stares at the bruise on my face. She looks horrified as she says, "What the fuck happened to you?"

"You didn't tell me your brother would kick my ass." I stomp into her apartment.

Emma turns to face me. "Don't be stupid. My brother's an obsessive idiot, but he would never hurt you."

"Want to bet?" Jared says as he stands in the doorway, glaring at Emma.

I watch Emma gasp like she's seen a ghost. "Jared, what are you doing here?"

Jared rushes into Emma's apartment. She closes the door behind him. Jared turns and demands, "Did you or did you not tell this fucker that I was your brother?"

Emma steps back and crosses her arms over her breasts. She looks like a little sister trying to look tough in front of her big brother. Although I want to feel bad for Emma, I have a bigger problem. I notice she's not wearing a bra. My hard dick hurts.

She clears her throat and tells him, "I told Trevor I had a brother."

"But you didn't tell him my name?"

"Of course, not. I met Trevor at the gala." She throws her hands up and continues, "Why would I tell anyone who I was when I was trying to network?"

Jared shakes his head. I take pleasure in shoving him and saying, "I told your ass. You two are related? You wouldn't tell me her name, and she wouldn't tell me yours."

Emma laughs but stops when Jared glares at me. "I agree with Trevor."

"You would." Jared throws his hands up. He looks at me. "Give me a minute with my sister."

I point to Jared. "See? All your fault."

Jared flashes me the middle finger. "Give me a minute with Emma."

I nod and take a couple of steps back as I decide whether to stick it to Jared. I wink at Emma. "I'll hang out in your bedroom."

She gives me a reassuring smile. "Okay."

Jared covers his eyes. I slowly go upstairs, but I don't go to Emma's bedroom. It's at the end of the hall, and I want to hear their conversations. So, I stand at the top of the stairs and listen.

Jared says, "Sit down."

“There’s so much I want to say, but I’m trying to limit myself.” Jared says, “You’re an adult, and I know you’re in control of your destiny, but you don’t want a man like Trevor.”

You bitch. Jared, you’re such a bitch. How could you throw me under the bus like this? I’m good enough to be your best fucking friend, but I’m not good enough to date your sister? That’s fucked up.

I sigh. Yep, this is why I don’t want you dating Amy.

“Why not? Does he have an STD or something? I already slept with him.”

STD? What the fuck? I lean forward and interrupt the conversation. “I don’t have any STDs!”

Jared screams, “Stop listening fucker.”

“Okay, motherfucker!”

He speaks again. “I’m not saying that. What I’m saying is that Trevor’s had a lot more relationships than you. Emma, you deserve someone like Dane, someone who will treat you well and—”

“Dane’s dead.”

“I know, but some young man like him.”

“Trevor’s only four years older than me.”

I step on the top step when their voice gets further away. Standing on the top step doesn’t help because I can’t hear them talking. I walk down a couple more stairs and peer into the living room. They must be in the kitchen. I walk downstairs and into the living room and walk to the other side of the kitchen door. I don’t look into the kitchen so that Jared doesn’t have a cow.

Jared tells Emma, “Don’t focus on me. You are a beautiful woman who can have any man. When Trev tries to get back with you, resist.”

Emma says, “I’m missing something because all I hear is how you want to control my life. When you asked me about

Sam, I told you to go for it. Now, you want to tell me that you know better about my life.”

I stare at the opposite wall and bow my head. Emma can get any man she wants because she is stunning, has a sick sense of humor, and is a great person. I love how she defends herself.

“You’ve got it wrong, sis. I’m telling you to pick someone else. You don’t know Trev like I do.” Jared sounds angrier with each word he speaks.

“I don’t want to know Trevor like you do.”

Hah, good point, Emma. You’ve got him on the ropes.

No one speaks, which causes me to peer in the kitchen for a moment. Emma and Jared stare at each other until he looks away. Quickly, I move back when I think Jared looks in my direction.

“You’re thinking with your...”

“What? My pussy? My vag—”

I roll my eyes because I’m disgusted by Emma right now. If Amy ever said that shit to me, I’d... Damn, I’d tell Mom. I don’t want to hear shit like that from my sister—or my woman. Well, maybe in the bedroom. Now, if Emma says some shit like that while making love, it would be a serious turn-on.

He yells, “Stop that shit.”

“Jared, I’m young, but I’m an adult. You didn’t save me from Dad or stop me from going to Los Angeles. I’ve been making my own decisions for a long time.”

“I get it, but love is different from life.”

“Let me make my own mistakes, Jared. I need my big brother, not a cockblocker.”

I lean my head against the wall and cover my mouth to stifle a laugh. Oh, yes, that’s Jared’s new nickname. I’m telling all our friends. *Get him, Emma. Damn.*

Jared didn't say anything for a long time. "This is what happens when you're around Trevor. You sound like a drunken sailor."

"Don't be stupid, I've sounded like this ever since I turned sixteen."

I walk into the living room and flop down on the couch. I've heard enough. I stare in the direction of the kitchen. I rub my eyes with my palms. I need some time to figure out how to get back on track with Emma. After Jared leaves—and he will leave—how will I approach Emma about our relationship?

She seems receptive to my apology, but things may change once Jared leaves.

"Don't wink. Trevor winks." I hear Jared say as his voice gets closer to the living room. When he enters the living room, he stands on the other side of the living room and stares at me. He says, "I told you to give me a minute."

I nod. Slowly, I smirk. "I did. When you went into the kitchen, I came downstairs. Do I have to go back upstairs, or are you finished, cockblocker?"

"I'm out of here. You two deserve each other." Jared stomps to the door. As he opens the door, he looks back and says, "Hurt her, and I'll kill you."

I look down at my lap. I've been warned, and it feels like I've just put my friendship with Jared on the line. Although I'm a positive guy, I know things may go wrong, and I might lose my best friend and my lover. That's the thing about risks. They are as risky as hell.

When the front door slams, Emma and I are finally alone. I'm still staring down. I hear Emma move between the couch and the living room table. It's a good thing she didn't sit next to me. We get too hands-on with each other.

"Does it hurt? Your face." She sits on the living room table.

"Yep."

There's a long pause.

“Do you want some ice to put on it?”

I glance at her. “No.”

This time, the silence between us is longer.

“I’m not sure what to do or say,” Emma breaks the silence.

I take my time to speak because I want to compose my thoughts. Slowly, I look at Emma and say, “First, before we go any further, I need to say sorry. I didn’t handle that phone call well. I ranted, and I never rant.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but I motion for her to stop. There’s more I need to say to Emma before she speaks. She has our fate in her hands, and I need for her to think about where we are right now.

“Emma, I don’t act like that. I was hurt when you left and worried when you didn’t return my calls, but that’s no excuse for me acting like a bitch.”

For a moment, we look at each, and I’m at a loss for words. I study Emma because she looks like she’s struggling with something. She’s so strong, and it’s hard to see her look as if she’s going to start sobbing. Emma inhales and exhales and repeats the motions. I want to touch her, but I don’t know if I’d be overstepping my bounds. So, I stare at her and pray I didn’t do too much damage with that phone call.

Emma moves her head from side to side in an attempt not to cry. Fuck it. I lean forward and rub my palm against her cheek. She cries.

“I’m sorry.”

As Emma clears her throat, she shakes her head. “It’s not the conversation.”

“What?” I frown because I’m totally confused by her statement.

“I…” It takes Emma a moment to say anything. “Dane was my boyfriend until some years ago when he died. I haven’t been in a relationship since. So, the conversation just occurred at the wrong time.”

Dane, huh? I briefly close my eyes because I can remember Jared mentioning that name some years ago. We didn't go out one weekend because he had to attend the funeral. He never said much about it after that time. I clear my throat and ask, "How did he die?"

"I decided to take the Amtrak instead of driving to meet him, and he was robbed and killed while he was waiting for me." She stares at me. "It's taken a while for me to move forward."

I exhale and ask, "Was he your only lover?"

Emma nods.

Things make sense—a high school boyfriend and little to no dating between relationships. I should have investigated more and taken things a lot slower. Her personality and how she carries herself makes her seem more mature.

I assumed she had at least two or three relationships before me. When she stares at me with a frown, I lean back. "Did he take you on many dates?"

Emma nods and wipes her cheeks. "Yeah, but we were together for a long time."

I look down. My thoughts are consumed with trying to figure out how to make this work. I jump when she breaks the silence.

"I'm sorry. I felt like you were more interested in getting Issac to stop harassing you than dating me."

I lean back and frown at Emma. "Why would you think that?"

"Whenever I asked you about going on a date, you gave me some vague answer. We spent more time at each other's places than going out, and I know our first date was a bore for you."

I search my mind and go back to that night. It all seems like a decade ago. All I remember is being relieved about Dad and wanting to make love and go to bed. If I remember right,

she made a couple of comments about going on a date. It wasn't important.

"It was a bore for me because it was on a weekday." I throw my hands in the air as the frustration mounts. "I had this great first date planned in San Jose, and we'd get to know each other during the long ride, but—"

She interrupts me. "I wanted a weekday date."

"Every time I tried to go on that date with you, something happened. The place had a wedding, or we decided to do something else."

As Emma watches me, she leans back. She avoids my gaze. "That night, you were so flippant about our next date, even after we had sex."

"Damn, Emma, I wanted to make love and go to sleep. I wasn't flippant."

Emma shrugs and gives me a challenging stare.

I look away. "We'll agree to disagree."

"Thank you." Emma smiles like a smart ass.

I don't smile. "You fucking hurt me when you left in the middle of the damn night—"

"Like a paid tramp." Emma studies me and squints as she asks, "How many paid tramps have left your bed in the middle of the night?"

"Not as many as Jared's had."

My comment causes a long lull in our conversation.

Emma shakes her head. "Can we date now?" I stifle a laugh and watch her cringe. Yep, Emma needs to cringe. She sounds like a child. "You know what I mean."

"I know what you mean, Emma." I caress her knees. "I'd like credit for stupid shit like movie night at home and making dinner for you. I want it to count as a date night."

"Are you that against going out?"

I lean forward and kiss her neck. “What can I say? Sometimes I like to chill at home.”

“We’ll compromise.” Emma runs my fingers through my hair.

I look at her. “No weekday dates. They suck.”

“I agree.”

I fist pump. After I clear my throat, I give Emma a serious look. “We need to talk about our expectations for this relationship. It looks like we have some differences.”

“Like?”

I make the decision that we will go slow. If we must date, we’ll have less sex. At least for now, Emma must get used to the ways of a man and a relationship.

I rub my temple and try to decide how to approach the subject. Well, the best way to do this is by telling the truth. “I’m more into wanting marriage and family. We’re not that far apart in age, but I’m done with the late-night parties and all that.”

“Marriage and family?” Emma looks nervous.

She looks like I’m telling her she’s on punishment for doing something wrong. That’s not the fear I want to invoke. I just want to let her know that I know she’s not where I am right now, and she shouldn’t be. I want her to know my expectations now so we won’t end up in divorce court later.

Emma hesitates before explaining, “I don’t think I’m ready for all that yet.”

“I’m not saying I want you to be. The point is that we may have some tough times ahead. I’m not saying your desires are wrong or vice versa—nor am I proposing to you right now.”

“I get it.” I hear a hint of disappointment in her voice. “What about Issac? He’s going to expect us to get married.”

I smile because I remember what Mom told me. “Don’t worry about that. I’m in complete control of the situation, thanks to you.”

Neither of us speaks for a long time. We stare at each other until I lean forward and kiss Emma.

“No pressure. The point of a relationship is to see where it goes.”

Emma rubs her nose against my nose before she kisses me. I deepen the kiss before she moves back. “Promise that we won’t stop talking.”

“I promise.” I stand and look down at her. “You must resist making assumptions about what’s going on in our relationship.”

“Yeah, I know. I promise.” Emma avoids eye contact. “That wasn’t my best moment.”

“We’ll have a lot of best moments.” I caress her cheek.

As Emma presses her lips together, she grabs my hand and pulls me toward the stairs. For a moment, I think about it. No, for a moment, I decide to go upstairs. I resist, which makes Emma turn around and look at me. “Let’s go to bed.”

“I’m going home.”

“Home?”

“Home,” I say more forcefully, “Sex confuses things. So, I’ll go back to being a good boy for a while. We’ll let our relationship mature first before taking the next step.”

She tries to speak but closes her mouth. She presses her lips in a thin line and looks away. I’m surprised Emma doesn’t hide her disappointment that we won’t make love.

I rub her shoulders and tell her, “Yep, I can’t believe I’m saying it, either, but it’s the best thing to do if we want to see where this goes.”

“How long should we wait?”

That depends on you, I want to tell her. However, I shrug and lie.

“We’ll see.”

“Can we make it?”

“Yep,” I say with a chuckle. “We’ll make it.”

We kiss, but neither of us deepens the kiss. I take Emma’s hand in mine, and we walk to the door. After I open it, I kiss her again. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Answer the damn phone, please.”

“Yes, sir.” She kisses me.



I return home, expecting to enjoy a cold beer and playtime with Charlie. Although I haven’t decided yet, I’m thinking about sitting in her room and watching her play with one of her cat toys. She likes it when I throw the line from the fishing pole toy thing. She tries catching the toy at the end of the hook. Yep, maybe I’ll do that. It will keep my mind off of Emma.

I slam my car door and stroll to my steps. When I look up, I stutter step and frown. Dad is standing in front of my door. He’s standing with his hands in his pockets and with a stern look on his face. After slowly making my way to my door, I walk past him and open the door. We enter my place without speaking.

It’s not until he enters my living room that he turns around and looks at me. His stern expression has changed. Dad looks disgusted. His eyes narrow, and he presses his lips into a line. I stand in the hallway and stare at him. My body’s tense. Do I need to prepare for a fight?

“What do I owe the visit, Dad?”

“Poppy told me about you.” He pauses and waves his left hand. “The plan to get me to lay off getting you to run for mayor. I was right all along. Emma’s a fake.”

About three minutes—that’s how long it feels like it takes me to realize I’d stopped breathing. Oh, damn. *Mom, what the fuck did you do?* I nod at my Dad. What’s the use in denying it?

“Yep.” I nod again. “Mom’s right. Emma and I planned it.”

“For the love of God, Trevor. Are you that scared of running for mayor that you have to scheme?”

“Dad, I’m running for mayor. Not on your terms or timing,” I say as I point at myself. “On mine.”

Dad shakes his head. “No, that will not do. You run next year, or you don’t run at all. You want to know why? You’ll become a coward and complacent.”

I count to ten and try to ignore the surging anger within me. It’s not working. “Emma’s a very gorgeous and intelligent woman, who you’d probably hate because she’s not the one-dimensional bitch you want for me.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I’m changing the subject so that I won’t commit murder.”

Dad laughs.

“Look,” I tell him, “I’m tired of telling you the same damn thing, Dad. I will run for mayor when I am damned ready to do so!”

“You will run next year. Tomorrow I’ll announce it.”

As Dad walks past me, I grab his arm and yank him back. His eyes widen, and he looks surprised. Maybe he thinks I’m going to kill him. It doesn’t matter because I have something to say, courtesy of Mom. “You will walk out of here and forget about forcing me into a mayoral run.”

“I won’t.”

“Mom spilled my secret, and she also spilled yours. So, here’s some political blackmail.” I pause when he looks away. “Dad—”

“I don’t know what she told you, but it’s not true.”

“Try to force me to run, and I will make my announcement. I will tell everyone about your little time with sex and drugs. Don’t worry about denying it. Microfiche doesn’t lie.”

I watch my Dad briefly close his eyes before he clears his throat. He says, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, Dad, I have a copy of four articles upstairs, and each one of them discusses how you fucked up a potential political career by getting involved with a family with more scandals than the Kennedys. Try me, and you’ll see what I will do to ruin you.”

Dad yanks his arm out of my grasp. After a long pause, he says, “You’ll make a great politician one day.”

I watch him stalk out of my place and slam the door. Although I should feel satisfied, I feel anything but.

EPILOGUE

The day is perfect for a wedding. I look at Jared and smile. The San Francisco summer is warm and sunny. It's definitely too beautiful to have a wedding inside. It's been a while since I've thought about Dane. Silently, I'll celebrate his birthday in two weeks. He was older than me by a couple of months. So, in two weeks, he would have been thirty years old.

I'm already thirty years old.

It's been six years since Trevor and I met at the CEW gala. I've spent more time working for Trevor in his marketing department than dating him. I've learned a lot in the real world. Life gets in the way of working. I must say, it's been interesting to work with Trevor in his office and go home with him at night. What's the adjustment?

I want to spend more time with Charlie than Trevor.

My dress is off-white, sleeveless, and silk. My high heels are lavender because I want a little color in my attire. I wear my hair down because that's how Trevor likes it.

I understand Trevor's thinking about our relationship. Back then, I wasn't ready for marriage or children. I was twenty-four years old, and career goals captured my attention like an alluring lover. He's been patient—probably too patient—with me.

We've discussed marriage and whether we should do it. For years, it's been just talk because of me. Maybe I'm ready one year. However, six months later, I'm not so sure anymore.

It's not that I was playing games or being complicated, I just wanted to finish what I started. I never wanted to wonder what would have happened if I'd seen my journey through to the end. This way, I know. I didn't miss very much. Although I choose to stay at Trevor's place, I haven't given up my apartment. In fact, I still stay there from time to time.

Within a couple of months of turning thirty years old, things changed for me. I loved working in a marketing department—a marketing department Trevor created for me. However, I thought about children and that ring Don gave me for the Issac ruse. What if I married Trevor? What would it be like to carry and give birth to Trevor's children? What happens if I'd become a stay-at-home wife?

For six years, Trevor's tried to up his game regarding dating. We've gone out on plenty of dates. No double-dating with Jared and Sam. Until today, Jared hasn't been receptive to me dating Trevor. Maybe things will change soon.

“Are you ready?” Tonya asks.

I step into the cluttered room, take a deep breath, and nod. Tonya looks at me. She's wearing a lavender dress, and she looks stunning. Her lavender heels are in the corner of the cluttered room.

“I'm ready.” I nod as I try to turn around without messing up my dress.

No matter how much turning thirty years old has changed me, I still can't believe what happened last year. In fact, I'm still getting used to things. The significant change was that Trevor and I stopped working together. I still go to his company, but a little less than I used to. This means I don't put in eight-hour days. I work part-time. It's not the same without Trevor there.

Don has assumed more of Trevor's duties at the company. I don't know what will happen when Trevor returns. Maybe Don will leave or do something different. I informed Don that he should hire a marketer to replace me.

“Sis,” Jared enters the room and helps me straighten out my dress. “Are you ready?”

I nod. “Everyone quit asking me if I’m ready. I’m ready.”

Jared stands. He’s wearing a tux and looks handsome. “Fine. There are many big wigs out there, and the mayor gave me this to give to you.”

He extends a trinket with a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge. Okay, I don’t know what this means. I nod, and say, “Tell him, thanks.”

Music starts in the distance. I look at Jared and smile. “Where’s Sam?”

Jared grins and points at the door. “She’s ready to walk down the aisle.”

“Good.” I look around and tell Tonya, “Let’s go.”

The three of us exit the cluttered room. Instead of going back to the exit where I entered, I go left. I stop, and Tonya walks in front of me. Although I expect her to look back at me and smile, she keeps walking and disappears out of my line of vision.

Jared stands next to me and kisses me on the cheek. “I won’t ask you if you’re ready again.”

“Good.” I stare straight ahead.

We take a couple of steps forward, and I stop. Jared turns to me and says, “It’s not too late to change your mind.”

I shake my head. “I’m not changing my mind.”

“Let’s go.”

We walk outside, arm in arm. The beautiful mansion lawn is filled with guests who are standing and watching me. They are smiling at me. I scan the crowd and see the important people like Mom, Poppy, and Issac. Dad was invited but didn’t make it. At least that’s the way the story goes.

As I look forward, I press my lips together. Sam tries to stand and watch Jared and me walk down the aisle, but Chrissy, my ring bearer and niece, refuses to be still. She’s

four years old, but everyone knows that she's going on forty-five. Jared and Sam married five years ago.

I inhale and exhale before I look at Trevor. He's sexy as hell at thirty-four in his blue tux.

As I stand next to Trevor, he lightly kisses me on the cheek. The minister asks, "Who gives this woman away?"

Jared raises his hand and says, "I do."

I watch Jared join Trevor's side of the wedding party because he must do double-duty as best man and my escort since Dad didn't show up. Though, I was willing to walk down the aisle myself.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Trevor and Emma."

The rest of my wedding is a blur. I barely remember repeating what the minister told me to say. In a few short minutes, I will be Trevor's wife. Is this happening?

Trevor and I exchange rings.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife." The minister turns to Trevor. "You may now kiss your bride."

Our guests stand and cheer as Trevor kisses me. He says against my lips, "I told you we'd do it."

I smile. "You were right."

The minister makes the announcement. "I introduce you to the mayor of San Francisco and his bride. Congratulations, Mayor."

THANK YOU FOR READING!

Thank you for reading *My Perfect Fake Marriage*. I hope you enjoy this book. As an emerging indie author, it means a great deal to me that someone would actually take the time to read a romance that I write.

As you know, reviews are the social proof every book needs to become a success. If you enjoyed the book, please take a moment and leave an honest review for *My Perfect Fake Marriage* online. Help other romance readers by telling them why you enjoyed reading. You can review *My Perfect Fake Marriage* [here](#).

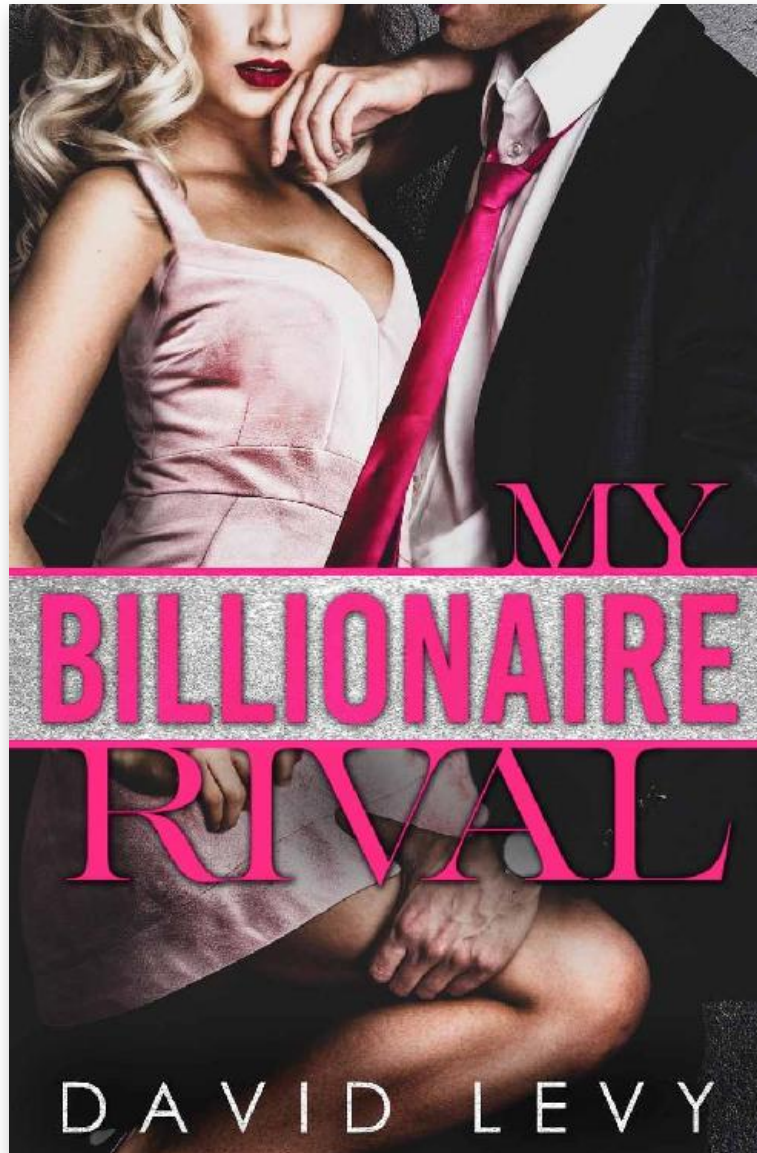
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ALSO BY DAVID LEVY

[My Billionaire Rival](#) — Forbidden Billionaires Book 1



God, I hate that guy.

Jared is competitive, mean, torturous.

He's also the guy I have a crush on.

But don't judge me.

It didn't happen overnight.

In fact, I hated him throughout college.

And now, I hate him for landing a position that I desperately wanted.

Only because his rich father is the CEO of the firm.

The same firm that has hired me as an employee whose job is to fetch people coffee.

The worst part about my job, though?

I get bossed around by my enemy.
Tolerating Jared in the office is a nightmare.
Resisting him is even harder.
I could imagine this ending in a lot of different ways.
But I never thought there would be a kiss involved.
Not one kiss, but two.
This peace between us seems too good to be true.
It's only a matter of time before everything comes crashing down.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Levy is an emerging contemporary romance writer. He lives a double life. By day he works with numbers and spreadsheets, and by night he immerses himself in the story world of contemporary romance, where steamy yet thoughtful characters come alive.

He lives in Arizona, enjoys everything the desert has to offer, is a sucker for a good romance, even though he knows better.