



Office

Heat

ZELENE HEATH

OFFICE HEAT

Enemies To Lovers
Romance

BURNING BOSSY DESIRES

BOOK I



ZELENE HEATH

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CHAPTER 1

AMBER



I stare at the book in my hand like I am studying it, but God knows I am not. It has been another day in the library where I am not my usual studious self because of anxiety—day three of sleeplessness. I am worried about being accepted to the internship at TotaBuyzz, but so is everybody else who applied. So I am just another student hoping for a big-bang opportunity.

TotaBuyzz is a multinational technology-based enterprise specializing in e-commerce, cloud-based computing, digital streaming, and artificial intelligence. It has been referred to as one of the world's most influential economic and cultural forces and is one of the most valuable brands of our day, so you can understand why I can't concentrate on anything. Flipping the pages of the textbook as I would if I was reading, I huff and press my lips together as the words blur into a smear of black ink.

My phone buzzes suddenly, and the screen lights up.

Could it be?

I reach for my phone with shaky hands. I take a deep breath. What I am about to see could change my life, so I brace myself. It is the email I have been waiting for. I am happy to see the email, but my happiness is cut short by the numerous murmurs around me as my peers receive the same email.

I unlock my phone and tap on the notification to open it. I close my eyes and try to catch my breath, begging my heart to slow down, but the beating only speeds up as my mind

entertains the possibility of being rejected. I shove the thought before peering at my phone.

My eyes frantically search for the word ‘accepted.’ When I find it somewhere on the second line of the email, I scream before I recall where I am. I have disobeyed the library’s number one rule.

Embarrassed, I clumsily pack my books into my bag and run for the door before Mary, the grumpy librarian, gets wind that I was the one who screamed.

After closing the door behind me and hearing the mumbles in the library quiet down, I pull out my phone to properly read the email with the broadest smile. Getting this internship is my first significant life achievement, besides my consistently good grades.

While reading the last line in the email for the fourth time, Michelle’s call interrupts me, and I pick up to hear her screaming on the other side. I realize she has gotten the same email acknowledging her acceptance. I can’t help but squeal along with her.

It takes all my patience to wait for the first day of the orientation at TotaBuyzz. I meet Michelle in front of her house ten minutes earlier than we had arranged, and then we go to TotaBuyzz together. She is just as nervous as I am, but I am bottling up my excitement while she is just being her usual self.

“Pull yourself together,” I say after we hug and smile at each other.

I hesitate as I take in the sight of the building as the cab arrives at our destination. The palatial skyscraper before us is in the commercial part of the city, with glass walls and doors on all except the bottom floor. The company name and logo are hung just above the entrance of the building, where the security team runs their checks. I glance at the cars in the parking lot and swear I will one day be a successful accountant at TotaBuyzz.

I feel Michelle's shaky hand grab mine, squeezing it too tightly, and I know she is as anxious as I am. I am just doing a better job of hiding it.

"We'll get lost in there," Michelle mutters as she stares at the building. I shake my hand out of her grip, trying to bring some life back into my fingers.

"It will be worth it. Where else would you rather get lost?" I grab her hand again and lead her to the entrance.

Due to Totabuyzz's most ambitious research project, where customers walk inside the store with their shopping cart that automatically scans the items and charges their account as soon as they leave the store, they recently opened a prototype store based on their new business model. Customers' accounts are charged for the items they put into their shopping carts as soon as they leave the store.

The store is intended to be the first of many. Because of the scale of this project, Totabuyzz has hired a large number of interns with skills ranging from software development to accounting, who will be trained and possibly offered jobs.

The building looks more significant than outside, and I feel smaller than I already think I am.

We look around in awe. I am taken aback by the grand design and layout of the place. Even the air smells expensive as I draw in a sharp breath. The fluorescent lights shine from the ceiling, and the big TotaBuyzz logo and slogan, covering one side of the wall, sparkle.

The more I see, the more nervous I become. The floor's glossy pattern of white and gray marble tiles makes me feel like I will slip and fall, then die of embarrassment, so I walk as carefully as possible.

"We came too early, Amber. We should have waited a bit and come in with the crowd. That way, we wouldn't embarrass ourselves by looking like lost chickens."

I squint my eyes and look around for someone to help us figure out where to go.

“Receptionist.” Michelle points a finger at a counter with ‘Welcome’ emblazoned on it.

“Yeah?”

“Best of luck.”

“We need it.”

Of course, we get the strange hey-are-you-lost stare from the people around us. It’s probably because of the way Michelle is lurking behind me as we walk. In the executive chairs to my right, I see some people sitting with impatience written on their faces and wonder what they are here for. They don’t look like students. Nobody beat us here this morning.

“Hi...um, ma’am.” I wave at the lady behind the counter.

She looks up. “How can I help you?” she asks, plastering a smile.

“We are...” I blink. “Interns—the new interns....” I manage to say without choking on my words. The place is intimidating.

“Oh.” I hear her typing. “What is your name?”

“Amber Stone.”

She turns to Michelle and raises her brow with an expectant stare. My dear friend doesn’t say anything but stares ahead, holding onto her anxious smile. I say, “This is Michelle Williams.”

The lady returns to her computer and looks back at us seconds later. “Congratulations, you two.” She beams at us, and I can’t help but stare at her perfect teeth, wondering if they earned her this position. “Thank your lucky stars that, among the many, TotaBuyzz accepted you.” She bobs her head. “Believe me; there were many.”

“It still feels unbelievable,” I mutter, but she catches my words and cocks her head.

“Yes, I know, right?” She spreads her palm on the counter. “I started as an intern as well. I spent days thinking it was a

dream until I realized it was real and I had been given a gift,” she says.

“Jena. Call me Jena since we’ll see each other a lot from now on.” She extends her hand, and I take it in a shake, nodding and returning her smile as I feel her soft palm.

You must be living well with your salary here.

“Tenth floor, down the hallway, last door on the right.” She drums her finger on the counter, still wielding her smile as she looks at Michelle. “Congratulations again.”

“Thanks.”

I pause as the elevator comes into view. I exhale, savoring the moment.

“TotaBuyzz, we’re here! Look how far we’ve come,” I mumble.

“I am good for something, after all.”

“Don’t spoil the moment by saying stuff like that. You deserve this as much as I do. Or, maybe, we are both just super lucky.” I look heavenward, then lower my gaze to peer into Michelle’s eyes. “I feel like we do deserve it. We have gone through a lot, so this is a reward for our suffering.”

More students flooded into the company and soon joined us for the orientation. As we tour the company, Michelle and I take numerous pictures on our phones for our social media, as does everybody else. After we take in as much information as our brains can handle, it is time to return home to prepare for the next day.

It’s my first day at work, and everything is going well. I am handling more papers and files than I have ever had before. I feel a surge of purpose as I perform my duties, helping with photocopying and document filing. I’ve heard other interns say they dislike filing, but I don’t know why—I am happy to do it. Just before lunchtime, I finish scanning all the invoices and emails I’ve received.

“I am thirsty and starving.” I grab my stomach dramatically as we walk to the elevators.

“That’s the feeling of your life seeping away. Too bad I share the same feeling.” Michelle looks down at her stomach.

“Would that quench your thirst?” Michelle brings my attention to the coffee maker ahead of us as we step out of the elevator.

“Of course, it will.” I walk over to it to make us two cups of coffee.

“I am hungry, though,” I say as I take a sip of coffee. It washes through my system, and my stomach grumbles at me.

“Yeah, me too. Let’s grab some snacks. Now or never,” Michelle says, raising her watch to my face.

“Every cup of coffee has been great since you developed this blind love for it,” Michelle says, rolling her eyes at my blissful expression. On our way home the previous day, we scouted the area for hotspots and found a restaurant that suited our tastes. So that’s where we decide to go for lunch.

“You know.” Michelle holds her hands in front of her. “You deserve this, and I just got lucky. I just applied because you were going to. Everyone was applying, and I didn’t want to be the odd one out. I had made peace with being turned down. I wasn’t ready for all of this at all. It’s only the first day, and life seems too serious already.” She wipes her hand over her face and heaves a deep breath.

I turn around, smiling at her as I walk toward the door.

“Why are you smiling like that?” Michelle asks me. “I swear, if I have to touch one more paper today, I will faint. I am so tired right now. I stood for a whole hour filing documents.” she kneads her temple. “How are you this energetic and delighted? They just threw all the unwanted work at us, and you took it with smiles.”

“It depends on how you look at it. We have to get through this for the sake of our dreams. All this training will make us hot-shot accountants in the end.”

“If I end up dying here, I will haunt you for the rest of your life,” she whines.

“We both know you won’t die, so—”

I feel the warmth of the coffee spill over my hand as I walk into something. I see a man staring at me with coffee spilled on his blazer.

My heart jumps out of my mouth, and my mind goes into panic mode.

I’m fucked.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t see you! I’m so sorry,” I explain.

His hair, coiffed to perfection, catches my eye. His well-groomed hair has a rippling quality. Hard-angled eyebrows frame his bright, spellbinding eyes that are Saturn round, looking like chrysolite stones dipped in a milk pool. I imagine them a-gleam with delight to pronounce the vigor of his youth—if only he smiled. His eyes are deep and expressive; you could get lost if you stared long enough. I know because I feel like I am floating in space as I stare. He sports a celestial nose that complements his prominent cheekbones, which carve down to a flinty jaw.

He has a burly physique with broad shoulders. I can’t help but notice the bulges on his arms that threaten to rip the cloth around them. This man is the kind of handsome that leaves me breathless. I want to look away, but my eyes betray me. I feel a chill run down my spine as I lose my breath and my knees weaken. Is this happening, or am I dreaming of a Greek god?

“I’ll get your suit dry-cleaned. I can—” I manage to say, most of my words coming out in a jumble. I am surprised I can speak at all. I’m starstruck. I am curious about how his voice would sound, but he stares at me wordlessly. I give the empty cup to Michelle, reach into my purse, and pull out a handkerchief to clean his stained suit.

The man by his side stops me. “Leave it. I’ll take care of it.” He smiles warmly and pushes my hand away from the Greek god’s suit. I hadn’t noticed this other man until he spoke.

Then, waving dismissively, without saying a word, the one I poured coffee on walks past us, followed by his companion. I exhale and draw in a long breath. I place my hand over my racing heart and close my eyes, breathing heavily.

“Did you see the kind one?” Michelle holds her hands behind her back and steps ahead of me. “He’s so handsome,” she adds.

No, I didn’t notice.

I don’t feel hungry anymore, but I follow Michelle to the restaurant. I ask for my lunch to-go, and we head back to the office after Michelle wolfs down hers.

On reaching the floor where I was appointed to help with some auditing, I’m summoned to the CEO’s office, and I panic as my mind searches for possible reasons why he would want to see me. But, of course, it’s only my first day, and I haven’t done anything wrong. At least, I hope I haven’t done anything wrong.

“Me? Why? Why would the CEO want to see me?” I asked the man who had notified me.

“I’m sure you’ll find out once you get there. This way, please.”

He leads the way, and I follow him into the elevator, silently praying that this isn’t another kick from the universe. I don’t know if I could take any more beatings. The elevator dings, and we step out into an open space.

This is the first time I will meet a CEO one-on-one, so I am incredibly nervous. Bringing myself to his door proves challenging, but I touch my knuckle to the door, making an almost inaudible sound before I push it open.

A combination of cologne and scented candles wafts into my nostrils as soon as I enter. The walls are painted a solid white, which makes the area feel very open and welcoming. The room’s floor is composed of dark brown stained wood paneling, and the ceiling is the same color as the walls. There is a dark walnut bookcase lining the entire right-hand wall, and I’m immediately intrigued. But, unfortunately, my admiration

of the office is cut short by a “Pleased to meet you, Miss Stone.”

“My apologies, sir. I was enthralled by your office, especially all those books.”

He smiles at me warmly; oddly enough, I feel at ease standing in front of the company’s CEO.

“Well, you’re welcome to borrow any of these books at any time.”

“Really? Thank you so much.” Was this a trick, or could I be at ease? I wasn’t sure yet.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I called you here today.”

I don’t respond. I’m unsure if I should be happy that he is getting straight to the point. If this whole thing is a mistake, I want to hold onto the idea that I could have been chosen to intern at such a company for a little longer. But, on the other hand, I am not ready for him to burst my bubble.

“I was so pleased to see your name on the list; I wanted to congratulate you myself.”

“Why would you want to do that? I don’t understand.” Now I am beyond puzzled.

“You don’t remember me, do you?”

“Ah... No...” I shake my head.

“I see. I remember you, however. How could I forget? You were one of the children I donated to at the foster home. One day, I visited the home, and you got into trouble and were called to the supervisor’s office. I remember you saying that someone had pushed one of your friends, and you defended him. I admired how you stood up for your friend and pleaded your case to the supervisor that day. Before then, I’d never seen such a well-spoken child. I swore you were a lawyer in training.”

I knew exactly what he was talking about. “Oh my God,” I inhale, and my lungs fill with joy instead of air. “That was you.”

He nods. I laugh slightly. “Yup. I sure remember that day,” I reply, and he chuckles.

“One for justice, I told myself. I knew right then that you would have a bright future. So, I took it upon myself to sponsor your schooling.”

To say I am shocked is an understatement. All these years, I had no idea how I’d been able to get into university on a full scholarship. Everything was paid for. Everything. If it weren’t for all the financial problems at home, I’d still have some savings stashed away, and this person was responsible for my education.

“Thank you,” I say, taking his hands to truly express my gratitude. Though I have only just met him, I feel comfortable. It is almost as if I am interacting with my guardian angel.

He gives me a genuine smile. “It’s my pleasure, and I’m glad I did what I did because here you are.”

“I still can’t believe that I’m here, you know,” I tell him truthfully.

“You deserve to be here,” he assures me. “Besides, with your feisty attitude, I’m sure you wouldn’t have taken no for an answer.”

I laugh just then, remembering that day in the supervisor’s office. “You know—”

The ringing of his office phone cuts me off. I watch as he picks up the handset and puts it to his ear. “I’m sorry, Miss Stone, I have to take this,” he tells me.

“That’s okay; I’d better get going. I don’t want to miss too much on my first day.” I nod at him and walk briskly out of the office.

“Hey,” a voice says, and a tall man walks up to me, suddenly blocking my path. I’m a little creeped out by his sudden appearance.

“Yes?” I raise my brow as I look at him and immediately recognize his handsome face. It’s the guy I spilled coffee on.

“You’re the one I bumped into earlier. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“What’s your name?”

Why is he asking? I don’t know who he is, but I feel the need to answer. “Amber.”

“You just came out of George’s office, right?”

“Um...” I narrow my eyes at him now. “Yes.”

He doesn’t say anything more; instead, he looks me over in silence. I’m left confused, wondering what his deal is, but I don’t wait to find out and quietly walk past him. He is handsome, but he is also acting strange.

After a second, Michelle returns from running an errand, looking like she has run a mile. “Spill,” she says to me.

Just as I open my mouth to speak, I am interrupted by a swarm of giggles and murmurs from the other girls around us, and I know immediately there’s a hot guy nearby.

My eyes inevitably follow the girls’ gaze to my right, and I see the same handsome man from earlier replacing the distilled water bottle.

So, he can be nice...

He smiles at me as we make eye contact, and I turn away. Why is he smiling at me? I glance at him again, and he is still looking at me. I look away again and conclude that I am right about him being strange. So what’s with the creepy smile?

Michelle taps my shoulder and gestures that we go somewhere away from the commotion. I follow her willingly. An image of Mr. cocky smirking at me flashes through my mind as we walk into the elevator. I don’t know his deal, and I shouldn’t care, so I brush it off.

“What?”

I shake my head, still processing everything that’s happened. “Nothing... where are we going?”

For some reason, I am not creeped out at the thought of him smiling at me. I don't know where all my annoyance with him had dissipated to either. Thoughts of him ravage my mind.

I clench my thighs at the thought.

I giggle internally.

Suddenly, as if I have no control, my feet take me up the stairs. Then I am outside his office. Just there. Watching him. Hungry for him.

"Come in," I hear him say, and I jump. It felt as though he'd whisper it in my ears.

I didn't move.

"Don't just stand there. Come in," he said again.

I push the door open... Might I say, even sexy? My fingers are playing with the top button on my blouse.

I'd never seen that smile on his face. Was it hunger for me that I could sense? Did he feel the same way that I did?

He walks around his desk and sits on the edge.

My fire is bubbling up inside. I take a deep breath, trying my best to hide the fact that I want to ravage him.

The glint in his eyes says he wants me. How could I be sure, though?

"Are you just going to stand there?" He was teasing me.

I lick my lips, making sure he sees my tongue linger there. "Would you prefer that I didn't?"

He leans back, and his palms are pressed into the desk at his sides. Then, all of a sudden, he isn't wearing his shirt. I look around the room, almost in a panic. Then, I refocus, looking at him. His left hand is now holding his crotch.

I move an inch forward.

Then I take another step.

I glide over to the sofa, refusing to walk to him. He needs to work for it—I am worth it.

I bend over the sofa, letting him see me from that position for the first time.

I hear him moan.

I lean over even further. My blouse is now open. My palm cupped my breast. The hardness of my nipple excited me even more.

“Aah,” I gasp.

He’s behind me, touching me. He pulls on my waist.

I try to catch my breath.

There is a sudden knock on my door. “Mom?”

MATHEO



If anyone had told me a year ago that I'd return to this city again one day, I'd have sued them for lying. Returning to Dallas, Texas, was one of the things I had ruled out.

Some might think that being born into a wealthy family means happiness. Well, I can say they couldn't be more wrong. There's always been a wall between my father and me. No matter how hard I tried to climb over it, I always tumbled back down.

Because he was occupied with building an empire, my dad wasn't around much. He missed soccer games, parent-teacher meetings, picking me up from school, and just about everything to do with my upbringing. Even when he was home, it was like he wasn't there. It was as if his work took precedence over his time with me.

If I were asked to predict what my first day back in Dallas would turn out to be, I would have said dull, uncomfortable, and busy. But I would have gotten one thing correct.

"Matheo, are you coming over to the house?" my dad asks as soon as I pick up the call. I am still at the airport, and if I didn't know him so well, I might have been fooled into thinking he loved and missed me so much that he couldn't wait to see me.

"Dad, I just got off the plane," I say. "And yes, I will stop by the house after I drop my things off. Eric and I are a bit jet lagged." I glance at Eric, and he gives me a questioning look.

"No, come straight home. You will be staying here."

I stop walking, and so do Eric and the other two guys behind me, pushing my luggage. “I have my own place.”

“I know that. But it’s been four years, and I’d rather you spend some time at home and catch up with your mother and sisters. I’m sure they would agree with me.”

“Alright, I’ll see you in a bit then.”

“I am at the office now. Stop by the house and come over here as soon as possible.”

I don’t get the chance to protest before the call ends. I am not surprised, however. Eric already briefed me on my schedule for today, and I am visiting our company, TotaBuyzz, whether I like it or not.

Apparently, I’m going back to the Martinez mansion. My father didn’t even give me a chance to say no.

“Well, telling people what to do does run in the Martinez family,” Eric says with a smirk.

“I don’t do that. I give options.” The answer is yes, but I was taught never to admit defeat, at least not in front of the enemy.

“You know you do, but I don’t mind it, *boss*,” Eric stresses that last word, clearly messing with me.

“Eric...”

“Or a more accurate title would be ‘Intern Boss’.” He tips an imaginary hat.

“Fuck you.” I move like I want to kick him, which he dodges effectively.

We keep fooling around until we both look behind and see that the men carrying our luggage are still present.

Eric clears his throat, switching to his professional role in my life. I adjust my tie and frown; that’s what my dad always does in the presence of his employees. “So, we’re heading to the Martinez mansion, right?” Eric asks.

“Yes.”

He turns behind and nods to the guys. When we walk out of the airport, there is a shiny black, expensive car with MRTNZ written on its plates. Eric opens the door for me, and it's after I get in that it dawns on me that life as I know it is over.

I spent four years getting a master's degree in Business at Parvis Magna University—the first institution of higher education established where only the elite of society could afford to attend the university. It was supposed to prepare me to lead, but here I am, back in Texas, and although everything has changed, it still feels like nothing has changed. I will have to be a different Matheo now. Gone are the days of partying and jet-setting.

The car arrives at the Martinez mansion in no time and seeing the place just as I remember it brings a smile to my face. Unfortunately, my mother and sisters are not at home, but the maids and caretakers welcome me. I don't stay long, leaving within an hour.

In the car, Eric lists the names of people in the company whom I will need to remember: the shareholders, directors, and department leaders. He mentions people I should be wary of and people who already love me even though they have not seen my work yet.

Eric has worked for the company longer than I have, and I am lucky to have a best friend like him. We have been friends since middle school, and while I traveled out to get my master's degree, he stayed back and worked at our company. Unfortunately, Eric's family business went bankrupt due to his dad's gambling addiction. I asked my dad to hire him, and since then, he has been one of the most competitive and trustworthy employees in TotaBuyzz. He traveled to help me pack and return home, and now he will be my right-hand man. I can't ask for a better person; having him makes me feel less tense than I would usually be.

I keep my eyes on the window, watching the city and half listening to Eric talk. Dallas is still a beautiful place to live.

“Matt?” Eric calls out. I hear him, but I’m so deep in my thoughts that I don’t answer. “Matheo?”

“Yeah?” I snap out of my thoughts and turn to him with a raised brow.

Eric frowns at me. “Have you heard anything I have been saying?”

I smirk. “Most of it.”

“Matt...” He sighs. “We’re at the office now. No more spacing out, please.”

“I’ll try.”

I’m not too happy about the prospect of seeing my father after so long.

“Let’s get this over with,” I say to myself.

Stepping out of the car, I expect to feel nothing but the heat of the September sun. I do. But, of course, it would be much better if I didn’t have a complicated family and a business to worry about.

The doors open, and I get out of the car after Eric, facing the gigantic building that belongs to my father. Eric stands by my side, and we exchange a look, nod to each other, button our suit blazers and start walking into the building.

“Your dad’s office, and yours, is at the top of the—” Eric is saying as we enter the lobby, but the giggle of some ladies cuts him off. What happens next leaves us speechless.

One of the girls, who was probably walking out as we were walking in, bumps into me and spills the content of her cup all over my suit and down to my shoes.

“Oh my God,” the girl exclaims, a hand over her mouth as she looks up at me. Her long hair sits in a ponytail, her bangs are arranged neatly over her forehead, and her eyes gleam with shock.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t see you. I’m so sorry,” the girl pleads nonstop. “I’ll get your suit dry-cleaned. I can—” She handed over the empty coffee cup to her friend and reached into her

purse, bringing out a handkerchief to help clean my suit. Eric stops her while I stand there, still stunned.

She's beautiful. Her eyes, hair, and how she talks remind me of a little girl I met on a bridge years ago.

"What are you doing?" a voice asks.

I look away from the water to the little girl, who looks younger than me. She is staring at me as I stand on the bridge's railing.

Her hair is frazzled like the wind had a party in it, and her bangs barely cover her forehead. I glare at her before looking away. "None of your business."

She pouts and turns around to look at the water. "Are you going to jump?"

My eyes sting with tears, but I don't want to cry in front of a girl.

"The fall is going to be so painful." She kept talking like she didn't hear what I said to her. "And the water is cold this year, so it will be like a thousand needles piercing through your skin." Then, she looks up at me again and smiles. "I know this because I once fell into a lake near my home and was sick for a long time. It wasn't pretty."

The tears start falling, and I bend my head, trying to hold the railings as tightly as possible. If I take a hand-off to wipe my face, I'll fall.

"You'll have to get down to clean your tears; it's not nice seeing someone cry," she says, even though she isn't even looking at me.

I reluctantly get down and wipe my eyes.

The little girl turns and smiles at me. Her teeth are crooked, but she looks as beautiful as an angel. She lowers herself to the ground, crosses her legs, and sits. She removes her backpack, placing it down in front of her.

I sit beside her, sighing and feeling like I will still keep crying. But something about the little girl makes me less angry at the world. She isn't judging me even though I wanted to kill

myself; she looks genuinely empathetic. "My dad hates me," I tell her.

"Really?"

I nod. "He doesn't treat me like I am his son. It's not fair."

"Is your dad dying?" she asks with no filter whatsoever.

I turn to look at her, surprised by her question. "No? Not that I know of."

She nods. "So, you're not dying, and your dad isn't. That means you both still have time to make up."

"What?"

"As long as your parents are alive, you still have a chance." She is talking to her fingers now as she intertwines them together. "When they are dead, that chance is lost forever. And if you die, you'd never get to find out if he doesn't love you or is just super busy."

"Super busy?"

She nods, turning to look at me. "Tell your dad you love him and then hug him afterward, so he knows you miss him."

I understand what she is saying now. It is weird and intriguing that such a little girl sounds like a grownup. I smile at her. "How old are you?"

She grins, standing up with a grunt and dusting her skirt. "Old enough."

I stand and tease, "Weren't you taught not to talk to strangers?"

"Well..." She reaches into her bag, brings out two bracelets, untangles them, and hands one to me. "I made this today in class. Friendship bracelets. You're my friend now, not a stranger."

"Friend," I read the words on the bracelet, staring at it like I am hypnotized. It is beautiful.

She surprises me by reaching up and pinching my cheek. "Don't die!" Then she giggles and runs off, waving at me. I

wave back as if in a trance, and it isn't until I can't see her anymore that I realize I never got her name.

I don't know her name. I didn't know where she came from that day or where she was off to. I'd gone back to the bridge many times thinking I'd see her, and I never did. I might have thought she was an angel if I hadn't kept the bracelet. It's funny how an encounter I had when I was twelve shaped my life and helped me understand things and appreciate my family.

My heart pounds. I should say something to the woman who has just spilled coffee on me and is trying to apologize, but I'm still caught up in my memories.

"Let's go, Matheo," Eric says, putting a hand on my back.

I wave a dismissive hand at the girls, still trying to clear my thoughts as I walk away with Eric.

"Are you okay?" Eric asks, concerned, as we get into the elevator.

"Yes." I shake my head, trying to think more clearly as I exhale deeply and put my hands in my pockets. "I remembered something. I'm fine now."

Eric and I tour the building, moving from office to office. Eric brings me up to the room where orientation is being held for the interns and asks me to wait a bit while he gets something. He is likely heading in to tell my father I have arrived. I don't wait for Eric; instead, I continue exploring, hoping to find a quiet place to relax.

I slowly made my way to my father's office, dreading any conversation that was to come. Our relationship was a strained one.

As I move closer to my father's office, I realize that the glass doors are open, and he is speaking to someone with a smile plastered onto his face. I come to a stop when I notice that it is a woman. She is wearing a blue sweater vest and a long-sleeved white shirt underneath. Her hair is pulled into a neat ponytail, and I can see a peek of her bangs from the side.

I watch as she suddenly takes hold of his hand. My father says something; I can't quite make it out from where I stand. So, I move an inch closer, hiding behind the wall in his office to observe their interaction without being seen.

He speaks again, and she breaks into a laugh that could send a jolt running through you like an electric current. She must be a friend of his or a new employee.

My gut tells me that my father has arranged for someone to spy on me. He doesn't trust me yet in managing the company. He's done something similar before. If not for Eric, I would never have found out that he paid some of my friends who had family financial problems to report back to him about my activities at school. I told Eric not to give a hint to my father that I knew about it.

I will not allow my father to control me like a puppet. He wanted me to be the CEO so he could concentrate on being the company's Chairman; he should learn to trust my decisions.

My father treats his precious company like his baby. He invests more time into it than he ever invested in his son.

Their conversation comes to an end when my father has to take a call. The woman gets up to leave, and I hang back. I think about confronting him but decide against it and go after the woman instead. I recognize her from the incident in the elevator earlier.

My brain runs a mile a minute. I need more information about this woman and her relationship with my dad. There must be a logical explanation for it. My father has always been a distant old man.

My fingers clench by my side, and I remind myself to be calm.

Leaning against the wall, I watch her, study her, for a moment. Then, I quickly catch up with her.

“Hey!”

She stops and raises her brow at me in curiosity.

“What's your name?”

“Amber.”

Even her name is beautiful. “You just came out of the office, right?” I ask her, even though I know the answer.

“Yes. Oh! You’re the one I bumped into earlier. Is there anything I can help you with?”

I open my mouth to ask something else, but other employees are walking around, so I clamp it shut. She gives me an odd look and walks away.

“Can someone please replace this 18.9 liter of distilled water? It’s empty and quite heavy,” one of the other female employees says after pouring the last drop of water into her cup.

“I’ll do it,” I offer since I am close by. I see that I might have attracted more than one person’s attention. All of the ladies in the vicinity seem to be looking at me. Amber’s eyes meet mine.

I smile at her, catching her off guard. I like how she looks at me with her hypnotic eyes and beautiful smile. I feel drawn to her.

MATHEO



Ever since I'd witnessed my father talking to that woman so happily, I'd wondered why he wasn't like that to me.

I left his office after yet another irritating episode where I'd tried to reach out to him with affection and had received nothing in return.

I plunge into reviewing and signing a shit load of papers and documents. Sitting at my desk, I look at my watch. Time is passing slower than I want it to. How will I get used to being confined to an office, alone with my thoughts? Unfortunately, I don't have a choice; it is my fate to lead the company and continue the Martinez legacy.

I hear a knock on my door, and my heart jumps with delight.

Finally, someone is here to see me.

I know who it is a. I asked my secretary to summon Amber to my office. I looked up her file before asking my secretary to call her in.

"You asked for me, Matheo." Amber stops and holds her hands in front of her. I can tell she is nervous, looking everywhere but at my face. My eyes run down to her feet and up to her face, and I'm impressed with her outfit. She wears a wrap blouse tucked into slim-fit, waist-high dress pants that emphasize her shapely figure. Her voice is gentle. She sounds different than when we first met.

I want to see her capabilities for myself. I need to know if she was hired only due to a higher-up connection. I can't have

someone like that working for me. A simple test of her skill set will do.

“Sorry.” She blinks, looking at me sharply, then downward. “I was working on an urgent task but came as soon as possible.” She peers into my eyes.

She shifts her body nervously, and my eyes stay glued to her waist for a few seconds but go back to her face.

“I need something done fast.” I raise my brow at her and give her a half smile.

She purses her lips and nods slightly, straightening herself to be prepared for instruction. “Whatever you need....”

Okay, that’s confident.

“You don’t know what it is yet. So how do you know you can do whatever I need?”

“Umm... I will try, but I am sure I can handle everything within the scope I am assigned to cover.” Amber gestures as she speaks.

“I see... so that means you can gather all the invoices that need to be paid for this month? They should round up to about five thousand dollars. I need to review them before pushing them to the Chief Executive Officer, so I need them as soon as possible—let’s say, by the end of tomorrow. I don’t want to keep him waiting. I am sure that will be a piece of cake for someone like you.” I lean back and rest my palm on the desk.

Her eyes dart around the room before settling on me. “I think I can pull that off.” Then, she rubs her hands together and says, “I should get going since we don’t have much time.”

“I just started here, and I am getting to know all the employees working directly under me, so I know how we would flow to promote maximum results. You’re an intern, right?”

“Oh, yeah... Yes, I am.” She smiles to reveal a set of perfect white teeth. I blink the image away. I don’t need to know everybody that works under me, I have Eric for that, but

I can't let her leave. I have to figure out her connection with my father, but it has to be subtle and smooth.

“So, tell me. What did you discuss with my father when I saw you in his office?” I lean forward and cross my ankles.

“Oh, I just found out that he was the one who sponsored my studies.” She fidgets with her fingers, a nervous habit.

“I am having a hard time hearing you. Can you come a little closer?”

“Sorry about that.” Amber takes two steps forward.

I raise my brow and then scrunch my face as I massage the back of my neck. She moves another step and looks at me.

Come a little closer. I don't bite... maybe a little, but you'd survive.

“Please, come and have a seat.” I gesture to the seat by my side. I chuckle at the surprise on her face as she looks almost petrified while she stares at the chair.

“I don't have much to say, but your father told me I will surely land a good job here if I prove my worth.” She shrugs, taking quick steps toward the chair. Then, she slants forward and places her hands on the chair. “That's pretty much everything.”

“I agree. So, did my father delegate you a special project or something? There must be a story worth telling?” I splay my hands on my thigh. Amber reddens and turns away.

“I should get to work now,” Amber says.

I stretch my legs out, wanting to ease the discomfort caused by sitting behind a desk all day, just as Amber stands up to leave. Unfortunately, she tripped over my extended foot and had to grab my chair's back to avoid falling.

I look at her as she leans over me, teetering on her high heels.

Our eyes meet, and everything goes silent as I stare into her eyes with a mix of shock and confusion about what is happening. As Amber stares at me, I feel a wave of cold run

down my spine. All I can hear is our heavy breathing. I take in her regal face as my eyes travel the contours of her soft cheekbone from her oval ears to that button nose. My eyes settle on her sultry lips after they twitch. I want to find out if they are as soft as they look. I feel her breath touch my skin as I lean a little closer, and everything in my body stops for a moment. I don't even consciously realize my hand is on her head until she moves slightly, my fingers catch on something, and her ponytail comes undone, revealing the full glory of her hair as it cascades around her shoulders.

My gaze falls, and I see my hands clutching her wasp waist that curves out to her hips. She has a womanly body with just the right proportion of everything. She is beautiful.

She leans slightly into my hold. The world around me slowly disappears as all I see is her, and all I want to do is touch her lips with mine. I pull her face closer, but in one motion, she jerks her head backward and squeezes out of my grip.

"I should go now," she whimpers breathlessly as she backs away, clumsily arranging her hair the way it was. I can hear her breathing hard from across the room. I don't say anything and lick my lips and smirk. She turns around in a whirl, and my eyes focus on her ass and how the material of her skirt tightens around it as she hurriedly leaves my office.

Shaking my head, I look down at what I was working on before the interruption. My heart continues to race.

What was all that?

CHAPTER 4

MATHEO



I pause at the oak wood door, looking it over from top to bottom, wondering if I will go through with this. Well, if I don't do it, then I don't think my dad ever will, and it's something I think should happen after so many years of being apart. I texted my mom and sisters on my way to the Martinez mansion, but they were busy shopping. I'll have to take a raincheck with them. My mom has always been more hands-on with my sisters than with me.

I knock on the door.

My dad's secretary, whose name I don't remember, had wanted to inform my dad I was coming beforehand, but I convinced her not to with a wink. I know my effect on women, and I don't refrain from using it and watching with a smirk as they fall, hook, line, and sinker. So, I told her I wanted to surprise my dad and hoped I would do that. It was going to be a 'good' surprise.

"Who's there?" I hear George Martinez ask in his assertive voice. He doesn't scare me, far from it. I've always admired my father's work ethic, and I will continue to. For the longest time, he has been an idol to me, and there is only one thing I want more from him.

I turn the doorknob and open the door, poking my head in. "Dad?"

He looks up from his table to see me, and I notice the expression on his face doesn't change. "Matheo."

I walk into his office and close the door behind me. “I’ve been back in Dallas, Texas, for some time now, and you’ve been locked up here for most of it.”

He relaxes into his chair with a sigh, gesturing to his crowded desk filled with books and papers. “I’ve been busy.”

I nod, pulling out a chair to sit down. “Too busy for your son?”

He clears his throat. “Matheo, how can I help you?”

I shrug. “I just wanted to invite you to lunch, dinner, or anything that would allow us time to catch up. It’s been a while, Dad, and all we’ve discussed so far is business and the company.”

“The business and the company are a lot to talk about, Matheo,” he said, giving me a stern look. “It should be your life.”

“I know.” I nod. “But I’d still like to share a meal with my father and talk about other things.”

“I’m busy, Matheo.” He gestures with his hand in an attempt to wave me away. “Maybe some other time.”

I slowly nod and get up, taking a few steps before I stop, sigh, and turn back to look at my father in his seat. He has his eyes back down on his papers. He’s already focusing as if I didn’t just come in and say something. This irritates me. I usually hold back, but this time, I find myself asking something I’ve wanted to know my whole life. “Why are you so cold?”

He looks up, mouth set in a thin line as he looks at me. “What?”

I take two steps closer and repeat, “Dad, why are you so cold to me? You always brush me off; you never give me time in your day. It’s work and work. Why does it have to be like this?”

My father stays quiet as he looks me dead in the eye like the silence is supposed to be some answer. I must be too dumb because I don’t understand it.

“Say something,” I almost beg him.

He clears his throat, gets up from the chair, and packs up a few things from the table into his briefcase. I watch him with curiosity and anger as he quietly walks up to me, pats my shoulder with a hand, and walks off.

“See you around, Matheo,” he says as he walks out of the room, leaving me alone.

I scoff, looking around the empty place and wondering if I was talking to my father or the wall behind him. I walk out after him and head straight to my office. If I wasn't going to spend time talking with my father like a typical son and have an actual family relationship with him, then I best be putting my time into work and getting better. Maybe he will acknowledge me when I am good enough for him.

I stay back at the office working my ass off and going through all the paperwork I thought I would put on hold until tomorrow. I still have many things to read through. There are many things to review and sign, and my dull mood is perfect. The only way to avoid dwelling on something is to keep your mind busy and active.

Eric isn't here anymore; he is usually long gone at closing time, and so are all the staff in the building. ...or so I think. After a few more hours, I start to feel thirsty. I get up and head to the kitchen to get some water. As I am filling a glass, I hear footsteps and some soft humming. I drink quickly. I don't want to linger with whoever is about to join me. They might want to talk and 'get to know more about the future owner of this company.' I'm tired of conversations like that.

I nearly spit the water in my mouth when the kitchen door squeaks. As our gaze meets, my eyes widen, and so do Amber's.

Before I can greet her, the power goes off, and we're plunged into total darkness.

Amber yelps, and although I'm shocked by the darkness, I don't make a sound.

“What’s happening?” I hear her ask. I get my smartphone out of my pocket and turn on the flashlight.

“Facility management,” I explain, recalling the announcement that there would be a one-hour power shutdown for planned maintenance. There was an email sent, but I forgot about it.

“Oh, right.” Her face lights up as she remembers. Then I see her cheeks color a bit, and she quickly looks away to pat her body in search of something. She doesn’t find it and looks up at me sheepishly. “I must have left my phone downstairs.”

I smirk. “What a day to work late, right?”

She nods with a small smile. “I forgot about the shutdown.”

I step closer to her. “Well, since I am the only one with a means to see, we must stick together. Especially since you’re scared of the dark.”

“I’m not scared of the dark,” she quickly refutes.

“Oh yeah, what was that sound when the power went off? It’s only the two of us here right now.”

She blushes, tucking a loose lock of hair behind her ear. “I-I was just taken aback. That’s all.”

“So, you’re not scared of the dark?” I peer down at her.

She looks up at me bravely. “Nope.”

I know she is bluffing, but I play along and nod. “Okay, so you won’t mind me leaving you here in the dark while I check out the premises?”

“What?”

“I will be right back.” I smile at her and make to leave, but I stop when I feel her fingers latch onto my arm, holding me tight. I bite my lower lip to keep in my chuckle and turn to her with a raised brow.

“Um,” Amber swallows. “Let’s go together. I want to check out the premise too.”

I slowly shake my head. “There’s no need Amber, just—”

She cuts me off. “There is. Four eyes are better than two.”

I smirk at her. “If you say so.”

She blushes and looks away from my face again. “Yeah.” When I don’t say anything, she looks up with curiosity and sees my attention is fixed on her hands, which are still firmly clutching my arm.

“Sorry.”

I chuckled and tried to open the kitchen door. “Stay close; we wouldn’t want something jumping at you.”

Amber increases her speed until she’s walking beside me, close enough for our hands to touch. “Something like what?”

Damn electricity and modern technology. Amber and I are stuck with no means of escaping, so I need to look for an emergency exit. We can’t use our access card because the access control readers and controllers need power.

“We’re trapped,” I announce, just in case Amber doesn’t already know.

“What did you say could jump out on me?” Amber asks, distracted, looking around. “Rats?”

I smile, finding the perfect opportunity to tease her. “Worse than that.”

Amber quickly looks at me. “What’s worse than rats?”

“Ghosts,” I say, trying to spook her.

She stares at me for two seconds before giving me a deadpan look. “Ghosts? What, do you think I’m five?” She rolls her eyes.

I shrug. “Well, whether you believe me or not, someone died in this building before my dad took over.”

Amber inhales deeply, and though she doesn’t say anything, I notice her move closer. Her body is practically touching mine. I smile—mission accomplished.

“The whole building’s power has been turned off,” I say.

“The main door on this floor is locked. So let’s look for the emergency exit.”

Staring into her eyes, I’m struck again by her beauty. Then, as if I’m under hypnosis, I nod my head, and she smiles.

We walk into the hallway, and Amber doesn’t let go of my arm this time. I don’t mention it. I feel guilty for scaring her as I did, and I can’t believe she believed the ghost story, but telling her it’s a lie now would spoil the fun, and I’d much rather keep her company.

I place my phone down after the flashlight beam stops working. Amber and I sit silently and wait.

“My phone’s battery is now drained. There’s no way we can continue searching for the emergency door. This floor is huge, and we might as well save our energy until this is over. Considering that we need to kill some time, you should start talking,” I say to her.

Why me? You can talk too.”

“You’re the one who stopped me from wasting time walking around.”

“Oh.” She nods as if that’s perfectly logical. “Thanks for staying.” Then she gulps. “Well, what do you want me to talk about?”

“You.”

“Me?” She looks up at me and shakes her head. “Nothing is interesting about me.”

I shrug. “If you let me be the judge of that, I’ll gladly listen. So what’s on your mind?” I ask, and I realize quickly that it is a stupid question.

She smiles. “Fine. I feel sorry for your ears.”

I chuckle, and then she takes a deep breath. “Well, I’m a student who desperately needs to keep this job because I have to pay my fees and help my dad out with his hospital bills.”

“Hospital bills?”

She nods. “Yeah, my dad has been sick for a while. He’s always telling me stuff like”—she lowers her voice— *Amber, don’t worry about me and live your life. I didn’t adopt you to care for me and carry my burdens. Go live, and I will be fine.*” Her voice returns to normal as she continues, “I can’t just do nothing. Although he isn’t my biological dad, he treats me like I’m his real daughter. He was there for me when I needed him, so I will be there until he doesn’t need me anymore.

“I do struggle to pay the bills, though. “She pauses and stares at her hands in her lap. “I didn’t know what true struggle was until now—what it was like to be able to meet one’s basic needs barely.”

She sniffles, and I notice a couple of tears on her cheeks. I feel a pull on my heartstrings, and I don’t know exactly what it is. I feel bad for asking her to speak; I feel bad that she is crying because of me, and I want to stop it. But cutting her off might be ruder than allowing her to continue.

“I don’t like when he brings up the whole adoption thing. I consider him to be my true father. My biological father was a miserable drug dealer who died one night during a raid, turning our lives upside down. My birth mother lost her mind and was transferred to a mental facility where I barely saw her before she died, leaving me alone. My life would have been much more miserable had my dad not come to adopt me from foster care.”

Amber looks up at me. Although her eyes and cheeks are wet with tears, she manages to curve her lips into a smile for me. “My situation may not be great, but I’m still grateful for what I have.”

I can’t ignore the pull in my heart and body anymore. My hand reaches out, touching Amber’s soft cheek, and I gently wipe away her tears with my finger. She keeps looking at me with wonder and curiosity, and she is so beautiful that I can’t resist the urge to kiss her. My eyes close, and my lips move over hers. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I feel an electric buzz around my body, warming me to my toes.

Amber freezes for a second. Then she kisses me back, lips moving over mine like two dancers moving in perfect synchrony.

I gently bite her bottom lip as my hands span her waist and slowly slide down her ass. I squeeze and pull her body to mine until there's not an inch of space between us. She moans and kisses me hungrily, pressing herself against me. I can feel myself getting hard, and if I don't want things to get out of hand, now is the best time to stop, but everything inside me screams with desire for her.

Amber lifts herself and wraps a leg around my waist so that I can press between her thighs. The awareness of where I am sends a shiver down my spine. Then, as she raises her face to mine, the look in her eyes encourages me to take things further.

I raise a hand to cup her breast. She arches her back, leaning into my touch. She yelps and her body jerks upward when I slightly pinch the tip. I kiss her neck, exploring the silky texture of her perfect skin.

She grabs my hair, guiding my head down, and I know she wants my mouth on her chest. So I untuck her shirt and pause as I look up at her for consent. She moans approvingly, and I unbutton her clothes while kissing her.

As I get to the last button, I pause, suddenly recalling why I was interested in getting to know Amber.

My dad.

I gently pull away, ready to ask what her connection is with my father—it must be something innocent; she seems honest. However, the power comes on, and light illuminates the building.

Amber blinks. She pushes past me and scurries off. “I have to go.”

AMBER



How could I have tripped like that? It's so embarrassing. First, I spilled coffee on his jacket, then fell on him. What does he think of me now? I must come across as graceless, uncoordinated, and too susceptible to seduction.

My legs shake as I walk away from Matheo's office.

I reach for the knob to the restroom and pull it open, hurrying inside. I survey my appearance in the mirror.

I shake my head as I consider what has just happened.

I am not one to succumb to temptation. Instead, I'm striving to improve myself and build a career.

"Amber, what were you thinking?" I ask my reflection. I exhale and run my hands over my clothes in one last sweep to ensure I am presentable and ready to return to the world like a respectable employee.

I have a ton of work waiting for me. So why did I say I could do the task he gave me? Ideally, I need more time to sort everything before finishing it.

I can't even imagine how many invoices a company this large pays every month. The only option is to try my hardest to work through everything. I must start immediately and stay late until I have made considerable headway.

It will be challenging, but it can be done. I must get it done. It's my first hefty task, and I am determined to prove myself. Nothing will stop me from becoming an accountant.

As soon as I shut the door to the restroom behind me, I see Michelle coming toward me. She must have been looking for me. I glance down at my watch and see it is almost lunchtime.

“I have been looking for you. Where have you been?” Michelle asks, crossing her hands over her chest as she slows her steps.

“Matheo summoned me,” I say with a sigh.

“Oh, wow.” She jerks her head back. “You mean Matheo Martinez asked you to his office? He has been doing that since yesterday with some staff and interns. Most of them came out all morose. Tell me what he does to take people’s cheer away. I hope I don’t get called up too. If you look like you have seen a ghost, I dread to think of how I will fare.”

“Nothing. There’s just a pile of invoices for the month that I have to file for him as fast as possible. So he’ll probably give you some work and a short time to pull it off.”

“Damn.” She shakes her head. Her eyes grow bigger as if she’s solved a mystery. “The guy is probably still mad at you for spilling coffee on him.”

“It was a *mistake*.”

“Calm down, girl. I’m sure he’ll come around.”

“I can do this.” I draw in a long breath. “I’ll work extra hours today to meet the deadline.”

I begin compiling all of the invoices. First, I have to review the dates precisely a month before and then start digging through them. A steady stream of new invoices comes in as I work on the old ones.

Michelle finds me and bids me farewell when the workday is over. But, unfortunately, I have only done half the work I am supposed to do, so I can’t leave.

“Take it easy on yourself. I would stay with you, but I have my mother’s thing to go to, and she will kill me if I don’t attend her little party.” I was hoping it wouldn’t be a sleepless night, but it is inevitable. So I step out to get myself food and soda for the evening.

It has been two weeks since I started my internship, and I am already spending the night at the office. I hope things continue differently.

I head to the kitchen to get some more coffee.

I hear a sound as I close the kitchen door and quickly turn around. I am shocked to see my cocky, handsome boss in the kitchen as well, getting water.

“Mr. Martinez,” I gasp in surprise.

He smirks at me. I notice the glass of water in his hand.

Then the lights go off.

GEORGE



Matheo didn't come home last night. I've been trying to convince myself that he stayed at the office all night to work so he could avoid me. Hopefully, he didn't go out partying. I wave at the many employees that greet me as I walk to his office. I am the one person in the building who doesn't have to knock.

"I have emailed the invoices to you," I overhear Amber saying to Matheo.

They turn to see me, and I smile.

"Good morning, Sir." Amber waves her hand and greets me with a beautiful smile.

"Morning." I close the door behind me and walk up to them.

"Good morning, Dad," Matheo says as he rises. I nod, and his mouth curves into a smile. I sigh, relieved that he is smiling at me. That means all is good, and we can put the previous day behind us.

I want to talk to him. I really do. He is my son, after all. It's just that the time wasn't right, and explaining things to him would only make me late for the meeting I had with the board in just a few minutes. Work is always in the way—it is necessary and more important than bonding over a meal. I am sure he will understand when he takes the company from me and sits in my stead, laden with the workload I have to deal with to see the company do well and not fail. He thinks I am cold, but I am usually curt because I am running late for one of

the many meetings that put food on the table for him and gave him the best life he could have.

“You didn’t come home last night,” I say to Matheo.

“Yes, I had something to do that couldn’t wait.” He shrugs.

“Okay, then. Come to my office later with a progress report.” I incline my head, and he nods.

“You will become fully integrated in no time. You are smart enough.” I jam my hand in my pocket, peering at Amber. “I see you are busy, so I will let you be now.” I pat her shoulder, and she nods.

“Anytime now, Matheo. I have a meeting scheduled for ten,” I say as I make for the door.

It is pleasing to find out he was working overnight. It makes me trust him more and reassures me that the company will be in good hands.

I walk to my office and settle in. My secretary comes in and tells me the plans for the day, and I start the day’s work by signing the papers she hands me and giving them back to her. I wait for her to leave before I take a moment to breathe. I am sad, as I always am, whenever I see Matheo. I inevitably start thinking back to the time when he was born.

As much as I want to, I don’t know why I always end up being cold to him. I am not cruel to him. Most of the time, I hold myself back from breaking into tears, so I don’t say a word, and sometimes, I walk out on him. I put up a stern, professional front. He needs to see what he needs to be. No one needs to know that you have weaknesses like everyone else in the business world.

Suddenly, I remember my first marriage. I can’t get over Veronica—the woman my heart still aches for. I still feel a burn in my chest whenever I think about how everything ended, and the whole thing replays in my mind.

It was love at first sight with Veronica. Though I was already engaged to Linda, my current wife, I still fell for her. My parents had arranged the marriage with Linda to expand our family business.

I used to stay up all night to think about her, and I'd watch her like a creep while she did the chores around the house. I did all I could to make her fall for me, but she seemed impervious. I was an excellent-looking brawny man in my youth, but she said no with such ease that it felt like a knife to my chest every time I asked her. I was flaunting everything I could, but no charm I implored seemed to be affecting her. Nevertheless, I couldn't give up on her.

I tried to find out why she repelled all my advances. That was when I stumbled on the heart-wrenching fact that she had a boyfriend. I couldn't take it. He was nothing compared to me. I was better-looking and more affluent than he was, but she remained loyal to him. I could never understand her devotion to him or what made him a better choice.

If I couldn't have the woman of my dreams, why hold on to life when it is gradual death to see her in another man's arms? So I was always gloomy, half drunk, and often partying to distract myself.

My parents tried to keep me on track, but they couldn't. So they paid a therapist for me, but I wouldn't say anything. My parents would either get rid of Veronica with the snap of a finger or pay her off, and I couldn't live with myself if that happened.

The more I drank to forget her, the more I realized how much I loved her. Maybe it was hard to get over because I saw her every day. She would appear like an angel, sparkling with a smile that seduced me whenever she beamed at me.

One night, I drank so much that my friends had to bring me home from one of the clubs we frequented. I asked Veronica to bring me coffee as I staggered to my room. She came over, looking concerned and caring with the coffee in her hand. When I looked at her, I saw the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and my heart melted like wax before the fire.

After staring at me for a bit, she snapped at me. I still remember her exact words like it was yesterday. "Move on, George. There are a million ladies that deserve you more than I do. Marry Linda and have a life with her. She is beautiful and

better for you than I could ever be. Stop doing this to yourself and go back to being you.”

I laughed bitterly as I dragged myself off my bed. “I was alright before you came here. I was the perfect son, and I was going to marry the woman my parents wanted me to, but then you appeared like a goddess and stole my heart with one glance. There’s nothing for me to be but this miserable self. It’s all your fault. You made me fall for you and then rejected me for someone else. What do you think that does to a man? Well, grab a front-row seat and watch me fade into oblivion because I can’t live without you. I can’t live knowing someone else has you and not me.”

Tears rolled down her face as she turned to leave, but I grabbed her hand and pulled her to me.

“Don’t leave me, please.” I stared into her eyes and inhaled the fragrance of her skin as she fit perfectly into my arms. I knew we were made for each other.

I kissed her, knowing all my laws and morals forbid it. But isn’t something the sweetest when it is prohibited?

At first, she resisted and wanted to leave, saying we couldn’t do what I was thinking, but I wouldn’t let go and kissed her again. Then, she stopped squirming and succumbed, kissing me back. That was the happiest moment of my life. It’s funny, but every time I think back, I smile widely without regret. If I could relive my life, I would do the same thing.

We both got carried away, and things got out of hand. But we made love, and it was the most incredible feeling ever, better than I had anticipated.

My mother entered my room while we were together and ruined the moment. Veronica leaped off me in terror and shame. My mother slapped her. She had never liked Veronica. The things she called her—I didn’t think my mother was capable of such behavior. Then she had a heart attack. I gave my mother a heart attack.

After the incident, my father kept tabs on Veronica to ensure she didn’t tell anyone what happened between us. He

had his reputation to protect. The media would jump on news like that and use it to tarnish his image.

He was a man of character. He wouldn't leave Veronica out on the streets after what happened to us. He convinced her to marry me. We married a few months later, and everything was blissful while it lasted.

I gladly went back to concentrating on the family business, being diligent as I learned everything I could from my father, who was a genius businessman. I learned from him how to become the mogul I am now.

My father was very well-connected and had access to unlimited information about his wealth. Therefore, he always told me I needed to be well-informed to succeed and stay abreast with the trajectory in the market.

I can't say I know what happened to Veronica and why she suddenly changed.

I couldn't believe Veronica had been pretending the whole time we were together. It was like someone flipped a switch and let out an evil alter ego. It was an unfortunate time for me. I had recently lost my mother. The marriage that helped me overcome that loss was shattered before my eyes, and my father was killed. After that, I was barely human anymore.

While I was on the verge of going completely insane, Linda showed up and helped me get through everything. We became close and eventually married and had our daughters at that time. It was beautiful to watch until we started having kids together.

Maybe one day, I will get over Veronica. I yearn for that day to come, even though, deep down, I still have unanswered questions about what happened in the past, and I can never make peace without the answers I seek.

MATHEO



I feel bad for snapping at my father the other day in his office. At that moment, I couldn't handle the rejection, not that it was not the first time, but I felt petty and needy. I also have been trying to put a speech together to apologize to him, and I feel ready to meet him.

We haven't talked much since that day. Not that we usually talk a lot, but the small talk we had, whenever I was at the mansion stopped completely, and I believe I am the reason why. I must overcome my pride and make things right between us. I expect him to apologize, although I know it would never happen deep down, but I still hope for it.

Most of the time, he is busy. He works after he gets home, sometimes through the night, and then goes to the office the next day and continues work. He gives all of himself to the business.

Leaving things like this and avoiding him at the office further pushes us apart, which is the opposite of what I want.

I drive to the mansion to meet him and apologize. We'll work together and chat in the car if everything goes well.

As I turn to face the gate with a cursive 'M' crafted in front of it, I remember the lecture my dad gave me the first time I asked him what the 'M' stands for. He told me the tale of how our ancestor, Dimitri Martinez, one of the town's founders, started a small trading business, deciding to go far out of the city to get the day-to-day things people need and then come back to sell it to them in the town.

He bought and sold everything his money could buy. Soon, word spread about his simple and fair trade, and neighboring towns started coming to buy from him, and then came the need for an expansion which gradually grew into what we have today.

Shortly after he told me that story, my father gradually pulled away from me and plunged himself into work. Some evenings I would sit outside the house and wait for him to come back, but he wouldn't, and I'd eventually fall asleep there, get carried inside while still asleep, and then wake up in the morning to see he was already at work again.

I know his sacrifices at that time paid off and are paying off—the business is booming at a level that the investors could only have dreamed of when it was in the hands of my father's predecessors.

However, I suffered because of my father's obsession. As a kid, I didn't understand why my loving dad stopped reading to me, taking me out to games, and generally just showing up when I needed a dad. It broke me and plunged me into uncertainty because I didn't know why he was suddenly not there.

I believed I must have done something wrong for him to disappear from my life. The few times I managed to see him and ask him why he was distant and rarely home, he would say, 'work.' Then, he'd yell at me when I kept poking at him.

I was so used to him lavishing me with love and attention that I almost went mad when all that was transferred to our business. Then, when I was on the verge of giving up on my life because I felt alone and no one was there for me, I met the girl at the bridge who was bold and surprisingly wise. Her words to me shaped my life from then on.

Since then, I have strived to be the best version of myself and take off some of the weight of running our company from my dad. However, perhaps, I am still a boy at heart and have never grown up from being that lonely kid who seeks his father's love above everything else.

My siblings are happy to see me when I greet them while they are getting ready for school. I miss living in the mansion, though I don't miss it enough to bring me back. I cherish privacy, which I don't have here because of the many servants who come in and out of my room to do what their jobs demand of them. However, I love my siblings dearly.

As I walk through the hallway, I hear my mother and father arguing—another reason I had to leave. It takes a toll on everybody. The whole day is disrupted, and nobody is happy after they fight. Since I am the eldest, my siblings look to me to fix things, but what can I do?

There was a time I tried to come between my parents to calm the situation. I was sixteen and feeling like a grown-up. I ended up in the hospital with a cut on my arm after my mom pushed me out of the way, and I fell on a pair of scissors. I fainted and woke up in the hospital with both of them looking at me. I was happy, at least, to see them at a cease-fire.

I reluctantly walk toward my father's study, the usual arena for their fights. He spends most of his time there. I wouldn't be surprised if he spends more nights there than he does in his bedroom.

Their voices suddenly go quieter, and I stride to the door to see what is happening, as it could mean that the fight has extended from words to them physically hurting each other.

As I reach for the doorknob, I hear my mom growl, "I am treating him like he is my son."

I freeze and shut my eyes as my head spins while I try to comprehend what I hear.

I must have heard her wrong.

"There you go again with that, Linda. When are you going to stop being selfish and biased about this? We've talked about the plan a million times. Matheo is the man for the job. He's got his degree, so he can take over the company while his siblings are still studying. Eventually, they will all work together to keep the family business afloat," my father babbles. My hands fall to the door as curiosity takes over.

What the hell are they talking about?

“I know he is the only person who can take over for now, and I treat him like my son. But, I want to ensure that your two daughters will also be given the right to manage the business when the time comes,” my mom bellows.

“What are you two babbling about?” I yell as I turn the doorknob and push the door open, confused and suddenly scared, staring at them expectantly.

Both their faces go blank as they turn to face me.

“What do you mean by *you treat me like your own son too?*” I turn to my mom, “Mom, what does that mean?” I narrow my eyes at her.

Please tell me it's not true.

“Ask your father,” my mom says, and I look at my father.

I cross my arms and look straight into my dad's eyes.

He sighs and looks away, wiping his hands over his face, and my heart breaks. I hope to hear him say something that refutes what I am thinking, but he looks away, which means that what I heard is accurate. Therefore, she is not my biological mother.

No, no, it can't be.

“Mom, you're my birth mother, right?” I ask, my mind running a mile a minute as I spread my hands in the air. My body trembles as what I just learned sinks in. My eyes sting with tears as my mom looks back at me without remorse. Her eyes are void of the love I used to see in them. Now, I see disgust and anger.

“Matheo, let it be,” my dad mutters, and I turn to him, enraged by what he just said. “Some things are better left unknown,” he adds, and I completely lose it.

“Some things are better left unknown”? I just found out that my life was built on a lie. How can you say that?” I laugh bitterly and shake my head. “That's the most ridiculous thing I have heard you say, Dad. Are you even my father? Am I adopted or something? Tell me!” I yell at the top of my voice,

letting my anger take over. “Who is my birth mother? I don’t understand. Why aren’t you telling me anything?”

“Leave this alone and pretend you never heard anything. You will not like what you find if you keep poking.” Dad’s jaw tightens as he looks at me. “If she will tell you, fine. That’s her choice, but I won’t say a word and cause more harm than has already been done.” He turns away, and I know he won’t say another word.

I turn to Linda, and she looks away too.

“I can’t believe this. You guys have lied to me for my entire life, and now you are holding back the truth? Who are you both? I don’t know these people in front of me. The parents I grew up with would not do this to me,” I shout.

They both keep looking everywhere but at me. I nod as I realize the monsters really won’t budge. “God!”

I turn around and storm out of the room.

Now I understand why she treats me differently. It turns out I’m not her son!

I wish I hadn’t come to the mansion. I always end up upset whenever I visit. Two things always happen—either I get too caught up in sad memories, or my dad’s words or silence ruin my mood.

This is the height of it all.

Reaching my car, I sit there, placing my head on the wheel, eyes shut as I try to calm my raging thoughts.

All this while, people who were supposed to protect me, love me, and nurture me are the ones who will ruin me ...

What hurts the most is not the lie but the fact that they think I do not need to know the truth. I deserve to know. I have only ever done what they want, and look what I get in return—a blow to my face for being good.

I have been living a lie. It makes sense that Linda always wants me to get into trouble in front of my dad. I thought she wanted me to protect my sisters from being punished by my

dad. That's why she told me to always take the blame for them. Now everything is clear!

Linda doesn't want my father to hand the company to me because I am not her son. She wants our family business for herself and my sisters—that is the whole point of her fight with my dad.

It's clear to me why she treated me differently than my siblings. I thought she was training me to be the man of the house when my father was away. But instead, Linda was the one who was there for me all those times when my dad was buried at work, and I was there missing and needing him, believing I was a bad son, and that was why he withdrew from me. Her kind words eased the pain and kept me sane, but now I know it was just for a show.

From the look of things, this isn't the first fight they have had about me taking over the company. His adamantness proves he is a loyal father, after all.

I do my best to calm myself down before I drive. I reach into my pocket for a handkerchief to wipe my face. I take long, slow breaths. Then I start the engine and zoom out of the mansion gates.

Driving to work, I keep asking myself why they must hide the truth. The lie already hurts. Which is worse, the truth or the lie? Who am I? Where did I come from? Who is my biological mother?

CHAPTER 8

MATHEO



I reach the company earlier than I'd expected to and head straight to my office to finish the leftover work from yesterday before today's work comes in. I don't want anything piling up for me.

The best thing for me right now is to get consumed in work to stop me from thinking about what I learned from my parents.

I can't help but wonder if everything they have ever told me is a lie.

My father calls me to his office, and I step out to see him. I am hoping for a speech about what transpired between us. But instead, he briefs me about a meeting he has scheduled.

He is transferring the company to me today. I am supposed to be excited, but I'm too distraught to be happy. I just discovered that the person I thought was my mother was not my biological parent.

My father officially discussed the transition at the meeting with the board of directors and his partners and handed over the company to me. I feign happiness as people congratulate me, but even that fake joy is taken from me when my father announces that he has picked my assistant. I need someone I can trust. I wonder why I don't have the liberty to hire or choose my assistant.

"This is Claire Donovan, Matheo's assistant," he says, and his voice echoes through the board room. My heart sinks when I hear it.

The lady he points smiles at me so enthusiastically.

I go to see my father after the meeting ends. He is packing his personal belongings when I enter his office.

“Why can’t I hire my assistant, Dad?” I ask, toning my voice down as much as possible to ensure I do not sound rude.

“Claire is the daughter of the third highest shareholder of the company. She is quite competent and qualified for the position. I have worked with her myself. I am sure you two will work well together.”

“If she doesn’t perform well, I’ll fire her.”

“Her father is one of the board members. Just like you, they deserve to know how the company works, and her father wants her to be your assistant, Matheo. I am not changing my mind as we both agreed, and he also has a say on this.”

“Can’t I at least choose someone myself? I’m the CEO, right?”

“You just started here and need someone to guide you. You will get used to her if you get to know her, so there’s nothing to worry about,” he says, looking straight at me.

“Dad.”

“Matheo, I have things to do right now. I am sure you do, too, so get on with it.” My dad returns his eyes to his desk and acts like I am not there.

I walk out of his office, more upset than I was before. To make things worse, I bump into Claire as soon as I close the door to his office behind me.

“You weren’t in your office. I wondered where you must have gone and figured you must be here. I have to get acquainted with your daily routine as soon as possible, so please bring me up to speed with all I am supposed to do,” she says as she flutters her lashes at me.

Saying nothing, I stare at her, hiding my irritation.

“Are you alright? You don’t look so good.” She clutches the files in her hand to her chest. “I couldn’t make out the

words, but I could tell you were arguing with your dad. Do you want to talk about it? You can tell me anything,” she adds.

Mind your own business.

I shake my head and start walking away. She calls my name, but I don't turn or stop walking. I don't like her at all. Then, walking down the hallway, I see Amber approaching me from the opposite direction.

“Hi, Mr. Martinez,” she says, not meeting my eyes. I nod at her and keep walking.

I check in on Claire at lunchtime to clear the air between us about earlier. I pretend to care about her before heading to the rooftop, where I can be alone and breathe fresh air.

Today has been the worst day since I returned to Dallas, Texas—I've had to deal with the lies from my parents and the nosy assistant. My mind is troubled, and I want to get away from everyone to clear my head. So I head up to the rooftop.

CHAPTER 9

AMBER



It has been World War III in my mind ever since Matheo kissed me. I have tried to fight my attraction, but I can't, and it's not just a case of a handsome man kissing me. No, it's Matheo, the arrogant heir of the company.

What have you gotten yourself into, Amber?

I don't know why he pulled away, but I am happy he did. I probably would have passed out if he had kept kissing me like that.

If we hadn't stopped and if I hadn't run away, I fear where things would have gone. I have tried not to think about it, but the question keeps coming; it's all I can think about.

I am figuring out what to make of the whole episode. I can still feel Matheo's lips on mine when I think back to that moment. Why did he kiss me? Was it a mistake because we were caught up in the moment? Will it happen again? Should it happen again?

Most of the night, I lay awake, asking questions I could not answer while battling with feelings I should avoid.

"How do I face him now?" I whisper as I stare at myself in the mirror while tucking my shirt in. I look frustrated and confused. I don't know what to do with my hair, and it's all over the place. My face looks plain, and this shirt surely doesn't suit the pants I have on.

I suddenly care about how I look. It's weird because I usually skip through the mess of my clothes, pick one, throw it on, and head out. Now, I notice details I typically ignore—

brows that need shaping, the difficulty of matching anything with brown pants, and earrings that may or may not be too frivolous for work.

I don't know how to doll myself up. I consider closing my eyes and putting on whatever I pick up first, but I realize that would be ridiculous. So instead, I pull myself together and choose a turquoise-blue pinstriped button-down top paired with a twisted pencil skirt.

I check my watch and see that I am running later than usual, so I hurry to my bed and grab my bag while slipping my feet into a pair of black stilettos.

What have I done? What am I doing?

Balling my fingers in a fist, I bite my bottom lip when I notice Matheo walking down to his office. But, unfortunately, he got to the office before me. My heart stops, and I freeze when he turns around, and our eyes meet. I wave and turn away immediately, hoping he will disappear into his office.

The kiss was a mistake. Nothing will come of it.

I know he saw me. Maybe he has too much on his mind or has chosen to forget, as I should have.

I settle down and start the day's work. I can't concentrate because I am still thinking about the kiss. I can't exactly ask him if it meant anything to him. Did he pull away because I was a lousy kisser? Thinking about the moment makes me cringe.

The numerous tasks I have to do distracts me for long enough to take my mind off Matheo.

After getting a burrito, I head to the rooftop. I enjoy the view of Dallas from up here as I eat.

"Hey!" I hear someone say. I know who it is even before I turn around to look.

What is he doing up here?

I peer at Matheo as my feet start moving toward him to leave the rooftop.

“You’re here!”

He didn’t say a word when I greeted him earlier in the morning, so I’m surprised at how friendly he appears to be.

“Yes, but I am leaving so you can have privacy here,” I reply, looking at my watch. I don’t want to be alone with him.

“I hope I didn’t startle you,” he says as he walks directly into my path.

“No.”

“Not many people come up here. You’re the first I have ever seen here.” He chuckles and jams his hands into his pockets.

“I come here to get away from life and everyone in it when I want to think and reflect on myself.”

I watch him curiously, ignoring the screams in my head to leave.

“What would you do if you found out that someone you trust lied to you all your life about something big?” He looks heavenwards as he speaks.

“It’s probably ridiculous to hear, especially when you are hurt and feeling betrayed, but it’s better not to dwell on people’s wrongdoings. Maybe they lied to you with the best of intentions. We live in pain because we continue to relive the past, which is not living at all.” I roll my shoulder in a half-shrug.

“You must move forward to be happy and live a carefree life without baggage. Never hold on to bad thoughts from a time that has already passed. Regretting your past will only break your future while stealing the present from you. You can’t undo the past, but the choice is yours for what kind of person you want to be after learning the truth. Let your heart guide you.”

I would never imagine him this free and vulnerable. I never thought I would see a warm person behind his arrogant

face.

He sighs, and after looking around and raking his hands in his hair, he lifts his gaze to my face. “I am sorry about earlier. I was in a bad mood and didn’t want to talk to anyone.”

“It’s okay.” I smile. “I have to go now. See you around,” I say after glancing at my watch.

Matheo nods as he shrugs, wearing a faint smile.

I take the next step and stumble as I lose my balance. Matheo grabs me around the waist, preventing me from falling to the ground.

“Oh my gosh!” I yelp, embarrassed, as I try to catch my breath.

“Sorry,” Matheo smiles warmly.

“You saved me,” I say as I peel away from his hands.

“I hope you haven’t sprained anything,” he says, placing my hand on his shoulder as he crouches in front of me.

Matheo feels around my foot, and I relish the tingle of his cold, soft hands on my skin. But when he touches my ankle, I whimper in pain.

He looks at me with concern, evident in his expression. “We have to get you to the hospital.”

“How are we going to do that? I can’t move.”

“Yes, you can’t walk.” He takes off my other shoe and stands up. “I will have to carry you.” He turns around and bends for me to climb onto his back.

“I do not get to have an opinion about this, do I?” I ask, and he shakes his head.

“Be careful,” he mutters.

I climb onto his back, and he carries me to the elevator and out to his car in a piggyback. It’s a surprise that I don’t die of embarrassment.

As Matheo is helping me to a seat in the hospital’s waiting room, his back gets bumped by a nurse, and his lips come

within a hair's breadth of kissing mine. I blush and turn away, trying to ignore how my heart rate speeds up.

His gaze lingers on me for a moment before he sits in the chair beside me. "Sorry about that," he says before turning to wave down a nurse.

After getting treatment and advice to avoid any activity that would stress my ankle, we headed out. I try hopping out of the hospital, but it feels too painful, and I can't stand on my own, so he lifts me and carries me out.

At the car, I reach into my pocket for my phone and don't find it. Then, it dawned on me that I had left it in my bag at the office. "Crap!"

"What?" Matheo turns to me with concern. "What is it?"

I almost smile, touched by his care, but I stop myself. "I left my bag on my desk."

"Let's go and get it then," he suggests.

"No, I can't go back there like this, with you carrying me around. What will people say? I am just an intern and can't be seen with you."

"I get it," he laughs. "You have nowhere to go."

I shake my head.

"Let me take you to my place and get your handbag for you later."

"Your place?" My heart starts beating fast as my thoughts go astray.

No, definitely not.

"It's a few blocks away from here," he says, leaning on the car as he gestures for me to move aside for him to open the car door for me.

"I can't go to your place," I say, shaking my head frantically.

"I knew you'd say that. But I can't leave you like this, so get in and let's go," he says, and I enter the car like a puppet.

As we drive to his place, I find myself plagued with doubts. Going to his house is a bad idea. We were alone at the office for the first time and kissed. Now I am going to his house. I promise myself I will not do anything wrong this time.

He carries me in and places me on a couch.

“I would say make yourself at home, but you can’t move,” he chuckles, and I roll my eyes at him.

“What can I offer you?”

“Water.”

“Alright then

He disappears and comes back with a glass of water.

The paintings on the wall catch my eyes, and I drag myself off the couch and check them out. As I hop like a kangaroo, admiring the paintings on the wall, I end up in a room with more images stacked side by side on the wall.

Abstract art has never really been my thing. However, the intense colors and dramatic lines interest me. To my surprise, I find myself captivated by the paintings.

As I move from one end of the room to the other, forgetting that I am being supported by just one leg, I see an easel with an unfinished painting. I put my hands over my mouth as I see the paintbrushes in a tray of dried-up colors on a chair in front of the board.

Did he paint all these?

“Like what you see, wanderer?” I hear a familiar voice say behind me. I turn to see Matheo crossing his hand over his chest. He has changed into a white t-shirt that hugs tight around his bulging biceps. My eyes enjoy too much looking at his muscles before I notice he is wearing jeans and white crocs.

How can a man be this hot? I thought they said perfect doesn't exist.

“You are trespassing. This room is my personal space.”

I smile and ask, “You painted all that?”

“Yeah. I paint when I have free time. Enough about me. Do you have a boyfriend?”

I startle and look up at him. “Where did that question come from?”

He shrugs. “I want to know if someone will come for my life by carrying you around and bringing you to my house.”

“Someone might try to kill you,” I respond sarcastically.

“Okay... is he a secret boyfriend?”

Before I can answer, his watch beeps, and he starts looking around for something. He grabs the remote from the side of the couch after scooting towards me and points it to the TV. He switches the TV to a sports channel and turns up the volume.

“So, are you a football fan?”

“Oh yeah. I have been waiting for this game.”

“It amazes me that you are normal and have a life.”

“What?” His face contorts, but his eye sticks to the TV. He is distracted, and I know anything I say will float out his other ear.

A few minutes into the game, his team, initially losing, scored a goal to equalize. He jerks off the chair and sits back with a yell, “That’s what I’m talking about!”

I watch in amazement.

“Goal!” he shouts when another point is scored. “Yes!” He hugs me but lets me go almost immediately to continue watching the game.

He notices I am staring at him and turns to look at me, toying with a lock of my hair. I don’t look away.

MATHEO



I can't take my eyes off Amber. The dreaded moment has caught up with me, but I don't feel afraid. I tell myself this will not happen again, but I feel like I am not in control of my mind and body, as if she has me under a spell.

All I want to do is feel her lips on mine again. I want her to kiss me like that again. I slip my hand to the back of her neck and pull her face to mine, all the while wondering if she will resist or do something to stop me, but then she leans in, and her lips slowly part.

My mind is screaming against it, but my body urges me to kiss her, so I close my eyes and put my lips on hers.

She kisses me back tenderly.

I withdraw my face from her and look into her eyes. I can tell she wants me as much as I want her, which riles me up.

She lies back, pulling me with her. I kiss her, running my fingers over her body. I cannot resist the urge to see if she tastes as good as she feels, so I unbutton her shirt.

I pull her bra down and cup her breasts. The softness of the smooth flesh and the sight of her naked skin sends a shiver running down my spine. I feel my shaft harden, and I groan as I take one of her nipples into my mouth. She presses up against me in encouragement. I massage her other breast with my hand and continue licking and sucking the other.

She takes my free hand and moves it under her skirt. Her boldness is like something out of one of my fantasies. I push

her underwear aside and slide a finger into her warmth. She squirms restlessly beneath me, clearly impatient.

I slide my finger further in.

Thrusting my finger slowly in and out of her, I gently bite her nipple, making her gasp. Her sounds of enjoyment are music to my ears. I feel her hand wrap around my neck, holding my face to her chest.

“Don’t stop,” she says breathlessly. I look at her and see her biting down her bottom lip.

I add another finger and increase the pace.

She begins to tremble as I keep sucking and thrusting.

Finally, she lets out a cry of release.

Amber loosens her grip around my neck, and her hands fall to her sides. I raise my face to hers and kiss her before I lick her fingers.

Our tongue twirl over each other as she runs her hands over my abdominal muscles. I smile at her and pull away to take off my shirt. She follows me to stand up, staring at my body as she trails her hands from her hips to her breasts and squeezes them. I go weak in the knees as I watch her.

Throwing my shirt to the couch, I remove my belt. Amber strides at me as I pull off my pants. She puts my hands on her skirt and pushes it down slightly, so I know she wants me to take it off for her. I pull the garment down, bending with the motion.

I look at her, taking in her magnificence. The girl is damn beautiful. I get down on my knees and pull her closer to me, kissing the area just above the hem of her thong as I grope her ass.

I stand, towering over her, and she rubs her hands on my crotch and squeezes my erection. Then, she hooks her fingers in the waistband of my boxer shorts and pulls down, pausing to stare at what she reveals with obvious appreciation.

I pull her up and kiss her neck, pressing her body against mine for a moment before I guide her back to the couch.

Looking straight at her, I go down on my knees, remove her underwear, and spread her legs. I put my face between her thighs and softly kiss her there, taking things slowly to discover the spots that drive her wild.

She whimpers, pulling at my hair as she approaches another climax. I get lost in the taste of her lips and the warmth of her body until she orgasms once more.

“I want you,” she says after that, looking beautifully disheveled on the couch, her face flushed red.

I guide her legs up until they are spread wide on my shoulder, and, with my eyes fixed on hers, I slowly push myself into her.

I feel euphoric when she clamps tightly around me, and I can't hold back a groan.

Thrusting slowly, I hold my breath, gripping her waist tightly as I plant my feet on the ground to keep me standing as waves of pleasure wash over me. I pick up the tempo of my thrusts as I draw close to finishing.

“Don't stop,” she whines, pushing herself toward me.

With a few more strokes, her body starts trembling again. I thrust faster, letting myself go. I grab her ass and lean forward, my lips connecting with hers in a passionate kiss, and I shake as a wave of pleasure runs through me, building and exploding like a firework.

I muster some strength and pull myself up, then pull out and press my shaft on her thigh, letting go.

“Matheo Martinez,” she mutters as she relaxes, dozing off.

I chuckle, resting a second to catch my breath. Amber feels heavier as I carry her into my room after wiping semen off her thigh. I lay her on my bed, go back to fix my living room, and sleep there.

In the morning, I come in, and Amber is still passed out on the bed, sleeping like an angel. I bring the rest of her clothes to her and leave her a note asking her not to come to work for the day.

I drive to the office while thinking about everything that has happened between us.

AMBER



Tuesday was the longest day of my life. I felt useless sitting in my room and doing nothing, unable to move around as I usually would because of the pain in my ankle. However, binge-watching a Korean series kept me busy and distracted enough not to lose my mind.

When I am back at work, I might prefer the feeling of uselessness to the growing disgust I experience whenever I see Matheo with Claire, his assistant. She has been following him around and demanding all of his attention.

We haven't talked since our time at his place. I am dying to know what he thinks of me—everything that happened between us that day.

I want it to happen again or not... I don't know. I shouldn't. I love how his muscles felt in my hands when I touched them. I still get the chills when I remember him naked, his statuesque body glistening with sweat. Matheo is handsome at first glance, but without his clothes on, he looks like a god.

He sure knows how to please a woman with his tongue. Just the memory of how it felt when his hands grabbed my waist as he moaned, ramming into me and driving me crazy, is enough to distract me. I don't think I have ever felt that good in my entire life. But I didn't want it to stop.

I have built a barrier around myself to ward men off, but Matheo can break through all that. He makes me go against the vows I make to myself. One minute I am telling myself I

can't and won't let anything happen. The next, I am swooning in his arms.

I don't know why I am vulnerable to Matheo. There isn't anything specific he does that gets through to me. Maybe everything he does affects me. That would be ridiculous, considering how arrogant he is most of the time, except that day he changed into someone wholly nice and caring, and I fell for his charm.

I should not feel this powerless with a man, but what do I do? What is there to do?

I spent the entire night reliving the magical sex with Matheo, and now I can't even look at him without seeing that *assistant* first.

Claire is deliberately touchy with him. She is an assistant, not a shadow, and she shouldn't have to touch him whenever she says something to him. He seems to be okay with it. I want to disappear.

I can't see Matheo's office from my seat. It's been seven minutes since she followed him into the office. So why isn't she out yet?

Now eight minutes.

I sigh as I stare at my watch.

He doesn't need an assistant, at least not a clingy female one.

I bow my head and close my eyes as I exhale. And count in my head to distract me.

What are you doing?

I hear someone talk and raise my head, opening my eyes—I am already at 122 with my counting. I am surprised to see it's Claire standing in front of me. I jerk my head backward and try not to frown as she smiles at me.

“Hi!”

“I was checking in with staff and interns yesterday and noticed your desk, here”—she points down at my computer

—“was empty. So I asked who was supposed to be at this desk, and they told me it was you, Amber, an intern.”

I peer up at her and fake a smile. “Yes, it’s me. Amber, an intern.”

“So...” She inclines her head and pushes a lock of hair away from her face. “Where were you? Did you have somewhere better to be? Will this be a consistent habit? Will we have to worry about you?”

“I, ugh...” I look away, searching my mind for what to say.

As I opened my mouth to say something, the telephone rang, and I hurriedly picked it up, glad to be called to Human Resources.

As I drop the phone, I put on a smile. “I had an injury,” I blurt out.

Claire squints at me, but I rise before she says anything else. “I have to go to Human Resources now.”

A few minutes later, after I returned from Human Resources, Michelle walked up to me.

“Hey! I see you’ve met Medusa,” she whispers as she grabs a chair to sit on.

“Medusa. That’s a perfectly fitting description.” I shake my head and look away from my computer screen. “She was wearing a snakeskin button-up and matching boots.” I roll my eyes. “Show off.”

“You don’t like her either?”

“Who would? She likes to stick her nose into other people’s business.”

“Hmm, what did she say to you?” Michelle asks. “She has interrogated everyone, saying she wants to get to know everyone since we will be working together.”

“She’s a weird person. You better get back to work before Medusa sees you chatting with me, and then we will both be in

trouble. She is Matheo's assistant, so...." I spread my hands out in front of me.

"True," Michelle says as terror grips her features.

I text her to meet me outside for lunch, and we'll talk about it instead of risking unwanted attention from Claire. Then, I resume going through figures and packages from Human Resources.

Matheo flashes through my mind, and I feel sad. I haven't yet talked to him, and he hasn't come for me. Is he supposed to? Was it a fling?

I am done with the task at hand in no time, and I send it in. I recline in my chair for a breather. My eyes catch the time on my computer, and I smile. Lunchtime is in eight minutes.

Michelle and I head out to our favorite restaurant for lunch after meeting outside.

"Medusa asked me why I wasn't here Monday after lunch, and I told her I had an injury," I say, wiping my mouth with a wipe.

"Ok," Michelle's eyes bulge. "Did she believe you?"

"I think so," I say, nodding frantically.

Michelle blinks at me.

"I could have just laughed it off with something funny to escape answering questions I find awkward." I lean forward. "It's the best way to avoid answering a question without making the situation worse and stop the person from prying further, but as far I know, she's just doing her job."

She scoffs, "How did you figure that out?"

"Everybody is nosy in college. There are just different ways and different times they poke at you. So, it would be best if you had a defense mechanism that won't put you in the spotlight for being rude.

"And if you grew up in a foster home, you would know you need to devise ways to get yourself out of trouble." I gulp all the soda left in my cup.

“Is there anything you don’t know your way around?” Michelle asks, shaking her head.

“Yes.”

“What?” Her eyes light up.

“Boys.”

“Oh, right,” she presses her lips together and looks away.
“Boys.”

“I have a history of meeting douchebags, and I want to steer clear of it,” I say, cognizant that I am not completely honest about my intentions.

“But where were you yesterday? If you are seeing someone without telling me, I will not forgive you.” Michelle leans forward with a piercing gaze.

I move back. “Stop looking at me like that,” I say.

She jots backward and raises her hands. “What does that guilty expression mean? Are you seeing someone?” She narrows her eyes.

“No. Of course not. You know me. I don’t have time for boys and all that relationship stuff,” I babble.

I can't tell you now. I'm sorry. I don't know what is happening to me. I can't risk telling you now as I'm also not sure what Matheo and I have. All I know is that it's still complicated. I have to be sure first.

“Why do you look suspicious?”

“Why are you seeing suspicion?” I jab her shoulder.

“Ouch. I’m fragile,” she whines, kneading her shoulder.

“Sorry, you are being weird, and I had to snap you back to yourself...” I shrug.

Her expression dulls, and she sighs, hugging herself.

“Why the long face?”

“Yeah, me too. TotaBuyzz is an excellent company to work for. Everyone was on the same page, friendly with each other, and life was sweet, but now there’s this tension in the air

because Claire will not stop hovering around and putting people under pressure.

Free-mindedness and space are priceless. Claire is the sort of person who will inspire employees to do things just for show rather than because they are appropriate.

“She is going to make our lives more complicated.” I drum my fingers on the table. “Why does she have to be a pain in the ass?”

“I can’t believe it’s only been three days,” Michelle groans, dropping her hands to the table.

“Hey, don’t be such a baby.” I lean forward and peer into her sad eyes. “Buck up. I am sure she will settle down, and everything will be alright. Even if she continues to be difficult, we’ll be okay. We have bigger things to worry about than her. I need this internship to kickstart my career to take care of my dad’s health issues.

“You shouldn’t waste your time and energy worrying about her. She’d probably come and go, and we’ll still be here.”

“I hope so. You are one of a kind. You know that, right?” Michelle smiles at me.

“I am different,” I mutter, nodding my head, “I know that. But so are you—special.”

“Don’t flatter me like that.” She presses her hands to her cheeks.

“It’s the truth.”

“We should get going. We have a few minutes before lunchtime is over,” she says, looking at her phone. “I don’t want a session with Medusa. She skipped past me on Monday. It seems I am invisible to her and want to stay that way. The sight of her gives me the creeps. How do you think she got the job?”

“I would rather not strain my mind with that. Are you going to finish your soda?”

“Take your greedy eyes off my drink. You had yours.” She rolls her eyes at me.

We return to the office and start avoiding Claire as much as we can throughout the day.

MATHEO



My family is well known for its style and prestige. We do everything to the highest standard—birthdays, graduations; you name it.

My father is stepping down as the CEO to focus on being the Chairman. I want the world to know a business mogul is laying down his briefcase in a grand style, so I organize a party for him. It will be the biggest party Dallas has ever known. I will make sure of it.

I am still upset about the big lie he and Linda harbored, but I have put everything behind me. He is still my dad, and being mad at him doesn't mean I hate him. On the contrary, he deserves a gift for all he's done for me.

Everything, to the tiniest detail, must be done to perfection. This is not a one-person job. So I arranged a meeting to announce my intention to my employees and to choose a social committee that would be up to the task of delivering an outstanding event.

“Morning, everyone,” I say, holding my hands behind me as my eyes move over the faces around the table. We are in one of the meeting halls on the floor below my office, and I only invited the group working directly below me.

I wait for the murmurs in acknowledgment of my greeting to die down before speaking again, “I have called you here for one purpose. I want to organize a party for my dad's retirement. As you all know, he has officially announced that he is retiring, so I want a celebration to escort him and

acknowledge his massive achievement. He deserves it, and we must give him something the world has never seen.”

They digest the information and look back at me. “I can’t do it alone, so I need a team to plan the event. So, if any of you are interested, you can arrange your participation with Amber, who will head the committee, assisted by Michelle.

“I specifically chose them because the accounting department has to oversee the approved budget for this event. Mrs. Percy and I agreed for Amber and Michelle to be in charge of this event for easy communication.”

I look straight at Amber and see she is just as shocked as I imagined she would be when she hears I have chosen her to lead the committee. I have purposely given her a huge task.

The room goes dead silent as everyone stares at Amber and Michelle.

“I will appreciate anyone who volunteers to contribute a thing or two.” I smile. “You all can go back to your work. Amber, Michelle, meet me in my office now,” I say before walking out.

Amber and Michelle trail me until I reach my office and sit in my chair.

“I know both of you will do exceptionally well, which is why I picked you.” I look at Amber, then Michelle. “I want to see what you can come up with by the end of the week before I choose the date for the party.”

Amber nods. “Okay.”

Michelle looks petrified as she looks at Amber, who is smiling. I know Amber is the stronger and smarter one in the duo.

“Don’t hesitate to ask me anything. Every little detail matters.”

“We will keep that in mind., Amber says. “We’ll brainstorm a few ideas and keep you updated.”

“Alright.” I lean back into my chair as I gesture for them to leave.

They come into my office at lunchtime, just as I prepare to go out.

“This will be quick,” Amber assures me. I perch on the corner of my desk.

“So, I—we—have a few questions to ask.”

“Get on with it. I am all ears.”

“Right...” She turns to Michelle and extends her hands. Michelle places a folded piece of paper in her hand. Amber unfolds it and spends a moment reading through it before raising her gaze to me and asking, “Do you have a venue in mind, or are we taking care of that?”

“I am leaving that to you.”

“Okay... will it be strictly by invite, or do we need a guestlist? If you could let us know who will be in attendance, that might help us to cater to their taste.”

I round my desk, pull out a drawer, and extract an envelope. Handing it to Michelle, I say, “Everyone I want in attendance is in there. Read it with discretion.” I smirk. The corner of Amber’s mouth twitches into a smile, and I find myself picking up where I left off in my last train of thoughts—asking myself why I have a soft spot for her and how she can get past my defenses.

“I am counting on you. I know you won’t let me down.”

They both nod their head, and Michelle sighs.

“Is that all?”

“Nope.” Amber looks at the paper again and back at me, “What is the budget?”

I chuckle. “As expensive as it can get. No limits. I don’t want something mediocre.”

“I should have guessed,” she chuckles. “That will be all for now.”

“You two will pitch your ideas to my family this weekend. They—not just me—will scrutinize what you bring to the table.”

Amber nods, and both girls leave.

I mainly said what I did to see her reaction, but she didn't appear to waver at the thought of facing judgment.

Every girl I have met has been intimidated by Linda. She is meticulous and challenging to get along with. I hope that Amber and Michelle will be up to dealing with her.

AMBER



I feel my soul leave my body when Matheo announces that I am heading the committee to plan his father's retirement party.

Once again, I pray for the power of invisibility because of him.

What the hell do I know about parties? I have only been to a handful as an unwilling participant. I was in attendance because Michelle was trying to get me to let loose a little.

I need clarification about what Matheo wants from me. Is he trying to send me a message or put me through a test by electing me as the head of the committee?

After giving all that speech about wanting absolute perfection and flawlessness, he chose me. Me! And Michelle. Just like that, out of nowhere.

I wish I had called in sick or something. This would have passed on to someone like Claire. Yes, she looks like she can handle such a task, but not me. I am just an intern.

Who would dump such a huge responsibility on someone inexperienced without prior notice?

The meeting ends, leaving everyone spooked. Michelle looks like she has seen a ghost. As we follow him to his office, my thoughts are all over the place. I try to suppress my urge to strangle him.

Michelle looks at me with furrowed brows and pouting lips. I grab her hand and whisper, "We'll figure it out

together.”

She lets out a sigh, and we keep walking.

This is yet another hurdle I will have to deal with. I will do my best to see everything comes out flawlessly. How hard can it be to plan the biggest party for one of the wealthiest men in Dallas?

Matheo seems to forget that I am an accounting intern, not an event planner.

“Alright.”

Outside his office, I drag Michelle to a corner as she looks like she is about to panic.

“Calm down. I am as surprised and overwhelmed as you are,” I tell Michelle. “Breathe.”

She takes a few long breaths and calms a bit.

“Thanks!” Michelle says. “I don’t know how you can be so relaxed about this. Where the hell do we start? I don’t think we can handle this. It’s going to fall apart. Why don’t we tell him we can’t do it before it’s too late?” Michelle whines.

“He’s a jackass for throwing this at us, but we can’t give up. We will do it and do it well. I have no idea what to do or where to start, but we will not fail. Actually,” I say, patting her cheek, “We can’t fail. Imagine what that would do to our careers, our lives.”

“All the more reason we need to abandon this right now,” Michelle whimpers.

“I am thinking about the look on people’s faces and what they will say after we pull this off and succeed,” I look heavenward, smiling.

Michelle scoffs, “If we get there, that is. Unfortunately, the odds are against us. I would bail if you were someone else,” she huffs.

I roll my eyes and place both hands on her shoulders, “We can do anything, especially since we are together.”

“This is not just anything, Amber. It’s George Martinez’s retirement party. Freaking George Martinez!” Her eyes glisten with panicked tears. “The world is going to go wild about it. And we will be finished on a worldwide scale. I can’t handle that.”

“Yeah, I know. This party is a big deal. Still, all this could be a gift from God to put us in the spotlight, where we belong.” I smile. “Imagine the headlines carrying our names, Amber and Michelle, the two accounting interns that planned the biggest, craziest party the world has seen.” I squeeze her shoulder.

“Calm down and breathe. We are going to be superstars. I know we will shock the world.” I smile and jab my finger into her side. She yelps and laughs in surprise. “There you go.” I grin. “Give yourself some credit, and let’s give this a go.”

“Okay,” Michelle sighs.

“Come along. We have research to do.” I lead the way, and she follows behind me.

“You do your research, and I’ll do mine. Let’s see what we come up with before lunchtime. Then we’ll meet him and pool our ideas,” I mutter as we walk back to our desks.

I relish the looks we get from our colleagues, who are still shocked we were chosen to head the social committee, even though most look scared for Michelle and me. Something about the situation lights me up inside. I love the challenge and thrill of proving people wrong.

Researching helps me to calm down and get a bit of perspective. After jotting a few things down, I take my paper to Michelle, and we compare, cross out and add items to a list of things we have to find out as soon as possible.

Matheo gives Michelle and me two days off from work to focus on putting a plan together.

Claire and two interns volunteer to join us at the last minute.

Contrary to my anticipation, planning the party is easier because I have unlimited resources. We visit high-end stores

and malls. It gave me a glimpse of the life I could have if I had managed to succeed.

The day of the presentation arrives. I am eighty percent sure Matheo's family will love what we have for them. I put in too much work for it to be deemed a whack idea.

I am shocked to see Matheo already at the office when I get there.

He sees me and walks over to my table, where I have seated with my presentation slideshow.

"You're here early," he says, standing behind me.

"Yes, I am. I have been waiting three long days to come back here. I missed work. Sitting in front of a computer and reviewing the tables and numbers fulfills me." I turn to look at him with a grin.

I missed his pretty face more than being at work, but I can't tell him that.

"I can't wait for the presentation." I clap my hands.

"Okay," he laughs. "Good luck then. I'd better finish some work before we meet."

I know he didn't expect me to be as excited as I am

Matheo hasn't brought up his house and the sex, so I won't either, especially not now with all the work and the party at hand.

"Okay. See you later then."

The time for the presentation soon comes, and we all gather in the boardroom.

I feel incredibly proud that all three members of the Martinez family appear to be impressed by my set-up for the party, especially Linda. Of course, she wants to make a few changes, but the presentation was a success overall.

"I told you we could pull this off," I say to Michelle as soon as we are the only ones left in the boardroom.

She smiles and runs toward me for a hug.

“Now I can breathe and have my life back. At least for now.”

MATHEO



It's been four days since I gave the job of planning my father's party to Amber and Michelle. I went to the boardroom to watch Amber's presentation, accompanied by Linda, Ava, and Mabel.

I keep my fingers crossed that nothing will go wrong. Linda is already skeptical about giving her husband's party to interns, who have probably never planned an event of such scale.

I push the door open and usher Linda and Ava to go in before me.

As I walk in, running my hands over my suit, I am shocked to see a committee of just five people. Amber, Michelle, and Claire are three of the five.

There is a file and a pen on the table in front of each of the three chairs where we sit.

"Welcome all of you," Amber says. We nod in unison.

Linda and Ava stare intently at Amber, and I know they are analyzing her looks.

"The file in front of you contains the program, theme, a couple of designs for the invitation, and a playlist." She points to the files, and we begin to open them. "There are a few missing pieces I believe all three of you will help me put together now that you are all here."

Amber seems more excited than I would have expected her to be.

“I want to thank Matheo for giving my team and me this opportunity. I don’t take it lightly,” she says, glancing at her colleagues sitting opposite us.

“For the theme, as you can see, we are going back to the fifties. So I have chosen Marilyn Monroe— sock hop posters, black and white balloons, streamers, cardboard records, and cutouts of Hollywood stars back in the fifties.

“I don’t know who George Martinez’s favorite artists from that era are. I have made a playlist around the rockers from that time that everyone will probably recognize. It is still flexible, in any case. Perhaps you could help us expand the list.”

“Bing Crosby,” Ava says, her attention locked on the playlist, “He adores him. He still listens to ‘Dear Hearts and Gentle People.’ You’re a genius. He’ll love this. These are his jams. Patti Page’s ‘All My Love,’ Gordon Jenkins’s ‘Bewitched’... The music is good.” Ava looks up at Amber and grins. “How did you come up with all of this?”

“We did it as a team.” Amber beams at Michelle.

“We’ll take a few songs off, but he’ll love the theme,” Linda says, crossing a song off the list. Then, she pushes her glasses down and glances at Amber, “Go on.”

So far, so good.

“Amber puts on a slide show of decorations. “The dress codes for the party are listed in the invitation; poodle skirts, pedal-pusher pants or saddle shoes, dark denim jeans, and white t-shirts—that kind of stuff.”

Amber takes a quick breath before continuing, “For the program, we start with cheers to retirement, eating and drinking, brunch and barbecue. We skipped a few details, such as speeches, because I needed to know the people he regards highly, and three perspectives are better than one. You should be able to help with that,” Amber adds, looking at Linda.

Linda raises her brows. “Okay,” Linda drawls, her eyes on the decoration ideas in the slideshow. Then she points, “That one. I like it.”

Michelle smirks at Amber.

“The food menu includes French fries, root beer, and ice cream floats, hotdogs and hamburgers, milkshakes and sundaes; the highlights of the fifties.”

I sit back in my seat, listening and admiring Amber’s courage. I have run through the file, and everything looks better than I expected.

“We thought building the party around his hobbies would be sensational, but we only know about his love for golf and have checked out local clubs. You know him better than everybody else so you should suggest friends and family, artists and maybe business mentors with whom we can surprise him. You can put those down behind the program,” Amber advises.

“Will do.” Linda nods and gets to writing. She is obliging Amber, which is a great sign.

“There’s no mention of a venue here,” I point out.

“Yes, I am coming to that. A venue can make or break a party, so we must choose the right place. We think the Martinez mansion would be perfect for this occasion.”

Amber walks to the edge of the table.

“Have you planned a party before?” Linda asks.

“No. This is a first.”

Ava jerks her head in my direction, and I shrug.

“Hmm. I am impressed. The theme is a brilliant idea. After a bit of tweaking, everything will be great. Good job.” Linda smiles as she closes the file and places her hand over it.

Amber finishes the presentation, totally nailing it. Linda is impressed. That says it all.

Once again, Amber comes out victorious, outdoing my expectations.

“Start sending out the invites. The party is next Saturday. Start making reservations and orders. Come to me for anything you need,” I say as I leave.

“Yes, Mr. Martinez will do,” Amber nods.

“Carry on with your other work as well. I don’t want you slacking off on office hours.” I turn around to look at Amber as I pull the door open for Linda, Mabel, and Ava.

After escorting them to their car outside, I head inside to return to my office.

“Yes, he is planning a party for your retirement,” I hear someone say as the elevator doors begin to open.

As I contemplate who it might be that is speaking, the doors open the rest of the way, and I see Claire putting her phone away. I fake a smile as our eyes meet. She leaves, and I step in, realizing why my dad insists I have her as an assistant. She’s spying on me.

My father’s party was supposed to be a surprise until the last minute, but she ruined it.

Why would he have someone spy on me? Is Claire the only one? Although I haven’t found any evidence to prove that Amber is also reporting my every move to my father, I intend to keep an eye on her.

I stop to take a breather after running for ten minutes. Usually, I run for much longer, but thinking about my father and Claire drains me.

The cold morning breeze that rarely visits Dallas hits my face.

It’s as cold as my heart.

I look at my wristwatch to check the time and see that it’s about twenty minutes to seven.

I should be heading back now.

It has been a while since I last went on morning jogs. This morning will help clear my head.

I didn’t get much sleep last night. I was searching my mind for something I might have done to make my father feel he needed to hire a spy. All I have done is try to make him proud,

but I can't escape the truth. He doesn't trust me, but why would he put the company in my hands?

I thought about confronting him about it, but it could worsen things. I know I have to be wary of what Claire sees me do if I don't want my dad to know about it. I don't want to live like this, but he has forced my hand.

I prefer to be transparent and straight with whatever I do. However, that is no longer possible. Claire doesn't seem to see a boundary between work and my personal life.

I dislike Claire following me around the company until I explicitly ask her to leave me alone for a bit or send her away on an errand. It has been hard adjusting to having a personal assistant like her. Knowing she is a mole further complicates things.

I want to know everything there is to know about Claire. How did she rise to the level of being a CEO's assistant? Why did she agree to spy for my father? How did they meet, and why does he trust her?

It's saddening. My father keeps finding new ways to hurt me. I should be used to it by now, but every time is as surprising as the last. At least he used to have work to justify most of his wrongs—he would excuse himself on the pretext of prioritizing the business to maintain the family's standard of life. However, the first thing he decided to do after stepping down as the CEO was to put spy on me.

I understand that the company is George Martinez's second heart, but I am his son, and I love the company and will do everything in my power to ensure it blooms. I thought he knew that. So why does he feel threatened now that the company is under my care?

I arrived at my office. After less than two minutes, I hear Claire's footsteps approach my door. I feel rage erupt from my gut, but I do my best to compose myself.

The door opens after a slight knock. I don't raise my head as I am pretending to be busy, going through a document I had already been through three times after signing it.

“Good morning, Matheo. I trust you had a great night,” her high-pitched voice rings through the room.

I look to see her usual exaggerated smile and smile back, too. “Morning, Claire.” I recline into my chair, “What do you have for me today?”

“Well, you have a board meeting at ten and another meeting with an investor at noon,” she reads from her notepad.

I stare until she says, “That’s all for now.”

I nod.

I am holding back so much disdain for her, and I want to choke her until she disappears so that it is like she was never here.

“Okay, come back when it’s almost time for my first meeting. Now, I have to finish this and send it in.” I lean forward and cast all my attention down on the file, praying she leaves even though I know the odds that she will are slim.

“Alright, call me if you need anything,” she says and leaves.

It’s a miracle! She’s leaving.

I cherish my personal space. The quiet helps me think better. However, it has been challenging to adjust to the sound of Claire’s heels clicking behind me and her giggles and relentless questions, most of which I ignore with a fake smile or a redirect.

The door opens, and I jerk my head up. *You can’t be serious.*

I exhale and smirk as I see Amber coming, not Claire.

“Good morning, Mr. Martinez,” she says.

She is clutching a bunch of files to her chest.

“Good morning,” I say, taking in the sight of her. She is wearing a pastel blue blouse tucked with a matching high-waisted pencil skirt. My heart starts beating fast as our eyes meet.

“These...” She staggers forward and drops the pile of documents in front of me. She breathes hard and fans her hand over her face. “...these are cost breakdowns for the party. Do you have any questions?”

“No questions for now. I will go through these when I have time,” I say, pulling the files closer to me.

“Right.” She whirls around and strides to the door.

I want to say something, but my mind goes blank. Then, she pulls the door open and slips through, closing it behind her.

I take a long drag of air and roll my eyes, kneading my forehead.

What the hell was that?

I don't understand why Amber affects me so strongly. I am usually confident and authoritative with women, but with her, I am left humbled and yearning for her approval. It scares me even more that I don't know why she has such control over me by just being herself.

I shake my head and pick up the first file, but my mind is still fixed on Amber. She is outstanding, and her commitment to this internship is unmatched by her peers. She is as brilliant as she is beautiful. She takes whatever I throw at her and outperforms the standards I set.

I remember the smile on my father's face when he saw Amber and me in my office. I have never seen him smile like that. Maybe when I told him I wanted to study business to help with the company, but that was expected. He rarely ever smiles.

I remember when dad visited the office, and I caught him looking at Amber and me while talking. Was he checking on me to see if I was putting pressure on his favorite intern?

I shut my eyes and cock my head. “What if...”

No, no, you do not want to go down that road. You know that she's not that kind of person at all.

At that time, I was lining up one huge task after another to test Amber's ability to withstand pressure. My father could have gotten wind of this. If he had confronted me, I would have brought up my suspicions about him hiring her to spy on me.

Amber does seem very innocent and incapable of doing something serious and desperate. But then, you never really know, do you? I might be too busy trying not to fall for her to notice anything off about her. It's hard to concentrate on anything but her whenever she is

I rub my eyes and blink a few times.

I return to the morning ration of work on my table and lock my thoughts away.

After two minutes of scrolling a file and making comments, the door opens, and Claire appears. I want to puke at the sight of her. I don't think I can harbor the discomfort in my gut for too long.

I might go against my father, throw her away, and get another person to fill her position.

MATHEO



The Friday of the party finally arrives, and all of Amber's genius plans have come to life. I am genuinely impressed.

My father is pretending to be surprised about the party. Of course, I am happy for him, primarily because of the people here to support and celebrate his life of success; however, it is a pity that the party couldn't have been a real surprise.

He is an expert at putting on different personas as the occasion demands, so you can only really know what is going on with him if he chooses to let you in on something. He rarely talks about his feelings as he is primarily focused on business.

Linda is clinging to him. She is the most extravagantly dressed woman in the room, as is expected of her. However, she emits superficial beauty and elegance in her dress with full-length gloves, kitten heels, and a heavy ring-stone diamond necklace.

If it is not a diamond, then it's not Linda. However, I much prefer Amber's beautiful simplicity over Linda's flashiness.

"What do you think?" Amber smiles as she walks up to me, obviously excited about how the party is going. "Are you having a great time?"

"It's excellent, Amber. All of this"—I look around the room—"is amazing. Even I am having fun."

"You should do that. Loosen up a little. Life isn't that serious. You must have fun sometimes and forget all your worries."

“Okay,” I say with a chuckle.

I grab a glass of wine from a waiter passing by with a tray. To my surprise, she also takes one, gulps the whole thing down, and puts the glass back on the tray. I peer at her, shaking my head.

“I have been looking at you for some time now. You haven’t moved from this spot since the party started, and you have been watching your father closely. If you weren’t his son and didn’t organize this party for him, I would call the police,” Amber says.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I sip my wine. “Am I that bad?”

She nods. You look bothered. I’ve noticed that you have had a lot on your mind recently. You should try to relax, even if it’s just for tonight. Have fun with everybody else back in the fifties when life was much less complicated, and we didn’t have to work so hard to get things done.”

Is it that obvious? This Claire thing is getting to me.

I look around for Claire and don’t see her. “I am just not a party type,” I say, looking away as I resist the urge to laugh at the lie I just told.

Amber rolls her eyes. “You, Matheo Martinez, are not the party type? So you think I don’t watch the news or follow the trends in Dallas, Texas?”

I laugh softly and shake my head. “I used to be a party freak back in the day, but now I have more to do with my time than waste away in a club.” I smirk, knowing that ‘back in the day’ was about two months ago.

“I saw clips of your graduation on social media, and they were pretty wild.”

“That was a long time ago,” I say. “It feels like a lifetime away now.”

“Whatever you say,” she says, looking over my shoulder. I turn back and see Michelle waving at Amber.

“I have to go. Try to have fun. I have my eyes on you.” Amber puts two fingers up and points them at her eyes, and then mine.

I nod, and she leaves. Immediately I search for my father and find him walking up to the stage. I gesture at a server to take my glass.

“Hey, buddy!” I feel a tap on my shoulder and turn to see Eric.

“Hey,” I muttered, crossing my arms.

“What’s up with you, Matheo? It’s obvious something is off with you,” he says.

“Dude, nothing is off with me. It’s my father’s party, and I don’t want to take the spotlight away from him, and that aside it’s a freaking *fifties* party.

“This isn’t a party for me. I am so thankful I wasn’t born in the fifties. I might have died out of boredom. Everything was snail-paced back then,” I babble in my defense.

“Yeah, good point.” Eric nods, “Good point. I thought I was the only one feeling like that, but I will go with the flow.”

He looks at Michelle, who has just passed us. “And it looks like the flow is moving me in that direction. See you later.”

“Alright, man.”

My eyes return to the stage where my father stands in the crowd. I follow his gaze, and my eyes land on Linda and Amber talking by the hall’s entrance. I return my gaze to my father, who looks pale as if he has seen a ghost.

My father hurriedly climbs down the steps on the stage. The next thing I see is him falling after missing a step, and terror overtakes me. I dash towards him, wishing my legs would go faster than I see him falling. But, unfortunately, he hits the ground before I reach him and lies there, still and unconscious.

“Dad!” I scream as I try to pick him up. Eric helps me carry him to my car, and we rush him to the hospital.

I try to wrap my head around what happened. *Why did my father look so frightened? Where was he going? And what was he going to do?*

AMBER



My heart sinks as I see Matheo's father trip over the stair as I look over Linda's shoulder. I shut my eyes and squeal, pointing at him.

Matheo growls, "Dad!" as he runs towards George, unable to reach him before his head hits the stairs.

It was almost as if Matheo knew something terrible would happen to his father. He'd watched him so closely all evening.

It's George's retirement party—his happy ending after a long life of working relentlessly. Why would this happen to him? Why would he fall down the stairs? Why do bad things happen to good people? What wrong did George do to deserve this misfortune?

He is one of the best people I have ever met. He helped make a little girl's dream a reality so she could help her adoptive family. I know nobody is perfect, and we all make mistakes, but the good things we do is supposed to cover for the wrong things we did.

It's just crazy. My dad has been sickly for a couple of years now, barely holding on to life. I try to make him proud and earn enough to provide for his needs. But he's only been good. He is a wonderful father, and I wish to give my life to him so I can repay his kindness to me. I never want to think about what my life would be like if he hadn't saved me from foster care.

Now, George Martinez, who donated to help me in my studies, is unconscious and on his way to the hospital. Things aren't looking good.

Will every person who does me good become ill-fated? I hope not.

It's sad to see George Martinez being carried on a stretcher, looking completely lifeless. He appeared to be a strong, agile, and energetic man with no known weaknesses.

Linda clutches my hands as she watches her husband being driven away to the hospital. Her muffled moans cut me. No matter how we hold on to our life and continue pushing through our hard times, life becomes a scary movie when we become vulnerable.

Linda drags me to the limousine parked outside the hall. The way she is gripping my hand and barely moving her feet, I feel like she will slump if she isn't holding onto something, so I wrap my hand around her and pull her close.

The car starts moving after Ava and Mabel gets in.

When we got to the hospital, there were lots of people. The media has got wind that George Martinez fell and is hot on the story's trail.

With the help of Linda's bouncers, we get through the crowd.

Michelle is already there by the time I arrive. I ask her for an update.

"He is in there." She points at the emergency ward, and my heart stops.

I hope it's not that serious.

I feel as if I am reliving the horrific experience with my dad all over again as I stand, staring at the entrance to the emergency ward. I can hear myself screaming when I recall the day he collapsed unexpectedly.

I was in the house, hearing screams and loud chatter. I was shocked that people had gathered around a cab and pushed my father into the back seat. I shouted his name in confusion as I ran to the cab.

I could see him through the glass, lying still, eyes closed, breathing erratically. I screamed, "Dad," but he didn't budge.

One of my neighbors entered the car with him, and I quickly ran to the other side, opened the door, grabbed my father's hands, and started shaking him, saying, "Dad, talk to me. What is going on?" He didn't even blink his eyes or say anything. That's when I realized something had happened to him.

"He fell and didn't stand up afterward, and now he is like this. We have to take him to the hospital. I don't know what is wrong with him. We'll know when we get there," a neighbor informed me.

I still remember every tiny detail of that day as if it were yesterday. It was the saddest day of my life.

Now, staring at the emergency ward, knowing George Martinez is fighting for his life, gives me the creeps. I am afraid, praying that he doesn't become terminally ill because of this accident.

"He's been there for some time now," Michelle whispers.

I look around for Matheo. I understand what he is feeling right now—that feeling of not knowing the fate of a loved one, hoping that everything will turn fine.

I let go of Michelle and started walking to Linda, wondering where Matheo was. He needs to be the pillar of strength in his family.

When I spot him, he looks drained and in pain. He seems walking toward me, so I stop and turn to face him. I take several steps to cover the distance between us and smile at him.

He doesn't smile back.

MATHEO



Amber, Linda, my two sisters, and a handful of others soon arrive at the hospital to check on my father.

“Is he okay?” Amber asks as soon as she is close enough for me to hear her. She looks devastated.

“I don’t know.”

“How are you? Is your dad awake?”

“Not yet. They are doing all they can to resuscitate him but hit his head pretty badly,” I say.

I couldn’t hold back anymore, so I let loose on her. “Are you scared that no one will compensate you for spying on me when something happens to my dad? That’s why he asked you to see him in his office on your first day, right?”

She scrunches her face and tilts her head back as she looks up at me. “What do you mean by that? I’m not doing anything wrong. I don’t understand,” Amber asks.

“Do you think your dad asked me to monitor your every move and report it to him? How ridiculous! Why on earth would I do that? I am not the kind of person whose life revolves around money. I can’t believe you’d think I would do such a thing,” she says, raising her voice slightly.

Her anger is both surprising and offensive to me.

You are still pretending.

I scoff, looking away from her.

“I can’t believe you right now. Please tell me this is all a joke of some sort?” Her brows draw close as she peers at me, her eyes shimmering with tears.

“Don’t deny it. That’s why you’re close to my dad.” I hush and look away, feeling disgusted by the sight of her. “I didn’t want to believe it. Even though it was right there staring at me in the face. Your feigned innocence fooled me there for a minute. Still, now I’ve got a grasp of who—what—you are,”

I grab Amber’s hand and drag her to a corner as people stare at us, wondering what we were arguing about when my father is lying unconscious in the emergency ward. She struggles to get out of my grip but is no match for my strength.

I let her go and back away once we are away from the crowd.

“Your dad did not ask me to spy on you. The connection between us is that he has sponsored my education from fourth grade until now. So he wanted to meet me to see how I turned out on my first day at work. I was so happy and grateful to find that out from him, and that was it.”

Amber pauses, shaking her head. “So, is this why you kept assigning me much more work than the other interns? Is this why you made me the chair of the party-planning committee? Was it all a test?”

“Matheo, I thought you were different, but now I know you are a douchebag. Maybe your family’s wealth and status make it difficult to trust people around you, but not everyone is after money. Some people are just looking for friendship.”

“We both know some people lose their minds over money,” I say defensively.

Amber’s eyes flare with rage as she glares at me.

“Are you serious?” Her face turns red as more tears gush from her eyes. Amber covers her face with her hand, turns around, and hurries away.

Michelle glances at me from a distance before running after Amber.

AMBER



“It’s Saturday, Amber,” my mother mutters with a sigh.

I don’t move at all and pretend to be sleeping. I want to be left alone to sleep until I fade into nothingness.

“Get up this minute. I know you can hear me, and you are pretending to be asleep. I’ll give you five minutes, but I will throw you out if I come back and you’re still lying under those covers. You will have to find somewhere else to continue this drama.”

Pulling the blanket off my body, I jerk myself up.

How does she always know I am pretending to be asleep?

I repeatedly blink, looking around my untidy room. Then, I feel around my bed, searching for my phone.

“I know you are in here somewhere,” I mumble, rubbing my hand over the sheets. I slide my hand under the pillow on the edge of the bed and feel something hard. “There you are.”

“It’s 7:00 pm,” I huff.

“Where does she want me to go? It’s already late. I don’t have anything to do or any place to go. Besides, sitting here is best for me right now,” I say.

I feel a chill run down my spine as I reflect on the day Matheo accused me of the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. Tears roll down from my eyes, and I feel my lips trembling as the immense pain and sadness I have been trying to sleep off overtake me.

He believes his dad asked me to spy on him.

I shut my eyes. I bite my lips together to stop them from quivering.

I let myself fall back on the bed and stare at the ceiling, wishing I had never even applied for my internship at TotaBuyzz. I regret it now.

I could have saved myself much pain. I wouldn't have met Matheo, and I would be all right, maybe doing something other than sulking.

I was so angry with Matheo that I forgot where I was and slapped him. The story must have spread. I can't face my colleagues and all of the questions they must have for me.

"Amber," my mother calls from the living room, and I frantically shake my head.

"I am up now," I yell back.

"You have a visitor."

Nobody should see me like this.

There is no way I'll be able to tidy the room before my visitor makes it to my room. Who could it be? I can only suppose it is Michelle.

I sit on the ground, crouching my head down, shutting my eyes as the doorknob turns and the door opens.

"What the hell happened here? World War III?" Michelle yells, but I stay still and tight-lipped.

"What is happening with you, Amber? You have become a cavewoman in here."

I muster the confidence to look up at her, plastering an exaggerated smile on my face, "Hi, welcome to my humble abode." I drag myself up and make space on the edge of the bed for her to sit. "Care for a seat?" I ask as I crawl to the other side of the bed. "You can't sit close to me. I stink."

I raise a brow at her. "Anyway, why are you here? I said I wanted to be alone."

“It’s Saturday night, Amber. I came to ask you to have fun with me tonight and forget about all your drama. How are you, by the way?” She walks up to the bed.

“How do you think I am?” I ask sarcastically. “My mind is worse than my room right now.”

“I know the whole thing is painful, but you can’t stay in here forever. You could be brewing a disease,” Michelle says, looking around with disgust. “Please, Amber. For humanity’s sake, fix your room before you cause a pandemic.”

“Wow, where is all that coming from? You are supposed to be consoling me and not making me feel bad.”

“Yeah. Sorry,” she mutters, looking away. “Please, let’s clean your room.”

“You’ll help me?”

“Yes. You can go and have a bath while I try to figure out what goes where,” she says.

“I do need a bath.”

Michelle starts picking up and folding my clothes, packing them back into my wardrobe.

Before I take my bath, Michelle does most of the work, tidying up the room. It now looks like where a human sleeps.

“Better,” she says with a smile as I step out of my bath. “Now it’s time to get you out of this cage.”

“Why do I feel like my mom put you up to this, Michelle?”

“Well... your mom did call me and beg me to come and take you out of her house. She was threatening to throw you out, so I had to come and save you, but”—she looks at me, raising a finger in the air—“the fact that you are going to wear a sexy dress and follow me to our favorite club in town is all my idea.

“Your mom knew something was wrong with you when you came home from the party. Staying here and drowning in your thoughts will only drive you mad. It would be best if you

had a good distraction. What better place to look for a distraction than a club?”

“Right. My mom never stops poking into my life.” I take a long breath.

“There will be booze and music,” Michelle says, fluttering her eyelashes at me.

I consider the idea for a moment before bringing myself to accept it. “Alright, hand me the dress.”

My mom smiles warmly as she sees me in the living room. “Go and have fun,” she calls after me as I leave.

I decided that I would get drunk. I need to have fun and forget everything about Matheo for as long as possible.

“Michelle.” I squeeze her hands as we approach the club’s entrance, where two hefty bouncers are standing guard. “How do we get past them?”

“I’ve got it covered,” Michelle says confidently.

I hope she knows what she’s doing.

“Hey, dude.” Michelle nods at one of the bouncers when we are standing a few feet away from them.

To my surprise, they shake hands, and he nods to me, then goes back to his post at the entrance.

“What just happened?”

“VIP passes just happened.” Michelle opens her hands and gives me a VIP card. “I did him a solid back in the day, so we are pals.”

“Who are you, again?”

Michelle laughs as we walk towards the entrance, where we are let inside after showing the cards.

“It’s only been four days, and now you are befriending a bouncer three times your size. How did this happen?” I turn to see Michelle tapping on her phone. “What are you not telling me?”

“Hugh and I go way back,” she says.

I glare at her.

“He was a classmate of mine back in middle school, and I always defended him against some bullies.”

“You defended *him*?” I jerk my head backward.

“Yeah. He wasn’t always a mountain, and I wasn’t always like this. Believe me. I don’t know where all the confidence and bravery went. I was perfect before, but now, everything scares me.”

I scoff, shaking my head in disbelief.

Michelle leads the way to the bar and orders us our first shots of the night.

“On three,” she says as we hold our glasses up. She counts, and we gulp our shots simultaneously, wearing the same expression afterward.

I don’t feel anything yet.

I feel my head start reeling after the fourth shot. I ask, “What is this?” holding the glass in front of Michelle. She laughs, takes it, and mouths, “I don’t know,” and I realize I am doomed for the night.

I turn around and lean against the bar as the music suddenly becomes louder, and my body starts moving to the jam blasting through the speakers.

As I look around, nodding to the song, I notice familiar figures coming towards us from the entrance. I blink and squint before I confirm that it’s Eric, with Matheo walking behind him.

He’s too handsome. He would have been perfect if not for his unstable attitude. Even after everything, I still find him attractive. I am the most stupid girl alive.

When he is only inches away from me, I say, “You’re grumpy, too proud, and rude.” I turn to Michelle, trying to take her next shot, but she moves out of my reach.

“You are flippant and quick to judge people without knowing them,” Matheo says, resting his hands on the counter

by my side.

I turn around and face the barman just like he is doing.

I hear a voice telling me to grab and pull him close, and I do it. I can tell he is surprised when I press my body to his. I missed his cologne and how his body felt on mine.

I close my eyes and enjoy being in his arms. He tries to push me away, but I clamp my hands around him, throwing my weight at him, so he is imbalanced. I look up at his face.

My eyes are heavy, but I try to keep them open. I want to keep staring at him and maybe do more than stare. I want to taste his lips, but as I stand on my toes and bring my face to his, I feel something erupt from my gut. And I suddenly feel sick. I start to excuse myself, but before I can hold back, I puke on him, and then I feel my knees weaken.

He catches me as I fall.

The next time I open my eyes, I see we are not in the club anymore, and Michelle and Eric aren't there. Instead, it's just Matheo pulling off a stained shirt.

"Sorry," I chuckle. "I didn't mean to...." I close my eyes and look away.

Matheo starts walking, and I rise from the couch and follow him.

"My conscience is clear. Your dad helped me. That's all. I feel nothing but gratitude that he is alive and has been like a guardian angel to me," I babble.

I see a bed neatly prepared, and I swear I can hear it calling my name, so I walk past Matheo to it. I admire it for a bit before throwing myself onto it.

MATHEO



I start saying, “Just stop that...” but turn to see Amber asleep on the bed. I scoff, curious about how many shots she had taken to knock her out like this. She is a whole different person when drunk—such an energetic talker.

After getting into my sleepwear, I stand far from the bed, watching her sleep. Her legs are hanging off the bed.

She’s going to have to sleep in the guest room. There’s no coming between my dear bed and me. I slowly walk to the bed and tap her leg, but she doesn’t move. So, I carried her to the guest room and tucked her in.

I smile as I watch her sleep soundly.

I walk out of the room, closing the door behind me so I won’t wake her.

The living room is still a mess, so I tidy it up before going to bed. Next, I wipe the puke trail from the living room down the hallway before it dries up and becomes harder to clean.

When all is done, I am ready to sleep. I close my eyes, and I go over the night’s events in my head. I wouldn’t have left the house if I knew Eric was taking me to get puked. Instead, he told me we would meet a friend in a club to spend some time and have a little fun away from the tension and pressure from work and everything happening to me.

The whole thing was suspicious because he kept texting someone from the house to the club, but I played along with it. I needed relief from the stress. A Friday night to wash my

mind with as many drinks as needed didn't sound like such a bad idea. I've missed clubbing too.

I wasn't all that surprised to see Amber at the club because I had suspected the *friend* he was talking to was Michelle. But, after what happened to my father, I was still determined to have some fun.

It has been a stressful week with the media. I had to go to interviews to answer weird questions concerning my father's accident and the company's new direction with me leading it. The workload has been overwhelming, as much as I hate to admit it.

I sweep my eyes across the room and see Amber's handbag at the edge of my bed with her things falling on the floor. I exhale and drag myself off the bed. One of the objects that have fallen out catches my eye.

This looks familiar. Is this the bracelet I was given when I was a kid?

I pick up the bracelet that looks like the one I have—the one that a little girl gave me as a token of friendship. I have been searching for her hopelessly ever since that day.

I dash to my wardrobe, dip my hands into one of the pockets of the last blazer in the row, and find an identical bracelet. My heart races as I see it. Amber must be the one I have been searching for.

Can it be?

Holding both bracelets in my hand, I shake my head as I remember that day again. I don't know whether to feel relieved or disturbed about this.

After returning the contents of her bag, including her bracelet, I yank myself off the bed and head to the guest room to put the bag next to Amber.

As I stand over her, I can see she is the one I've wanted to find and express my gratitude for stopping me from throwing myself off the bridge. The two pictures in my head merge into the same person.

I have to take it easy on her.

I hope I have not irreparably destroyed things between us. Oddly, she probably hates me after our last encounter at the hospital. I have put her through so much already. I believe what she told me about her relationship with my father is true. She is the kindest, sweetest soul I have ever met.

Silently putting her bag on the ground, I walk backward until I reach the door and slip out.

It takes longer than usual for me to fall asleep. So instead, I lie awake for some time, trying to wrap my head around the situation.

When my alarm wakes me up the next day, I feel like I have only closed my eyes.

I hurriedly make breakfast before Amber wakes up. After setting the table, I knocked on the guest room door and opened it. Amber is shocked to see me there.

“How did I get here?” Amber asks, staring at me suspiciously.

I laugh. “You don’t remember anything?”

She shakes her head at me.

“We were at the club yesterday,” I say, and she shakes her head again frantically and kneads the sides of her head. “Okay, what is the last thing you remember from yesterday?”

“Last thing I remember is, um...” She frowns.

Watching her try to remember yesterday is the funniest thing ever.

“Oh, um, Michelle, the club.” She raises her hands to her mouth, staring at my chest, “Sorry about...” She turns her face away as it turns red with embarrassment.

“It’s fine. I cleaned everything.” I wipe my hands over my shirt and chuckle. She winces, and I ask, “Headache?”

“Yeah,” she whines and hangs her head. “I should have never followed Michelle to that club. I don’t do well with

alcohol, but I wanted to.....” Amber’s face suddenly contorts. “How did I end up here with you in your place?”

“You passed out in my hands after you got sick.” I knead the scruff of my neck. “Eric asked me to take you home. But, unfortunately, Michelle was also drunk, so I could not get your address from her when you puked on me, so I had to bring you here to my place.” I shrug.

“No, no. This is the guest room, and you were so drunk and looked like dead meat.”

She frowns at me, narrowing her eyes.

“At one point, I had to check that you were still breathing.”

“Dead meat! Of all things? You can’t call a girl that! Well, maybe *you* think you can. You think you can say whatever comes to your mind without considering that the other person is human and has feelings. So you don’t bother to ask direct questions. Instead, you prefer to make baseless assumptions and just explode, creating a maximum amount of drama. You’re proud, rude, and entitled,” she says.

After finishing her rant, she hides her face, hugging her knees.

“I feel like you’ve wanted to call me those three things for a long time. I am not offended. People always ascribe a bad attitude to rich people, and I am used to those comments by now. I’ve heard similar sentiments at least a thousand times.”

I pause for a moment and then continue, “About the whole drama....” I look away, trying to figure out how to sound apologetic and friendly enough for her to loosen up before breakfast gets cold.

“I was overwhelmed by the whole situation. My dad was in the emergency room, and I took out my worry and frustration on you. I am sorry about all that. I know I hurt you.” I let out a gush of air and looked straight at her.

Amber slowly raises her face, and I see she is in tears.

I don’t understand why she is upset. I just apologized. What does this mean now? Did I blow the apology too?

“Please find a place in your angel heart to give me a second chance,” I raise my hands and press my palms together. “I cross my heart. I will not be proud, rude, or entitled,” I mutter.

She snuffles, peering at me, “That’s the nicest thing you have ever said to me. Do you mean all that? Or is this all a ruse? I will hit you if it is.” Amber wipes her face.

“I meant every word I said.” A look of surprise sweeps across her face, and I smile. “I know. I can’t. I am being so sincere, either.

“Please get out of bed and meet me in the kitchen. I made us breakfast.”

Amber nods, and I stride out of the room to check the state of the table I had set for us. I hope she likes what I have made. I haven’t cooked in a while, so keep your fingers crossed.

A few minutes later, Amber walks in. My heart starts beating fast.

She smiles at seeing what I have set for us on the table.

I feel a little relief as she smiles. “I would never have guessed you could cook.” She shakes her head.

I run around the table to pull a chair for her. Then, I dash back to the opposite side of the table. I watch her as she takes a spoonful of a tomato and basil frittata.

I watch her chew. I am practically on the edge of my seat as I wait for her verdict.

“Are you sure you didn’t order this and quickly put it in the oven?” She gives me a smirk, further wrecking my nerves.

I shake my head.

“This looks delicious. I forgive you then.”

She likes it. Great job, chef.

I smile smugly and feel myself relax.

“I might be exaggerating, but, damn, this is good,” she says, digging in.

“So”—I feign a cough—“I still got it,” I add more berries to my yogurt and granola.

“You’re good in the kitchen,” she says.

“Noted.”

“Just don’t let my praise go to your head.”

MATHEO



“Hey, buddy,” I say into my phone after the call goes through.

“Hey, man. What’s up?” Eric answers.

I sigh and look down at my desk, using just a finger to press my phone to my ear. I glance at my watch and see that it’s almost noon.

“Do you want to go out and have a drink with me?” I ask, shutting my eyes.

“Dude, it’s still early, and you want to go and have a drink right now?”

I chuckle.

Eric pauses for a moment before saying, “What is wrong with you? Talk to me, man.”

“Let go and have a drink,” I drawl. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

“I am supposed to be on my way to the mall.”

“You can do that afterward.” I spread my hands on the table and study my fingers.

“Where? the usual?”

“Yes. I am at the office. I will see you in ten minutes,” I say before I hang up.

Ever since I discovered that Amber is the girl from the bridge I have been looking for, I have been overwhelmed by a

barrage of thoughts and feelings.

I don't know what to do or say to Amber.

Our relationship is becoming increasingly complicated. I was elated that I had finally found her when I saw the friendship bracelet. I am attracted to her and want to sleep with her again. I still lose my breath whenever she smiles. However, she is my employee. I should maintain professional standards. Most of all, I wonder if I can make myself vulnerable to her.

I want to drink with Eric to clear my head.

Eric meets me outside the building right on time. He scans my face. "Did you sleep last night?"

I shrug. "Not really. I don't know."

"That means you didn't sleep last night, or the night before, or the one before that," he huffs and rolls his eyes, "Do you have to go through a complete breakdown before you realize giving too much to work isn't good for you? I get you to have to work overtime sometimes, but the problem with you is you don't rest at all."

When have I ever broken down?

"Okay, can we go now? We are using your car," I say, eager to move on from the topic that Eric broached. "Let's get out of here." I turn to him and gesture for him to start walking.

"Matheo," Eric calls, but I don't stop walking. "Are you alright? What's bothering you?"

"We'll find out at the bottom of a bottle when we get there," I say as I get into the passenger seat. I feel a sharp pain in my head and shut my eyes, clenching my teeth until the pain disappears.

I open my eyes and turn to see Eric looking at me like a broken thing. "Why are we not moving, dude?"

"Why do you look like you're in pain, Matheo? Are you sick?" He keeps looking at me.

“Nope, I am fine. I was thinking about something to ensure I didn’t miss any details. Let’s get going,” I say, relaxing in my seat and closing my eyes.

I can feel his eyes crawling over my skin. “Stop looking at me and focus on driving us out of here,” I command.

We reach our favorite bar, and I order a strong shot and take two more before turning to Eric, who only ordered beer and hasn’t touched it.

“Alright.” I lick my lips and cough in response to the sting of gin in my throat. “My problem is a girl.” I turn my face away.

His jaw drops, and he blinks, just staring at me.

“Yeah, I know. I am shocked, too,” I say, shaking my head. I take another shot and press my eyes shut.

“You have to slow down, man. You wouldn’t want to embarrass yourself.” He taps my shoulder. I nod, and he says, “Matheo Martinez is losing sleep over a girl? This is crazy. I don’t understand.”

“It’s more complicated than that. She’s not just an average girl. I am confused. There’s too much to weigh here, and I can’t afford a mistake right now,” I babble and turn to the barman to order another shot, but Eric glares at me and waves a finger at the barman.

“Kill joy,” I mutter to him.

“No more.” He sips his beer. “Not on my watch. Your dad will kill me when word gets out that I took you out for a drink during office hours and watched you get drunk.”

I shrug and rake my fingers through my hair. “It’s Amber.” I puff my cheeks out, looking straight at him for a reaction, but he remains blank-faced for a bit.

“I would have bet on that.”

“Okay, what does that mean?” I ask, trying to keep myself from panicking. Has Eric seen me being intimate with Amber? Has anyone? Did Amber tell anyone anything?

“Have you noticed the way you two act around each other?” He smiles as he drums his fingers on the counter. “Everyone with eyes will be waiting for you two to start dating,” Eric smirks.

Shit, shit, shit.

My heart starts beating fast, but I try to stay as calm as possible. “What are people saying?”

“Remember, you didn’t hear this from me, boss,” he says with a chuckle. Then, he turns his face away and shrugs as he takes a sip of beer. “Rumors are circling about why you put so much pressure on Amber at work.”

“That’s just ridiculous,” I scoff and shake my head. “Some people just live for gossip and false stories.”

“Yup.”

“I give her challenging tasks so that she has a chance to prove herself. She’s at the business to learn. That’s the point of an internship.”

“I think you pick on her because you’re trying to get her attention, but maybe you haven’t consciously realized that yet.”

“Alright.” I spread my hands on the counter. “Where did you hear this again? Who is putting all this together?”

“I don’t know. I just heard it from someone that was telling someone else.” He holds up his hands, protesting his innocence. “You can’t say it’s not true, right? Because you *are* losing sleep over Amber. Why exactly?”

I sigh and smooth my hand over my thigh.

I don’t even know.

“That’s the question that I lie awake trying to answer,” I say, staring into space.

“You know,” Eric says, “I might understand you—that cluelessness about what is happening to you. You don’t know how you have fallen for her; the feeling is there, and no matter

how hard you try to deny it and get rid of it, you find that it only grows. And you are vulnerable to her.”

“Alright, Eric, what about you? Would you mind telling me who you are dating now, huh?”

“What?” Eric blinks his eyes a few times and nervously scratches the back of his neck.

“Yeah, you heard me. Who are you dating, Mr. Loverboy?” I ask.

He smiles sheepishly and waves his hands at me. “Don’t call me that. But, yes, I am completely in love.” He smiles dreamily. “I feel like this one might be *the* one.” He glances at me. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“You can’t be serious.” I jab a finger into his sides, and he yelps, moving his chair farther from me. “Where is my friend? Who are you, and what have you done to him?” I slowly shake my head from side to side, utterly shocked at the transformation.

“This is why I haven’t told you. I knew this would happen.”

“Who’s the girl that got you straightened up? I need to know her. I need to ask her how she did it. This should be the first on the list of the world’s wonders. But, I mean...damn!” I jerk my head backward and squint at him. “Eric, who is the girl? Tell me.” I rub my hands together as I peer at him.

A smile creeps over Eric’s face, and his eyes twinkle as his gaze falls to the ground before quickly rising to meet mine. “It’s Michelle.”

I know he is studying me for my reaction, so I keep a straight face.

I stare back at him as everything sinks in. “Okay. I did not expect that. I would have never guessed it was her. I’m curious how she roped you into being this love puppet, cooking up speeches about a strange feeling he vowed to get away from him.”

He keeps looking at me.

“I know Michelle. She’s a good person like Amber. But, she’s very straightforward, which is not the type you usually would go for.”

“Yeah, I’m surprised, too. She is different in every way and not what I am used to. I don’t get why I am drawn to her like this. But, of course, everything is still under wraps, so please keep this to yourself.” He puts his palms together and raises his hands to me.

I nod. Eric exhales and relaxes.

“I’m in a similar position to you. I feel like Amber has this power over me that no other girl has ever had. Everything points to the fact that Amber is doing something to me that I can’t figure out, and that’s unacceptable. How do you explain that?”

“When Amber stands five feet away from me, I can’t think anymore. I feel like I am not myself, and my raging heart doesn’t help me get a grip of my wits.”

“It’s as if I become different when she’s around. As much as there are too many complications between us to say this, I know I feel something strong for her, something unusual that overwhelms me whenever I think about it.

“I hate when I am not in control of a situation, so this is killing me, but I can’t help it, and I don’t know what to do about Amber,” I finish.

Eric blinks at me without saying anything.

“What?”

“You should see your face right now.” Eric shakes his head. “I have known you for years, but I have never seen you like this.

“Also, you should know it doesn’t have to be this way.” Eric pauses for a second, and I think he has the answer as to why I have stayed up for nights. “Let me ask you this…” he says as he leans forward.

A question? You’ve got to be kidding me.

“What?”

“All this time, you’ve had difficulty trusting people because the people that hurt you the most are the people who’re supposed to protect you, love you, support you, and hone you to be a better man. Regarding this suspicion about Amber being hired by your dad to spy on you, maybe she didn’t know it either, and your dad kept asking her how you manage the interns.

“Now, before you say anything, I know you haven’t because you wouldn’t be in this situation if you had. And Amber doesn’t seem like the sort of person who would spy on you. Instead, she seems to be genuinely invested in her internship.

“I am a hundred percent on your side, but I have told you often not to judge people too quickly.”

I lean back and look around the bar, then back at Eric. I don’t say anything yet.

He says, “Maybe you should stop and consider that your heart will never lie to you or try to deceive you. That’s the purest thing we have, beating in there.” Eric points at my chest.

“See, I knew something wasn’t right when I was in my past relationship. My heart warned me, but I didn’t want to let go until my girl drove a spear through it. Now, it is different with Michelle. It feels right.

“If your heart leads you to Amber, you should see that as a good sign.” Eric takes a sharp breath. “See where things go. Don’t judge too quickly and push something priceless away.”

AMBER



I can't stop smiling to myself in the cab as I go home. It's just unbelievable. That wasn't the Matheo I knew. It feels like a switch was flipped, and he changed into an angel overnight.

My face hurt from non-stop giggling and smiling. It's strange that I am so elated after making a fool of myself by getting drunk and puking on Matheo. However, I am happy that all of that led to a great morning with him. Everything about it was perfect—the breakfast, the apology, the jokes, and the occasional flirting.

The cab drops me off. I pay the driver and walk up to the front door of my house, taking one last look at myself to make sure nothing is out of place. I try to put on a blank expression. I don't want to barge in wearing a grin and have my mom force everything out of me. I never know how she does that; it happens every time she wants to learn something from me. The best chance I have is to avoid making her suspicious.

Grabbing my bag and hanging it on my shoulder, I push the door open and enter the house. As I expected, my mom was sitting in the living room.

“Where have you been?” she asks, squinting at me.

“Good day to you too, Mom.” I plaster a smile on my face as I walk toward her. I bend to kiss her cheek. “How's Dad?” I ask as I straighten up and take a step back. “How's he doing?”

“He's holding up. You didn't come home last night and didn't call like you normally do. I was worried about you.”

“Sorry, I had too much to drink with Michelle, but I had a great time. But, unfortunately, because I got drunk, I forgot to call you.”

“Make sure it doesn’t happen again. I need to know that you’re safe. All I need is just a text message. I’m happy to know to see you full of energy now.”

“Sort of...” I press my lips together.

“Your dad was worried about you. He kept asking me about your internship, and when I ran out of things to tell him, he tried to get up and look for you.”

Not again, Dad. You know you can’t walk, but then you still try.

I shut my eyes. My heart sinks at the thought of my dad trying to stand up. I can imagine what happened. He is indeed a stubborn man, worse when he sets his mind on doing something. Nobody in the world but his wife can stop him. Good thing she wasn’t out of the house. I take my resilience from him. He taught me to believe in myself and always do what my heart tells me.

“I’m sorry. I was too busy having fun.”

With Matheo.

She sighs and makes a steeple of her fingers. “I see. Is there anything specific that improved your mood to this extent?” She raises her brows and purses her lips.

No, Mom. I can’t tell you that.

Even if I am grown up and can do whatever I want, she will not be happy knowing I spent the night with a guy. She will pretend everything is okay, but I know it isn’t. And if I told her I slept at my boss’s house, then all hell would break loose.

“I am sorry I didn’t call you. I literally couldn’t. Let’s say I wasn’t in the right state of mind,” I say, dodging her question.

My mom rolls her eyes at me and laughs.

“You missed me that much?”

She glares at me, and I back away.

“Let me check on Dad.” I walk around the couch and place my hand on her shoulder. “You look tired. You should rest.”

“Amber, don’t forget that we’re always here for you and ready to listen if anything bothers you.”

“You should be a detective, mom. You over-analyze everything.” I shake my head and start walking toward their room to check on my dad.

She laughs and says, “Maybe I was.”

I smile to myself as I walk away. Once at the door, I see it is slightly open, so I push it slowly so I won’t make too much noise and wake my dad up. The only time he is not suffering is when he is asleep. I don’t want to take this rare moment of peace from him.

Placing one quiet step after the other, I stride to the bed and look him over. He is still sleeping. He looks peaceful and calm like all is well. I wish it were. I smile as I study his breathing.

It’s just not fair for you to end up like this. I will do everything I can to help you out of this condition.

I fight the urge to cry as I stare at him, wishing everything would go back to how it was when we were all happy and not spending a fortune on medications that barely helped. However, I am grateful that he is strong and endures everything for the sake of his family.

Hold on a little longer, Dad. Things will start getting better soon. I have to finish my internship and get a job after graduation.

I leave the room as quietly as I had come in and head to mine. It’s tidy—the way I left it, thanks to Michelle and her set-up plan. We will talk about it when I see her. I am not angry that Michelle set me up with Matheo, as things turned out great, but she deserves some scolding. She sold me out.

How did she get close enough to Eric to set Matheo and me up? Something is going on—something I will find out.

She'll surely get into trouble with me if I find out that she started dating Eric without telling me. She has been rambling about him lately, but she denied it whenever I accused her of having a crush.

I undress, get into my sleepwear, and lie in the middle of the bed, staring at the ceiling and replaying scenes from a day well spent with Matheo. Today might be my favorite day this year.

I feel genuinely happy. I can't wait to see him again. I hope he doesn't flip back to his arrogant version of himself. It will be disheartening. I fall asleep, reliving the best moments I had.

The following day, I woke up to a lovely text from Matheo, who was still apologizing for the misunderstanding. So it's official; he's changed.

Smiling like a fool, I clutch my phone to my chest as I think about what to reply to him. My mother comes in and interrupts my thought. I quickly tuck my phone under my pillow. It's too late to pretend to be asleep because she has caught me awake.

"Hey, Mom," I say, trying to sound sleepy.

"What's wrong, Mom? Why are you looking at me like that?" I ask, trying not to panic. My heart starts racing. "Is Dad alright?"

"Sort of," she mutters as she sits on the edge of my bed. Now, my thoughts are running wild, and my hands start shaking.

What do you mean by sort of?

"Mom." I peer at her. "What have you come to tell me?" My heart skips at the thought that my dad might be dead. I squeeze the sheets in my hand to hold onto something for stability.

"He's still asleep and fine. It's his meds, Amber. We went to the hospital for a check-up, and the doctor prescribed new medicine after running a few tests on him. These new ones are quite expensive, and we don't have that much around now, so I am worried," she says.

“Don’t worry, Mom. Your daughter here is quite resourceful. I can take another job to help,” I say.

“I am concerned about you, Amber. You don’t have to suffer like this.” Her voice trembles as she speaks.

She has taken on so much to see that my dad remains in good health. Can life be any worse right now?

I scrape my brain for possible solutions and how I can help lessen the burden for my mom. Nothing comes up after a few seconds of sad silence. “We will find a way to pull through this.” I take her hand in mine. A tear breaks from her eyes and rolls down her chin. I feel a weight laden my heart as I watch her. I shut my eyes and hug her. “We can do this together. We have to stay positive.”

She pulls out of the hug and looks at me, lips trembling and hands shaking. Then, she hugs me again and sobs into my shoulder. “Yes, we will,” she says.

My mom is a hard-hearted woman and doesn’t break easily. Seeing her completely broken down is the scariest thing ever. I caress her back and press my eyes shut, resisting the urge to cry.

“I have to go now, though,” she snuffles as she unravels her hand from around mine. “Make sure he takes his medicine while I am gone. I have to go and see where I can get a little help.” She rises and wipes her eyes.

Please, Mom, don’t go and borrow money again. We are already in so much debt that we can barely keep paying it back.

“I will see you later. There’s food in the fridge, so—” she breaks off with a gasp.

I nod so she won’t have to talk anymore. I can sense that she is worried about me.

“I will look after him while you are gone.” I wipe my nose and lift myself off the bed to escort her out.

“See you soon.” She waves at me as she gets into a cab while I nod and watch the taxi drive her away from the door.

I must do something to help, but I can't think of any possible solution. I return to my room after checking my dad's new prescription.

An idea lights me up after I stare at the ceiling for some time. I could be a freelancer and still manage to be an intern at TotaBuyzz, so I can make some extra money to help with my father's medicine. It will be a struggle, but it will be worth it.

I find a global online marketplace for freelancers. I post my services for hire to do bookkeeping for e-commerce business owners. My fingers are crossed that I will get some clients.

By the end of the day, I am still waiting to receive any messages. I know I shouldn't get any responses since I just created an account, but I still get sad about it, as I need this side hustle. Fortunately, I got lucky the next day and got my first client. We negotiate a fair term that works for both of us.

Getting a steady flow of clients on this site will take some time. For now, I have to start somewhere by focusing on satisfying their job requirements to get good reviews.

It is a ray of hope for me, and the burden in my heart is lifted a bit as I now have a way to bring something to the table to help the family.

MATHEO



If I could drive faster without getting pulled over by the cops, I would because I am eager to return to work after having a memorable time with Amber.

I want to tell her that I am that boy she gave a bracelet to and see what comes out of it. I would like to know if I will get a chance to talk to her about it. She might be busy today since it's a Monday.

I get to the office, hurry to the elevator, punch the button for the highest floor, and impatiently wait for it to lift me. I put on my best smile, raised my shoulders, and walked out of the elevator. I glance around and wave at everyone greeting me, searching for Amber. She is not at her desk, and it saddens me. I hoped to see her.

Where are you?

I reach my door, and just before I open it, I look back and see Amber coming out of the elevator, clutching a heap of files in her hand.

There you are.

I only catch a glimpse of her, but I hold on to the picture of her in my mind, making myself smile as I slot in my key and open the door.

I look up eagerly from work on my desk a few moments later as the door opens again. When I see Claire coming in, my smile fades. I thought Amber was bringing the files to me.

“Good morning, Matheo,” Claire says, wearing her usual broad smile.

I smile back. “Good morning, Claire.”

“How was your weekend? Parties, clubs, girls—”

“It was fine, just fine,” I cut her off.

“Right.” She nods. “You must be tired,” she says, pulling out a chair so that she can join me at the desk.

“Not really.”

I notice she doesn’t have the notepad from which she usually reads my schedule for the day. So I assume I don’t have a lot lined up.

“You should have fun sometimes. Go out and breathe,” she says.

“Hmm.” I give her half a smile and shrug. “There’s no time for all that now. We have too much on our plate.”

“Yeah, I know, but—”

“What do I have on my plate today? Any meetings?”

“No, not really. For now, you are free, except for a conference meeting at 2:00 pm and those.” She points at the document on my table, and I follow her fingers to the last four files from the Chief Financial Officer about our sales and profits for the past month. I have to go through them, compare them with the latest records in our database, then write a review and send it back to him.

“I should get right to this then,” I say, expecting her to leave so I can get to work.

She gets up but doesn’t leave. “Don’t you want to have fun with me in your office?” She asks as she trails a hand from her waist to cup her breast.

“I don’t have time for this!” I say, looking away.

She laughs and walks around my desk, giving me a seductive smile.

I recline into my seat and rub my eyes, hoping I will snap out of this nightmare. I didn't like Claire from the get-go because I cherish my personal space, and then the whole spy thing spiked my irritation toward her.

Claire slowly pushes my chair backward, throws my cell phone aside, and sits on the desk directly in front of me. She traces her fingers from her knees to the hem of her short skirt. I try to ignore the slight thrill that runs through me. I am a man, after all.

"Don't you want to relax a bit? You work so hard," she says, parting her legs so I see more of her thighs. She stops when her underwear comes into view, and I raise my gaze to meet hers. She bites her bottom lip. My throat suddenly feels dry, so I swallow thickly.

She smiles, liking the way I am reacting to her teasing. I can tell that she has planned every step of this little routine.

You must have done this many times.

"You work so damn hard," she moans, looking straight at me, now kneading her tits in her hands. "You need some reward, some time away from all the never-ending responsibilities." She undoes two buttons from her top to show more cleavage and says, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, but guess what?"

I raise my brows at her.

"I know just how to play," she says with a smirk.

Claire might physically arouse me, but my mind warns me of everything that could go wrong if I fall into her trap. I will indeed become vulnerable to her.

As Claire spreads her legs further, she lets out a sensual moan as she gestures for me to come to her. I try to ignore how hard I am.

No, boy, stay down.

I snap out of the spell she is trying to cast on me.

I need to call someone before this gets out of hand and I get blamed for the situation. I reach for the phone on my desk,

only to find it's disconnected. My cellphone has fallen somewhere out of reach. I don't see a way of getting out of this mess except to appeal to Claire's better judgment.

"There are times and places for these things. Having 'fun' this way is frowned upon. And thanks for the concern, but the only way you can help me relax is by doing a good job as my assistant and nothing more. Especially not this." I wave my hand at her as I sneer.

"Get yourself together and leave my office. I will pretend this didn't happen and let it go because I am kind-hearted and considerate. Then, of course, I should fire you, but I will not," I say.

I shut out the voice in my head, urging me to take the opportunity before me. If she had met me three years ago, I might have given in to temptation.

She continued to stare at me as if she didn't hear anything I said. It starts to drive me mad, but exploding will only draw attention to my office, and I don't want anyone seeing us like this. They'd get the wrong idea about the situation. My greatest fear is that Amber will walk into my office while this is going on. It will ruin everything between us.

"I have told you too many times that I am here for you, and I will do whatever you need me to do. Am I not attractive to you?"

"If you want, I can report only good things to your dad. I can also help you change all the board's doubts about you as our new CEO."

Claire gets off the desk and whirls around, arching her back as she raises her skirt to her waist. I try my best not to look.

What if someone steps in now? I hate your very existence in my life, especially as my assistant. Then there's the nosiness and being a mole for my dad. Then, there's your impertinence and...

She jiggles up and down, and her bottom bounces, giving me ideas I do not want to entertain.

I snap my eyes closed and turn away. I open them to see her facing me with a leg on my seat. I move aside a little, watching her intently.

My eyes slowly travel over her hips down to her tiny feet and then even slower, back up, this time up to the junction of her thighs.

A smug smile spreads across her face as she sees me look at her. Then, she slides her hands between her thighs and pushes aside her thong to reveal herself.

I hear footsteps approach my office door. I wipe my hands over my face and cross my hands over my chest.

I can't take any more of this.

“I play hard too, but, I’m sorry, I don’t like you. You’re just not it for me. But, all that aside, I feel disrespected, belittled, dishonored, and the list goes on. What kind of man do you think I am?”

“Relax! There’s no need to get worked up here.” She slides a finger into her slit and brings it out, glistening with her wetness. She raises it to her mouth and slowly sucks it clean.

“Get out,” I say, pointing at the door.

The door to my office opens slightly, and I jerk around to see who is coming in.

Shit! This is just what I was hoping to avoid.

I feel a slight sense of relief that the whole drama has been interrupted, and I am standing far from Claire. Regardless, the entire situation will most likely be misinterpreted.

My legs felt weak as I put myself in the place of whoever was about to enter and asked myself what I would think if I saw everything.

Some documents fall to the ground. “Sorry about that,” I hear, and the girl bends down to pick them up. She rises, and our eyes meet. She freezes, and all the documents fall out of her hands again.

Oh no! It's Michelle.

Michelle is Amber's friend. The two are inseparable, so she will tell Amber about every detail she hears and sees.

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. Claire is as spooked as Michelle as she clumsily tries to redress herself.

Michelle bends and gathers the documents with shaky hands, rushes to the desk, drops them, then glances at me. "My manager needs your... signature." She points at the mostly crumpled papers and whirls around, striding to the door and slamming it after she goes out.

My eyes are set on Claire. "You're fired."

She jerks backward and scoffs, "Are you serious right now?"

"Get out and never come back. You won't like what you find if you do. Leave this instant. You have done enough damage for a lifetime."

"It's because of Amber?" Claire says and laughs bitterly. "That's the only kind of thing you play with." She tucks her shirt into her skirt.

"I won't repeat myself."

"You can't fire me. George put me here."

"To spy on me, right?" I incline my head. "Get out, Claire. Don't ever let me set my eyes on you again." I grit my teeth and point at the door again.

The shock on her face morphs into anger almost instantly. She turns around and marches to the door.

I take a long drag of air and turn around, gingerly propping my forehead on the wall as I close my eyes. Just as I started to understand what was happening between Amber and me, Claire did what she does best and ruined everything.

My door opens again, and I don't turn to see who it comes in. It doesn't matter.

I hear Eric's voice, "It's me."

I spin around to face him.

“Why did Claire storm out of your office like that?”

“I fired her.”

Eric tilts his head to the side. “What? Why?”

“Claire was trying to get me to have sex with her just now.” I purse my lips as I walk to my table and sit on the edge.

Eric’s jaw drops as he takes in what I have said.

MATHEO



Back home after such an eventful day, I sink into my couch and stare at the ceiling, trying to let go of some of my tension.

I didn't see much of Amber today, maybe because I didn't leave my office as much as I usually would.

I can't stop thinking about what happened between Claire and me. I blame my father for the situation. He forced Claire on me. It was inevitable that we wouldn't work well together.

If I could go back, I wouldn't even go to work today. I'd just lay here and watch the premier league and game afterward. It would have been better than going through what I did. I am just glad I was able to resist Claire.

I didn't even know I had that much self-control until then. I knew she had the hots for me, but I would have never imagined she would take it as far as wanting me to bang her in my office. How could she not have thought this through? I have been looking for a legitimate reason to get rid of her, and she gave me the perfect one.

A knock at my door pulls me out of my thoughts, and I reluctantly get off the couch and drag my feet to the door, wondering who is here to disturb my peace. I wipe my hands over my face and take a few deep breaths before opening the door.

"Dad," I say, surprised to see him at the door. I wasn't ready to talk to him yet, but I guess I have to face him now to eliminate some of the thoughts that have piled up in my head.

“Son, we need to talk. Are you going to let me in?” he asks, glancing into the room.

I move for him to come inside.

That bitch must have come to you after I fired her.

Folding my hands across my chest, I say, “What do you want to talk about?”

There are like a thousand things to talk about. Where do we start?

“You are going to need to sit down for this.”

“Okay,” My heart starts beating fast as I sit on the couch opposite him. “Seated,” I mutter as I peer at him.

My day has been ruined already, so go on.

“It’s about your mother, Matheo.” He presses his palms together as he leans off the couch, peering at me.

I need a drink for this one.

Rising to my feet, I walk back with a bottle of wine and two glasses. “My mother?” I cock my head and pour him a drink.

“Veronica.”

I don’t know anyone with the name Veronica.

“Veronica is the name of your biological mother. But, as you know”—he takes a sip of wine and looks at me—“Linda is not your real mother. She just stepped in to take care of you.”

“I don’t understand. Why did my mom leave, and how did you end up with Linda?” I ask, putting my glass aside.

“Veronica was my first love....” My father pauses and huffs. “It’s a long, complicated, and unfortunate story.” He raises his hands and covers his mouth as he stares into space.

“I never understood her...” he continues. “I never understood why she gave you up. We were fine and happy, or so I thought.” His eyes shimmer with tears.

I look straight ahead as his words sink in.

My mother wanted to get rid of me. Why did she do that? There must be a misunderstanding behind this. She could have just left me to my father.

“Why did she want to leave? Why did she do it to me? Why have I never seen her before, and why did you not tell me all of this until now? Where is she?” I shake my head frantically.

“Slow down, son. I know you have many questions and want answers, but I still don’t have the answers to most of them. I think back to that time, and I still can’t figure out why the love of my life bailed on me and wanted to get rid of our only son. But, of course, your mother didn’t give any answers to any of those questions either. It’s crazy.” He laughs bitterly and casts his gaze down.

“Your grandfather died while trying to save you. I had lost your grandmother, your grandfather, and your mother. Everyone I loved left me, and only Linda was there for me. She helped me through that difficult time, and we connected and ended up together.” George exhales.

“Where is she—Veronica? Where’s my mom? Is she dead?” I ask. This is too much for me.

My mother didn’t love me. I wish I hadn’t just heard that. I thought my father must have done something to make her leave, but this—this is much worse.

I already suffer from little to no love and attention from my dad. So perhaps I should take the knowledge that my mother hated me as a sign that I am not meant to be loved.

“Why would she—” I try to speak, but tears choke me, and my words become a gush of air and a whimper.

“We didn’t want you to know because we didn’t want you to feel like an outcast in the family. I also promised Linda we would never talk about Veronica, even with you.”

There I was, angry that my so-called parents hid the truth from me when they kept it away to save me. I don’t know how I would have coped if I had known that my mother wanted to get rid of me all along.

I can't help but imagine my reaction if I had found it out earlier. Would it be less painful? I guess it would not make any difference at all.

“Do everything you can to forget about it and move on. You could lose your mind if you keep pondering the questions to which you might never get answers,” my father says.

I hum as I ruffle my hands through my hair. “Why are you telling me all this now? I thought you said some things are better left unknown when I asked you about it the other day.”

“I made the wrong decision not to tell you because this is a part of my past that I want to forget. All I know is that she needs to pay for what she has done.”

“Our life would be the talk of the media if you try to look for her in prison.”

“Do all you can to stay away from her. Just steer clear of her. She has done too much damage already.” He sighs and kneads his temple.

“Your mother was gone the day she decided to run away and sell you off. Now, she is just a shadow of herself. She used to be the sweetest person I know until I discovered it was all acting and pretense.”

“I understand.” I wipe both my hands over my face. I don't know what to do with this information. I turned out okay without her, so I should close the chapter of my life that involves her. I want to see her, though, and maybe ask her what I had done to deserve the abandonment. I was just a child. How could she be so heartless?

“Sorry about Claire, too,” he mutters, snapping me out of my train of thought.

“Yeah, sorry I fired your mole. Is there anyone else you hired to spy on me?” I roll my eyes and sniffle as I lean back into the chair. “I get the feeling that you think I can't handle the company after preparing all my life for it. Do you think I would ruin the most important thing in your life? Everywhere I turn, I'm met with lies, pretense, and abandonment,” I huff.

“Could you at least believe and trust in me for once? Why did you want to hire someone and know my every move?”

He pauses for a moment before saying, “Yes, I didn’t give you the right to choose your assistant. However, you have to understand that I wanted to know if you were on the right path and if I made the right decision by putting you in my place. We have employees who depend on our company. I wouldn’t want the company in the hands of someone incompetent.

“I hired Claire because I thought both of you would protect the company’s interest since her dad is also a board member. I didn’t know she planned to force herself on you and trap you into a family alliance.

“I couldn’t be there and watch over you, so I put Claire to observe and tell me everything that goes on, but she took things in a strange direction and messed up. Good thing you fired her. I was embarrassed to hear about what happened.”

“She was always in my face, poking at things she should have stayed away from, always wanting to overdo this or that. I endured it at first, but she went too far today,” I say.

“I didn’t let myself believe you put a spy on me because you don’t trust me. Even though the evidence was there in my face, I blocked it out. I didn’t want anything to distract me from work. I just became cautious with everything I did.”

“I can imagine it made you feel paranoid. Sorry about all that.”

“Alright.” I shrug and lean forward. “I will never see her again, which is best for me. So I’ll have my space and privacy back.” I smile weakly.

“I understand why you wanted to keep an eye on me. It’s hard to let go of something you’ve sacrificed your life for. You have to be sure you are leaving it in good hands, and you did, Dad. I will put my heart into running the company and ensuring it blooms.” I swallow hard.

“I don’t want to fail you and everyone that looks up to me. All I want is for you to be proud of me and to feel that I have a

family who is always there for me through my achievements or failures.”

AMBER



Michelle chuckles and moves away. “I couldn’t believe my eyes,” she says after a pause. “Why did I have to go and see that? Now I am scarred for life.” She screws her face up and looks at nothing.

“This is just unbelievable. I can’t even imagine myself in that situation.” I shake my head frantically. “I would be traumatized.”

“Tell me about it.” Michelle shakes her head, then looks at the empty plates on the table. I glance at my watch for the time and see we have a few minutes of lunchtime left.

“What was Claire thinking?” I hang my head, feeling utter hatred for her. From the first day, I saw her as Matheo’s assistant. I didn’t like her. I knew she was up to no good with how she followed him, taking any chance she could to throw herself at him. “Good thing she is gone for good.”

“You know...” Michelle looks at me impishly as she stirs her soda with a straw. I lean forward and open my ears. “I keep wondering why Matheo didn’t fall for her.” She pauses, and her eyes grow bigger. “Do you think he is gay?”

I did not see that coming. Hell no, he’s not gay. He’s not gay!

She continues, “I mean, Claire was in there working her magic on him for a considerable time. She followed Matheo into his office right after he arrived and was there until I came to see him. So what other explanation is there?”

“He’s just a good, good man.” I smile. “Those are hard to find nowadays.”

“Exactly. Either he’s not attracted to women, or he has someone hotter that he is loyal to.” Michelle shrugs.

“Ninety percent of the men I know would fall for Claire, and I wouldn’t even blame them. She has an amazing figure.”

Me, me, me. He’s loyal to me. I hope.

I smile to myself, and Michelle bats her lashes at me. “Why are you smiling like that?”

“No reason.” I shake my head. Her phone beeps and I jerk off my chair. “We have to go now.”

“Amber, what is that smile? What are you hiding from me?” Michelle follows after me as I stride away. Thankfully, I have long legs, and she won’t catch up with me unless she starts running.

“Stop looking for something where there’s nothing. Please leave me alone. Am I not even allowed to smile now?”

Michelle finally stops to take a breather. “Stop. I can’t do this anymore. I will cough my heart out. I am not meant for this hard life.”

“We don’t have time now. Hurry, catch up.”

“Wow, you are out for blood! Just go. I’d meet you at my own pace.”

“Whatever you want.” I slow down and start fiddling with my fingers as I think about Matheo’s restraint. The guy is perfect. He’s every girl’s dream—rich, handsome, and talented.

Such an ideal man for me.

“There you go! That smile again. You’re biting your lips. It’s a guy. Are you dating someone?” Michelle asks me excitedly.

“No, I am not seeing anyone. You know me. I don’t have time for that since I have more important family matters to attend to.”

“Do I know you? Will you never date? I mean, here you are, daydreaming about some boy you haven’t told me about,” Michelle bites her lower lip.

My phone rings, and I reach into my pocket, raise it to my face, and see it’s my mother calling. So, I pick it up, “Hello, Mom.”

I hope all is well.

“Amber,” she whimpers, and I stop walking, realizing she is crying.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

“Oh, Amber. Your dad fell and is not moving at all. I don’t know what to do,” my mom cries.

“Is Dad okay?” I ask, covering my mouth with my hands as terror overtakes me.

“What is it?” Michelle snaps with concern written all over her face.

“I am coming right away,” I say before I cut the call.

My hands start shaking. “My dad...” I swallow, looking straight ahead. “He fell, and he’s not moving. Michelle, we have to go back to the office now so I can tell Mrs. Percy that I have a family emergency,” I say, looking worried.

He’d better be okay. He can’t dare to leave us like this.

My mom calls me again. “Mom, how is he now? How is Dad?” I blurt out.

“We are on our way to the hospital now. Meet us there,” my mom says, her voice weak from crying.

“I’ll meet you there as soon as I let my manager know about our situation,” I say.

I reach the hospital and run inside to look for my parents. I ask around, and the nurses show me to his ward.

“Mom!” I break down and rush to her side. Tears stream from my eyes. “What happened?”

“I found him lying on the floor in the bathroom,” she gasps. “He wasn’t moving....” She covers her mouth with her hands and sobs. “They stabilized him, and I’m waiting for the doctor to assess his condition.”

I look over her to my dad. He looks like he is just sleeping. I grab his hand and squeeze it.

You can't leave us. We need you. I want you to see me graduate and be proud of me.

I look up at my mom and put my hand on her cheek. “He’ll be all right. He’s the strongest person I know. He has to be all right.”

A doctor walks in, and I lift myself from the ground and stand by the bed, looking at my dad and praying for him.

The doctor nods his head, glancing at us. He walks to the bed, and I move aside for him to work his magic to make sure my dad is okay.

He sighs after lifting my dad’s hand and pressing his thumb to my dad’s wrist. “He is out of danger now.” He turns to my mom. “However, he’s going to need surgery,” he mutters, handing her a paper.

My legs become weak, my heart stops, and my breath seizes at the word ‘surgery.’ I fall backward, but the wall helps me stand.

What do you mean by surgery? Where do we get the money for that? Just trying to pay for his medication is turning our lives upside down.

“Surgery?” I whine as I regain control over myself. “Why?”

The doctor turns to me, and our eyes meet. He looks at me for a bit, contemplating if I can handle what he is about to say. “Your father has coronary artery disease.”

What is that? It doesn't sound good.

“He needs to undergo surgery as soon as possible to prevent him from having a heart attack.” The doctor explains.

I look at my dad and feel a literal pain in my chest. “I don’t understand. He just fell. How does he have that now?”

He turns to my mom. She is frozen, staring at the paper in her hands.

“Mom,” I say as I go around the doctor to see what she is reading.

“Sixty-five thousand dollars!” She looks at me. I freeze mid-step.

“What?”

“Yes, that is the cost of the surgery.” The doctor presses his lips together.

Life only gets worse for us, right? So where are we going to get sixty-five grand now?

“You’ll have to settle the bills before we can schedule the surgery,” the doctor adds.

I sit beside my mom and wrap my hand around her shoulder. She looks at my dad, then at me. I take the hospital bill from her, toss it aside, and then take her hands in mine.

“Where will we get this money, Amber?” she whines.

“We don’t have that kind of money right now, but I will find a way, Mom.”

She shakes her head.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor mutters. “His condition will get worse, so we need to start as soon as possible before it gets worse than this,” he says and then leaves.

“I will do everything I can. We will not let him die, Mom.” I close my eyes and hold her close as I think about ways and places to get money to help cover the bill.

We spend the night at the hospital with my dad. The doctor says he must stay at the hospital so they can keep a close eye on him.

Some people owed my dad when he was making good money from his small plumbing business before he got very

sick and sucked all our savings away. So the first idea that hits me is to get some money back from the people he lent money to.

Fortunately, he had a notebook where he wrote down all the people who still needed to pay him, so it would be easy to track them down.

I work through the list systematically. I should be able to collect ten thousand dollars from the people who owed him, but most of them still cannot pay.

It's been a week since I started applying for loans, but the world is against me. I don't meet any requirements, mainly because I am still a student and an intern TotaBuyzz. It's only been four months since I started there. I need to get at least another \$10,000 for the initial payment so the hospital can schedule my dad's surgery.

After exhausting all my options, I returned to the hospital even more distressed than when I left.

In the thick of the night, I let go of my pride and texted Michelle, asking her to lend me some money.

I join a Facebook group page where all the members are eCommerce business owners. I introduce myself and provide information about my services, like bookkeeping. This is a better way of getting clients while trying to get 5-star reviews simultaneously.

I'm happy to see many clients who are interested in my services. I immediately create a contract for them so I can collect a down payment for my services.

Michelle transfers \$10,000 to my account, which I need for the deposit on the surgery. She had some money saved from doing the side hustle of filing personal income tax and business tax.

It's still early, but I dial her number, knowing I will wake her up. She picks up after the second try, and I thank her for

helping me, promising her that I will pay her back as soon as the storm calms and I can work again and save some money.

I could buy his medicine and pay for his stay in the hospital and surgery deposit with the money Michelle lent me. Unfortunately, it isn't enough for the total amount of the surgery we still owe, but I know I must keep pressing on.

There's just one resort left for me. After that, I'll ask if my mom has some jewelry we can sell and see how much that money amounts to.

It feels like we're stuck in a scary dark room with a monster coming to steal our last bits of happiness, and there's no way out of it. I am exhausted, depressed, and shaken to my very depths. There's just one fate for my dad if we cannot raise enough money.

My dad is dying slowly, and I have to do something. After all, he has done for me; I have to try any possible way to save his life.

He hasn't spoken or budged since he was admitted to the hospital. The most he has done is wake up, look at us, and turn away in tears. His poor heart is giving out. My world will come to an end if he dies. What will I be living for? I wanted to repay him for his kindness, love, and care, but now his life was at risk.

One of the main arteries in his heart is completely blocked, and they have to remove the blockage surgically, or else he will die. Unfortunately, time is running out, and he is getting worse, looking paler as the day passes.

My mom and I are stripped of anything valuable, and we cannot raise enough money. We need to pay the balance as soon as the surgery is done.

MATHEO



Amber's manager, Mrs. Percy, comes to my office and tells me that Amber has gone home because of a family emergency. That is all she tells me. No details.

I ask for Michelle in my office, pretending to intend to give her a task, and she shows up after a couple of minutes. It's the first time she has come to my office after the incident with Claire, so it's a little weird. However, I can see she is looking around, uncomfortable and recalling that day.

"Where's Amber?" I ask, peering at her.

It's like the world is working against me. Yesterday, when I wanted to talk to Amber, Claire interrupted the whole day. Today, Amber has gone home for an emergency. I had planned to take her somewhere we could talk after office hours, but she disappeared.

"We were coming back from eating lunch when her mother called her, and she had to go to the hospital immediately," Michelle says, looking everywhere but at me. She seems to be fixated on the desk.

"I hope everything is fine with her."

"I don't know about that." Michelle shakes her head. "I don't know what happened, but I assume it must be her dad. Unfortunately, his health has been deteriorating lately."

"Well, I hope that he gets better soon."

"Yeah, me too."

I gesture for her to go, and she leaves.

I want to talk. I want her to know she saved my life on that bridge.

Amber is passionate about work, so I know she will return as soon as possible. I hope I can count on that.

However, Amber didn't return to the office by the end of that day. I am both sad and worried. I call Michelle and ask if she has heard anything, but I receive a 'no' response. The void in my chest only grows.

I comfort myself that she will come to work tomorrow, and we'll meet and talk.

The next day, I leave my office and walk down the hall to the elevator as if I am going somewhere. But I want to see if Amber is at the office.

Her desk is empty—my heart breaks. I immediately head to Michelle. She should know where her best friend is.

"It's odd not to see the dynamic duo today," I remark.

"Yes," Michelle says. "I have been trying to call Amber, but the call is not going through. I am worried now. I just texted her, but she hasn't replied. It's like she's off the grid," Michelle explains.

"I wonder what has happened, and I pray she is okay wherever she is, but it's not good that she isn't here. We need more details to explain her absence than the excuse that it's a family emergency."

I head back to my office, take my phone out of my pocket, and dial Amber's number. It starts ringing. Amber doesn't pick it up. I buzz her number again. It rings, but she doesn't pick up.

Why is Amber not picking up my call? She has my number. I gave it to her when she was planning my dad's party, so I know she knows I am the one calling. I didn't expect this. It means something is truly wrong with her.

The long day at work ends with Amber still unaccounted for. Michelle didn't come to tell me anything as she couldn't get through to Amber. I have been trying to call her. Either she

doesn't pick up, or her number doesn't go through. I have received no replies to any of the texts I sent her.

There's so much work I still have to do because I spent most of the day sulking and worrying about Amber, so I have to work overnight to keep up. But it will be better than going back home and wallowing in loneliness and boredom like I did yesterday.

After clearing my desk of tasks the next day, I head out to see Eric. I am about to knock when I hear him and Michelle talking about Amber's dad.

"Her dad is in a serious state of health. She's sucked dry, but the down payment is still incomplete, and the doctor says they have to clear the balance right after the surgery," I hear Michelle say just before I knock on Eric's door. I pause and lower my hand.

So, he gets exclusive news just because they are dating?

"That's too bad," Eric says.

"That's why she hasn't been picking up calls or answering all her text messages, as she's busy trying to figure out how to pay the balance in the hospital. Instead, she's spending all the time she can with her dad. She is doing everything she can to raise the money, but I'm beginning to worry about her health."

I walk away from the door as quietly as possible, pondering what I have heard. I remember she told me her dad had been sick for a while. He is about to die because she can't pay the bills.

I understand how she feels. When my father had the accident at his party, it also gave me a different perspective on life. I am incredibly grateful that my family had enough wealth to care for our health. I know he would have died if we didn't have the money to save his life.

There's no way I will not do something about this. I can't sit back doing nothing, knowing I could help Amber save her dad.

I go to my office and call the head of Human Resources and the Chief Financial Officer for a meeting.

They both arrive at my office at the same time. After they are both seated in front of me, I clear my throat and say, “You know, having dedicated employees who will do whatever it takes to see that we move towards our goal is paramount to guaranteeing the success of our company.”

I pause and glance at each of them.

After the nod, I continue, “Now, these employees need to be sure that we have them at heart. They need to know we care about their comfort and well-being. That’s how you create a loyal staff member.

“I have been thinking about the company’s future and how to turn our employees into a family.”

I turn to the head of Human Resources. “Edward, what do you think about an employee loan program that can be available to anyone as long as they have worked in the company for at least three months? This should be available to everyone, regardless of their status in our company.

“I will need a third-party lender that will agree to go after those employees who no longer work for us on their own, just in case they quit, or their contract with us ends. We’ll also work out a process where anyone that borrows money through us will choose how they want to pay back based on percentages that will be deducted periodically, considering their convenience and financial capacity.

“I also want you to start looking for companies who could offer our employees discounts on homes, insurance, and anything else. We would technically become advertisers of their products, which could incentivize businesses to offer our employees better deals.”

“It’s brilliant! This will boost employee morale, and we want more people with great skills and talents to work in our company.” Edward smiles.

“I want you two to make a call now and send out the news to all our employees using the company newsletter tomorrow, so they’ll all know about it.” I recline in my seat and drum my fingers on the table. “With this program, we will be assured of

our employee's trust and commitment to our company. They'll most likely reciprocate the love and care by putting more effort into the business, which will be a win for us."

The Chief Financial Officer, Rod, opens his mouth as if to speak, but I chime in. "Yes, Rod, we will make sure that this will not implicate us or make our company financially unstable. We will choose the best proposal from a third-party lender. I'm specifically looking for a company that has the option to spread the loan over several payments if our employee is no longer connected with us and who can collect the payment directly from them since they will also have their personal information. We will serve as their backer in securing the loan while they are working with us."

"You read my mind." Rod smiles.

"We don't get any cut from this; remember that. Although, as I said, I have been thinking about this for a while," I lie.

I just cooked it up to help Amber access the funds she'd need to cover her dad's treatment.

"Alright," Edward mutters.

"I will be waiting for you two." I rise from my seat, and they get up too. We shake hands, and they leave.

"Lives depend on this," I mutter to myself.

The weight on my chest lessens. I take a long breath and sit down, closing my eyes and smiling.

Brilliant, man. Brilliant.

I wait for my idea to be implemented, suddenly feeling like I have fulfilled a significant purpose in life for doing this.

Amber will not accept money from me directly. She's the kind of woman proud of her independence, and she wouldn't want to be beholden to a man who is both her boss and lover. So the employee loan program is the best chance I have of helping her.

My watch beeps. I open my eyes and raise my hand to my face. It's lunchtime. I suddenly crave a burrito, which reminds me of the day I met Amber on the rooftop.

That was the first day we connected. I smile and close my eyes again, letting my mind run wild to the later part of that day.

AMBER



The past days had been hell. The nights were even worse. I'd convinced the doctor to keep Dad in the hospital against his sending him back home. There was no specific source from where the money would come, but I'd been taught to stay positive even in the ugliest situations.

Dad was asleep. His brows creased as when he was angry, and I assumed he had a bad dream. He had slept through the night without making a sound, and I sat watching him, just like I was doing now. The only difference now was that his eyes weren't half-open, and I wasn't feeling this dizzy.

I had gotten used to the way the hospital smelled and looked. I got to witness some of the worst post-accident treatments. They were worse than what was shown on the screens.

"You're still here," Mom smiled as she walked into the room. Since we had no money to pay yet, I'd told the doctor that I didn't mind if he stayed in the cardiac ward with other patients, but he was kind enough to let us have a private room.

"I'll be here for as long as he is," I said, and Dad's mouth quivered. I think he was trying to smile.

Life has funny ways of testing you. First, it helps you pull your hair out to its last strands, and then it doesn't grow afterward.

I called Human Resources and informed Mrs. Percy, my manager, of my extended absence of leave until my father's surgery was done.

I know Matheo wants to help me, but I won't accept any money from him. He is my boss. He shouldn't be involved in my family's financial problems.

I can't just rely on other people every time I encounter a problem.

It happened again—another nightmare. He was going to be alright. There was no improvement in his health, and when I'm supposed to know peace, I'm thrown into an abyss of worry.

“Amber?” I hear my mom's voice.

“Mom?” I roll onto my back, throw the cover off my body, and sit straight.

My back hurts from tossing and turning all night, and I don't want her to know that.

So, “How is Dad?”

“How did you sleep?” she asks, ignoring my question. Instead, she walks over, closely examining me. I shrug. I don't want to answer that.

“How did you sleep, Amber?” she repeats softly.

I can't stop the tear that runs down my cheek. She comes over and wraps her arms around me.

“Oh, my poor child. I heard you scream. I'm sorry,” she says, placing my head on her chest.

“Is he asleep?” I ask weakly.

“Yes,” she answers, not letting go of me even a second.

GEORGE



I lean forward and whisper, “The higher you go, the more you need dedicated employees. “How did you come up with this brilliant idea?”

He shrugs. “My thoughts were reeling around that I don’t want wavering employees, dwindling between something else and work, maybe taking on a side hustle that they earn money from to support themselves. It’s good for them, but that means their attention is divided, and the optimum level of commitment I need from them is not there, which is not suitable for the company.

“I thought, what if there was a way I could ensure our staffs remain committed to us for the long run and put in more effort than they are putting in now? It will boost our success rate, and as time goes on, we’ll be sure that no one will bail on us because there’s a job out there that’s paying them more, and they need the money, so they leave us for a better salary.”

I am impressed. That’s my son, my Matheo.

I smile and nod my head. “Yeah, that makes sense.” I pause for a bit, thinking. “It *would* be disheartening to hear that we lose one of our employees to a rival company because of a couple of more hundreds or thousands of dollars.”

“Exactly!” Matheo spreads his palm on the table as he nods. “With this loan system, they’ll be dedicated too. This is also a way for our staff to know their value with us. They will feel protected and cared for knowing that we have found a way to solve their financial problems.”

“This is a great idea. For one, it will boost employee morale and guarantee a swell in our growth in the eCommerce industry.”

“Yes.” Matheo nods at me with a smile.

Looking at him now, I regret hiring Claire because I didn’t trust him enough. However, he is more than capable of handling this. As much as I will not readily admit it, he is doing better than I was doing when I was his age.

When I had the company handed to me, I wasn’t ready for it. It happened too fast because my father died, and someone had to take over to keep the ball rolling. It was overwhelming, and it took me a while to get the hang of things and begin to plan and do things as expected.

Matheo is in the groove, and he knows what he is doing. Moreover, he knows what he wants and thinks a chief executive officer should consider.

My mind is at peace that the company, my dear baby, is in capable and safe hands. I am proud of Matheo.

The media has been buzzing about his new strategy that shows immense care for our employees, making everyone want to work with us because of the essential benefits a potential employee is looking for.

Matheo looks at his watch after it beeps. “We have to go now. It’s fifteen minutes until the press conference.”

“Alright, let’s hit the road.” I rise from my seat and brush my hands over my blazer. I notice he does the same thing, and I smile, knowing he picked the gesture from me.

He rushes past me to the door and opens it for me. “After you, sir.” He motions for me to walk through the door.

All the employees that catch sight of him opening the door for me smile approvingly.

I may be too impressed with how he has won them over. However, I am proud to think I have raised a fine man, although maybe Linda did more than me because I was rarely there for him the way he wanted me to be. But I did my part to

ensure he had a good life, and I left a blooming business for him, so you can't say I haven't done well.

We get out of the elevator and walk out of the building.

I want to make up for the lost time. I would love things to return to the way they were when I had time for him. We played, talked, and had a great relationship before he started morphing into the spitting image of Veronica, reminding me of everything that happened. I ran like a coward to bury myself in work, using my success and need to keep things moving upward and forward as an excuse for not being a father.

"I am proud of you, son," I say to Matheo.

He jerked his head backward, looking surprised, as I knew he would be. I have never really commended him on anything he has done.

Most times, he is outstanding—he always does things to the highest standard, and I am always impressed, but I believe in being scarce with applause and accolades. This pushes people to do more.

If they feel like you are satisfied, they will relax and get comfortable, whether ignorantly or not. This is not good for business. It's not what you want.

However, Matheo deserves my praise at this moment. I know how much he wants my approval. He has done and surpassed everything a father could want from his son.

He looks so much like her and barely takes anything from me regarding looks. It's not his fault that I have not been able to deal with my horrible past, which has cost both of us a good father-and-son relationship.

I am trying to take care of my health due to the accident at my party.

Matheo ushers me into the waiting car. The driver starts the engine, and the convoy of seven vehicles moves off.

Sometimes, the attention you get when you ride through town reminds you to push forward for more constantly. Everyone dreamily looks at you at that moment, wishing they

were you as you pass by. Yet, you know you will get twice the amount of unwelcome attention if you fall from the height you have managed to attain; that alone is unimaginable for me.

“How do you feel driving around like this?” I ask Matheo.

“I don’t know. I have never thought about it. Most times, I want to get to my destination on time. So I usually try to visualize whatever meeting or event I go to and predict what could happen there.”

I scoff and nod. “Hmm.” I cock my head. “You should look out sometimes. It will help you see how far you’ve come and keep you going.” I pause for a moment. “You don’t like surprises?”

It’s too late to start learning about him now, right? I should know this by now. He used to like the times when I would surprise him with a gift when coming back from work.

“Not really. It’s always better when things work out as you have planned.” He rubs his palms together a few times before making a steeple of his fingers. “In our line of work, a surprise almost always means things have gone south because you missed a loophole.”

“Right. I get it. I do.” I lean into my seat as a few images of the times I experienced such disheartening surprises flash through my mind. “I guess you already have a taste of what that feels like,” I mutter. He nods, and I continue, “That is when you begin to feel the weight of being in the forefront of everything. It’s crazy.”

We laugh, and I am elated that we are having a moment.

“Yeah, and you begin to ask yourself why you took the responsibility in the first place.”

“You’re doing well, Matheo. It’s only been a few months, but you have significantly changed our monthly revenue.”

“Really?”

“Yes. My sources say you are working on something spectacular that will blow all our minds and change the game for the market.”

“Sources?”

I immediately realized where his mind went. “Yeah, just the news and social media. Nothing like Claire. That was a one-time thing.” I look out the window.

“Alright.” He chuckles. There’s silence before he asks, “How’s Mom?”

My head spins as I don’t know whether he is asking about Linda or Veronica.

He couldn’t be asking about Veronica. That would be crazy.

Playing safe, I go with Linda. Nothing could go wrong. “Linda is okay.”

He chuckles. “She always loves to be in the spotlight.”

“You got that right. We all know she loves her face in magazines more than the air she breathes.” I laugh softly.”

“You were confused when I asked....” He looks straight at me.

“If you had all the baggage I have in my head in yours, you would be confused, too,” I say.

“Right. It’s great that Linda is fine, but I want to know what my biological Mom was like.” He leans forward, peering at me.

I feel a chill run down my spine as he stares at me while the question sinks in. If only he knew how much I try not to remember anything about Veronica; it’s why I put a distance between him and me.

Please don’t do this right now.

It is already super uncomfortable to sit here and look at him while we try to talk as a father and son. This is scarier for me than putting much money into a new venture and crossing your fingers as you hope things don’t go wrong.

We had to take the same car. The media would have made a big deal of us arriving separately. I spent some time thinking about how it would be sitting through the drive till we got

there and then doing an interview with him. We haven't talked this much or sat this close for years.

Turning my face away to escape his piercing gaze, I sigh.

"I understand if you don't want to talk about it. It took me everything to throw that question at you. I am still trying to get my head around Veronica's existence."

He looks down as he continues, "It's just I have been wondering.... was there a time when she loved me? Did you both love each other? How did it come to the point where she wanted to leave everything behind and get rid of the only thing that tied her to you? If you want to play the some-things-are-better-left-unknown card, then that's fine. But it must have hurt you too. You never mentioned her for more than twenty-five years."

To my great relief, the car suddenly stops. I look outside and see we have arrived at our destination. I sigh, thanking the stars that we won't be able to continue our conversation.

After thirty minutes of cliché questions, the session ends, and it is time to leave.

There's no way I am getting into the same car with him. I don't want to have that conversation.

"Thanks, Dad," he says, beaming as we step out of the studio. For a split second, I see Veronica smiling at me. Then, I blink, and the face reverts to Matheo's.

He only has to smile or say something, and suddenly, I am snapped back to when all was well with Veronica and me. Now that I think about it. I can't even be sure she wasn't pretending from the first day we met. She loved me too, didn't she?

I nod and smile sharply, trying to fight the urge to cry. He can't see me crying. No one can. I wipe my hands over my face and look at my watch. I do not need to check the time; it's just to make it look like I have somewhere important to be.

“I have to go now. You go to the office and do your thing. We’ll catch up later,” I say, gesturing at my watch.

“It’s okay. We’ll catch up later.”

I don’t want that. Not today.

“See you later.” I start walking down the hallway quickly until I am out of the entrance to the studio. I take a deep breath and quickly reach for my handkerchief in my back pocket.

AMBER



As I sit on the ground, swiping through my contact list to see who to call and get help from, an email notification from TotaBuyzz, forwarded by Michelle, pops up on my screen.

I reluctantly open the email and start reading through it.

My eyes catch the word loan as I read word after word, and my heart leaps.

You've got to be kidding me. This is just what I need.

It turns out it's a newsletter offering a loan to anyone who has worked for at least three months in the company. I fit that criterion. A requirement I have. It's been roughly four to five months since I started my internship at TotaBuyzz.

"Mom," I say. My mom slowly turns her stricken face to me. She's been watching my dad's every breath since 2 am. So we've been taking shifts doing that.

"He's still breathing." Her voice cracks as she speaks, her dry lips curving into a weak smile.

I smile and say, "There's a way out of this. He will live. The surgery will go on."

"Really, how?" She rushes off the bed to sit by me. I would not have imagined she had the strength to move that fast. A ray of hope can do that to you.

"Look at this." I give her my phone to read the email from TotaBuyzz. "I have to go there now." I drag myself up, putting my hand on the wall for support. My stomach grumbles,

reminding me I haven't eaten much for about two days, except for chips and soda.

As I stand, my vision goes blurry. I shut my eyes and blinked a few times until I could see again. I try to take a step, but my knees feel weak, and my legs tremble.

“Are you alright?” my mom asks.

My stomach whines at me, and I rub my hand over it. “I might have been sitting on the cold floor for too long, and my legs have forgotten how to walk and hold me up. But they'll come around.”

“Make sure you eat something. You haven't eaten much these past few days, and now you don't have the strength to carry yourself.”

I stop to take a look at my dad. “You'll get better. I promise,” I say, caressing his hands. I bend down and kiss his head before turning to my mom. He twitches, and I take it as a sign that he heard me.

“Take care of him while I am gone. If anything happens, call me.”

“I will.”

I nod. “I'll see you soon.” I pause for a bit, falling into my thoughts. “I'll send the rest of the money to you so that you can pay some of the outstanding balance. The doctor should start prepping him for the surgery immediately after he receives the money, okay?”

Hurrying down the hallway to exit the hospital, I smile, feeling a tingle of joy in my heart. I am so happy I decided to do my internship at TotaBuyzz. Imagine if I didn't.

I stop a cab and get in. Soon I am at my house. I miss the sight of the house and being inside. I pay the driver and get out. It has been about a week since I was home. My dad, though sick as he was, acted as the glue that held our family together.

The rooms are not as messy as I imagined before I got in. I walk straight to my room and a lot myself thirty minutes to

make myself presentable. I haven't had a proper wash in days.

Even though I exceeded my time by more than ten minutes, I finished up as fast as possible and got on the road to TotaBuyzz.

On my way, I begin to rehearse the answers I will have to give to some inevitable questions as I come to terms with the wave of pitiful looks that will overwhelm me when I get there. I hate to look weak, and I wouldn't say I like it when people feel the need to pity me because I know that no matter what life throws at me, I will survive.

"How hard can this be?" I mutter to myself and step into the building. I keep my head down as I walk down the corridors. Lunchtime is almost over, and I may bump into some of my colleagues in the elevator.

Before the elevator opens, my eyes meet Michelle's. She screams and hugs me before I can gesture for her to stay quiet. Everyone turns around and sees us.

"Hi! Miss me?" I say, pulling out of the hug and pushing her back into the elevator as I press a button with the other.

"Of course!" She blinks and wipes her teary eyes. "I miss my friend."

"I can tell." I smile as I look at her, suddenly realizing that I haven't seen her for a while. I hug her again and feel my eyes water. She tried everything she could to be there for me as a true friend should.

"It's nice to see you. I just had my lunch and was thinking about you," she says, wrapping her hands around my waist. "I promised myself I wouldn't talk to you again when you return. You locked me out of your life when I wanted to be there. You forgot that your father is like a father to me too. He took us out to playgrounds and ice cream shops when we were little. Do you remember?" Michelle pulls away and peers into my eyes.

I nod. "I remember. I am sorry."

"I don't know why I am talking to you now. I guess I missed you too much."

The elevator opens, and we walk out. My eyes dart to my desk, and I see it is just how I left it. I miss worrying about coming to work and taking on whatever challenge I am given.

“Carry on. I will catch up with you later. I have to go to Human Resources.” I back away, watching her turn on her computer.

“Okay,” Michelle’s brows furrow as she looks at me.

I turn around and let out a heavy breath.

After brushing off many concerned people, I reached Human Resources. I smooth down my dress, the best I currently have, and take a few breaths. Then, I knock gently on the door.

It opens, and I step in.

“Hi!” I say as I walk in, locking the door behind me.

We discussed my financial needs, and they gave me the application form.

I register for a loan. It is comforting to find out that I have yet to be the first employee to use the service.

In a matter of minutes, I get the loan approved and am told to wait for the funds to be transferred to my account in the next 24 hours.

I call my mom immediately after the meeting.

“I got the loan approval notice you sent me,” she says, “and we will be able to pay off the remaining balance in the hospital tomorrow.” I can hear she is crying.

I sniffle, feeling overwhelmed, “And Dad, how is he?”

“He’s great. He’s going to be fine. I can’t believe they will give you the money.”

I smile and hold my phone to my chest after the call. I can barely hold back the tears of relief.

Don’t you cry here, Amber.

I wipe my face and start walking down the hallway.

I feel the happiest I have felt in a while. Even though it was not the way I wanted to help him, I still did it. I know I will have to work my ass off to cover the loan, but it is worth it. He is worth it.

I looked for my manager, Mrs. Percy, to inform her that I would return to work soon after my dad's surgery. Office hours are almost over when I leave the building.

As I walk to the subway to take a train home, as I don't have enough money to get a cab, I think about everything that has happened. Maybe the world isn't as broken as I thought it was. Maybe there is a load of good waiting for the right time to save someone who has only been good all their lives.

I hear an attendant telling someone that the train station has been temporarily shut down because of an accident and might not resume immediately due to a significant accident resulting in mass casualties.

Oh, I can't go home yet.

I called Michelle to check if she was still in the office, but she didn't pick up the call, and I decided to walk back to the office since I have nowhere else to go.

Good thing that my workplace is steps away from the train station. Everyone is gone by the time I get back. I received a text message from Michelle that she's not in the office anymore and is headed to a massage appointment.

My mind falls back to one of my friends from school that lives in the area, so I text her, asking whether I can come and spend the night at her place.

The past couple of days has changed how I view life. I feel energized, knowing that all my worries are being resolved.

Now, I know that no matter how complicated a situation seems, you shouldn't give up hope. If you keep striving and refuse to accept a terrible fate, you will see that everything will fall back into place. My eyes tear up again as I think about how lucky I am to be able to help my father.

A sound startles me, and I turn to see it is Matheo staring at me.

Why is he here? I can't believe he is watching me cry.

MATHEO



“TotaBuyzz Shop and Go is a new type of store featuring the world’s most advanced shopping technology,” I say with a charming smile at the camera. “No lines, no checkout. You grab the product you want and go. See how easy it is? We take your convenience seriously, so we came up with this service just for you.”

I get out of my seat, put my hands in my pocket, and start walking, still looking at the camera as it moves with me.

“The seven-day countdown has begun. Remember, stay tuned for the first seven hours to get a thirty percent discount on whatever you buy.” I hold out my hands. “There you have it. TotaBuyzz Shop and Go, the most convenient online store on the planet.”

“Cut,” the director yells, and I relax my pose.

“Good job, guys,” I say, clapping my hands, and everyone cheers.

I have been working on this project for some months. A cashier-less grocery store is the future of shopping, where busy people can use their time for more important things, like picking up their kids after work or going to an appointment, instead of lining up in a grocery store.

This is the last commercial I will do by myself before the launch. After we launch, the marketing department will handle everything that has to do with commercials and broadcasts.

I leave the studio exhausted, heading to my office to lay my head down and relax. Being buried in numerous meetings

with shareholders and investors, interviews, conferences, and commercials has, at least, kept my mind too busy to worry about Amber. A few days without seeing her feels like a year. I might have gone insane if I hadn't had so much to occupy my time.

As I open my office, I see a pile of work waiting for me on my desk, and I frown. There's no rest for me. I don't know how my dad went through this for years. Every day I spend in my office, I realize how hard he must have worked for so many years.

There's no way I will finish the work for the day without working late.

After work hours, I go out to a restaurant. I will eventually shut down if I don't eat something. I

I put up the loan program thinking Amber would rush back in, I would get to see her again, and maybe we would talk and catch up, but because of my busy schedule, I couldn't meet her.

Why do I miss her this much? What is going on with me?

I sigh and rake my hands through my hair. Unfortunately, I lose my appetite for food before reaching the restaurant, so I turn around and return to my office, taking the same lonely road back.

Before now, I didn't know how much I liked our small talk, the glances we stole at each and just the fact that I knew she was around until the past few days that led up to this moment.

I don't know the hospital her father has been admitted into. I could have looked for it, but I don't want to disrespect her wish to avoid contact.

"It can't be," I mutter as I look up to see Amber as I step out of the elevator.

My heart leaps with joy as I stride towards her.

It's been too long, Amber.

I pause when she stops in front of her desk and leans forward. I stare, admiring her elegance as her hair falls forward, covering her face.

She jerks around as a floorboard creaks beneath me. I note that her eyes are wet with tears.

“Matheo,” she says as she turns her face away in embarrassment. “I didn’t know you were here.”

I want to speak, but my mind goes blank. I have many things to tell her, but now my fast-beating heart is the loudest in my mind. I know she has gone through a lot lately, and I understand what it means to almost lose someone important to you. I would take the pain away, but I don’t have magical healing powers. It breaks my heart to see her in pain.

“Long time no see,” I say.

“You shouldn’t be seeing me like this,” she sniffles as she wipes her hands on her face. “I didn’t mean to be here this late. I just came in today to go to Human Resources to apply for a loan.

“I can’t go home because the train station is shut down due to an accident, so I need somewhere to stay. I’ve texted my friend who lives in this area to see if I can stay at her place tonight, but it’s taking forever for her to reply.”

She fumbles in her purse, drawing out a tissue, which she uses to wipe her face. “But that’s not why I am crying,” she laughs bitterly.

“I know.”

“Right... okay.”

“I’m sorry for how things have been with you,” I say, reaching out to touch her arm. Amber jerks back in surprise and then stand still. I cup her face gently.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I feel like I needed to say that. I want you to feel better.”

“I have heard that a lot today. Everyone has been wishing me well.”

“I miss bickering with you,” I say with a sigh.

“I miss it too.” Amber smiles at me.

“How’s your dad?”

“His surgery is scheduled for tomorrow, so everything should be fine soon. I am not happy that he suffered a lot, but I know everything happens for a reason. Just knowing he will recover is enough for me.”

My gaze moves over her body from her feet to the side of her neck. Our eyes meet, and she blushes, looking away.

I take one more step to cover the distance between us. “I don’t like to see you sad.”

“Well, I don’t like it either,” she mutters as she looks up at me.

“I’ve been worried about you.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but the words seem to stick in her throat.

I look for approval in her expression as I slowly bend down to kiss her. But, instead, I shudder and moan from the spark of pleasure the action ignites.

My hands find her waist as she leans forward, kissing me back.

She gasps and pulls her face from mine when I grope her ass and press her harder against my body.

Her brows rise as she looks at me.

“Okay, I believe you missed me now, and I think I know why.” She chuckles, slips her hands between us, and spreads her palms on my chest; her eyes fall to her hands as she lightly squeezes my muscles.

“I was going a bit crazier every day you were not here, but I gathered that you didn’t want anyone to see you while you were struggling,” I blurt out.

“Yes, I wanted to be alone in my worst state.” Amber raises her face to mine as she grinds against my crotch. “That

didn't work out. You walked in on me crying, looking like an idiot."

I cup her face. "It saddens me to see you cry, but you are still the cutest intern I have ever seen."

"You're such a liar."

"No, I'm just a little obsessed. I haven't been able to get you out of my head. What did you do to me? Spill your secret."

"I won't tell you until you lose your mind," Amber laughs.

She pulls away from our embrace and reaches for her phone that's on her desk.

Of all the time and place, why do you have to beep and disturb me right now, stupid thing? Couldn't you wait ten more minutes?

I squeeze my watch like I will break it.

"Oh, no, my friend hasn't texted me back. That's bad—it means I am stuck here."

I nod. "Right. What's wrong with being stuck here with me?"

"I can't be seen like this tomorrow again, in the same dress. I am tired. I need to sleep in a bed tonight."

"Oh, I get it." I raise my hand to knead the back of my neck. "You could..." I blink and sharply look away. "It's a comfortable bed you want, right?"

She nods.

"It's getting late. It can get pretty uncomfortable and chilly in here, and also scary sometimes—"

She screws up her face, backs away, and asks, "Why do I feel like this is a regular problem whenever I end up alone with you?"

I resist the urge to laugh. "—but you can go to my place while waiting for your friend's reply. At least if she doesn't come through, you can crash in one of the guest rooms."

She sighs. “It’s a bad idea to go to your place, but staying here is worse.” She pauses for a bit, staring at me. “Yeah, I can wait at your place. I’ll decide my fate when it’s ten o’clock.

Bad idea? Really?

Her phone starts ringing, and she picks it up. “Hi, Mom. How is Dad?” she asks.

“Yeah, I can’t get home, so I am staying at a friend’s place for the night. I will quickly head home tomorrow morning, then come to see you at the hospital.”

“You’re staying at a friend’s place?” I ask as soon as she drops her phone on the table.

“Yes,” she nods.

“Are we friends?”

Amber looks at me pale-faced, taken aback by the question. But then, she clears her throat and looks away. “Don’t worry about that.”

“We’re friends?”

“Sort of.”

I hang my head and peer at her through narrowed eyes. “Sort of.”

“Stop looking at me like that. I should be the one asking you this. I have wanted to ask but haven’t found the right time and words to do so.”

“Let’s leave that matter to sort itself out. Then, maybe we will be even more than friends. Time will tell,” I say.

She purses her lips and hums, “Hmm, mmm.” She plays with her fingers. “So, we’ll just leave it to sort itself out?”

Have I said something terrible?

My heart races as I stare at her, trying to read her facial expression and failing.

“We should go.” She folds her arms. “Friend,” she adds, and my heart sinks.

Please don't call me that in that tone of voice. What was I supposed to say?

“I don't have a label for our relationship yet because I am still reeling from everything that's happening and trying to understand what I am feeling. We haven't exactly had the time to talk about anything.” I walk up to her and kiss her forehead. “I don't miss my friends as much as I miss you.”

Her face flushes.

I gesture for her to go ahead of me so I can admire her ass as she walks to the elevator. She is stunning, and I am lucky.

She knows my eyes are set on her ass, so she sashays as she walks off, and I follow like a lion stalking a gazelle. I stride forward and grab her waist. She yelps and squirms out of my grip, running into the elevator and closing it before I reach her.

Now, I have to wait for the elevator to come back up.

AMBER



I know Matheo, and I are not just friends, but then what are we? Unfortunately, everything else keeps getting in the way, preventing us from discovering the answer to that question. First, there was that witch, Claire; there was Matheo's suspicion that I was hired to spy on him; now, there's my father's health. We are the perfect definition of complicated.

I feel like I am falling into a trap I want to get caught in. But, on the other hand, I know what will happen at some point when we are alone at his place. So still, I follow along, pretending to be oblivious.

Considering how stylish Matheo's home is, it is strange that I feel so comfortable there. I slump into the couch closest to me after leaving my shoes at the door.

He laughs and picks up my shoes, presumably packing them somewhere out of the way.

He's a neat freak, and I am not very tidy. That's a bad combo.

"I have had a long day," I whine because he won't stop laughing.

"Yeah, a long week."

"Got that right." I exhale and look heavenward, thanking the stars for hearing my prayers.

Matheo cooks carbonara pasta with garlic bread after I tell him that I am hungry. I am pleased by his kind gesture.

He's the kind of man I would want to live with. He's clean, talented in the kitchen, stylish, and, apparently, considerate.

We settle in, eat, and catch up on the lost time. He reveals that he put up the loan program, hoping I would take the help and treat my father. However, he knew I wouldn't take it if he came and gave me the money in the hospital.

The thought that Matheo went into the trouble of setting up a whole new system for my sake is a little overwhelming. However, knowing that Matheo came up with a great employee program makes me realize that beneath his cold-hearted appearance is a man with a good heart. He will be able to help other employees in need in the future.

I feel like I have waited for ages for him—my soulmate.

MATHEO



I came out of the building, looking for Amber after she playfully ran away from me and locked me out of the elevator. Instead, I spot her leaning on my car and roll my eyes.

She dashes away and says, “I will sit at the back of the car. You drive. I am staying away from you right now.” She turns her face away with a blush.

“Whatever.” I open the back door for her and step back. She strides to the door and gets in the car. I scoff and gently close the door before taking the driver’s seat.

Amber has her eyes closed throughout the drive to my place. I can’t quite decipher the mysterious smile on her face.

I grab the chance to score a mark as a gentleman and cook her pasta when she tells me she is hungry a few minutes after we are in. After watching her eat, I usher her to the living room, and we sit on the couch opposite the television.

“I can’t believe it! My circumstances helped you attract more skilled applicants and be the company everyone wants to work for.” Amber looks around before grabbing a couch pillow and hurling it at me.

Her eyes tear up. “I didn’t think I would be saying this, but what would I have done without you? I didn’t know you cared about me this much.”

I also can’t believe that you helped me to become a better boss.

“I am shocked at how things turned out myself. Don’t worry, I don’t regret it, but I know myself.” I chuckle. “I always thought that no matter how you try, you can’t help someone if they are doomed to fail. There isn’t any amount of kindness that can change that. So I usually prefer to stay out of other people’s business, even if they want me to be involved. It prevents things from getting messy.”

“Wow! I’m happy to find out that I’m the lucky charm that helps you create ideas.”

I look at Amber as she sits beside me. My eyes trace over all of the features I long to touch.

“My face is going to peel off. Matheo, stop staring at me like that.”

“Alright,” I turn my face away. “I know I shouldn’t be saying this, and it will wreck my ego, but you have an influence over me that I don’t yet understand. I always want to ensure you are fine, and it pleases me to know you are close by. I don’t get it.”

Amber surprises me by getting onto my lap and wrapping her arms around me.

“You are very considerate to your employees, Matheo. You are a smart man, and I am sure you made the right decision. Everyone in the company will benefit from the program you came up with.”

Amber leans back a little, frowning slightly. “I don’t even know what I am feeling right now. Do I feel obligated to pay you back for your kindness, or...?”

She smiles, squeezing me tighter against herself. “It still feels unreal to know you did all that just to help me.”

I feel myself getting hard, and she will soon feel me poking at her. I regret that—I don’t want to scare her off—but it was inevitable. What man wouldn’t have a physical reaction to a gorgeous woman sitting in his lap and pressing her breasts against him?

“I wanted you to get as much as you needed for your dad.” I pause for a moment. “And I think your circumstances made

me realize that for our company to grow continuously, we need the loyalty and commitment of our employees. So because of you, I was able to come up with a good plan to make them feel valued. So now, even if no one is looking, I can see that everyone is happy and trying to contribute to the growth and success of TotaBuyzz.”

Amber chuckles, looking away, “You don’t know how happy I am to hear that I was able to help you somehow.”

“You amaze and inspire me, Amber. I didn’t have anyone to rely on before you came into my life. I’m falling in love with you because you taught me that waiting patiently for the right person to stand by me is all worth it.”

“You’re just trying to seduce me, Matheo. You are good at flattering women. You should know I will not fall for that.”

“Yeah?”

She smiles as she nods her head, trying to appear unaffected. However, I noticed her cheeks were still pink in response to what I said.

“All you have to do is walk up to me and smile like you are right now, and that’s it. I will do anything you ask of me,” I tell her. “You’re the person I’ve been waiting for my whole life. Someone who’s always there to love and support me no matter what happens.”

“I’m willing to laugh, cry or scream with you, whatever you feel like doing. You will always have a place to warm up your heart here with me.” Then, Amber kiss my lips.

“With you, I can compromise and talk about anything,” I say sincerely.

She sits down, pressing down against me and biting her lower lip. It feels great, and I can’t help but moan.

She begins to grind against me.

I like where the situation is heading, but I have more that I want to say to her. I put my hands on her hips, holding her still as I look into her eyes.

“I’m a better person with you around, Amber. I want you to be my woman—only mine.” I raise my hand to cup her cheek. “Being with you makes sense to me.”

She says nothing in response, but I can see from her expression that she is surprised at how serious the conversation has become.

I take one of her hands and place it over my heart. “It doesn’t beat like this for anyone else but you.”

I shudder beneath her as her lips slowly descend to mine.

When she pulls away, she says, “You know, I have had some admirers, but I decided to stay away from meddling with boys and focus on my family’s problems instead of giving love to someone who doesn’t deserve it, but you swept me off my feet and made me go against everything I promised myself. One smirk and my head started spinning.

“You excite and challenge me, and I want that, always. I love you and have waited earnestly for you to tell me you love me too.” Amber bends and kisses me again.

“I guess we are something now, aren’t we? A couple?”

She nods. “Yes.”

“I’m taken, and you are mine and mine only?”

“Yes,”

Laughing softly, she tickles my sides, and I yelp, letting her go. “I love how you respond to that.” she tickles me again,

“Please, don’t, please.”

Amber smirks and slips her hand down to rub over my crotch. She peers at me as she brings her second hand to join the other, moves back a little, unzips my pants, and pulls me out.

She wraps her hands around me, gently stroking me up and down.

I moan and drag myself up to get a better look at her and her pleasuring movements. But instead, she gives me a sultry

glance as she climbs off me and points my tip to her mouth, slightly parting her lips.

I shudder as I wait in anticipation for her lips to touch me.

She sucks just the head.

Please don't tease me like that.

I lean back on one elbow, stretch my other hand to tuck her hair away from her face, and press her head down until I can't see myself.

Amber gags and moves her head off me so she can breathe.

She starts moving her head up and down. She rubs my balls with her fingers and gently kneads them. The combined sensations of her mouth and her hand are enough to drive me out of my mind.

I don't realize I am moaning incessantly until she suddenly stops and breathlessly mutters, "I like it when you moan like that."

Please don't stop.

She smiles and takes me in her mouth again.

I look upward, shut my eyes, and surrender to the shockwaves that lead me to my climax. Amber stops again, and I feel like begging her to have mercy on me.

She giggles as she stands to her feet and pulls her dress off, revealing her beautiful body. My mind goes blank as I take in the sight of her. I take a long drag of air as she takes off her bra and starts massaging her breasts as she looks at me.

"You're so beautiful."

She moans, spreading her legs apart as she trails her hands from the sides of her body to her navel and down to her underwear.

She sure knows how to put on a good show.

"Do you want these off?" she asks.

I nod frantically, eyes glued to the hem of her underwear as she slowly pushes it down, turning to the side and giving me a good look at her bottom. I quickly slip out of my pants and unbutton my shirt.

I wrap my arms around her and hold her close to me.

“I want this,” she whispered, and it was all I needed to continue.

“Let’s go for the pleasure tonight. Just that,” I said before leaning in to kiss her again, this time with no plans of stopping.

I heard her low moans, and it motivated me to seek control.

I lay her gently on the bed, our lips not separating for a second.

She begins to loosen her dress from the ropes on the shoulder. I grab both of her hands. “Be patient,” I say in-between kisses, but she was having nothing of it.

“No, Mateo,” she moans. “Please,” she begs.

I stop for a second and stare at her below me. Her eyes are hungry and needy. Finally, I release her hands and lift myself off her.

I watched with keen interest as she took her dress off. Light from a part of the curtains shone on her perfect porcelain skin. My eyes take in every inch of her body, and I feel my member twitch in my pants.

It was time to let loose without restrictions. It had never happened like this before. Usually, I’d be in control, but there’s always a first time for everything.

We stood facing each other in all our naked glory. “Damn,” I groan, kissing her again, this time a little rough, my hands roaming over her body. I give her lady bum a light squeeze. She gasps for breath and moans, pulling me toward the bed.

I loved how eager she was to have me because little-big Mateo was becoming impatient.

We move to the bed, and my lips trail down to her bare chest and then to her breasts. I nibble on them before sucking, and she grabs my hair.

“Mateo,” she moans.

Lifting my lips back to hers, I attack her with a needy kiss. My hand traced its way down to her core, and with a swipe of my finger, I could feel how wet she was, and I groaned in response.

“Ready?” I asked, looking into her eyes for any sign of withdrawal, but all I saw was an urgent need. She needs me.

With one thrust, I found myself plunging so deep. She screams amidst moans, and it makes me go even crazier.

I ease myself out of her and thrust again, a deep groan escaping my lips. I’d never known a connection so carnal yet deep.

Amber glide at me, bends down, and gives me one last mind-blowing caress with her mouth. Then, she rises and climbs over me.

She kisses me and moves my erection between her thighs. As she pushes herself down on me, she quivers. I kiss her again. She moans against my lips as I slide the rest of the way into her.

“I love how you feel inside me,” she whispers.

I thoroughly agree.

The desire in her eyes arouses me even more than the physical sensations I experience as she rides me.

“I’m close,” I warn her, unable to hang on much longer.

Then, she digs her fingers into my shoulders, moving harder against me as she grinds her way to completion.

With a few more strokes, I heard her scream, she was at her release, and I found mine in no time.

Both of us are breathing hard by the time the waves of pleasure calm to receding swells.

After regaining my strength, I carry her to my room and lay her on the bed, wrapping her in my arms just the way I have always imagined myself doing. Eventually, I fell asleep.

I wake up, look to my side, and see Amber isn't there. I'm a little disappointed to have missed an opportunity to wake up beside her, but I understand she has to leave early to return to the hospital.

At the office, we exchange glances and share secret smiles. She has much work to catch up on, so I let her be. Work first, then pleasure later. I can be patient now that I know she is mine.

After the day ends, I invite Eric out for a drink. I tell him that Amber and I are dating. He is as happy for me as I was for him.

"A toast to being officially taken." Eric raises his glass, and I raise mine. We toast and drink our wine.

"Is this normal?" I point to my face, and Eric raises a brow. "I can't stop smiling."

He shakes his head and says, "You are so in love, Matheo. Enjoy it!"

AMBER



I wake up before Matheo does. For a moment, I lie in bed, processing the previous night's events. At last, we agreed that we were officially dating. My heart assures me that we will grow into something beautiful. It's a dream come true for me.

I grab my dress, put it on, and search for my handbag. An object on the table beside Matheo's bed catches my eye. I walk towards it, and to my shock, it's the bracelet I gave to a boy I met on a bridge when I was a little girl. I pick it up and turn around to look at Matheo. I can't believe he is that boy.

How crazy can life get? Does he know about this? I have thought about that moment a thousand times and wondered what happened to that kid, hoping he didn't go back and didn't do something that would harm himself.

It was Matheo Martinez!

Putting the bracelet back where I saw it, I tiptoe to the living room, trying not to wake him up. My shoes are on the shelf by the door. I grab them and smile as I see my handbag on the ground by the couch.

I head to the train station to get home, wash up and change into something nice before I go to see my dad at the hospital and run back to work.

The grind is back on, and I have to put in twice as much effort since I now have a debt hanging around my neck.

I smile, squinting at the sky as I walk down the street. My mind is full of memories from my stay at Matheo's place. I had a good time with him, a far cry from the previous horrible two weeks.

We spent all day at work apart from each other because of the day's workload, but we caught a few glances at each other, which said all the words we would have said to each other if we had met and talked.

Everything seems to have fallen back into place, and my life is on its way to becoming better than I could ever have hoped it would be. My father is healing from the surgery. Soon he will be back on his feet and back to normal.

I am dating Matheo Martinez. The man of my dreams—a good-looking, good-hearted, miraculously well-mannered—although he can be a bit cocky when he wants to be, bringing excitement to the mix.

He's one of the most competent people I've met. He is committed to the things he loves, and I am lucky to be able to count myself among those things.

Michelle almost screams the roof off when I tell her that Matheo has professed his love for me and that we are dating.

“Wow!” She jerks off the chair, and everyone in the restaurant turns to look at us. I glance around apologetically and pull her back down.

“Wait.” She inclines her head and squints at me. “Are you serious?”

I nod, grinning at her.

“Unbelievable!” She shakes her head.

“That's it. We are leaving before you make embarrass me to death. Would you stop screaming, please?” I grab Michelle's hand and drag her behind me until we leave the restaurant.

“I always suspected something was happening between the two of you,” she says.

“Yeah?”

“Everyone in Dallas, Texas, will go crazy when they hear about this. Have you told your mom?”

“I haven’t told my mom yet. I will after my dad heals completely. I know that she will support me in being with Matheo. She only cares if the guy I’m with is a good person.” I purse my lips.

“Michelle, please keep this secret. I haven’t told a soul but you. I am not ready for all the attention and explosion, and we are taking things slow for now.”

“Alright,” she groans, rolling her eyes.

“Michelle, I’m serious. I will be mad at you if anyone finds out about this,” I whine.

“I won’t breathe a word.” She smirks at me. “I promise. Cross my heart.” She draws a cross in the air over her heart. “I’m just so happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you think they planned it?”

“Who? Planned what?”

“Eric and Matheo. Do you think that those planned to date us since in the beginning?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t mind, anyway. I’m happy, and you’re happy. That’s all that matters. It’s just destiny.”

“Really?”

“Who knew a cup of coffee could get us our ideal men?”

We share a laugh and say our quick goodbyes before going our separate ways.

As I walk to my house, grinning like a fool, my phone buzzes, and I bring it to my face. It’s a text from Matheo asking me to wait for him at his place. Unfortunately, this means I will have to turn back.

I am now Matheo’s girlfriend. So many girls would kill to have a taste of him, but I have him all to myself. I have been

trying to tamp down my pride, but the thing has grown wings now. It's surreal.

Now, the search for something nice to wear begins. I sold most of my classy dresses and shoes to raise money for my dad's surgery. There isn't much to choose from, but I still don't know what to pick.

After much thinking and not getting anywhere, I go to take my bath, believing that by the time I am done washing up, I will have something in my mind that will be perfect for the night with him.

The only thing on my mind as I step out of the bathroom is the blue bodycon mini dress in my wardrobe, so I put it on, do my makeup, and hit the road.

Matheo is waiting for me outside his place when I get there. I thought I would get here first—I tried to get here as fast as I could, but he was already standing in fitted jeans that showcased his fine legs.

His arms and chest show through his button-up short-sleeved shirt with two buttons undone. He takes his hands out of his pockets and smiles at me. I blush, looking away and putting my hands over my face as I walk to him.

The man of my dreams is waiting for me.

I purposely exaggerate the movements of my hips as I walk toward him so he will notice and appreciate my curves in the dress I chose for him.

“Hey there, gorgeous! You look amazing.” His eyes trail my body from my face down to my feet and back up as he shakes his head. “Good thing you're mine.”

I am satisfied with Matheo's reaction.

He steps forward to cover the space between us and hugs me. “I missed you.”

“Aw, I missed you too.”

“It's been a long day of not seeing or talking to you.” He pulls out of the hug, peers into my eyes, and pecks my

forehead. “I want to spend the whole night with you and, of course, every night after that, too.”

“Hmm. Calm down.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. I love to hear you tell me how much you love and cherish my presence. That means I am one of a kind, and you need me for your day to be complete.” I smile smugly. He scoffs and raises a brow at me.

I chuckle and say, “Of course, I need you too, and I want to spend all my days with you because I love you so much; you have stolen my heart and locked it up.”

We share a laugh, and he gestures for us to go inside. He rushes to the door and opens it for me.

Feeling like a princess, I walk as majestically as possible through the door. “Thanks,” I squeal in excitement.

“Always.” Matheo locks the door and joins me on the couch.

“Stop being such a gentleman. You are driving me crazy.”

He laughs, shaking his head.

I look at the couch, recalling the last time we were on it together. I look at him and giggle.

He smirks, understanding the silly look on my face.

“Yea, it was wild...amazing. Why did your mind go there right now?”

“I don’t know. I’m just picking up where we left off yesterday.”

“Alright. Whatever you say.”

I huff and roll my eyes at him. He shrugs.

As I glance from one end of the room to another, I see a new painting on the wall and walk toward it. “This is a new piece?” I ask, taking a closer look at it.

“I was hoping you would see it.”

“Really?” I stand on my toes and stretch my hands to run my finger over the painting. It’s smoother than I anticipated. “When did you do this? It’s beautiful.”

I smile, feeling proud of him. The fact that he paints this well still thrills me. I can’t wrap my head around it.

“Thanks.” He kneads the scruff of his neck, looking downward. “I have been working on it for some time now. Do you remember the place in the painting?”

“It’s familiar.”

“It’s the bridge where we first met, just as I remember it. But, of course, that’s without the new towers and cables.”

“Yeah. This is unbelievable. How did you remember it with such detail.”

“It’s a special place to me. I remember that night like it was just yesterday.”

“About that... I saw something in your room and have been thinking about it all day.”

“You already want some things changed?” His brows lift as he jerks backward.

I laugh. “No, your room is perfect. It’s a bracelet that’s on the shelf by the bed.”

“I have been meaning to talk to you about that. I saw your bracelet fall out of your bag that night when you got so drunk, and I had to bring you here since I didn’t know your address. I was blown away. I couldn’t believe it. It was you. That little girl who saved my life is you, all grown up, super-hot, intelligent, and still a lifesaver.”

“I’m so glad I found you. I always wondered if you went back the next day and killed yourself. I kept going back to check, praying you were still alive somewhere and hadn’t drowned yourself,” I say.

“You did? Wow...., that’s unbelievable.” Matheo’s eyes grow bigger. “I always wanted to find you and thank you for what you told me that day. It saved my life and shaped me into the man I am today. Everything down to the last detail you see

when you look at me originated from that moment, and I am grateful you were on that bridge that day.”

Matheo takes my hand. “Isn’t it amazing that we found each other again?”

I squeeze his hand, too overwhelmed to speak.

“You didn’t know it until now, but I am indebted to you for who I am now, so it’s only right that I give myself to you. I was so bothered by the fact that my dad was distant from me. I couldn’t stop thinking it might be better if I wasn’t around.

“He pushed me away and told me he was tired whenever I asked him what I had done wrong to anger him. I became fed up and wanted everything to end, and there was just one way to make the pain disappear.”

Matheo looks at the bracelet.

“I don’t even really remember what I told you that time,” I say. “I remember that I helped you clear your head and realize the importance of being alive. I gave you a friendship bracelet I made to brighten up your day. I didn’t even know your name at that time. I feel like you are crediting me with too much.”

“No, Amber. I would jump from the bridge if you didn’t show up and talk to me.” He pokes my sides, and I yelp, jerking away from him. “I guess you have always been good. How were you so smart back then?”

“I don’t know that I’m smart. Some people said I was nosy when I was little. George was the first person to call me smart. That was the nicest thing I had heard then.” I wipe my hand over my face. “I needed time away from the foster house. Nobody saw me as anything worthwhile, and they all wanted me to change, but I only knew how to be myself, and I couldn’t keep quiet when someone mistreated my friends or me.”

“I am alive because you were yourself. And you haven’t changed at all. On the contrary, you just bloomed into something more beautiful.” Matheo holds my hands.

“Oh, stop,” I say, covering my face.

“I’m serious. You are still as bold as you were then.”

“How did you keep the bracelet till now?”

“I always look at it when things aren’t good, or I feel lost. But, somehow, it gives me strength when I wear it.”

“Nah, you’re just making things up.” I shake my head.

“It’s the truth, Amber. I guess, in some way, you have always been with me as my guardian angel.”

It’s just all too much for me to take in. This is not a coincidence. I would have lost the man of my dreams if I hadn’t decided to sneak out of the foster home to see more of the city and if that cat at the corner of that alley didn’t scare me onto the path that led to the bridge.

I can see Matheo’s mouth moving as I stare at him, but his words go over my head. I love him so much. I guess it pays to be yourself.

Matheo pulls himself closer to me, clears his throat, and takes my hands. My mind returns from trying to understand the cosmic laws that lead to this moment.

“I know we are meant to be, and this, all of it, is not an accident. Maybe it was our fate to meet again. That’s why I couldn’t jump, no matter how hard I tried to get you out of my mind. The harder I tried, the more you overpowered me.”

“Matheo... I don’t know what to say.”

He laughs gracefully and moves closer to me. “I will always cherish the day I met you, Amber. Thank you for saving my life. I will make sure you have the best life can offer.”

“I love you too,” I say. “And I will do my best to support you in every way I can.”

His lips find mine, and we kiss passionately. I moan into his mouth as his hands slide toward my neck.

Pulling my face away from his, he whispers, “Don’t ever leave me.”

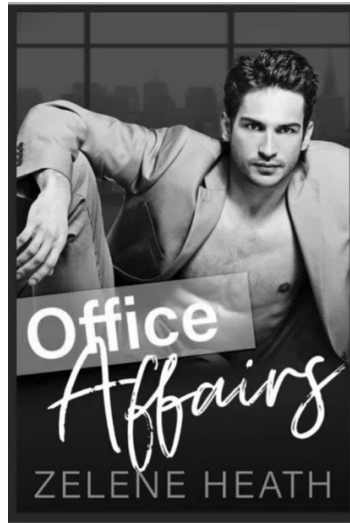
“I won’t,” I reply, gazing into his loving eyes.

He kisses me again. Our lips move in perfect synchrony until he pulls away and leans his forehead against mine.

For the first time in a long time, everything feels just right. Sometimes, the universe rewards you with a freaking hot billionaire and true love. I'm certainly not complaining.

The End.

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Matheo Martinez wanted her. It didn't matter that they were in the office. He needed Amber.

Finding love should have been easy for Matheo Martinez. He was a CEO, handsome and charming, but he fell for the one person he wasn't supposed to...his intern.

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He was a hot-shot executive. He had everything he wanted - could he lay it all on the line for love and happiness?

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SNEAK PEEK - CHAPTER ONE

Have you ever found yourself crushing on a co-worker? I wouldn't lie; it has been thrilling and fun, from the stealing kisses and caresses here and there to the heart-jarring sex after work. Our relationship is mutually beneficial as we inspire each other. The only difference is that I'm her boss, not her colleague.

We fell for each other for a short time without knowing it. The chemistry is embarrassingly unreal. We kissed one night while still at work, and our feelings just exploded from there.

Isn't it funny how one woman can occupy such an ample space in a man's world and ignite his every desire?

I couldn't put a finger on why no one else was as disturbed by her presence in the room as I was. I thought it was just me, but then....

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