



SAVAGE SUIT

KATHRYN C. KELLY



Savage Suit



by

Kathryn C. Kelly

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Savage Suit is a standalone story inspired by Vi Keeland and Penelope Ward's *Stuck-Up Suit*. It's published as part of the Cockey Hero Club world, a series of original works, written by various authors, and inspired by Keeland and Ward's *New York Times* bestselling series.

Dedication

To Candice and Russell, I dedicate Savage Suit in honor of your marriage. I wish you love and happiness always.

To Aunt Wanda and Uncle Craig, thank you for your love, encouragement, concern, and support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Three
Chapter Forty-Four
Chapter Forty-Five
Epilogue
Cocky Hero Club Newsletter
Acknowledgments
Contact Kat
Bibliography
Playlist
About Kathryn C. Kelly

Prologue

Ryan

For once, I trusted my little sister's idea wouldn't lead me into the debauchery she thrived on.

"Here, Ryan," Quinn chirped, shoving more champagne into my hand. Without releasing the golden bottle, she wrapped my fingers around the neck, kept her hand over mine, and guided the rim to my mouth. "Drink."

Blinking, I looked at her and giggled at how huge the 'A' enclosed within the spade seemed.

"Drink," she ordered.

"Where'd you get *this* bottle from?" I asked, happy and bubbly and drunk. "You already swiped one." I sniffed. "Without glasses to drink from."

"Damn it, girl, drink," she growled. "Goddamn, you can't even be a good drunk. You always have to mommy my ass."

"Low bl—"

She shoved the rim between my lips and tilted the bottle. The bubbly liquid would've rained on my rented ballgown if I hadn't tipped my head back and swallowed.

Satisfied, she pulled the bottle away and swigged the champagne.

"I didn't steal either bottle. We're guests here. Remember?" She waved her hand. "Never mind, I'll ask you when you're sober."

"No! I want to forget this day. I don't want to hear about it again."

It didn't matter how much I drank; I couldn't forget I'd lost my job at T.S. Marketing earlier today. I hadn't seen the termination coming. Worst of all, I'd gotten the 'it isn't you, it's me' from Trent Smith, my boss—well, former boss. He'd let me go because of the company's financial problems, not

over crappy work or insubordination. So it had been the luck of the draw, and I got the short end of the stick.

Quinn pushed the bottle against my lips again.

“Yo, I didn’t use my plus one on you for it to go to waste. Drink like there’s no tomorrow. Who’s going to know? Your mask covers half your fucking face.”

After another deep swallow and handing the bottle back to her, I made a face at my little sister.

“Even though I decided against a recreation of one of her gowns, I still fancy myself Empress Josephine,” she announced out of nowhere. Sighing, she raised her hand before I responded. “I know, not PC, but the clothes the chick wore was *sick*, Ry. You got to admit she had excellent taste and style.”

“You’re right,” I said gravely. “So do you. I prefer this gown anyway. We’re at a ball, not a coronation. The dress and mantle you chose at first would’ve been out of place.”

The pink ball gown and crystal and lace mask enhanced her beauty. Her sparkling bodice matched the tiara on her pink hair. She was two inches taller than me in bare feet, but tonight in her clear, Cinderella-like pumps with thin, high heels, she towered over me. At some point, I’d taken my shoes off, and I couldn’t remember where I’d placed them.

“There you are.” The pleasant drawl drew our attention to the doorway.

We’d escaped the masquerade ball a while ago and found this elegant sitting room in a 5th Avenue mansion on the cusp of Central Park.

My sister’s date hadn’t walked entirely into the large room, but despite his full-face mask and their distance, sexual tension buzzed between them. Though I’d seen many fancy costumes tonight, his remained the most flamboyant.

She smiled and set the champagne on the mantle of an impressive fireplace, then curtsied as if she’d stepped from the pages of a historical romance. He swept into the room, her own musketeer of the guard, even if I was too tipsy to decide

whether he was Athos, Porthos, or Aramis. Hell, who knows? He might've even been the erstwhile D'Artagnan.

My sister and her masked man moved in unison, meeting in the middle of the room, the dull light gleaming on his blond head. He offered her a courtly bow, stood to his full height, and whispered in her ear. She nodded eagerly and stepped into his arms. Together, they walked to the door, where she forced him to stop.

She turned to me. "We can stay with you if you'd like," she offered.

"Enjoy yourself, baby," I told her. I hadn't wanted to come in the first place, and I knew the way to my apartment. "I'll be fine. I'll call you in the morning."

"Ry..." She heaved and started over. Anonymity for the evening was a strict attendance rule. "You can't leave by yourself in your condition."

I rolled my eyes and grinned. "Indeed, I can. I'm not driving."

She glanced at the silent man beside her. I gave him props for allowing her to fuss over me.

"Why don't we escort her to a bedroom," he suggested. "She can rest while we enjoy ourselves." Once again, he whispered in her ear. "She'll relax, and she won't be far from us."

"You're right, sir," she said, breaking away from him to return to my side. She grabbed the bottle of champagne, then dragged me to where he stood waiting.

"Nothing too strong," she ordered, handing him the bottle. "Just something to relax her after her long day."

"She can join us."

"That'll be the day," Quinn said with a hearty laugh. "She doesn't have my joie de vivre."

"Then I'm lucky to have you."

“That you are, sir,” she said merrily, grabbing my hand again and urging me forward. “That you are.”

She held onto me as he led us down a long hallway that opened onto a central foyer with a grand staircase. His foot touched the first stair.

Quinn clutched my shoulders. “Up,” she said. “And be careful. If you fall backward, I’m tumbling down too.”

The mysterious man took my hand before continuing. His hand, big and warm, held me as tightly as Quinn gripped my shoulders. He placed his hands on my waist at the landing, lifted me, and plopped me beside him.

“Good thinking. She might’ve tripped on that last stair.”

I ignored Quinn’s comment and squinted at the massive chandelier centering the ceiling. Had I not imbibed so heartily, I would’ve enjoyed the mansion, styled after a Venetian palazzo, with soaring ceilings, an intricate balustrade, heavy doors marching down the center hallway, and too many other exquisite details to count.

He handed the champagne bottle back to Quinn. In turn, she held it out to me. “Drink,” she commanded for the hundredth time tonight.

“You aren’t supposed to drink when you’re sad,” I protested blearily. “It makes you more depressed.”

“Are you depressed?” she asked in exasperation.

“Nope. But it’s the principal.”

“Fuck principals. They get you nowhere.” Her voice had hardened, and hearing the tone upset me even in my drunken state. “You love champagne. You have the chance to drink an excellent vintage. Stop worrying about everything and everyone, and live a little, damn it.”

“I won’t be alive if I starve to death because I can’t afford to buy food.”

Quinn growled, then pressed the rim to my lips and tipped the bottle, forcing me to drink. “You’re not going to starve,” she snapped, not relenting with the flow of liquid. “You just

lost your fucking job today. And you know what? I'm so fucking happy you did. You had a birthday three months ago." She snatched the now-empty bottle away. "Did you celebrate? Nope. Why? Because you were working." She spat the word as if it was the dirtiest sound in the English language. "You worked in high school. You worked in college. You work all the fucking time!"

Ordinarily, her snideness might've offended me. Instead, that last taste of champagne left me giddy and removed whatever fucks left to give. I could've stripped off my mask and gown and run naked through the house.

"Hey?" Quinn snapped her fingers in front of my face. "What's wrong with you, dude?"

The question struck me as funny, and I guffawed.

"She'll be fine. She might find a walk on the wild side," the musketeer said.

"Ryan?" Quinn snorted in amusement. "A walk on the wild side?"

"I can be wild when I want to!" I protested, wondering why her calling my name bothered me. I couldn't remember, but it felt good not to have worries weighing me down.

"We'll collect her when we're done."

Wrinkling her brow, Quinn studied me.

"I'm fine," I said in a sing-song voice because I hadn't felt so free and unencumbered in...well, I didn't know how long, but it felt like forever.

"Okay, then." Once again, Quinn tugged me forward. "Let the debauchery commence."



Noah

I didn't need fucking enemies when I had brothers.

Somewhere downstairs, my youngest sibling, Nathaniel, roamed in search of his next fuck, unconcerned today

would've been our mother's 60th birthday. While I had my share of complaints against Nate, our middle brother, Nicholas, cared even less. Otherwise, he wouldn't have opened his home to this travesty. Despite my protests, he'd planned this masquerade ball at his wife's behest to celebrate her 30th birthday.

Fuck, I didn't begrudge him or my sister-in-law, Tina, their happiness. All I'd asked was they withhold hosting this enormous affair in deference to a sacred day in my life.

The room spinning, I leaned my head against the pillow and closed my eyes. After presenting the gift I'd gotten Tina and a check for the family's favorite charity in her honor, I'd closeted myself away in one of the guest rooms. Photographers and society columnists were in attendance—another thing I'd asked they forgo, and another request denied—so public speculation on a Keegan feud would've been rife if I hadn't shown up. My disguise was a poor cloak to the rabid media always on the hunt for me.

Without warning, the bedroom door opened.

“Get out, little brother,” I growled. True, he preferred this bedroom, but I'd commandeered it. Partly to be a motherfucker, but mainly because of the location in its own corner, the most private of the guestrooms.

Since the door hadn't closed, I snapped my eyes open, shooting to a sitting position to blast Nate's intrusion into my solitude.

Instead, I blinked, sure the vision in the doorway was a figment of my imagination. But, no, she remained. Across the room, two lamps were lit. One on the table between the chair and the loveseat and the other on the writing desk. Lights from the hallway flooded in, illuminating the stranger like an angel dropped from heaven.

A blue mask of feathers and crystal covered half her face. Black, bone-straight hair blanketed her shoulders and cradled her face. Full, red lips taunted me. She wore a shimmering long-sleeved blue gown. A deep, plunging neckline stopped inches above her belly button. The intricate décolletage

revealed golden skin and teased my senses with glimpses of her tits. The form fit curved into her tiny waist, flared at her luscious hips, then slid down her legs, fabric pooling around her feet.

She stumbled entirely in, closed the door behind her, and leaned against it. Her gaze fell on me, and her beautiful mouth opened in surprise.

“I didn’t know someone occupied the room.”

My fingers touched my mask. I hadn’t removed the thing in case one of my brothers invaded my privacy with someone in tow. But I was shoeless and shirtless.

She turned. “I’ll find another room to rest in.”

Leaning back again, I eyed her. My mouth watered at the sight of her shapely ass, where the tips of her hair flirted. I longed to run my fingers through the thick mass. “Stay,” I told her.

Without further encouragement, she turned and floated to the bed. Instead of sitting on the side near the door, she came to me and plopped on the edge, inches away. She eyed the empty whiskey bottle on the nightstand next to the highball glass I’d used.

“We’ve both drunk a lot tonight,” she said gravely.

Although her balance and slurry tone pointed to a large amount, I didn’t know how much she’d had. I remained silent, not in the mood to talk. Not in the mood for anything. It was rare I drank to the point of drunkenness. I didn’t like hangovers, and I hated the foggy memories. My brothers said I wasn’t a drinker.

Fuck, according to them, I wasn’t a fucking human.

“You seem sad,” she said, her observation surprising me. It had been a while since anyone looked closely enough to see anything other than entitlement and assholery. “Are you?” she pressed. “I am. Today has been shittier for me than in a very long time. I don’t think I would’ve come otherwise.”

I hadn't turned on the lamp on the nightstand, so I couldn't gauge the color of her eyes, but her light, clean fragrance held hints of coconut and arrowed to my head, awakening my cock.

My sudden lust annoyed me and stirred my temper. I didn't engage in one-night stands with strangers. Ever.

Once again, I sat up. "If you'll excuse me," I said politely and indicated she slide over with a nod of my head.

"You don't have to leave on my account. Truly. I'll go back downstairs and wait for my sister." She waved a slim, manicured hand. "She's with the Count of Monte Cristo." She laid a finger on her chin and thought for a moment. "No, I think he's D'Artagnan."

"Who?"

"My sister's date. He's blond and dressed to the nines." She paused. "Well, everyone is, and he still stands out. So maybe to the eighteens?"

"He wishes he was D'Artagnan. Think Porthos. Loud, obnoxious, and ostentatious."

"You're being unfair," she chastised around a chuckle. "Porthos turns out to be a profoundly devoted friend and a fearless fighter."

I nodded. A ridiculous rule for tonight's masquerade required everyone to remain anonymous, so I stayed silent about my cousin.

She slid over, affording me the room needed to move off the bed. I didn't. Her sweeping glance settled on my bare chest. "You're not even in a tuxedo," she said with disappointment. "I was hoping to guess your musketeer counterpart."

Relaxing against the pillows, I offered her a heavy-lidded smile. "Why don't you take a guess anyway?" I challenged, enjoying our simple conversation.

She cocked her head to the side, gazing at my lips and chin, before meeting my eyes again. Her silence stretched. I thought she mightn't give her opinion, then her mouth curved into a half-smile. "Athos. Definitely Athos."

“I’m not old,” I said sharply.

She laughed again. “Neither was he, but he was D’Artagnan’s mentor, an elegant nobleman who didn’t flaunt his wealth. He didn’t need to, comfortable with his place in society.” She slipped a swath of hair behind her ear. “But he was a deeply troubled man,” she whispered. “Filled with tragic secrets.”

My nostrils flared, and I wondered who she was. Even in my drunkenness, I would’ve remembered her from a previous meeting. Wouldn’t I? But for the life of me, I couldn’t recall the soft sensuality of her voice or her golden skin enhanced by straight, dark hair.

She turned back to me. “Am I right?”

“Perhaps.”

“Tragedy lives within everyone, doesn’t it?”

Women were to be revered and protected, loved, and cherished. If my father had adhered to chivalry, my mother might’ve been celebrating her milestone birthday.

Grief, loneliness, alcohol, and lingering anger at my brothers led me to insanity. The invasion of my privacy didn’t matter. Sliding over, I tugged the girl into the crook of my arm. She didn’t resist.

She turned to me, lifted, and pressed her lips against the base of my neck. Desire shot through me, and I tightened my hold on her. Her warm breath sighed against my skin. I groaned, my engorged cock throbbing. I stayed still, not wanting to interrupt the moment. And, yet, I wanted to continue our conversation and hear her infectious laughter and musical voice. I wanted to ask what tragedy had befallen her. But then mutual grief, or talk of it, would be a mood killer.

She trailed kisses up my neck, her mouth soft and warm. The feathers on her mask tickled me while the crystal abraded my skin. I considered removing my mask and then hers, then left them be. Hers was a little askew but still in place. And maybe, this anonymity was what we both needed. We could be

other incarnations of ourselves. Carefree. Even a little decadent.

Her lips brushed mine in a slow, sensual touch. I drew in a sharp breath, my dick hurting.

Gasping, she pulled back and stared at me. She scrambled to her feet, her breasts heaving. Our sudden separation left me with an odd sense of loneliness.

“Oh my gosh,” she squeaked, “I’m so sorry.” She backed away.

I grabbed her arms and halted her. If she wanted to leave, I wouldn’t detain her, but if believing she’d offended me drove her away, I’d set her straight.

“No, it’s fine,” I muttered, guiding her back to the bed and pulling her beside me again. Settled against the pillows with her in my arms, I relaxed. “I’d be fucking thrilled if you did it again. If you don’t mind, of course.”

I looked at her as she tilted her head to me. She frowned. “Why would I mind?”

“Unless I’ve missed my guess, you’re as fucked up as me. I have been drinking for hours.”

She giggled. “I’ve been drinking a while,” she confessed. “It might have been hours. It might’ve been days.”

I laughed. “Days?”

“Maybe not days. I don’t think I drink very often, and I don’t drink such expensive champagne. Out of my price range.”

Another tidbit to her identity and an interesting one. She didn’t socialize in my circles.

“I have a champagne bucket list.” She laughed again. “No pun intended.”

“Noted,” I told her. “You’re telling me you have a list of champagnes you’d like to taste?”

She snapped her fingers and pointed at me. “Exactly.”

“Give me the names of your top two.”

“A Taste of Diamonds is the *crème de la crème*. I don’t need to name any others on my list. I can’t pronounce its French name right now, but it’s expensive. Ex. Pen. Sive,” she said, laughing wildly.

“You can pronounce it under different circumstances?” I asked, intrigued.

She giggled. “*Oui, monsieur. Ma...mère...*” She hesitated. “*Nouvelle-Orléans*. She was from New Orleans.”

“Ah. You would say: *Ma mère était de la Nouvelle-Orléans*.”

“You know French?” she gasped. “My father always said I should learn Spanish, German, or Mandarin, due to the economic benefits. He probably added German because of his Irish and German roots. My mama’s grandfather only spoke French until he was seven or eight. She was immensely proud of our Afro-Creole heritage.”

“Your explanation should’ve been, ‘*Ma mère était de la Nouvelle-Orléans. J’ai un héritage afro-créole et j’ai appris le français grâce à elle*’.”

“*J’ai appris?* I learned?” she asked with hesitation.

I nodded.

After another moment of silence, she said, “*Grâce à elle?* Because of her? Hmmm. I learned French because of her?”

“*Très bon*.”

She beamed at me. “Why did you learn French?”

“*Ma mère était française*.”

“Your mother was French?”

“Yes.”

“We sound perfect for one another,” she said dreamily.

I smiled at her sentiment but otherwise didn’t comment. For whatever reason, she broke into peals of laughter. Her joy was contagious.

“I just remembered,” she said when her amusement settled. “Spades was on my champagne list, too.”

“I think you mean Ace of Spades,” I told her, wondering if her subject changes were as abrupt when she was sober.

She nodded. “I think I do.”

“Would you like a bottle of Goût de Diamants?”

“Noooo,” she sang, then held up two fingers. “I’d like two bottles. One to drink and one to save. Will to my future children. Assets other than money in the bank are so important.”

“It is,” I agreed.

“I want to work and build my nest egg before having children.”

“Work?” I echoed. Everyone saw my ideas about women in the workplace as outdated and chauvinistic. No one bothered to consider my mother might still be alive if she hadn’t been a career woman. “You want to work?”

“Yep,” she drawled, still looking at me.

Worried she’d get a crook in her neck, I adjusted my body so we faced one another.

“Work?” I repeated with distaste.

“Work,” she said firmly. “Loosely defined as activities performed to earn a livelihood.”

“Smart ass,” I said without rancor. “I know what work is. I just...you shouldn’t work.”

“Then I shouldn’t eat?” she asked. “Everyone must earn wages to survive.”

I wouldn’t see her again after tonight. And, even if I did, I doubted I’d remember her. Once she left, I’d ring for another drink, so continuing this conversation was pointless.

“What’s another champagne on your list?”

Lifting her hand, she ran her fingers through my hair and smiled at me. “I want to kiss you again.”

My cock had just settled down, but he stirred and hardened again, my balls tightening. My fingers tangled in her hair, and she sighed, stirring tenderness in my chest.

“A part of me wants to remove our masks,” she whispered, mewling as I massaged her scalp. “My sister tells me to live with audacity. She does. Tonight, in my disguise, I can, too.”

I drew her closer and slanted my mouth over hers. Immediately, she parted her lips and allowed my tongue entry. She tasted sweet, of peaches and orange blossoms. Yielding to me, she melted into my touch, her tongue dueling with mine. The sweet kiss quickly blazed out of control, turned hot, and demanding.

Desire shot through me, and I slipped my hand into her bodice, brushing a taut nipple. I froze.

“Don’t stop.”

God knows I didn’t want to. “You’re drunk.” For the first time, I detected a slur in *my* words.

“You are too, so we’re even. You aren’t taking advantage of my drunkenness and vice versa.”

Logic failed me, blocking any counterarguments. Besides, I couldn’t remember the last time sinking my cock into a particular woman felt so urgent. “There are condoms on hand. Probably in both nightstands.”

“You don’t know?”

“This is my brother and sister-in-law’s house. And this is the room our youngest brother crashes in. Knowing him, he’d want quick access on whichever side of the bed he finds himself.”

“You have those too?”

“Those?”

“Siblings,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

I barked a laugh at her disgruntlement. “I do.”

“Let’s not discuss them. Before I forget, I’m on the pill.”

If we were acquainted, I'd come in her. For all I knew, she lied about contraception. Besides, the pill wouldn't protect from STDs.

"Holy fuck," she said suddenly. "I don't think I'm practicing debauchery correctly. We aren't supposed to ruin the vibe by discussing condoms and birth control. Nor should we concern ourselves with our drunken state."

"Debauchery is one thing. Irresponsibility is something else altogether," I told her.

"Right."

"We can talk," I offered. "If things have gotten too awkward, and the, er, vibe too ruined."

"Do you ever feel so lost and alone, so misunderstood, you long for a connection with someone?" she said softly. "If only for a brief moment?"

"Sometimes. No one would believe me. Many forget I'm human. With feelings and emotions. They don't bother to understand me." My admission welled from a deep, dark place hidden from the world. This stranger had slipped past my guard, and I'd opened to her. Knowing I'd never see her again helped.

"I like you a lot, but it's an illusion of the masquerade. Real life has a way of disappointing us. We could talk. We *should* talk. I don't want to. What I want is to do something wild and impulsive."

I slipped my hand into her bodice again and caressed her magnificent tit. "Will you remember this impetuosity?" I asked, tracing my tongue over the shell of her ear and tweaking her nipple.

"Will you?" she retorted, breathy.

"Touché."

Reclaiming her lips, I pulled her closer.

Whoever this woman was, she had a mouth made for kissing. I nipped at her full lower lip and a sexy moan escaped her. When she parted her lips for me, I moved my mouth over

hers, savoring her sweet, fruity taste. Our lips attached, I flipped her onto her back and positioned myself over her, coaxing a gasp from her. I grabbed her arms and pinned them above her head, my fingers intertwining hers. She whimpered against my mouth and copied me, softly biting my lip.

I lifted my head, ready to devour her. Tenderness burst in my chest at her sweet smile.

We were both cast in shadows, the dimness of the lamps and their placement not allowing me a hint of her eye color. “We can remove our masks. Our identities will be known only to each other.”

“Must we? We can pretend we’re Batman and Batwoman. Catwoman and...Captain America.”

Grinning, I brushed my mouth over hers. “Ummm,” I said lazily. “You’re mixing your Universes.”

She giggled. “You’re a superhero fan?”

“In another time and place.”

She laid her hand against my cheek. “You sound so sad suddenly.”

I cleared my throat and turned away, resting my head on my pillow. “Why don’t we talk, sweetheart?”

“I don’t want to,” she pouted, nudging her head against me.

Smiling, I settled her into the crook of my arm, and she kissed my chest. Urgent need pulsed through me. If I didn’t sink into her pussy, I might die—

Humming broke the silence and graduated to singing. “There’s a place in France where the naked ladies dance; there’s a hole in the wall where the men look at alllll.” She finished on a high note, drawing out the monosyllabic word with decent skill.

“That’s a hootchy-kootchy dance.”

“You’re not dancing.”

She giggled. “Not where you can see. In my head...” Her voice trailed off. “*Anyway*, you can also say hoochie coochie.

A lot of variations exist. Rumor suggests someone stole the song from the people of an Algerian village. No one ever had it copyrighted.”

For a man who hated trivial bullshit, her bits of nonsensical fluff thoroughly entertained me. “Interesting.”

“The guy introduced it to America at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition.”

“What guy?”

She thought for a moment. “Fuck if I know,” she retorted with wild laughter. “Wanna hear another one?”

If it kept that animation in her voice, I did. “Go for it.”

Sitting up, she fluttered her hand against her chest, then cleared her throat. “In the land of Oz, where the women wear no bras, and the men don’t care ‘cause they wear no underwear, and there’s a big fat genie with an artificial weenie, so now you know why you shouldn’t gooooo.”

The only fucking reason I laughed my ass off at this version was because I was drunker than I thought.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. “What do you think?”

“Brava, madame,” I chortled, clapping. “Brava!”

“Are you feeling better now?” she whispered, settling her upper body against my chest, the beading on her décolletage cool against my skin. She kissed me. “Did your sadness go away?” she asked after a moment of losing ourselves in each other.

The day, the *night*, had been fucking torture and left me sentimental. Fuck, a little vulnerable, too, if I was honest, gentling my typically hardened worldview. Any other time, I would’ve scoffed at her naiveté. In the here and now, her softness opened a font of longing that turned into a physical ache. Desire turned into a scorching need. Come morning, when life returned to normal and I stood alone in the world, I’d embrace my usual routine.

Reversing our positions, I slid my fingers over her, caressing her body as I explored her with my lips, trailing

kisses from her mouth to her softly rounded chin, the delicate rim of her ears, and the column of her neck.

She writhed, lifting her hips, and grinding against my hard dick.

Pulling my mouth away, I leaned back, wishing for a glimpse of her. She licked her lips, and my cock pulsed.

“Hurry.” Her breath fanned my cheek, stoking my need to sink into her.

On my feet, I unbuckled my trousers and opened my fly, then removed them and my boxers, freeing my erection. In the nightstand drawer, I discovered plenty of condoms, as expected. She watched me place the rubber, lifting and taking off her black lacy thong and tossing them to the side.

Once I guaranteed our protection, I grabbed the excess fabric of her dress and raised it slowly, caressing each inch of skin I revealed. Her bare pussy made my mouth water. Her legs opened, her swollen, wet clit winking at me.

The mystery of her identity deepened my arousal. Though I longed to discover who she was, our anonymity excited me.

I resumed our previous position and readied myself to enter her. At last, I buried myself inside her warm pussy in one thrust. We both gasped at the entry of my cock. Pinning her hands above her head again, I pounded into her. She bucked against me, the walls of her pussy clenching around my dick. She moaned. I was so deep inside her, each slight shudder she made vibrated through me.

I released her arms, opting to lay my cheek against the crown of her head as I slowed my thrusts into her, her full lips sucking the tender skin of my neck, the action nearly undoing me. She bent her legs at her knees, opening wider for me. I pressed into her, my strokes speeding up. I tilted my head, my lips seeking hers, both of us moaning when our mouths reconnected. The kiss was gentle and tender. Our orgasms burst upon us in seconds, her body convulsing around me as cum exploded into the condom.

Pulling out of her, I collapsed onto the bed, taking her into my arms as I did so. I closed my eyes, our fucking robbing the last of my energy. I drifted to sleep with my nose buried in her hair, inhaling the coconut scent of her strands. Her breath slowed, and the rise and fall of her chest against me evened. She had drifted off to sleep. A moment later, darkness engulfed me.



The next morning, I awakened alone and chalked my erotic recollections to whisky-induced hallucinations. The lacy black panties tangled in the sheets proved the previous night a reality, not an alcohol-fueled fantasy.

Chapter One

Noah

One month later

I glanced at my watch, impatient for my guest to arrive. My vantage point from table eighty-five afforded me an excellent view of the restaurant, so I turned toward the entrance. A small party of six crowded the space, awaiting a table at Camille's Bistro, a French restaurant attracting Manhattan's upper echelon.

Graham Morgan's unusual lateness annoyed me. Another few minutes chugged by, and I clenched my jaw, glaring at my Rolex again. The next time I looked toward the hostess station, Graham had arrived, strolling past the would-be diners. Pausing, he surveyed his surroundings. For the most part, he was one of the most punctual people I knew. I'd learned my fair share of what it meant to be a savvy businessman from my father. Still, Graham had whipped me into shape by advising me and setting an example on how to stay at the top of my game, though he was only two years older.

Catching sight of me, Graham brushed past the maître d with a nod of acknowledgment. My attempt to push back my annoyance at his tardiness met little success. This evening, of all evenings, he was late. But he had a lovely wife and a young child, who were first in his life.

Perhaps, my aversion to settling down—due to damn good reasons in my estimation—increased my aggravation. *I* saw Graham Morgan as a businessman who understood time equaled money.

"Noah! What can I do for you?" Graham asked by way of greeting as he pulled the burgundy upholstered chair from under the table and seated himself.

His abruptness stemmed from wanting to get to Soraya, his wife. We shared many similarities, Graham and me. We'd both lost our mothers early in our lives. Their deaths had shaped,

defined, our lives. Yet, Graham had been willing to put his heart on the line again to find the love of a good woman.

Eventually, I hoped to marry, but I'd never risk the devastation I felt after my mother's death. Not even when my father died had I felt so broken and lost. My criteria for a would-be wife were hard to find—I had no desire for children, and I didn't want a working woman.

My mother's plane had gone down as she'd returned home early from an unsuccessful business trip over a project she'd been working on for months. She'd been the head of Keegan Media Group, and her pet project had acquired advertising and publicity contracts for certain perfume houses. Mother's brilliance and shrewd business acumen convinced my father to go public with Keegan Enterprises.

She had catapulted the Keegans to billionaires. I was Barron Trump before there *was* a Barron Trump. My mother had loved me as fiercely as his adored and protected him.

I lived my entire life in luxury with servants, private schools, limos, exclusive vacations, and custom-made wardrobes.

In my estimation, the facts of my mother's death made the tragedy much more pointless. Had she been a billionaire's wife on do-good committees and the mother who had loved me unconditionally, she would still be alive.

“Noah, do you care to let me know why you asked for this meeting?” Graham didn't sound amused.

“Amage is launching their new perfume in eighteen months,” I said, not wanting to waste time on what could've been. My voice remained even, just short of cold. *He* had the family; I didn't.

Graham's eyebrows rose, and he studied me. “Your company is always a shoo-in for the deal. Amage has awarded Keegan Media Group their last several contracts, so I wasn't aware you had concerns.”

Of all Keegan Enterprises' subsidiaries, I kept a particular watch over KMG. Or I thought I had. Until betrayal

undermined a pet project to honor my mother and jeopardized the Amage contract. “I wanted to check in with you, ensure everything is going smoothly, so I can set my plan of action accordingly.” In my determination to best Sauncier, I didn’t want an overbid hurting Keegan Enterprises. One falling domino created a chain effect. “Market volatility continues to concern me.”

The arrival of our waiter prevented Graham’s response.

“Mr. Morgan, sir, a pleasure to see you.”

“Thank you, Alf,” Graham said.

Alf was a pleasant man with round cheeks and a white beard. During the holidays, he worked as Santa at a local mall. He’d been part of the bistro’s staff for several years. The first time he introduced himself as Alf, I thought he was shitting me. It sounded awfully close to *elf*, and damned if he didn’t remind me of the jolliest one. Not to mention *Alf*, the alien life form from Melmac. Later, I discovered *my* Alf’s name was Alphonse, who’d been called Alf for as long as he remembered.

Alf turned to me and gestured to my empty glass. I missed him taking Graham’s order. “Would you like to order anything from the bar, sir? Another highball? A Vodka Martini like Mr. Morgan?”

Two highballs were my quota. “I’m fine at the moment, Alf, thanks.”

It didn’t take long for the waiter to serve Graham’s drink. Once he tasted the martini and nodded in approval, Alf set menus in front of us and walked away.

Graham tasted his drink again. “You’re in a good position right now. If market volatility is your concern, you insult me.” Judging by his grin, he wasn’t the least bit offended. “Every several years, Amage releases a limited-edition fragrance. You make a perfunctory bid but always win the contract. Keegan Media Group’s previous digital media campaign garnered widespread praise, acclaim, and several awards. I still don’t understand your need to meet two weeks earlier than usual.”

A dear friend, Graham, was also the man I entrusted with managing my finances and investments, the reason for the meeting this evening. My negotiations with Amage had become complicated and fraught with legal breaches. If I sued, I risked exposing family secrets. “Sauncier Marketing is presenting stiff competition.” Understatement.

I refrained from admitting my complacency toward Amage led to the betrayal of several employees. While I did feel a modicum of regret at how much I’d let my guard down, Sauncier’s bid had removed my boredom, fully engaging my competitive nature. I couldn’t back away now. If Sauncier won the profitable deal, *my* company would lose.

“If I’m correct, you lost a department head to them, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. Dorset was one of my top managers.” The messy situation caused heads to roll. In the intervening months, KMG had gotten entirely new upper management. I hadn’t built enough rapport with the men to trust them to do what I wanted with Amage. “Dorset was with us so long, I took his honesty for granted. When I turned my attention to Kee-Tel, he stabbed me in the back.”

Graham drank more of his martini and eyed me.

“Dorset signed a non-disclosure. If he reveals any trade secrets, his ass can be sued to hell and back.” Simple, on the surface.

“He should’ve had a non-compete clause in his contract, Noah.”

I scowled at Graham’s mild rebuke. “He did, but only for six months instead of the two years I insisted upon.” Hence, the head-rolling. Yet, I was angriest with myself. Because I slipped up and allowed men I believed trustworthy to oversee the creation of a limited edition perfume in honor of my mother, produced by the division that claimed her life. Now, I was scrambling to save the launch set to take place in a matter of months for a project in development for almost five years. Market oversaturation bred disloyalty. After tweaking the composition, Sauncier would release *Réjane, Eau Fraiche*, not

the expensive parfum I intended. The smell-alike would be sold significantly cheaper. “My parfum launch is in jeopardy of not being released,” I admitted.

“I’ll need to rerun numbers. KMG has pumped millions into this project.”

I nodded, then detailed what went wrong. “Amage still intends to release the scent,” I finished.

Graham removed his glasses and set them on the table, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Claude’s work?”

Undoubtedly. Claude Amage and I had a long, bitter history, so everything had to be perfect for this project. “I’ve tried meeting with the Amage brothers, but they are waiting on Claude.” I sighed, torn between desire for revenge, fury, and sheer fucking fatigue. Tasked with hiding my mother’s entire story from the world, and my siblings, exhausted me. “I’m searching for an account manager answerable only to me. He will update the packaging and create a new marketing campaign.”

“He?” Graham echoed with disapproval.

I ignored him. “I can’t have any other surprises disrupting my plans.”

He didn’t press the issue. “Have you talked to your legal department about your proprietary rights?”

“We decided against legal protections due to the perfume’s short on-sale period.” My father still headed the corporation when I presented the idea. He’d set terms I couldn’t alter when I took over a year later upon his death.

“Your private investments are doing well. Keegan Enterprises saw a thirty percent growth rate last year, despite market volatility and the Fed’s talk of raising interest rates faster than predicted. The company’s on track for an even bigger growth by year’s end.”

His words pleased me, so I forged ahead. “On New Year’s Day, my mother will have been dead for twenty years. I must get my plans back on track, despite Dorset and Sauncier.” My

calm voice and steady demeanor belied my heartache, fueled by grief never fully healed.

“Shit, man. Twenty years? It’s been that long?”

Graham was only seventeen when his mother died of cancer.

I nodded. “Yeah. I can’t believe it either.”

I was scheduled to go on the trip with my mother but had gotten sick. I was rushed to the hospital with a high fever. To be at my bedside, she’d cut her trip short. Instead...

I was twelve when she died, so I’d been without her most of my life. I would never get over losing her. Countless sleepless nights were spent thinking about her. Her absence tore me to shreds with each accomplishment, deep down, where no one could glimpse. My family’s dysfunction worsened those feelings. Mother had been our glue, and at her death, everything fell apart.

Talking about her opened too many wounds. After a heartbeat of pain-filled silence, I grabbed my menu, and Graham followed suit. Once we made our selections, I beckoned Alf.

“Are you two ready to order?” he asked, his informal manner appreciated.

Call me sentimental, yet he reminded me of my mother’s love for Christmas. I admitted how I missed her and how consumed with guilt I continued to be. If I hadn’t been ill...if I had gone with her as initially planned...if she had survived...

Her death ruined our family, devastated my father.

Destroyed me.

“Thank you, Alf,” Graham said. “I’d like the salmon en papillote with asparagus and garlic mashed potatoes.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Morgan.” Alf jotted Graham’s order and turned to me. “Mr. Keegan?”

“I’ll have the Bouillabaisse with a side of garlic bread.” Just as the words left my mouth, my stomach rumbled.

“Coming right up.”

“How’s the family?” I asked after Alf rushed away.

“Soraya is busy planning Lorenzo’s birthday party. He’s turning five next month.”

“Five already?”

Graham smiled. “We can’t believe it, either. All parents say this, but they grow up so fucking fast,” he gushed, his face lighting up as he rattled on. “And the older Chloe gets, the more she resembles my mother. It’s almost uncanny,” he said, referring to his daughter from a previous relationship.

“She’s what? Ten now?”

He nodded, then continued extolling their virtues. I regretted initiating the topic. Call me insensitive or a rotten friend but his droning about his family reminded me how much happier mine had once been.

“...work just to plan the celebration.”

The words caught my attention. “What?” I demanded, to be sure I heard correctly.

“Soraya took time off work just to plan the celebration?” He presented his words as a question, speaking with slow precision.

Bristling, I frowned in disapproval. It never failed to astonish me how little he worried about his wife’s safety. Graham earned more than enough money to support their family, so he shouldn’t allow her to do any tasks outside the home. Being a wife and mother was a full-time job needing a woman’s undivided attention. Therefore, I didn’t see the point in combining that with the stress of managing a professional life.

He raised an eyebrow and picked up the martini. After tasting the drink, he frowned at me. “Do you have anything to say, Noah?”

I nodded, unconcerned at his reaction. “You still let your wife work?”

He gulped half the martini. “A, you already knew. B, what the hell do you mean ‘let her work’?” He stared at me like I’d

sprouted another head. “Soraya would have my dick if I told her she wasn’t allowed outside the house.”

“Exactly what I said,” I snapped, not appreciating his twisting my words to turn me into an ogre. “You two don’t need the money, so she has no reason to work. And I don’t mean to hold her as a prisoner, Graham.”

He finished the martini, set the glass on the table, and scowled. Every time I expressed my feelings about working women, he pretended shock.

“Maybe she fucking wants to work? *My* wife will continue to work until she decides not to. Ida Goldman retired months ago. Soraya has taken over the column full-time.”

I ignored news of Ida Goldman. “I disagree with that choice.”

“Well, that’s pretty damn cheeky, considering it isn’t your choice to make.”

I raised my hands in surrender, not wanting a full-blown argument between us in this setting. “I’m just saying, man. A woman shouldn’t have to endure the stress of a job.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “You sound so goddamn sexist right now! Are you going to bar your future wife from working?”

“Plenty of women prefer being a housewife instead of a working woman.” Except I hadn’t found her. At least not anyone I’d want with the Keegan name. “I have a lengthy list to choose from if I desire.” Lies, but fuck it.

Graham offered a small smile. Instead of calling me out on the fabrication, he said, “Many of those women are also gold diggers, and you know it.”

Yeah, and like the gold-digger extraordinaires they were, they also wanted my children to milk the golden calf dry. “I have enough sense to avoid them.”

He studied me. “Instead of worrying about what might be, embrace what is, Noah. I didn’t know you when your mother

was killed, but the idea that it is too dangerous for a woman to work has morphed into insanity. Plain fucking stupidity.”

At my scowl, he glared at me.

“Fuck you,” he said, answering my unvoiced anger. He was uncanny like that. “Your hobby is scuba diving. The last time I checked, that’s fucking dangerous and isn’t required. Ever thought of hanging up your fins to keep yourself alive?”

“That’s different,” I snapped and raised my hand to forestall the question I couldn’t answer. “And don’t ask me how. You already know.”

Graham lifted a brow. “Do I?” he demanded, then sighed. “I’m not a psychiatrist, but it sounds like you still suffer from the trauma of your mother’s death. You’re obsessive about a working woman. Do you even remember *why* you don’t want women in the workplace?”

“Business trips might take them away from their families forever,” I said without a second thought. “My father died of a heart attack. It could’ve just as easily been my mother. Her work kept her stressed out.” I glanced away, the words lodging in my throat demanding I release them. “We were happy until the last few months of her life. Six months before her death, she had a heart attack.” Nausea twisted in my gut. I was revealing a secret I’d sworn to my parents I’d never tell. Yet I respected the hell out of Graham. Whenever I mentioned Soraya not working, his disapproval reminded me no one knew the entire story. “She hadn’t been herself for a couple days. It had been stressful at the office, so Dad insisted she stay home. I don’t remember why I was home that Friday. She couldn’t take a fucking break, even for her health. She was in bed, reading reports, and I was in the room to spend time with her. Shit happened so fast. Sweat began pouring from her and, suddenly, she couldn’t breathe. I ran to her bedside. She looked at me and went limp against her pillows. I tried performing CPR. I broke one of her fucking ribs. EMTs arrived, though I can’t recall dialing 911.”

“Maybe one of your staff did.”

“Perhaps. Dad never told my sisters and brothers. He didn’t want to stress them. I went to Switzerland with my mother after the hospital discharged her. She completed her recovery, and we came back to the States. A few weeks later, we lost her in a fucking plane crash,” I added bitterly.

Graham swallowed, nodded. “I understand your reasons a little better. It has nothing to do with business trips.”

At this point in my life, it didn’t matter. My mother had dodged death, but the Grim Reaper insisted he wanted her and stole her anyway.

“A woman will come along at the most unexpected time, Noah,” Graham inserted. “What you think you want in the future Mrs. Keegan won’t matter considering who she is and the joy she brings to you.”

I raised my hands. “Spare me, Graham. Few people meet their soulmates. You are one of the lucky ones. I’m happy for you, but I don’t hold to that same belief—”

“I didn’t either—”

“This meeting isn’t to discuss my personal life,” I interrupted.

“You’re right. We’ve talked about this a million times, and you’re still a mule-headed jackass. Let’s change the subject.”

I let his insult slide. Though Graham disagreed with my stance, he had enough regard for me to respect my opinion, so I’d return the favor. “I think that’s best.”

Alf walked toward our table, carrying a silver tray. After setting his load on the empty table next to us, he doled out our food.

“The Bouillabaisse with a side of garlic bread for Mr. Keegan and salmon en papillote with asparagus and garlic mashed potatoes for Mr. Morgan. Can I get y’all anything else?”

Graham handed his empty glass to the waiter. “Another Martini.”

“All right. It’ll be just a moment, sir.”

“Give me a day or two,” Graham said after Alf went to fulfill the order. “Let me do a little research on the House of Amage. I’m sure there’s more to it than meets the eye.”

Much more, though it was personal and not financially based, as Graham alluded.

Nodding, I unwrapped the cloth napkin to grab the soup spoon.

“I’m fucking starving,” he said, cutting into his salmon.

I inhaled the savory scent and shoved a spoonful into my mouth. The rich flavor of the stew hit my tongue and washed away the last of my aggravation.



Later that evening, I sat in my study, listening to Frank Sinatra and enjoying my favorite whisky. My live-in staff had retired for the evening, and those with their own homes were gone for the day. It was just me and the music. Several copies of *The City Post* lay on the desk, some older, others more recent. I wasn’t sure what compelled me to have my butler, Lumley, round up the newspaper with the *Ask Ida* column, but Graham had sounded so fucking proud of Soraya.

As I’d read the questions and the answers, I noted when the tone of the advice changed and became edgier, sharper. Funnier. Graham had every right to admire his wife.

Emptying my glass, I picked up the remaining newspaper I’d refused to read. I was on the cover toasting my sister-in-law on her birthday, the day that would’ve been my mother’s birthday, too.

Each time I thought about that night, I remembered the beauty in the blue dress, though a fog clouded my brain, caused by that evening’s drunkenness. I’d kept her panties, even jerked off to the lingering scent the material held. I regretted not getting contact information from her. Fuck, a name would’ve been nice.

She had the sweetest fucking mouth I’d ever tasted, the softest skin I’d ever touched. Always, in the wake of those

thoughts, I wondered if I had turned her into a goddess. But, perhaps, believing her perfect was the only way I accepted that I'd fucked a stranger.

Sighing, I opened the newspaper. I skipped the society pages. I couldn't bear to linger on photos from that night. For me, the moment the angel in blue floated into my room meant more to me than my brief appearance at Tina's party.

I found the *Ask Ida* column.

I recently began dating a new guy, and my dog growls every time my boyfriend visits. My guy gave me an ultimatum. Him or the canine. My BFF says a dog can't hold me at night, help pay the bills or send me flowers on special occasions. I don't want to lose this man, but I love my dog. Please help!

- Sydney

Listen to the dog, woman. His animal instinct is warning you away. Walk away now. Change your phone number and give your dog extra treats for being so protective of you.

I smiled at the advice. Once, I'd heard dogs detected evil. Though I'd never put much thought into the accuracy of the statement, Soraya's advice might've been based on scientific fact.

I scanned the next question, asking about a cat that jumped out of a cupboard and scared a man's new girlfriend. Today's column seemed primarily animal-focused. Just for the hell of it, I glanced at the last question.

Recently, my sister had a fling, but she was wasted and doesn't remember the encounter. She asked me directly, and I promised she was alone, asleep, and perfectly untouched. She was so relieved, saying she would be too old for such irresponsible behavior, I couldn't bear to admit that I found her asleep, smelling of sex, disheveled, and next to a man whose back was to me. She'd never met this guy before and hasn't seen him since. I couldn't see him, so I wouldn't know him if he waved at me on a subway. She hadn't slept the alcohol off and never drank as much. But she'd also recently lost her job. My sister needs to loosen up and live a little. She doesn't understand the concept

of a one-night stand. I say life is too short for regrets. I have two questions. How can I admit the truth? What can I do to help her release her inner thot?

- A Concerned Sister

A thot?

What the fuck was a thot?

Googling the definition would wait. I was curious about the answer, as this scenario hit close to my situation.

She may not have your free spirit. Appreciate the person she is. Mistakes are learning experiences, and she may hand you your ass for hiding the truth from her. Woman up, sister. She needs to know. When you two kiss and make up, encourage her to join a dating app. Make sure she stays away from the bottle before her dates to stay clear-headed. She just may find the man of her dreams.

I read the exchange several times, searching for clues linking this column to the woman I'd had. Yet, there was nothing. Unfortunately, in 21st-century America, one-night stands were a common part of life, so it was an almost non-existent chance that the subject of the question and the woman I'd fucked were the same. The words didn't magically shift and offer a defining hint when I reread the question. She'd wanted children, or so my foggy memory told me. If it made her happy...

Fuck. After another drink, I realized my imagination bestowed perfection on her. Reality wouldn't be so kind. I was also grasping at straws to discover her identity. It would never happen. My mysterious beauty would forever remain unknown.

Chapter Two

Ryan

One month later

I glanced at my image in the full-length mirror behind my bedroom door. A maverick strand of my jet-black curls broke loose and flopped into my eye, ruining my perfectly coiffed hair, slicked back into a low bun.

“Shit,” I muttered as I glanced around my small bedroom, hoping to spot a bobby pin to repair my hairdo. Even after applying a fuckton of gel and other styling products to my thick tresses, I still couldn’t get my hair to cooperate with me.

My gaze landed on a black pin resting on my dresser. Strutting to it, I made sure not to go too fast in my four-inch heels. Today of all days, I dared not trip and land flat on my perfectly made-up face. My stilettos might be too high for professionalism, but I found the height perfect for my tastes. I didn’t need to wear heels at five feet six, but I loved how they elongated my legs.

Stopping at my dresser, I grabbed the pin and focused on the little heart-shaped mirror above it, my hand freezing as I contemplated my meticulously styled hair. It looked good. Though the escaping curl ruined the sleekness I went for, I liked how the renegade tendril framed the right side of my face. Deciding the lock could stay free, I threw the pin back onto the dresser and returned to my bigger mirror.

Appraising my overall appearance, I swore my attire screamed BUSINESSWOMAN. Yet, my confidence dwindled as the clock crept closer to when I’d leave. Technically, I wore a suit. A suit by any other name was still a suit. Right?

Yep.

Who was I kidding?

My stunning, scarlet-red suit hugged my curvy figure and contrasted against my sun-kissed skin. Unfortunately, I didn't achieve the professionalism I wanted. While I couldn't magically lose the hips and ass my mother blessed me with, I could've downplayed them. The suit caught my attention on the department store rack and seemed perfect to wear to the office. It looked even better when I tried it on in the dressing room.

Red was my favorite color. The suit had my name written all over it from the moment I spotted it. Then, in my estimation, it had been perfect for a day at the office. Or, in this case, my interview.

Today, when the time arrived to put the plan into action, I wasn't sure I'd made a sound decision.

My interview to be an account manager at KMG, the well-known advertising division of a larger conglomerate dabbling in several industries, was the opportunity of a lifetime. The best impression meant the difference between my goal of a seven-figure bank account within ten years or halting that plan for the time being.

Noah Keegan, the majority stockholder in the company his grandfather had founded, was a rumored chauvinistic pig bastard and a hard-nosed, no-nonsense, impatient tyrant.

I wagged a disapproving finger at myself. "Remember your life goals, girl," I warned my reflection. Though allergic to bullshit, I was utterly over financially struggling.

If the rumors held even a bit of truth, the attire highlighting my femininity wouldn't go over well with Noah Keegan. Besides, deep down, my short skirt, stiletto heels, and form fit served as a *fuck you* to a fuckhead.

Those thoughts did nothing for my confidence, and I glared at myself.

However, his intolerance of women in the workplace must've been a lie, specifically in his office. The EEOC would've served him his ass on a platter. Perhaps, though,

dressing more masculine than typical for me would go over better with him.

Ten days ago, I took a leap of faith by applying for the position after Dakota, my older brother, tipped me off on the opening at Keegan Enterprises. For days, I'd stressed over my submission package, arranging my portfolio of the marketing campaigns I'd headed, refining my résumé, requesting the required three letters of reference to forward with my online application, and perfecting my cover letter. The process had been as time-consuming, nerve-racking, and comprehensive as an Ivy League school application. I'd even had to sign a non-disclosure!

While I had a business degree from NYU, with a concentration on marketing and management & organization, and had proven my worth at another advertising agency, a position at Keegan Enterprises was very coveted. According to Dakota, candidates much more qualified vied for the spot, so I hadn't stood much chance because. Against all odds and my brother's naysaying, I received the email inviting me to an interview. I couldn't let this opportunity go to waste, even if Noah Keegan's rumored power intimidated me.

My mom used to tell us no one was better, only different. He was in the top 1 percent of wealth distribution; I was in the bottom 20 percent. He mentioned his love of scuba diving in several interviews. I preferred tamer activities that kept me on solid ground, like yoga. He had a cock. I had a pussy. So, yeah, my mom was right. He was different. He'd made his money or inherited it, or whatever. I *would* make mine. He needed me for a marketing campaign. I needed him to hire me and pay my salary.

I'd carve a niche for myself in the rat race world of marketing and advertising, and no one, including him, would stop me from climbing the corporate ladder. But, if he was fair-minded, my potential boss would recognize my talent.

I gasped when I glanced at the black Coach watch I had gifted myself on my twenty-fifth birthday. I should've left five minutes ago. Hurrying into my living room, I collected my

purse and briefcase from my messy couch before dashing out of my second-floor apartment and rushing down the staircase.

Outside, I paused on the stoop, allowing the morning sunshine to hit my face. A guy who lived two doors down scooted over to give me room to walk down the five steps.

“Hey, Joe.” He had a friend who lived in my building, so his presence wasn’t unusual.

“What up, Ryan?” he asked, nodding. He sipped from a can of beer, half covered by a brown paper bag, and belched. “Can you spot me a nickel?”

I would need to borrow fingers and toes to correctly count how many times I’d given him five dollars in the three years I’d lived here. He rarely told me why he needed the money, and I never asked. Ignorance was best in this situation. Every now and then, he mentioned a meal or food for a dog I’d yet to see. This morning, I didn’t have a lone bill. His nickel consisted of two one-dollar bills, six quarters, five nickels (the coins), five dimes, and a handful of pennies. I’m positive it didn’t add up to five dollars, but it was all I had.

“Thanks.”

He had the nerve to sound annoyed. Getting to his feet, he looked me up and down before leaving.

Asshole. “Ohhhhhmmmm,” I chanted to recenter myself, although I couldn’t remember the last time I’d done yoga.

Directly across the street from my building stood a church over a century old. I’d never attended service and didn’t know if I ever would. After the loss of my parents, my beliefs were shaky at best.

Grimly, I shoved aside the thought. Religion need not enter my headspace. I walked down the steps, gritting my teeth as memories threatened to intrude.

“Behave, Sandy,” I growled once I sat in my light beige 2005 Volkswagen Beetle, so nicknamed because of her color.

Manhattan was one of the worst places to be a car owner. Still, sentimentality was a bitch paid for in time, patience, and

money, when I added the grand to my yearly budget for unavoidable parking tickets.

“Come on,” I encouraged, chiding myself again for not sending her to that car park in the sky.

Pumping the gas pedal harder, I asked my guardian angels to start Sandy. Arriving late for this interview would make an awful impression.

Soon, I’d buy myself a new car and keep Sandy in storage or take the subway like millions of other New Yorkers. But, despite how bad off she was, I couldn’t part with her. A decade ago, my parents gave me money on my birthday to save for a car when I turned eighteen. Four weeks later, on a bright Saturday morning, my behavior threatened that dream. On Monday, my parents expected me to withdraw the money from my savings and return it to them. Instead, they were stolen from us, and my life was never the same.

The car sputtered to life, and I said a silent prayer of thanksgiving as I drove away, knowing I would break the speed limit to arrive on time.



An older building on 5th Avenue housed Keegan Enterprises. The scourge gods were assholes to have unleashed such worldwide chaos, but here in the city, the traffic deities had become benevolent beings thriving from so many working from home.

As I turned Sandy into a space in the building’s garage, I decided I’d take the subway if I got the position. It wouldn’t be feasible to drive her to and from work daily.

In the elevator, two businessmen eyed me with curiosity. Although I blamed my outfit, unease prickled my skin.

The older guy opened the glass door leading into the building from the small area with the parking garage elevators.

“Thank you,” I murmured.

He nodded. I entered the lobby, quickly clearing the doorway so the two businessmen could continue. Bright

abstract art lent a pop of color, yet even in its starkness, the area was intimidating.

Swallowing, I walked to the gray marble circular desk, where a tanned man in a dark business suit monitored an obscene number of small video screens.

“May I help you?” he asked, meeting my gaze.

I smiled at his friendliness. “Could you direct me to Mister Keegan’s office?”

He straightened his tie, then buttoned his jacket. He reminded me a little of Channing Tatum, just with black hair and bronzed skin. “Which one?” he asked, not unkindly, glancing at the screens but still attuned to me.

“Noah Keegan.”

He scowled and brought his hand to his tie, revealing the small, clipped microphone. “Get to Frederick’s office,” he said, his other hand adjusting an earpiece unnoticed until then. “He’s locked out again.” He listened for a moment, then snickered. “Yeah, she probably buried the key. Later.” With his conversation over, he grabbed a clipboard. “Is he expecting you, ma’am?”

I glanced at the wall clock. 9:04. “Yes. I’m Ryan Hagen. I have an interview with Mr. Keegan—*Noah* Keegan—today.”

“You! You’re Hagen?” Eyes widening, he squirmed in his seat, suddenly ill-at-ease.

“Yes.” My stomach knotted. “I’m late. If you’ll be so kind...”

He smiled like a cat seconds away from fucking up the canary. “Floor twelve, *Ms.* Hagen.”

I frowned at his emphasis on ‘Ms.’ “Thank you.”

I punched floor twelve’s button inside the elevator, still puzzling over the guard’s reaction.

It almost seemed he’d been expecting a...holy shit.

A ludicrous possibility hit me. Could it be they didn’t know I was a woman? I’d checked my sex off on my application, so

they must know.

Right?

My heartbeat increased, and I wrestled my nerves under control. Noah Keegan could *not* see how he intimidated me because of a silly rumor. In modern-day America, he would've faced numerous lawsuits if he rejected hires based on gender, so it couldn't be true.

The reminder calmed my nerves a little.

"Floor twelve," the robotic monotone announced as the elevator stopped too soon. I wasn't entirely composed yet.

I stepped out of the elevator, and the large, cheery room instantly eased my fears. The Noah Keegan of rumor wouldn't allow the yellow walls or the four English Ivy. One sat on the large walnut desk, the other on the table in the middle of the waiting area, and one on each end table, which stood on either side of the wall and sat between four chairs.

"May I help you?"

I looked over my shoulder.

A petite woman with a blonde pixie cut and dressed in a calf-length sedate gray serge suit stood behind me, a long, dimly lit corridor in the background.

Smiling, I turned. "I'm Ryan Hagen. Mister Keegan is expecting me for an interview."

Her porcelain skin turned paler. "You! You're Hagen?" she asked slowly, as if she didn't want to face the inevitable.

I shifted my briefcase to my other hand, the weight of my purse hanging on my shoulder suddenly as heavy as lead. Exasperation combined with my returning unease. "Is there a problem, Ms...?"

"Mikes. *Mrs.* Mikes. Mister Keegan's secretary," she supplied, pity warring with apprehension in her blue eyes.

"Ms. Hagen—" She stopped and pursed her lips.

I eyed her, noting the silver wedding band on her left finger. "Say what's on your mind, Mrs. Mikes," I said gently, not

wanting to upset her. Unfortunately, I had a nasty habit of snapping at anyone in the path of any emotional distress I experienced. Hence, me taking up yoga. And relaxing music. And Zen spaces.

I'd heard weed worked wonders too, but I hadn't gotten that desperate yet. Marijuana is legal now in many places, including New York State. Still, I'd never enjoyed being under the influence of anything except champagne. It was such a weakness I'd created a bucket list of vintages to experience.

The silence stretched as tautly as my nerves. The secretary's delay held *me* up, guaranteeing my tardiness. Hopefully, my almost boss would understand his employees were partly to blame for my extreme lateness. "Mrs. Mikes?"

"Please forgive me, Ms. Hagen. I'll show you to Mr. Keegan's office."

I followed Mrs. Mikes down the long, twisty hallway with an array of doors and arches, frowning at more abstract paintings hanging on the walls between the many entrances. I preferred Impressionist works and had never been able to make sense of abstract art. But maybe I just wasn't creative enough to get it.

"Here we are," Mrs. Mikes said at the end of the hallway. She retrieved a ring of keys from her jacket pocket. Unlocking the heavy wooden door, she opened it and placed her hand inside the room. In seconds, light illuminated the office.

"Excuse me for a moment, Ms. Hagen," she said, leaving me alone without waiting for a reply.

I clenched my teeth at the hi-tech, sophisticated elegance. The furniture—black, sleek, and devoid of warmth—stood boldly out from the austere gray décor.

It wasn't long before Mrs. Mikes returned and used a remote control to open the draperies.

"Ms. Hagen, I'm afraid Mister Keegan has been unavoidably detained. He asked me to extend his apologies and request you to be kind enough to wait."

“I don’t have a choice if I want the interview, Mrs. Mikes,” I answered, annoyed and disappointed. “Of course, I’ll wait.”

On the bright side, I would have time to control the butterflies in my stomach.

“Thank you, Ms. Hagen. Please make yourself comfortable.” Mrs. Mikes grimaced as she vacated the office and closed the door behind her.

All the courage I had mustered to meet the controversial Noah Keegan fled.

“Mr. Keegan would understand if you left,” Mrs. Mikes said when she came in an hour later to check on me.

“Maybe I should reschedule.” Grabbing my purse, I reached for my briefcase. “Does he have an opening tomorrow?”

Mrs. Mikes blinked. “You’d want another interview with him?”

“Uh, yeah.” Her question caught me off guard. “Why wouldn’t I?”

She pursed her lips. “I’ll have to let Mr. Keegan know. Wait here, please.” She walked out.

Five minutes later, she returned. “Mr. Keegan says he’ll understand if you leave, but there will be no other interviews. His schedule is incredibly tight, and you were late.”

“I arrived on time, Mrs. Mikes.” Technically. I was in the building before nine. Or the parking garage. Fuck. *Somewhere* on Keegan property.

“You were eight minutes late, Ms. Hagen.”

“He wasn’t here,” I protested.

Mrs. Mikes placed her hands on her hips. “If you want the interview, wait for him to arrive.”

“Fine.”

Again, an undefinable look came across her face. “You still intend to stay?”

“I have no choice,” I responded, suspicion welling into me. This almost seemed to be a coordinated effort to drive me away. “I will stay. If you’d like, I can come into the reception area.”

“No, that won’t be necessary.” She turned toward the door. “Please, just wait here,” she said, closing me in the office again.

And wait I did. And wait. And wait. Mrs. Mikes brought in sandwiches and coffee at noon, but I was too angry to eat.

In reversed roles, I wouldn’t have gotten to the interview stage for being so fucking late. Yet, I assumed Keegan used his position to waste people’s time.

Several times, I almost left, but my anger notched up as the hours ticked away. I would wait for his ass if it fucking killed me. I’d wait for that sonofabitch if I had to go without food and water for the rest of the day.

A small part of me, the *evil* side, shoved away the *almost seemed a coordinated effort* and swore his behavior was fucking methodical. This was his clever little way of getting rid of *Ms.* Hagen. I had no evidence to support my theory he practiced such savage moves. Besides, despite the security guy’s genuine surprise, he allowed me to come up. If Noah Keegan wanted me gone, wouldn’t he have made me wait in the building’s lobby? Or in the waiting area on this floor?

After another ninety minutes, the office door swung open, and Noah Keegan strolled in. I wasn’t prepared for his tanned skin, ebony hair, and eyes so blue, he must wear contacts. His good looks stole my breath.

He walked over to the couch where I sat and extended his hand, surprise and disapproval written over his handsome face. He towered over me, his long legs braced apart. His buttoned suit jacket hid his belt and fly, so being eye-level with his crotch wasn’t as obscene as it might’ve been.

He dropped his unaccepted hand to his side. “You must be Ryan Hagen. I’m Noah Keegan. Sorry to have kept you waiting, Ms. Hagen. And...”

I got to my feet, all the better to glare at him, and his voice trailed off.

His calm demeanor and blasé words dissolved my fragile placidity. His looks and position be damned.

“How dare you! You pompous assho—”

Anger flashed in his eyes, and I drew in a deep breath.

We were inches apart. Honestly, I don’t know how our bodies didn’t touch, even accidentally. He hadn’t backed away when I stood, but for me to move meant retreating, *giving in*, even if I didn’t know how.

The warmth of his body and his scent left me giddy. His mouthwatering cologne smelled of spice and leather. The fragrance was recognizable, but I couldn’t name it or remember why it was so familiar. Still, my annoyance remained, perhaps even ratcheted up a degree by an incongruous wish we could’ve met in a different setting.

Or not. A certified fucking asshole, a savage suit, stood close to me. Meeting him anywhere would’ve produced the same result.

I licked my lips, and his gaze dropped to my mouth.

“Mr. Keegan,” I began again in a soft, controlled monotone. “I arrived here this morning at the time appointed in my confirmation email to interview for the Amage project manager position. Instead, I sat cooling my heels for four and a half hours.” Those words, his narrowing eyes, were a powder keg reigniting my temper. “You waltz in here like it doesn’t matter!”

The hot ire on his face warred with his icy stare. “Ms. Hagen, you’re out of line,” Noah said with deceptive calm, his lips as tempting as his smell. “I sent my regrets earlier and apologized when I walked in. That’s as much as you get. I explain my actions to no one. Certainly not to a potential employee. Your outburst is unprofessional. There will be times in this business when you will wait, and if you can’t handle it, you’re in the wrong profession.”

The wrong profession? Fucking asshole! “No, Mister Keegan,” I said evenly, turning slightly to snatch up my purse and briefcase. Ignoring my breast brushing against his arm, I straightened and faced him. “I can assure you I’m not in the wrong profession.”

Noah arched an eyebrow, sculpted to precision. I wished they were professionally shaped, but this man was blessed with perfection.

I lifted my chin. “I just have the wrong company.”

His firm jaw relaxed, softening his oh-so-handsome face, which registered surprise. But his undisguised admiration captivated me. For the briefest moment, I went still, unable to move or look away.

His gaze roamed over my breasts, lingered on my hips, then traveled down my legs. My outfit wasn’t lost to him. The sharp intake of breath told me as much. The startling blue intensity of his eyes showed me as much. His appraisal flushed me with heat and melted my insides. An eternity passed, and still, we stared at one another, neither of us speaking. I didn’t like him, and I was damned sure he couldn’t stand me. Words would ruin our mutual carnality.

He cleared his throat. Damn him.

“You’re no longer interested in the position with Keegan Media Group, Ms. Hagen?”

I frowned. He was being purposely obtuse. “You’re very perceptive, Mister Keegan,” I said with sarcasm.

Another beat of silence pulsed between us. “Rethinking your decision is your prerogative.”

Tightening my hold on my briefcase, I bristled at his dismissiveness. He sounded as if our moments of reciprocal awareness had never happened. Glowering at him, I sidled away, determined to avoid him, and started for the door.

He dogged my steps, his looming presence a powerful aphrodisiac. At the door, I grabbed the knob.

Noah placed his hand over mine. “Allow me.”

Electricity surged through my veins. The odd familiarity his touch evoked bewildered me. I'd never met him, even if my body didn't agree. Imagining his tall, well-built frame moving over me, into me, rose in my head. My fingers tousled his ink-dark hair, and his blue eyes burned into mine. We fit together perfectly.

Then, he shifted, bursting my fantasy. Shame swept through me. This behavior had disgusted and infuriated my parents.

Noah's hand remained over mine, cool and gentle. Firm and masculine. Desire pooled between my thighs, despite the memory of my father's fury. I forced myself to recall Noah's assholery.

Annoyance wrapped me in a protective cloak. I jerked my hand away. "Good afternoon, Mr. Keegan," I snapped, ready to leave.

Noah turned the knob and opened the door, the action as slow as the small smile tipping one side of his mouth. "Ms. Hagen."

He nodded as I brushed past him without a goodbye. In my mind, I called him every name under the sun while also kicking myself for squandering the opportunity.

Chapter Three

Noah

I stared out the fourth-floor meeting room window for a brooding moment, my hands shoved in my trouser pockets. It was a sunny day, and the street below buzzed with activity. The traffic wasn't as bad as I'd seen it, the city slowly returning to normal after months of closures and shutdowns. Businesspeople, tourists, and locals populated the sidewalks, waited at traffic lights, crossed streets, and performed the million routine tasks taken for granted. A sidewalk shed, scaffolding to the world, surrounded the building across from mine on the left side of the street. Keegan Enterprises would send documentation to the Department of Buildings in another year to prove our façade still met standards.

But I stood, watching it all, in a dark mood. Somewhere out there, in the everyday chaos, Ryan Hagen circulated. Since she'd walked out of my office yesterday, I'd tried hard to banish her from my head. An impossible task. Fuck, I'd even jerked off in the shower this morning, thinking of her amazing gray eyes, edged with silver, and set in a face so devastatingly beautiful it still shocked me she was single.

The savage game I'd played with her wasn't a new trick. The moment I saw the gender of an applicant, I put my plan into motion. Most times, I alerted my staff, but this time my sister-in-law's business trip and the argument with my brother over her distracted me. She was a Keegan executive. If he didn't worry about her health, why didn't he take better care to keep her off planes?

It was an answer for another day. I was still smarting from my encounter with Ryan Hagen.

Usually, my tactics worked like a charm. With her, though, it hadn't. She'd stayed. And she'd waited to read me the riot act.

Even as her dressing down annoyed the living fuck out of me, it also sparked something inside me.

Hours later, I couldn't help but wonder if I'd done the right thing by not giving her a chance. I needed a project manager as much as she needed a salary. Then, I dismissed the idea, assaulted by one just as ludicrous. Last night, I had the insane notion of contacting her and asking her out. Usually, I implemented my ideas. I didn't hesitate. Whatever I wanted, I pursued until I won.

Yet, I hadn't executed my plan. Call her. Wine and dine her. Fuck her. And if she showed as much passion in bed as she did in her anger, make her my mistress.

If she worked for me, she'd be off-limits. Ethics and legalities aside, I'm not sure I could have her as my lover if she were a part of the same company that killed my mother.

The opening door reflected in the gleaming window I stood in front of, revealing W. White Leman. He'd worked in the company for decades. I'd never known what his first name was. As a child, I'd referred to him as Lemon, an easier pronunciation of his French-sounding surname.

I turned.

"They're here," he announced.

Folding my arms, I leaned against the wall while he glanced into the hallway and nodded. Six men of various heights and ages walked in, dressed like Lemon and me in custom-made suits worn with the knowledge of our privilege. The absence of Channing Powers, one of their executives, relieved me. Fifteen years my senior, he was a fuckhead I detested.

"Gentlemen." I indicated the oval-shaped table with room for ten. This room was where my mother met with the Amage brothers, so I'd chosen it for nostalgia's sake. "Please, have a seat. My presentation will not take long. Afterward, we'll enjoy a light lunch."

Sacha, the perfumer of the family, was the first to sit. He glanced at the folder in front of him, identical to those around the table for each man present. They'd received a digital copy, but I eschewed hi-tech today. What I intended to propose was personal, much more than a cold electronic file. After six and a

half weeks, we were face-to-face. The company's president, Boyd Andrews, had agreed to a meeting. Even that snake, Channing Powers, voted to hear me out. It had been the Amage brothers holding out. No, not the brothers, one in particular.

As Sacha opened the folder, Leo, the second eldest, sat in his chair, found because of the nameplate in front of each seat. Hugo and Guy waited until Lemon seated himself before following suit.

Denis, slightly older than me, nodded and found his seat. Instead of sitting, he grabbed the crystal pitcher filled with ice water from the middle of the table. He took a water glass, filled it to the brim, and then sipped. Lemon returned the pitcher to its place.

Claude Amage stood in the doorway, glaring at me. There was no love lost between us. He among his brothers was the outlier, the holdout, the motherfucker who wanted to push my company out of the contract that had been ours for years. But unfortunately, he held power, owning forty percent of the shares, with the remaining brothers having ten percent. The last ten percent were split between Boyd Andrews and Channing Powers.

“Claude, sit,” I said coolly, “so I can proceed.”

His face tautened, though he walked further into the room and closed the door. “I have but fifteen minutes to spare.”

I glared. He smirked.

Lemon cleared his throat and opened his folder. “Why don't we begin, Noah?”

Shoving my hands back into my pockets, I paced. “Keegan Media Group and Amage have had an exceptional working relationship since my mother was alive.”

Claude made the sign of the cross. “*Dieu accorde le repos à son âme gracieuse.*”

Yes, please, may He rest her gracious soul.

I drew in a shuddering breath, hating Claude a little more and thinking of my mother. And, for whatever fucking reason, I thought of Ryan Hagen. “This coming January, twenty years since she was killed, was meant to be a special collaboration between our companies,” I continued, my stern voice hiding the emotions running through me. “As we briefly discussed via our teleconference, KMG can still deliver a limited-edition perfume. We can separate the fragrance from our bid for the marketing contract instead of tying the two together. My company won’t compete with a low-end smell-alike Sauncier is releasing, so you would end the partnership.”

“Are you insane?” Claude demanded. “That would be a loss for us. We will share profits with Sauncier with a much higher return because the development of the end product is less costly.”

“It is cheap,” I said flatly. “Made so because of inferior ingredients, cheap packaging, and little marketing. They don’t have the fucking right to release anything to mark the solemn occasion.”

Claude offered a small smile. “Monsieur Dorset knew Réjane for many years. She was his friend.”

“She is *my* mother,” I snapped.

“Was, *ami*,” Claude corrected, feigning sympathy.

“The fact she is no longer with us doesn’t negate her relationship with me. She will be my mother forever.”

“As she will always be my friend,” Claude returned, his smirk so infuriating I had to gnash my teeth together to keep my temper in check. His eyes gleamed. “Pity for you, Shawn’s involvement in the negotiations for your brainchild, oui?”

Denis shifted in his seat. “Your father was not as sold on the idea as you.”

My pulse thumped in a fast rhythm. “Sold or not, I never agreed with allowing Amage’s exclusivity. He allowed a clause for your benefit without securing the same benefit for us.” The terms of the contract tied my hands. I couldn’t take my idea to a composition house for development. My father

had reasoned we had a relationship with the House of Amage. They had an in-house perfumer, and their name also had worldwide recognition. Overhauling our telecommunications subsidiary had immersed me, so I overlooked a lot. “I trusted my father’s judgment of allowing Dorset to oversee the project with my attention focused elsewhere.”

“What choice did you have?” Claude demanded. “You know nothing of fragrances.”

“I wrote the brief,” I reminded him.

“It means nothing,” he retorted. “You had a few paltry ideas, a scent here and there, a name, but nothing else. Who would this thing of yours appeal to? How would we draw customers? *Where* would we sell it?”

“It was supposed to be sold in your boutiques and marketed to your customers.”

His narrowing eyes pushed me closer to an ultimatum. True to his word, Graham had sent me some information on Amage. It gave me a better understanding of their motives. The company was in financial trouble and thought using Sauncier’s loss leader idea with the fragrance would draw new customers to their boutiques.

“Most of the profits would’ve gone to Réjane’s favorite charities in our deal with KMG,” Claude pointed out.

“We admired your mother’s philanthropic nature,” Guy said.

“Among other things,” Claude purred, casting another mocking look at me.

Varying degrees of confusion masked the faces of Lemon and the other five Amage brothers. I alone understood the fucking asshole’s meaning.

Leo cleared his throat. “Sauncier is set to drop the fragrance on January 9th. Ship dates are in place.”

I backtracked. It was too late to hire a composition house for my idea if I wanted to commemorate the 20 years since her death. But, on the other hand, if I waited and restarted the process to honor the 25th or 30th anniversary, they would

accuse me of stealing Dorset's concept. "Then move forward with your plans," I stated coolly. "We'll do mine in addition to Sauncier's."

Claude shook his head. "*Non*. Impossible. We do not have funding for this undertaking."

"Money won't be a problem. The cost doesn't matter to me. KMG will finance it all, including the media campaign."

Claude went rigid. "Ahh, yes," he said with sarcasm, "Keegan money can buy the world if you choose, *oui*?"

He was French, as my mother had been. It should've been *de rigueur* not to mention my wealth. He wanted to play that game, did he?

"I could buy and sell your holdings a thousand times over if I choose," I said savagely. "As I recall, KMG once helped turn your declining sales around. So what will I find if I do my due diligence?"

The men shifted uncomfortably.

"What I'm proposing can do wonders for your bottom line. Besides the composition fee, you'd get a share of the profits."

"We have none of your ideas," Sacha protested.

"I beg to differ," I murmured pointedly. "What Dorset presented were *my* concepts—"

"That Shawn credited to Dorset," Guy interrupted.

"On behalf of Keegan Media Group," Lemon said with a frown.

Pointing fingers was useless since we couldn't undo the past. "I might decide to step in to rescue a business in trouble. A takeover by Keegan Enterprises would save your fucking company. There wouldn't be a question of partnering, so tread with care."

Claude flushed. "We have what you want," he returned, recovering too quickly from my promise. "Our name and prestige. Producing your fragrance through the House of Amage will set it apart. Of course, you may decide to 'step

in’—” he sneered, using air quotations, “but you would not have the Amage brothers. We are the reputation.”

“But I am the danger.”

Loyalty was debatable when presented with an offer backed by a large amount of money, so I was almost certain at least two of the brothers would accept my offer. Boyd Andrews tired of Claude’s volatile personality. Channing Powers had always had a price tag. My handicap was not knowing the position of the other shareholders if I wanted to take a simpler acquisition route.

Leo cleared his throat. “Noah, we appreciate your idea,” he interjected uneasily. “Réjane was a wonderful woman, and her passing was most tragic. However, I would consider your proposition only if we award you the principal contract. This would be an ancillary agreement.”

“No.”

Leo’s eyes widened. “*Excusez-moi?*”

“We have another forty-five days before you award the advertising contract,” I pointed out. “Even if you choose KMG, there’s no way we’ll be able to create a fragrance—”

“It is all but impossible now,” Sacha said.

“You have the original composition,” I reminded him. “Dorset changed it to fit Sauncier’s lower budget. This will be a separate deal settled today. If that happens, I will agree to compete against Sauncier for the advertising deal on your new perfume.”

“*You* must agree to fairness, Noah,” Sacha said. “No hostile moves to acquire our company.”

I mimicked a smile. “Fairness?” I scoffed. “How are your underhanded dealings with Sauncier fair? The fragrance fiasco aside, we were all but guaranteed the new contract six months ago during our discussion about the success of the current campaign. Keegan Media Group won the last five pillar campaigns.” Hell, in twenty-two years of dealing with Amage, KMG won fifteen pillar contracts.

Guy shifted in his seat. “It is about consistency, Noah,” he said quietly. “Years ago, you worked closely with us on two campaigns. Since then, Dorset has been our project manager. Now, he has jumped ship to Sauncier. He knows us.”

“Sauncier also offers a better deal,” Hugo said. “How do you Americans say? More bang for your buck?” He nodded, deciding he’d said the phrase correctly without affirmation. “You are not even a division head of KMG.”

“I have a project manager specifically for your account,” I lied, annoyed by my predicament.

“Where is he?” Claude jeered, exaggerating his glances around the small room.

“They had a prior meeting.” I enhanced my untruth, once more thinking of Ryan Hagen. What would they do if I unleashed her on them? The idea pulled a smile from me. “You called for this appointment at the last minute.”

“And, yet, you are here,” Claude taunted. “We call, and you scramble.”

There would be no fairness from Claude Amage. Attempting to negotiate with him was futile. “I adjourn the meeting,” I bit out, starting for the door to go to my legal department and order the move-in on the Amage Group.

It wouldn’t be a Keegan Enterprises acquisition. This was personal. My procurement would be as well. If the shareholders proved difficult, I’d form dummy companies and perform buyouts under assumed names. Fuck Claude. I had the will and the wherewithal to fuck him a thousand ways.

“Noah!” Sacha called, panicked. His brother had fucked with me once too many. “What if we ask Claude to step aside during the decision process?”

I’d just passed the table. Sacha’s words halted me. “Do you take me for a fucking fool?” I demanded, glowering at him. “There’s no fucking way I’d cede my control to anyone for one project or twenty, so I doubt your brother will give up his power in this matter. He isn’t an idiot, whatever else Claude might be.”

The brothers glanced at one another, then stared at Claude. He clasped his hands together. “You will need to put any takeover attempt to a shareholder vote. I know there are acquisition clauses in your bylaws. You must have a two-thirds agreement in these matters.” A smug smile curved his lips.

“You forget yourself. I have the will and the wealth to do as I fucking please. I can move-in on you since it wouldn’t be a company takeover. It will be a Noah Keegan acquirement.”

As my words dawned on him, horror washed away his fucking arrogance. He grabbed the silk handkerchief skillfully placed in the small pocket of his suit jacket and mopped his brow.

“This has been your intent the entire time,” he accused.

“No, it hasn’t. Otherwise, it would’ve been done. My mother carried a special fondness for the Amage Group. She was a wearer of your perfumes for many years. I would not wish to dishonor her memory, but she understood opportunities.” My mother had been an ace at wheeling and dealing. “She’d see the wisdom of taking advantage of your instability, moving in, and then selling off your assets one by one, little by little,” I said with quiet menace, enjoying how the color dropped from his face, “until Amage became a recollection in the annals of fashion and cosmetics.”

“You would still sully her memory if—”

“No,” I interrupted. “My mother would understand my patience with your shenanigans has ended. I will bid for the contract fairly and compete against Sauncier, but on my terms.”

“Explain to me this perfume you want,” he demanded. “How different is the composition? What of the packaging? The bottle is most important. And the name? Tell me this now or—”

“*Tais-toi*, Claude,” Leo demanded.

Claude shut up at once, just as Leo ordered.

They spat words back and forth, but I ignored them. I understood French because of my mother. Among all her

children, I was the only one who took an active interest in her native language. The girl at the ball and our conversation rose in my head. I ruthlessly shoved away the memory, yet Ryan invaded my thoughts again. She had been the closest I'd come to a project manager since the man I had trusted jumped ship and ran to the enemy.

Ryan hadn't been my only interview. Since I'd met with Graham Morgan, I'd had six others, four men and two other women, who tired of waiting and left without an interview. The men hadn't struck me as having the insight needed on this project to sufficiently honor my mother.

The contract with Amage had worked so well because Claude and I hadn't had to cross paths. I didn't have the patience to deal with him. Not having an employee to put distance between Claude Amage and me seemed stupid and irresponsible. Besides the perfume I wanted for my mother, the Amage contract wouldn't make or break me. But it was the principal of Claude's treatment. I needed a perfume house. *He* stood in my way. Money bled from Amage's coffers. Had he thought I'd suddenly jump at the chance to meet with him without doing my due diligence?

I had discovered more about the brothers, their holdings, financial status, and personal lives than I would ever need. Yet, instead of taking my good faith and fair play into account, he'd fucked with me.

Mopping his brow again, Claude nodded. "I have misused your decency. You had choices and chose the high road by competing for our contract. We are no longer in the position to antagonize you."

No, they were not. Once, the bidding *had* been fair. They had been in the position to be as vicious as they wanted. They had ruined smaller companies and made laughingstocks out of media managers who didn't meet their standards. The first contract between Amage and Keegan Media Group had been a hard-fought battle that had sown the seeds of hate between Claude and me.

“It will be your way, Noah,” he added into the silence. “We are willing to partner with you for Réjane’s parfum under certain conditions.”

Without answering, I nodded to Lemon, who called in the floor manager.

A moment later, Elroy Woodson opened the door. He was a tall, thin young man who had worked at Keegan Enterprises for six years, fresh out of high school.

He served as my assistant during my visits to the fourth floor, once my mother’s domain. It housed part of the advertising division.

“We are ready to enjoy our repast,” I told him. “While we eat, please call Tom Leonard and tell him to join us in an hour.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Keegan, sir,” he said and walked out to do my bidding.

I smiled at Claude. “Unless you intend to eat while standing, I suggest you sit. We have an exceedingly long afternoon ahead of us.”

The Frenchman sat in his assigned seat with a sigh.

“One last thing before we eat.”

I raised my hand to halt Sacha. “My legal team will iron out all the details. We will apply for trade secret protection, a design patent for the packaging, and a copyright for the logo,” I said with reassurance. “The paperwork for our signatures will be drawn as quickly as possible once we work out all issues.”

“This is to what I refer,” Sacha said. “An issue.”

I’d hear him out but doubted I’d agree.

“We must meet your project manager within ten business days to consider your company against Sauncier. We know theirs. Dorset.”

The man who had been mine.

“We can also discuss your fragrance with him,” Sacha continued. “I understand your desire, *monsieur*, but you must admit to the impossibility of your dream without all the details in place.”

Shit. The words wiped away my smile. The request was reasonable and expected. On the bright side, today was Friday, giving me two weeks to find someone.

“Is there a problem, Noah?” Claude asked from his seat.

“Not at all.” My calm veneer masked my rising urgency. “I’ll notify my project manager so we can schedule the date.”

“Excellent.” Sacha’s shoulders relaxed. “Now, let’s dine, shall we?”

Chapter Four

Ryan

Loud banging startled me awake, and I roused with a gasp, which turned into a yelp as I tumbled off my couch and smacked the cold, hardwood floor. Despite all the junk on the sofa, I'd fallen asleep while searching for work.

Not taking enough care as I turned, I banged my head against the coffee table leg. "Crap!" I exclaimed as I pushed back, and my hip slapped the sofa's edge.

"Ryan, you in there?" a familiar voice called. What the hell was Quinn doing here so early in the morning?

Groaning, I held my aching head and maneuvered myself into a sitting position. Trapped between the sofa and the coffee table made it risky, but I managed it without further damaging myself.

Maybe I was dreaming. All had fallen silent.

The fans in my 2017 HP laptop whirred, preparing to cool down the motherboard. I whipped my head around to where I set the computer last night during my job search, worried the time unattended may have damaged it.

For ages, buying a new computer had been on my to-do list, but my work laptop had been my crutch. However, my boss had been enormously permissive and allowed my personal use. I didn't visit porn sites or anything. Instead, it had been for recipes and exercise apps, clothes and makeup shopping, music listening, or reading Kindle books through the program designed specifically for computers.

But then the world screeched to a halt and, so too, work. First, they furloughed me until my boss's income dried up, and he couldn't pay his employees. When I lost my position, my state-of-the-art laptop went bye-bye.

I needed it so badly now.

After my disastrous interview with Noah Keegan five days ago, I searched for a similar position. Unfortunately, such jobs were scarce, and most companies with openings considered me underqualified, despite my degree and experience. Keegan Enterprises' willingness to hire people fresh out of college or those with minimal expertise made them unique. Their commitment to cultivating young talent was another reason a position at the company was so coveted.

Intense eyes, startlingly blue, flashed in my mind. He should've been the last person featured in any fantasies, especially my own. And yet, as much as I tried, I *couldn't* stop thinking of him. Not of his miserable assholery. Not how he'd kept me waiting like the biggest limp dick alive.

But of *him*. The warmth of his body as he stood so close to me. The prickling of my skin as he followed me to the door. His hand over mine so massive and male, like a weightlifter's. And the tone of his voice called deep inside of me. What, I didn't know or understand. Insta-love wasn't for me.

My favorite genre to read was romance. The hero and heroine falling madly in love at first glance was my most hated trope. It was just gag-worthy.

Oh, the fucking irony.

I wasn't in love with that belly-crawling cretin. But damn, if I hadn't gotten my little Rabbit and fantasized about fucking him and having his beautiful mouth all over my body, especially between my legs.

Goddamn him.

Scowling, I crawled back onto my crowded couch and picked up the laptop resting on the old wooden coffee table that had gotten in the way of my head. It had been a gift from my older sister, Armani, when I moved out of the brownstone we grew up in, just blocks away from my apartment. As their eldest child, she was the lucky one who inherited the century-old row house from our parents when they passed. They had inherited the residence from my father's parents.

The glare of the laptop hurt my eyes as it flared to life, glowing in the room's darkness. I blinked, needing coffee. Once I checked my computer and found it only struggling not to overheat, I sagged in relief.

Banging resumed on my door. Damn! I hadn't imagined the noise. My little sister *was* at the door. But why so early, and where the hell was her key? And why the fuck didn't she use the doorbell?

I continued to ignore her and got to my feet, stumbling through my dark apartment to the lone bedroom, where I flipped on a light and carried my laptop to my desk to let it charge and cool down.

Glancing at the clock on the desk revealed it wasn't early morning but late evening. After paying bills, checking the balance in my bank account, and suffering a brief breakdown, I'd stretched out on my sofa, mentally exhausted, and fallen asleep—early this morning. Now, when I should've been winding down, I was awake.

Quinn's door pounding turned into noisy kicks. Cursing her, I quickly plugged in my laptop, recoiling when I accidentally caught a glance of myself in the mirror above my desk. My curls were plastered to my head, and dark circles marred the skin under my eyes. Noah Keegan wouldn't look at me with such lust if he saw me now.

Oh, fuck him.

"Ryan!" Quinn screeched.

Not wanting her to alarm my neighbors, I relented and walked out of my bedroom. Scratch that; they understood Quinn and me by now. Knocking and yelling weren't the worst things heard here. Even though my apartment building wasn't in the most dangerous part of town, it was not the safest either.

After flicking on a light, I stalked to my door and yanked it open, glaring at my little sister. In response, she beamed at me, her purple-blue ombre hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun. Long ago, her hair had been even curlier than mine, but years of processing it had made it wavy at best.

I stepped aside to allow her to enter; she bounced into my apartment.

“This better be important with all that knocking. You woke me up.” I slammed the door shut.

She tsked. “So grumpy, and it *is* dire. You know Paul, right?”

I stared at her blankly. I should, but Quinn was a lover, not a girlfriend. She had more flings than Casanova. Others might call her a ‘ho’. I called her a free spirit. Besides, we all managed grief differently. I searched for men who wanted long-term, took relationships extraordinarily slow, and never allowed myself to get too attached, afraid I’d awaken one day to tragic loss. Quinn scoffed at commitment, went from man to man, and swore never to settle down—afraid she’d awaken to a devastating loss one day.

Our fear of losing a significant other stemmed from the same thing—our mother’s passing. Quinn was supposed to have gone with them, but Daddy told her to stay home at the last minute. No matter how much she’d begged and pleaded, he’d remained firm when usually her demands worked.

His death had been doubly hard on Quinn. She’d believed she should’ve insisted Mama and Daddy stay home until a time when they’d allow her to go with them. Quinn had been so inconsolable. Even now, I shuddered at the memory. Back then, I’d wondered how much guilt and grief Mama would experience once she recovered.

I needn’t have worried. After losing our father, we believed Mama would survive.

My siblings and I long agreed the accident hadn’t killed her. Instead, she’d died of a broken heart. Comatose for a week, she had beaten the odds and woke up. She had shown signs of recovery for days until learning her husband, our father, had been killed on impact. As cheesy as it sounds, my parents were made for each other. In every sense of the word, they were soulmates. And when Mama discovered her soulmate had died, all the progress in her recovery disappeared. Hours later, she slipped back into her coma and never awakened.

Armani hadn't ever allowed me, Quinn, or Logan, our youngest brother, to see their death certificates. She'd shielded us from the press coverage the crash garnered. The major accident that left three minors orphaned. Whatever she'd received concerning their automobile crash was claimed by her, and she'd never shared it.

As an adult, I still didn't want to look at the macabre mementos. Neither did Quinn. Most importantly, our parents were gone, killed in a car crash, and never returning. Nothing would change that, so we'd let it rest.

"Paul!" Quinn's exasperation snapped me out of my thoughts. "The guy I mentioned?"

"You tell me about three men a week, so no, I don't know Paul."

She placed a hand on her chest, releasing an overdramatic gasp. "Are you slut-shaming me?" She sniffed. "How regressive, Ryan."

I rolled my eyes. "Cut the theatrics, Quinn. I'm just stating a fact. Tell me why you're here since you woke me up from a beautiful snooze where I was on an unknown beach, fucking a fine-ass man."

Maybe that had been the dream, and maybe not. Noah Keegan *had* been fucking me, though, but Quinn didn't need to know the fine-ass man in question had been my almost boss. It was just too embarrassing to admit to her I had been fantasizing about the man since I met him. Even though he was a dick, he was a very handsome one. Our moment at the door was the most intimate I'd been with a man in months.

"Ohhhh," Quinn said with an understanding nod, her loose bun bobbing. "That's why you're so annoyed. Pussy-blocking would annoy me, too."

Instead of allowing her to see me wrinkle my nose at her comment, I walked away from her. We'd been standing right near the door. Since I decided I wouldn't open it again and shove her ass back into the hallway, there was no need to stay there.

“By the way, where the hell is your key?” I threw over my shoulder, heading to my kitchen and pausing in the room’s entryway, where everything stood against one wall.

Eight light brown cabinets separated the stove and the refrigerator. There were four cabinets on the wall, four base cabinets, two sets on each side of the sink with a cream-colored Formica counter, mostly taken up by my microwave, and white floor tiles. I dressed up the area with a hot pink kitchen mat, kitchen towels featuring pink hearts, and a small, low-maintenance plant since I had no window.

“If you lost that key, I’ll punch you in your nose.”

“So violent,” Quinn chided, leaning against the breakfast counter that allowed me to see my living room. “Do you have any g and g stuff? It was so good.”

“Grits and Grillades?”

She nodded with vigor. “That’s it! Can you say what it is called again? Grits and gree-ahds?”

“So disrespectful of Mama’s heritage,” I sniffed, inordinately proud of it, and chose French as my foreign language throughout my high school career. Since her death, I’d signed up with genealogy sites, taken DNA tests to find long-lost relatives, and visited my mother’s hometown three times. Out of my siblings, I was the only one who habitually prepared New Orleans cuisine.

“I’m not disrespectful, Ry. Nothing is pronounced as it’s spelled there. I can remember grits easily enough, but the other part? Nope. It’s just beef and gravy over the grits. So why not grits and gravy? Why so fancy?”

Hands on hips, I turned and scowled at her, then gave her an under-eyed look. She was stalling, and we both knew it.

“Oh, fuck! Fine. I don’t know where I put your stupid key. I may have accidentally thrown it out. Or it could be in one of my purses. I just can’t remember which one.”

Instead of chastising her like I typically would, I clamped my jaw shut. When our parents were killed, I’d been sixteen, Armani had been twenty-six and married with her first child,

and Quinn had been thirteen. Dakota and Logan, our brothers, had been twenty and eleven, respectively.

Though we were close in age, I'd had to take up a parental role with my younger siblings after our mother's death. A dividing line had existed between me, Quinn, and Logan for a long time. I took over where Mama left off. For a time, my grades and dreams faltered under the strain. I'd almost dropped out of high school and abandoned my goal of attending NYU. Somehow, I'd rescued myself and still cared for Quinn and Logan.

When that asshole of all assholes sneered I was in the wrong profession, I'd almost lost my fucking mind. He didn't know what I'd gone through to get my degree for him to dismiss it so cavalierly.

"I don't have any grits and Grillades, Quinn," I said with a sigh, leaning against the kitchen wall. Hell, I barely had food. "As for that key, find it. I'm not supposed to make a fucking copy, and this is the second one you've lost."

Okay, so I didn't sound authoritarian.

"Come off it," she snapped. "You're within your legal right to have a spare, so bite me."

"My lease states no copies. I've made two for you. Why? Because you and Logan don't get along, and you crash on my sofa. Armani threw you the fuck out. Then Dakota had enough of your antics. You're still at Logan's because he can't afford to show you the door. I can't afford to move, Quinn, and I'm afraid I'll be kicked out if it's discovered I had door keys made for you."

Her hazel eyes flashed. "They act like my pussy is community property, and *they* get a say in where I throw it."

I wasn't about to have that conversation with her. It didn't matter if she added a hundred lovers to her repertoire. I loved her. Men slung dick to Earth's four corners, and all they received was a wink and a nod. Now and then, there was a backlash, but mostly, it was awe and respect at their body count.

My issue was wondering what Mama would think of both Quinn and me. Would *she* think less of us? Me for not reining my little sister in, instead of assuring her birth control stayed up-to-date and keeping her with a vast supply of condoms, and Quinn for going from guy to guy?

Other issues with Quinn had nothing to do with her coochie pitching. “You need to be more responsible and have more regard for me,” I snapped. “I don’t give a damn if you live footloose and fancy-free. Show some consideration when I put my fucking neck on the line for you.”

“I’m sorry I lost the fucking key,” she said, throwing her hands up in frustration. “It might not be lost, so take a chill pill and panic when you have a reason.”

My meaning escaped her, so I let the conversation go. Talking to her was like facing one of the brick walls in my apartment and discussing my day. “Why are you here?”

Smirking because I dropped the subject, she smiled. “I’m getting to that.”

Oh, hell no. “I will kick you out if you don’t tell me *now*,” I warned, my glare intensifying.

Sleep was one of my favorite activities, and I didn’t appreciate Quinn interrupting my precious beauty rest for bullshit.

“Calm down,” she said, turning on her heel and heading to the couch, where she plopped down.

Folding my arms, I leaned against the door frame.

“Paul is that businessman I’ve been messing with, and we’re both huge fans of MMA.”

Right. She’d come because of the Paul guy. “That’s great, but why do I need to know this?”

“Because an underground fight in Westbury is happening tonight, and he bought an extra ticket for you. At my pleading, of course.” She batted her fake eyelashes. “And a good session of sixty-nining.”

A wave of homicidal rage swept over me. My little sister had disturbed me because she wanted to see two sweaty guys pound each other into a bleeding pulp.

Closing my eyes, I clasped my hands and centered them against my chest. I inhaled deeply. “Ohhhmmmm,” I chanted on a long exhalation. “Ohmmm.”

Fuck, it wasn't helping. Sheer willpower kept me from storming to the sofa and choking the shit out of her. “You woke me up for that? What makes you think I want to see two grown men injure each other?”

“I know. I know it sounds crazy.” She held her hands up. “You hate martial arts and prefer boring-ass yoga, but TT is performing.”

“Who the hell is that?”

“Tristan ‘Twinkle Toes’ Thornton.”

Words escaped me. Perhaps my brain screeched to a shocked halt. Incredulous, I stared at her, wondering what grown man went by the moniker Twinkle Toes. No, what *adult* would call themselves that? “Yo, get the fuck out of my apartment. I'm going back to sleep.”

“YOLO,” she teased with a grin.

My eyes narrowed, and she broke into peals of laughter, so contagious I couldn't help but smile.

“C'mon, Ryan. He's excellent, I promise,” she pleaded, her attempt at puppy dog eyes not moving me.

“Who calls themselves Twinkle Toes?” Folding my arms again, I grumbled, “Isn't that an outdated derogatory term? Does he even know the meaning?” Did Quinn?

“Wait, it's offensive?” she asked, baffled, answering the question she didn't know I had. “It isn't a reference to the cartoon Avatar: The Last Airbender?”

Oh, for God's sake. “You thought your MMA man just named himself after a bald child monk?”

Her dark eyebrows scrunching together in confusion, she nodded.

Why I felt so surprised, I wasn't sure. Quinn could be surprisingly innocent despite her gaggle of men. Heaving a dramatic breath, I walked to the couch and threw pillows and blankets aside. Once I sat beside her, I placed a hand on her shoulder. "Quinn, I love you, but you're an idiot."

I could never out-drama her.

Gasping with thespian precision, she widened her eyes and placed a hand over her heart in mock hurt. "Rude! And since you're so smart, what does it mean?"

"You're twenty-three, little sister. If you don't know what it means by now, you never will."

Groaning, she shrugged my hand away. "TT didn't name himself. He lost a bet and got his name."

"I'm not interested in MMA or suffering through a performance of someone with that dumbass name."

"Ignore the name. He's so fine, just come to admire him. Think of the finest dude, multiply by a billion, and you have him."

Wondering how my little sister turned out like this, I shook my head. "If I wanted to see a good-looking man, I'd scroll on Instagram or get my ass up and walk around town." Or, even better, go to Keegan Enterprises to glance at Noah. He was incomparable. Breath-stealing. Panty-melting. "Now, leave," I said, sharper than intended because of my Keegan cogitation. "I have to look for a job or something."

"Or something? You say it like it's an excuse instead of a fact."

"I'm so close to dragging you out of my house."

"For someone who hates violence, you threaten it a lot, especially regarding my person."

"Quinn, fu—"

“C’mon, Ryan,” she pleaded for the hundredth time, stopping a stream of curses from flowing. “You’re unemployed, your bills are overdue, and you haven’t gotten dick since...” She paused, then sighed. “Since forever.”

The masquerade ball Quinn had dragged me to rose in my head. Noah’s image intruded, and my pussy throbbed as if the hot fucking I remembered wasn’t a wet dream but a reality.

For a moment, that night replayed in my head. I saw him leaning over me, his lips descending to mine. But they were no longer mystery lips; they belonged to Noah. The non-descript eyes were ocean blue, deep and mesmerizing.

My nostrils flared, and I swallowed.

“Yo, dude, what the fuck’s wrong with you?” Quinn snapped her fingers in front of my face again. “You’re dick deprived? Should I leave, so you and Mr. Rabbit could have a liaison?”

Her words snapped me to the present, and I narrowed my eyes. “Are you sure I didn’t fuck a random stranger the night of the ball?”

She scowled and turned away. “How many times are you going to ask me this, Ryan?” she snapped. “It sounds as if you *want* to have fucked a man and—”

“That isn’t true!” I protested. Everything Mama and Daddy said the last time I saw them would be true. It would also set a fucked-up example for Quinn.

“And I would do a fucking happy dance under a midnight moon if that was the case,” she said without missing a beat. “What makes you bring this tired subject up again?”

“I was a little sore,” I mumbled. Confessing my lackluster sex life shouldn’t have embarrassed me. On the contrary, as Quinn’s mother figure, I should’ve rejoiced. Yet, somehow, I still felt I’d failed her. If I had set an example with a stable relationship, maybe she would try one. “I’m asking you point-blank: did I have sex at the masquerade ball? Is there a possibility I had sex? Tell me the truth, and I won’t be angry you didn’t admit it at first.”

Quinn averted her eyes. “You didn’t have sex, Ryan.” Annoyance filled her concise words.

“It felt like I had sex.”

She glared at me. “Did you smell like cum and cologne?” she demanded.

“No, I smelled of soap.” A thought occurred to me. “My panties to the set I bought to wear with the gown were missing.” Eyes widening, I gasped. It should’ve been nothing but shame rising. However, it was also heat and lust and desire. Not toward whoever I’d fucked. No. It was for Noah, and that made it ten times worse. I wanted to die. “Oh, my God. Quinn! I *did* fuck a stranger.”

I cringed. My conscience preferred if I pretended I’d fucked that savage asshole. I shied away from thinking about what my parents would’ve said. The names they would’ve hurled my way. Daddy would’ve screamed them, but Mama wouldn’t have corrected him. She would’ve stood by while he ripped me to shreds, then slapped the shit out of me and told me how ashamed she was of me. Then, they would’ve walked out the door, ignoring my sobs and Quinn’s pleas to go with them. We’d never see them again. Their displeasure and disgust would be their last words to me. I’d never be able to show them they hadn’t failed at raising me.

A shudder went through me. If only the scenario was conjecture instead of reality.

I hated the times I remembered... No, I wouldn’t do it. My parents were gone, and no one was perfect. What had happened had hurt me deeply, but they’d only wanted the best for me. But, of course, if Armani hadn’t opened her big fucking mouth about my birth control...

“Ryan?” Quinn chimed, snapping her fingers in front of my face yet again. When my gaze flew to hers, she shook her head in disapproval. “Get out of your head, girl. The place where you always torment yourself for all your sins and failures toward Logan and me.”

“I *have* failed if you lied to me about something so important!”

“Ryan!” Quinn growled. “I didn’t lie to you. We found you in bed, *alone* and asleep, still drunk off your fucking ass—”

“Was I only drunk? That wasn’t the first time I’ve overimbibed.”

She covered her face with her hands, then threw them up. “Fine. My date might’ve given you a downer too, but it was just to relax you.”

Staring at Quinn, I wondered where I’d gone wrong. “Do you use illicit drugs?”

“Sometimes,” she said quietly. “But not the hard stuff. Just pills.”

“Quinn—”

“I don’t want to hear a lecture. This isn’t about me. It’s about you. Remember? You can’t even have a fucking crisis without worrying about *me*. When the fuck will you realize you have a life too, and I have a fucking brain? I have *choices*, Ryan. Free will. It doesn’t mean you’ve failed. It just means I’m an adult. So, back to *your* meltdown.”

My head pounded. “Let’s just drop the subject. You said it didn’t happen, so I believe you.”

I’d awakened in my apartment late the next afternoon following the night of the ball. My sister had been there, ready to tend to my hangover.

Amid the vomiting and the headaches, memories of the encounter swirled in my head. I’d demanded the truth from Quinn. It was a figment of dick deprivation, she’d insisted.

“Stop worrying about a phantom fuck,” Quinn drawled. “You have bigger problems.”

Yep, I sure did. My financial situation was so dire, it grew harder to pay rent. With each passing day, I inched closer and closer to homelessness. Or stripping.

Or worse, Armani's house. My siblings and I had grown remarkably close since Logan turned eighteen. Not wanting to return to the house I grew up wasn't a lie. Nowadays, I couldn't stand Armani's cockhole of a husband, Timothe. He was a schemer, and I had no clue what she saw in the man. I loved my nieces and nephews, but because of Armani and Timothe's multitude of children, she'd never think of leaving him, so I'd long ago accepted him as a permanent member of our family.

Before moving in with them, I'd live on the fucking streets. My small savings and occasional gig as their babysitter kept me afloat. But, week by week, my stored away money was depleted, so my routine wasn't cutting it.

"For God's sake, you have wet dreams! A distraction would be good for you," Quinn blared when I remained silent.

I playfully thumped her shoulder. "First off, why does my sex life call for the same level of concern as past-due bills and unemployment? Your priorities are fucked up. Second, it isn't hard to get dick. Guys stick their penises anywhere. A hole in the wall. A toaster."

Quinn laughed. "Maybe, a vacuum hose. A toaster would burn the fuck out of that dick, so—"

My growl interrupted her. "How does a damn fight relate to any of the above?"

"I told you."

"Remind me again."

She looked at me and sniffed. "I'll answer your question, but first tell me this: What the hell kind of guys do you date that fuck household appliances? Where do you find such masochistic pervs?"

I rubbed my head. "I'm single for a reason, Quinn. The dating pool isn't great right now. Also, it wouldn't burn them if they unplugged it first. Even I wouldn't date someone too stupid to unplug it first."

She shook her head. "If it were recently used, it would still burn them. By the way, no wonder you're single; you have

horrible taste in guys.”

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but Quinn forged on.

“Paul will pay for everything. Even better, his job is hiring secretaries. You have a degree and had an outstanding advertising job just two months ago. You weren’t fired because you didn’t know your shit; you were let go because of the company’s issues. You have more than enough experience and an excellent track record. I’ll talk to him about it after you meet him.”

“I don’t know, Quinn. Even if I didn’t fuck a stranger, I was sloshed and drugged the last time I went out with you.”

“Oh, my fuck!” she snapped. “You won’t let me live that down. If you had fucked Mr. Sir, you’d lay the blame for that at my feet, too.”

“I would not!” I protested, a little too vigorously for truthfulness. “You don’t understand. I remember snatches of conversations and...and...” And since meeting Noah, I’d had feelings of déjà vu. His voice and scent seemed too familiar for me not to have met him before.

“I understand perfectly. You’re above lust and mistakes. Or non-mistakes. It might not have been a mistake if you had slept with someone. It could’ve been a night of passion and forgoing responsibilities and worry. Goddamn, girl, the nicest thing you did for yourself was buy that Coach watch for your 25th birthday. This year, you didn’t even buy a fucking cake.”

“Twenty-five is a milestone.”

“Every year is a milestone. Do you know how fucking precarious life is? Celebrate each birthday with abandon because it might be your last.”

I frowned. “How grim.”

She scowled at me.

“Quinn.” I drew a breath. “I won’t bring the ball up ever again.” From this day forward, I’d ignore all thoughts of what I believed I remembered. “Swear to me I didn’t fuck a stranger, and I’ll let it go.”

“You wear me out, Ryan.” Quinn rested her head on the back of the couch and stared at the ceiling. “You couldn’t find the man if you had slept with someone at the ball.”

“You could. Whoever invited you might know.”

“The dude who invited me? Fuck him.” Her lower lip trembled before anger blanketed her face. “Fuck him,” she repeated. “I don’t talk to that asshole anymore and never want to see him again in my entire fucking life.”

“I did—”

“Was anyone in the room when you walked in? How’d he look? You were alone when I found you. As I told your ass ten minutes ago when you swore to drop it and said you believed me.”

“Swear to me,” I insisted.

“For fuck’s sake. You’re calling me a liar,” she accused, sounding both hurt and outraged.

I winced, wishing I could explain the feelings Noah had stoked. He’d been a supreme fucking asshole, *but...* “You want me to go out with you *again*,” I said, too confused to dive into other details. “You don’t lie. However...”

“Fine,” she said dramatically, “I sw-swear you didn’t fuck a stranger.”

Quinn’s stumbling over the word grabbed my attention. “Why—”

“For what it’s worth,” she interrupted, “I’m so sorry I let him give you that pill. I shouldn’t have allowed it. That was so irresponsible of me.”

“Oh, Quinn,” I said, pulling her up and hugging her. “Baby, I believe you!” I kissed her cheek. “And I’m sorry for harping. I won’t ever bring it up again. What the hell am I thinking? I know you’d be honest.”

She lowered her gaze and nodded.

“Enjoy yourself tonight. You don’t need my anal retentiveness marring your fun.”

“You’re fun, too, and I insist you come out with me.”

“But—”

“C’mon, Ryan,” she coaxed. “We won’t be at the place that long. There are just three matches before the main event.”

“How long is—”

“Each fight averages between nine and fifteen minutes,” she inserted, interrupting my question with an answer.

The possibility of a job tempted me into reconsidering. I had no interest in paying to watch violence or any type of sports. And the idea of a crowded building with sweaty, cheering people—possibly drunk—sounded like hell.

However, working as a secretary was short-selling my skills. Making a wrong move and dying filled with regrets frightened me. So many times, I wondered if my parents regretted how their lives turned out. From what I’d heard, my parents had experienced love at first sight when they’d met in high school, once my Creole mother and her parents moved from New Orleans. Mom and Dad met on the first day back at school. She’d been a junior, he a senior. Nine months after she earned her diploma, Armani was born. After growing up with each other, my parents were killed in the prime of their lives and didn’t have a happy ending to their love story. My mother had been forty-four, and my dad had been forty-five.

I didn’t think they had regrets, but I’d never know. There’d just been...*something*...something about them and their ‘happy’ life I couldn’t put my finger on.

I *would* regret starving though, so secretarial work was better than the alternative. Giving myself to shady men after shaking my ass in the nude or being homeless sounded worse. So as the days dragged on, being picky became less and less of a possibility. Besides, I had only myself to blame. Noah Keegan might’ve hired me if I hadn’t lost my temper.

“Ryan,” Quinn drawled. “Are you accepting the invitation?”

“You’re pretty insistent on me going.”

“I miss hanging out with you. Other than that infamous ball, ever since you were fired, you’ve just been job searching, watching our sister’s bratty children, or sulking around your apartment. It *is* understandable, but still...”

“The kids aren’t that bad, and you make me sound deeply depressed.”

“You’re not?!” she exclaimed with genuine surprise.

“Qui—”

“Shut up, stop whining, and give me an answer,” she rushed out, cutting me off again. “Just think of the job I guarantee Paul will give you. I have excellent oral skills, you know?” Giggling at my glare, she waved her hand in dismissal. “You’re bummed out over losing the opportunity to work for Noah Cocksucker, or whatever his name was. So what? Get over it. You need to explore other options right now.”

Upon hearing her nickname for Keegan, I laugh-snorted. “Fine, fine, I’ll go. What time is the match for?”

“10 p.m.” She glanced at her watch. “We have three hours to get ready. Take a shower, and I’ll pick out an outfit for you. I’ll borrow one too if you don’t mind.”

Chapter Five

Ryan

“Why are these pants so baggy?” Quinn whined three and a half hours later, tugging up the jeans she’d borrowed as we descended the stairs to reach our seats.

On me, the black skinny jeans hugged my hips and ass beautifully. A belt always gathered the extra room left at the waist. But on her, even with a belt, the waistband barely clung to her slenderness and drowned her long legs in a sea of denim.

“I bought them to fit me, not you,” I reminded her, “and my ass is bigger than yours.”

“I’m so happy I wore a sports bra with these stupid jeans; else, I would look like a 2000s backup dancer.”

I smirked at her. “Newsflash: You still look like a 2000s backup dancer. Crop tops and baggy jeans were in back then. Seeing a bit of your thong doesn’t help.”

Quinn pursed her lips. “That is intentional. It’s called fashion, my dear. Y2K is in right now. I just don’t want to look like Soulja Boy.”

“Whatever. Where’d Paul go?”

“To get refreshments,” she answered as we found our seats amid the third match.

The spacious underground arena boasted the ring in the center, surrounded by front row seating. Rows of staggered stadium chairs designated by ticket purchase hallmarked our section. Luckily, we weren’t in the upper area, which Quinn described as a seating free-for-all. Paul had bought tickets for the assigned seating. It allowed us the luxury of sitting while ensuring we’d see the bloodshed in full glory. We’d just miss the sprays of blood and sweat those in the VIP section experienced.

As I imagined, the smell of booze, cigarette smoke, and sweaty humans filled the air, marrying and marinating in a gag-worthy scent. The screaming crowd deafened me. Spectators shouted demands for more brutality; others offered advice on how the losing man could turn his odds around.

I hated noisy events and assumed the volume would increase once the main act came out. Twinkle Toes and Knucklehead, or whoever TT's opponent was. They were all knuckleheads, as was I, for allowing Quinn to convince me this would be a clever idea.

At the disgusting smells, two grown men pummeling each other, and the overwhelming noise, I regretted my choice. Quinn could've introduced Paul and me at lunch.

"Hey, babe," Quinn greeted as Paul sat beside her. She leaned over and planted a kiss on his cheek.

Well, speak of the devil.

He smiled in response, pecked her on her lips, then handed Quinn her popcorn and beer before passing me my nachos and Coke.

Paul was not a man you'd expect to be into MMA. If I had to guess, I would've thought his sport of choice was golf, tennis, or even polo. Mixed Martial Arts wouldn't have been on my radar.

An attractive forty-something Italian American, he wore his salt-and-pepper hair in a parted pompadour. Unlike Noah's tapered fade, Paul's hair glistened with gel.

Noah? Did I just think about the man *again*? So casually, too.

Paul and Quinn switching seats placed her in the middle. She leaned close to me.

"What do you think?" she whispered, close to my ear.

"He's *hawt*, just like you said," I returned, my voice as low as hers.

Smiling widely, she gave me a vigorous nod, then turned to Paul.

According to my sister, he was a trust fund baby on the board at the company his older brother had inherited from their dead father. He was a man of few words based on the car ride to the underground fight club.

“Ooooh, fuck,” Quinn chirped, bracing against the chair, and tipping her head back, her gaze focused on the ring.

Curious, I directed my attention there, too. The two fighters weren't evenly matched. Didn't martial arts have weight classes, or was that only in boxing? Heavyweight, welterweight, middleweight, and so many other categories I couldn't remember. My dad loved boxing and introduced Quinn to the world of martial arts. He'd wanted to be a professional boxer. I had my theories about why he'd never realized his dream.

Gritting my teeth, I forced my thoughts to the here and now, once again noting the disproportionate sizes of the MMA fighters. One was tall and lean, and the other was average height and bulked up. When we found our seats, I'm sure Beefy had been kicking Lanky's ass. Somehow, Lanky had changed into a lean, mean fighting machine because he'd turned the tables on Beefy. He was struggling to block Lanky's blows. He'd prevent a kick, only to have Lanky elbow him.

Lanky feigned a blow at Beefy's face. Falling for the tactic, he raised his fists to protect his face from a hit that never came. Lanky punched Beefy around his liver, and the poor man doubled over. Not that it mattered. Lanky lost all control and went on a brutal offensive.

The roars of the crowd turned to gasps and boos. Lanky didn't give a fuck. He repeatedly kned Beefy in the chin, keeping his opponent upright to continue his assault.

Curses and insults rained from the spectators. Lanky released Beefy and the man collapsed onto the mat. He was still conscious and twisted to sit up. The blows had him disoriented. Without warning, Lanky rushed Beefy and tried to knee the side of the man's head. Beefy's movement at the last minute thwarted Lanky's attempt. The sudden shift in the crowd and the vicious attack had me on edge.

“What’s going on?” I asked Quinn. My eyebrows scrunched together in confusion because the referee wasn’t moving to stop Lanky.

“Knee strikes to the head aren’t allowed when your opponent is on the ground.”

I made an “o” shape with my mouth and nodded.

Lanky spat near Beefy’s head and walked toward the official. Beefy, the abused foe, stuck out a foot and tripped Lanky’s rule-breaking ass.

My eyes widened at Beefy’s reengagement, and I gasped. Lanky stumbled, then fell backward, landing spread eagle, arms outstretched. Beefy straddled him, reigning brutal punches to Lanky’s head and face. The organized fight turned into a chaotic mess. The referee blew his whistle, but Lanky and Beefy’s melee continued, entirely out of hand.

Men in black shirts with white letters proclaiming them as security rushed from a tunnel close to the brawl and swarmed the ring, pulling the two men apart.

“*What* is going on?” I demanded, confused as hell. Was this the usual outcome?

“They’re not fighting according to the rules,” Paul responded in a manner that immediately had me classify him as an asshole. “That should be obvious if you have a brain.”

Annoyed at his unnecessary comment and *this*, I narrowed my eyes at him and opened my mouth to respond. Unfortunately, the announcer interrupted my intentions.

“Well, that was something, wasn’t it, folks? I’m sure you could tell those two have personal beef,” the man declared, chuckling.

The crowd booed, and his laughter died away.

He cleared his throat. “Sit tight, folks! You’ve been waiting all evening for the main event, and it is moments away!” he announced, then allowed that to sink into the minds of the disgruntled crowd. “TT vs. Big K is up next!”

I admired how he so deftly turned the atmosphere around. The mob went from threatening violence to stomping and cheering, which also confused me.

Big K? Was it Big Knucklehead? “Why do these boxers have such stupid names?” I asked.

Quinn dragged her attention away from the ring. “The K stands for Kudi. He’s a fan of Kid Cudi.”

Her animation gave me joy. I smiled at her.

“The rapper,” she added, talking to Paul.

“That doesn’t answer the question, Quinn,” I said, recapturing her attention. “And isn’t that a copyright infringement?”

“His is spelled with a K, not a C.”

I rolled my eyes, a singular thought on my mind.

This was going to be a long night.

Chapter Six

Ryan

The fight between TT and Big Kudi bored me out of my mind. Compared to the first match we watched, the main event proved ho-hum, run-of-the-mill dull trading of blows, and lasted fifteen minutes, far too long. To Quinn's delight, it ended with a victory for TT.

Once we headed back to the city from Westbury, Quinn and Paul decreed the night too early to end. My sister announced I'd continue as the third wheel. As their passenger, I had limited options. Head to the subway—an idea Quinn shot down—call an Uber—as a broke bitch I couldn't afford the ride service; walk and take my fucking chances—another option Quinn protested, peppering in a few insults about my sanity—or remain in their company.

“Can you drop me off, Paul?” It was his car, and he was driving. “I'd appreciate it. You and my sister can enjoy the rest of your evening without me.”

“Sure can't,” Paul responded. “I didn't want you with us in the first place.”

Quinn leaned toward him and whispered in his ear. “If you leave, my night will be ruined, Ryan,” she said, straightening again.

I glared at the back of Quinn's head. Those words guaranteed my cooperation. The heifer played both ends to the middle, demanding I stop mothering her and then dishing sentiments to bend me to her will.

I didn't mind her company. She was my best friend and my blood.

Paul, the ass, was a different story and the one I hated most of all Quinn's flings. Unfortunately, he was her current favorite. Every time he spoke to me, he offered passive-aggressive bullshit. I am positive there was an old rule about messing with people who were assholes to your family, one

Quinn would hopefully abide by after tonight. Or at least not invite me to any event he attended.

My sister, Paul, and I arrived at a Midtown dive bar after a two-block walk from where he parked his Benz. As we walked up the steps and Paul opened the door, Quinn's phone buzzed, to my chagrin.

She snatched it from her pocket and looked at the screen. "I'll catch up to you guys in a sec," she announced, turning away and answering the call.

Less than pleased, Paul allowed me to walk inside first.

"One minute," he instructed, strolling forward. A moment later, he beckoned me to where he stood near the opening of the overflow seating area.

As dive bars went, this one wasn't anything out of the ordinary. It had scarred tables, a dark wooden floor, and a long bar covering half the section. Hanging lamps with low-watt exposed bulbs supplied the lighting.

"Thank you for letting me tag along," I told him as we slid into the booth, sitting across from each other. My sister seemed into him, so I'd overlook his assholery and get to know him for her sake.

"Thank Quinn," he said flatly. He sat ramrod straight as if the stick shoved up his ass replaced his spine. "She insisted you come. Knowing you were dateless, depressed, and jobless would've marred her night."

"Quinn said that about me?" I asked, too stunned for outrage.

"No. She said you spend your days searching for work. If you had a man, I doubt he'd appreciate you ignoring him. And if a woman's jobless *and* manless, I'm certain she's depressed."

"I'm jobless because of circumstances, bast—" A guardian angel flew onto my shoulder and reminded me Quinn asked him about a job for me. I'd fucked up with Noah Keegan. However, this asshole was ten times ruder than Noah. He'd only made me wait on him. Paul was an insulting fuckhead.

I clamped my mouth shut. He was also the fuckhead my sister liked. If I lit into him, I'd not only fuck up my employment chances, but I might damage Quinn's relationship. Learning where to draw the line between concern and interference had been hard. She'd reminded me in no uncertain terms I was her sister, not her mother, and just because I martyred myself on behalf of her and Logan, I had no right to meddle in her love life.

She'd been nineteen, dating a dude I couldn't see my little sister with for any reason, and I'd told her so in a less than polite manner. But, of course, it also hadn't helped said guy was in the room.

Maybe I held back from Paul now because I felt so guilty about all but calling my little sister a liar earlier. Or, perhaps, I wasn't confident how she'd react if I tore him a new asshole. Would she understand his shitty treatment had pushed me over the edge, or would she accuse me of overreacting and side with him?

He drummed his fingers on the table, peeking over his shoulder. No sign of Quinn. Annoyed, I pressed my lips together and glanced around the dimly lit place. I was happy he'd found a spot in the bar's broader section toward the back.

Paul's sigh drew my attention back to him. I hoped Quinn would finish her call soon. I searched for a topic and settled on the one that mattered the most.

"Quinn said your office is hiring?"

"Yeah, we are."

I smiled, not wanting him to detect my dislike, though he didn't hide his feelings toward me. "What industry are you in?"

"Advertising. We're only looking for secretaries right now."

"An advertising firm?" I echoed with genuine interest. Being a secretary didn't interest me, but landing a job at his company could allow me to network and climb to a better position. "I have a degree in marketing and merchandising."

“Your sister told me you had experience in marketing,” he responded, his tone and stony face showing his disinterest.

Fucker. I slid some of my hair behind my ear. “What’s the name of your company?”

“Sauncier Marketing. You’ve probably heard of us.”

“I have,” I confirmed. “I looked into a position at the company, but unfortunately, y’all weren’t hiring.”

“What happened with your last job?” he asked, the question challenging my earlier assumption about his indifference. “Quinn mentioned your position at T.S. Marketing. A well-known company. Impressive.”

My smile was as hollow as the compliment. “I was among the unlucky laid off. Such jobs are rare, unfortunately. A recent interview for a similar job ended in disaster,” I explained, memories of my encounter with Noah teasing me.

A brow lifted. “What do you mean by disastrous?”

“I was given a time for my interview but was kept waiting for an additional four hours. I’m sorry, but I didn’t appreciate his unprofessional actions.”

Paul studied me. “It could’ve been a business emergency.”

“It wasn’t,” I returned, though I hadn’t thought of that possibility. “He could’ve rescheduled if that was the case, Paul. Or he could’ve had his secretary call me before my arrival.”

“Agreed,” he relented. “What company was it?”

“Keegan Enterprises.”

At my words, Paul’s eyes lit up. He straightened, sitting even more rigid, and eyed me with newfound interest. I could almost see the wheels in his head spinning. “You dodged a bullet. I’ve heard many a nasty rumor about Keegan. Former employees willing to disclose sordid details.”

Paul’s opinion about Noah shouldn’t matter. Despite believing the gossip after my experience with him, Paul’s distaste annoyed me. “I’d hoped the information was false.”

“Kind of you,” he sneered.

Displeasure surged in me at the pettiness I detected. Paul didn't have a sterling personality, either. His nerve in placing himself above Noah angered me.

Fuck! My annoyance on Noah's behalf was out of place. Lust signaled my pussy to kill my fucking pride.

“Since you have prior experience at such a high-profile company as T.S. *and* got Keegan's attention, I'll convince my brother to interview you for a...better position than a secretary at Sauncier. You were a junior marketing specialist at T.S., correct?”

“Yes,” I responded eagerly, newfound hope growing in me at his words.

Perhaps Paul wasn't so bad, after all. Maybe he was...a little too blunt.

“I'm positive we'll find you a similar position at Sauncier. Let me give you my business card. Come to the office at 2 p.m. next Monday. I promise we won't keep you waiting.”

My heart soared as he pulled a cream-colored suede business card out of his jacket pocket and handed it to me. I read *Paul Gallo* and proclaimed him a marketing executive, with his contact info below his name and position. I slipped it into the tiny cardholder wallet.

I'd forgotten my business cards and a pen, though I found a scrap of paper in one of the wallet slots. “Do you have a pen so I can give you my number and email?”

I grabbed the pen he found and inspected it, noting the brand to feed my weird fondness for nice-looking pens. My younger self had a bad habit of accidentally stealing appealing ones.

Scribbling my contact info down, I gave him the paper and pen, despite my urge to keep the black rollerball. He wouldn't appreciate that, though.

He looked at the slip of paper, his eyebrows shooting up. “You have lovely handwriting.”

“Thank you.” I returned my wallet to my pocket.

Quinn bounded toward us, a troubled look on her face.

Paul didn’t see her stalking toward the booth. It took him a moment to note her arrival, so he missed her down-turned lips, angry eyes, and indecision about where to sit.

Her bleakness raised my alarm, and I stared at her, awaiting her next move.

Paul registered her presence. “Quinn!”

Quinn masked her genuine emotions with a blinding and phony smile. She slid next to him. “Hey, babe.”

He pecked her on the lips.

“Did you two bond in my absence?”

“I offered your sister a marketing position at our company,” Paul answered.

Squealing, she clapped, and I grinned, shoving aside my concern.

She smirked at me. “I told you tonight would be worth it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I joked, waving her off. “You were right for once. So what?”

Her laughter erased the last of her distress. “I’m always right, Ry. You should know this by now.”

Paul grabbed her hand. “You *are* always right, babe. It’s one thing I love about you.”

She laid her head on his shoulder. “Aww.”

Did she find his cheesy comment cute?

“That’s so sweet,” she muttered, kissing his lips.

The innocent gesture intensified. At their display, bile rose in the back of my throat. My sister’s happiness pleased me, but I didn’t appreciate seeing her sucking face. We were close, but not that close.

The happy couple slipped into their own world, their lips attached and showing no signs they’d come up for air. Tired of

their PDA and needing another Coke, I slid out of the booth and headed for the bar.

Sighing, I sat on the worn-out red barstool, admiring the stained-glass lamps on the bar, placed strategically apart. Since our arrival, the crowd had grown. Chatter and bursts of laughter peppered the air. Beats of a song, lyrics unintelligible, pulsed over me. The bartender hadn't noticed me, but a break from the face suckers relieved me.

“Ms. Hagen?”

My breath caught and my senses awakened at the deep, sexy voice booming behind me.

It couldn't be! My imagination played tricks. But no. I'd recognize his voice anywhere.

I stilled, sat straighter. Knowing it *was* him didn't curtail my shock. Drawing in a deep breath, I slowly turned. Even as reality sank in and my heart raced the moment he called me, facing Noah Keegan, handsome as ever, melted my insides. One command from his sexy lips, and I would've dropped my panties and rode his dick for the entire night.

Chapter Seven

Noah

“Why are we here, Nate?” I demanded, staring at the building with disgust.

The grimy brick façade had seen better days. The structure was old. In my mind, it was a standing safety hazard.

“For a drink,” my brother answered.

At twenty-five, Nathaniel was seven years my junior and still living off his vast trust fund, constantly wasted on weed, alcohol, and women. Despite being five years away from thirty, he wasn't inclined to build a life for himself and replenish his constant spending.

A good-looking woman in black jeans and a crop top paced on the sidewalk as she talked on her cell phone. “No, I don't want to talk to Reid,” she growled.

Reid, hmmm? Odd coincidence.

“Fuck you. You're the stupid bitch, Derrick! So is Reid for putting you up to this bullshit. Fuck you. Fuck him. Fuck everything.”

She was about 5'8, with wavy purple-blue ombre hair and several skin shades darker than me. Even though she and this stranger couldn't be further apart in appearance, the eccentric-looking woman reminded me of Ryan Hagen. Odd. Ryan was shorter and curvier, with skin a few shades lighter than the woman pacing outside the dive bar. Ryan's hair was also a beautiful, shining black.

Though the stranger was yelling, her voice was pleasant, but it couldn't replace the lyrical quality of Ryan's. Since she'd stormed out of my office, the woman plagued my thoughts. She was gorgeous, with captivating gray eyes so bright they were almost silver. The light color of her eyes contrasted with her golden skin and added to their allure. Her dark hair reminded me of a warm tropical breeze with its coconut smell.

When she'd brushed by me and the scent wafted to me, a sense of familiarity entered me.

She'd worn it up, allowing only a curl to escape, and I'd longed to see its length and actual thickness and touch it to test its silkiness.

"Kiss my ass!" the woman on the phone screeched.

My lips tightened, and I glared at my brother. "You've yet to tell me our purpose for being here," I snapped.

That fucking red suit Ryan had worn kept her on my mind. She should've been barred from buying it. If not for that short little skirt, coupled with her red stilettos, she would've been another gorgeous woman I'd met. But goddamn, her legs had looked so long. Those thin-heeled pumps defined her slender calves and toned thighs each time she walked. She had a killer body. Big tits, tiny waist, and a round ass I dreamed of gripping while I fucked her.

"Live a little, bro."

Nathaniel's voice killed my vision. Maybe my annoyance was misplaced. I didn't relish an evening with a hard cock if I had no intention of finding relief inside a woman. In the weeks after the ball, I couldn't muster desire for anyone. Meeting Ryan worsened my dilemma.

"I wanted to assist you with that goal, so here we are," my brother said, his timing either perfectly bad or inherently good depending on how I looked at it.

"Go to hell!" The woman ended the call. Unaware of our presence, she turned on her heel and ran up the steps. As she disappeared inside, I again thought of Ryan. Fuck. Her disrespectful mouth and career path should've killed my desire.

Double fuck. I admired her low bullshit tolerance. It wasn't the suit keeping her uppermost in my thoughts. It was her self-assurance.

Enough was fucking enough. One woman had turned me into a pining bitch. Adding another would break an unwritten

man code. From this moment forward, I'd never think of Ryan Hagen again.

"This is a hole in the wall, Nate." I stared at the door the woman had disappeared through. "This isn't my thing."

I hadn't ever been to a fucking dive bar, especially one so grimy and shabby.

"We haven't hung out in a while," he said, "so I figured I'd take you to one of my favorite spots."

Nodding to the place in front of me, I swept my hand in an arc. "This?" Someone with the Keegan name frequenting such a place repulsed me. "You're a regular at *this* place?"

He nodded. "While in college, there used to be a bartender named Mandy who worked here. I liked her very much. She had one of the best asses I've ever seen, Noah. Every weekend, my buddies and I would spend our nights trying to catch her attention while getting drunk as fuck on cheap beer. After I graduated and even after she left, I kept coming."

I scowled in a way that made my business partners shake in their loafers. Nate didn't want to hang out with me. As always, there was a method to his motives. He was after a favor. He hadn't said it, but I sensed it. "What the hell do you want, Nathaniel?"

"I can't just want to spend time with my family?"

"You only call me when you want or need something."

"Let's go inside before you throw accusations," he huffed, having the nerve to sound offended.

Over the years, my siblings' behavior taught me not to trust when they sought me out.

They believed me an unyielding crackpot, longing for his mommy.

"One drink. My treat, I promise," he said, forgetting the affront and gentling his tone.

Folding my arms, I lifted a brow, still suspicious.

He entwined his index and middle finger. “Scouts’ honor, I swear.”

“Fine,” I barked, stalking ahead and entering the bar, not pointing out he’d never been a Boy Scout.

After opening the door, I wiped my hand on my trousers, wishing for hand sanitizer. My previous travel-sized bottle had run out days ago, and I had yet to replace it. Who knew what germs dwelled on the doorknob?

Nathaniel skirted around me, then halted so abruptly that I nearly bumped into him. “Watch out,” I snapped.

“Why so grumpy, bro?” He didn’t give a fuck about the answer because he spoke again. “Never mind. Let me show you to my favorite table.”

His favorite table? He visited the place so often that he had a fucking favorite table? I gnashed my teeth to keep from voicing my displeasure at his taste in bars. It would only fall on deaf ears.

We passed a beat-up jukebox next to the long, worn bar with at least a dozen stools. At the very back of the establishment, we bypassed dingy booths, continuing to a small wooden table against the wall, surrounded by three wooden chairs.

Before wearing this suit again, I’d have my dry cleaner disinfect the tainted fabric. Grime, a huge pet peeve, overran the place.

Once seated, I waited for Nathaniel to explain why he had brought me here. Instead, he stared at me, tight-lipped. I lost patience, angry he wasted my time. “Why did you invite me to this bar, Nathaniel?”

Selecting a project manager for the Amage contract was critical and an unexpected challenge. A substantial percentage of the most qualified candidates were women. Typically, I missed interviews and remained out of the office until a female candidate lost patience and left. My machinations were no longer a sustainable course with the volume of applicants.

Since I had the pleasure of meeting her, one woman occupied my mind. Despite her limited years in the industry,

Ryan Hagen was more than qualified, graduating at the top of her class with experience from her previous job. Her reaction to my 'lateness' showed the backbone to be a top dog in advertising. Contacting her and scheduling another interview seesawed in my thoughts. A female project manager seemed likely, so why shouldn't it be her?

She was also fucking gorgeous, an unimportant detail in the scheme of things. Except for me. Her beautiful gray eyes, golden skin and wealth of dark hair lived in my dreams.

"Why can't you believe I wanted to spend time with my eldest brother?" Nate's question snapped me to the present. "When was the last time you hung out with me? Hell, any of us?"

"Two months ago, at Tina's birthday party."

"You showed up to forestall rumors of a Keegan rift, asshole. Not since Dad died have you wanted to spend time with us. Am I wrong?"

Quite fucking wrong. My mother's death hung between my other siblings and me. My father demanded we gather each month for family dinners. If not for Nicholas working at the company, I would see him as sporadically as I did my sister and her husband. Nathaniel always needed my help. Otherwise, we wouldn't interact much, either. After Dad passed away, Remy, the baby of the family, preferred gallivanting from country to country, contacting me just enough to keep me satisfied.

"The only time I hear from you is on holidays or when you seek my aid."

"Bullshit. I call you every fucking year on your birthday."

"Considering it's the fucking middle of September and Labor Day has passed, I know why we're here. I want to hear you say it."

Nathaniel had the Keegan blue eyes, inherited from our father and his father and on down the ancestral line. He hadn't quite mastered the icy Keegan stare, though I'd give him 'A' for effort. "It's been almost two years since I asked you for

even a dime, and you're holding onto that? In that time, I might've changed, Noah."

I'd perfected my glacial glare. My glower removed his bravado. "It's been only a month since you asked to borrow my Ferrari to impress a girl. I lent it to you for the evening because I was in a generous mood with your birthday so near. How did you repay me?"

Nathaniel's car had been in the shop, so I'd lent him my prized Ferrari.

"You repaid me by crashing my car," I said at his silence. "Your dumb ass didn't have the sense not to smoke a blunt while on the road. Because you were too stupid to drive sober, I also had to bail you out of jail and offer a few payoffs to remove the accident from your record."

Adding insult to injury, he'd dumped the woman at the center of the bullshit—albeit indirectly—a week later for her *best friend!* He'd soared to new heights of irresponsibility.

"I might've crashed your car, but I paid for the repairs," he snapped. "And I didn't ask you to bail me out or quietly clean up my record. You did that on your own."

"Would you have preferred to rot in jail after I discovered you were arrested for reckless endangerment?"

"No, but—"

"Would you have wanted those charges on your record for the rest of your life?"

"No, but—"

"Exactly. Might I remind you—the repairs would've been unnecessary if you'd been sober?"

"Sober?" he scoffed. "I wasn't drinking and driving. I smoked a fucking joint."

"A damn strong one."

"Weed and alcohol aren't in the same category. You can get addicted to booze. That doesn't happen with Mary Jane."

I managed not to cringe at his slang and refused to get into the cannabis versus alcohol debate with him again. “You’re lucky you didn’t kill yourself or someone else. So, I’ll ask you again: What the hell do you want? I’m a remarkably busy man, and I don’t have the time to act like your end goal isn’t money or a favor from me.”

“Fine. I want a job.”

At his announcement, I narrowed my eyes, searching for signs that he was high or had hit his head or anything that might explain his foray into responsibility. “You can find one. There are always positions open in Manhattan.”

“At our company, jackass,” he told me with no small degree of resentment.

Once more, I stared at him, lost for words.

“Well, your company,” he amended dryly, “since you’re the majority shareholder. I’ve always been good at math. I can put my talents to use in the finance department. Since Nick is CFO, you wouldn’t have to see my handsome mug daily. I’m sure you’ll like that.”

I let the comment slide. “You’re a borderline weed addict and alcoholic,” I said, my tone brooking no room for a counter. “You fill your days with stupid shit and jump from woman to woman. I recall you saying you’re proud to be rich and jobless. So, please tell me, what’s changed?”

“That’s all true, but I want to change,” Nathaniel said, his tone as earnest as his look. “Last month’s incident put things into perspective, and...” He trailed off and glanced away.

Worrying about what he’d say next, I tensed.

He paused and drew in a deep breath. “And I got that girl pregnant,” he blurted, barely meeting my gaze. “She wants to keep it, and I don’t want to be a deadbeat dad, so I’m trying to get my shit together.”

In moments, a range of emotions slid through me. Concern. Nathaniel wasn’t ready for fatherhood. Outrage. He went from woman to woman, so covering his cock was a no-brainer to me. Shock. He’d been stupid enough to get trapped. Most of

all, worry. An innocent child would have parents with dangerous lifestyles. “Jesus Christ.”

Logically, one of his women turning up pregnant had been bound to happen with how Nathaniel lived, so I shouldn’t have been surprised. Still, I was. I couldn’t picture the man before me responsible for a helpless human being. He could barely care for himself.

“What do you mean by ‘that girl’?”

He drew his brows together. “The one I borrowed the Ferrari for,” he responded. “Alessia. Her best friend was too fucking demanding, so I called Alessia to talk. We met at Tiffany’s the next day, then went to lunch for a long heart-to-heart. We patched things up and decided to give it another shot. For the baby.”

I played purposely dumb. “Where does Tiffany live?”

Nate scowled at me. “Tiffany and Co., jackass,” he said tightly, thrusting his fingers through his hair. “Alessia was already pregnant. When I saw her earlier today, she said she’s seven weeks along.”

“Get a DNA test,” I stated flatly.

He shook his head. “I’ve put Alessia through enough. She’s a good girl, and I refuse to insult her by implying she’s been unfaithful to me.”

“I’ll arrange it.”

“No.” A muscle ticked in his jaw before he leaned closer. “She was a virgin,” he whispered. “We dated for three entire months before she allowed me into her bed. Three months ago, I was her first when she did,” he reiterated. “I’ve never slept with a girl who hadn’t had sex before, especially an almost thirty-year-old, but there was a lot of blood, and there was pain, leaving no doubt about her honesty.”

Not only was Nathaniel irresponsible, but he was a stupid motherfucker. Admittedly, I’d never had a virgin before, so I didn’t know much about what had happened, but my brother’s story didn’t add up. Instinct told me this Alessia had played my brother for a goddamn fool.

“Let me get this straight. You dumped her best friend, who you dumped Alessia for, to get back with her after you got her pregnant?”

“I thought I dumped Karol. In the week we were together, I spent more on her than I have in the six months I’ve known Alessia. But she told Karol about her pregnancy before she told me. Knowing Alessia carried my child, Karol morphed into a demanding harridan and left when she discovered Alessia’s pregnancy.”

I did the calculations in my head. “If she’s seven weeks along now, then she was about three weeks when you borrowed my car and a month gone when you broke up with Karol?” I posed it as a question, already having the answer. He wasn’t the only one good with numbers. “She told the friend who helped you to cheat on her before she told you, then waited another three weeks to inform you of your impending fatherhood?”

Nathaniel nodded. “That’s right.”

“You don’t see any issues with this scenario?”

“None,” he responded without hesitation. “I hurt her, Noah. She put her faith in me and trusted me enough to give me her most precious gift. I severely abused her belief in me.”

“What did you buy for her at Tiffany’s? How much did you spend?”

“Not that it matters since it was my money, but a watch, a tennis bracelet, and hoop earrings.”

“Does she work?” I demanded.

“Yes, she does.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“You’re the only man I know who isn’t fine with a woman working because your therapist stole your money and didn’t do his fucking job. Mom was killed being a mother, not a career woman. She wouldn’t have cut her trip short if you hadn’t gotten sick. Stop blaming every woman out there

because *one* decided her son, *you*, couldn't survive without her."

"Asshole," I whispered, low.

Over the years, I'd been the target of my brother's and sister's blame. Nicholas fed Rosalie's resentment. My father never laid explicit accusation at my feet, but I believed he saw my mother's love of me as the reason for her death. The two youngest of the family, Nathaniel and Remy, had been...?

I thought for a moment. They'd been neutral.

"On the other hand," Nathaniel continued when I said nothing else, "even if she had stayed for the scheduled duration, she might've *still* gotten killed. She didn't die of a heart attack due to job stress."

The fucking irony of that statement.

"A heart attack killed Dad, but I don't see your fucking ass retiring. Mom didn't have an aneurysm or a fucking bleeding ulcer that killed her. She died in a goddamn plane crash because of severe weather. She could've been returning from a vacation. Or a visit to friends. Or anywhere. It just so happened it was a business trip."

"If she hadn't been a part of the company, there would've been no need for her to go on the fucking trip," I interjected.

"No, if she hadn't worshipped *you*, she would still be alive."

I ignored that. Otherwise, I might've grabbed him by the throat and choked the fuck out of him. But, we didn't need that type of press, so I swallowed my hurt and anger and said, "The shit you're in with that woman has nothing to do with Mother's death."

"Everything with you has to do with Mom's death," Nathaniel returned. "We aren't meant to live forever, and it was just her time to go, goddammit. Stop making every woman pay for your irrational anger over Mom dying. She's fucking dead, Noah. *Dead*. And being a chauvinistic, antiquated motherfucker won't bring her back. It just arms you with the fucking excuse to stay single and keep women out of your fucking company. Fuck you. Do you understand me? I

refuse to allow you to overwhelm my pregnant girlfriend with your mommy and mental issues. Poor little Noah. He lost his mommy, and it broke his fragile heart. Fuck you, dude. Get over it. She's gone."

Fury rose in me, and my nostrils flared, but I was too livid to respond. His mockery repulsed me. He was five when she'd been killed. Though he'd missed her, he barely remembered her, so her death didn't affect him in the way it had me. My mother and I had been the closest, two peas in a pod. When she was killed, I lost my best friend.

"She's your mother too, you little fucking asshole," I growled, fighting my urge to strangle him. "Show some goddamn respect for her."

"I'm aware of that, Noah. I'm not stupid. But unlike you, I can function fine without dwelling on her passing every day. And you know what? On second thought, I don't want to work at your fucking company. I couldn't take seeing only cocks every day."

"Your job request was a smokescreen to announce your girlfriend's pregnancy."

"That isn't true!" he denied, his arrogant demeanor shifting. "Working in the same office won't be good for our relationship. Is Graham Morgan hiring?"

The change of subject relieved me. When my anger deserted me, I would fight memories that left me hollow and sad. "I'll talk to Graham in the morning and explain the situation." I stood. "I need a fucking drink in the meantime."

"Noah?" Nathaniel called as I walked away.

Pausing at his bleakness, I kept my back to him. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry. Whether you believe me, I worry about you. We all do. We...*I* want you happy. While Mom's death haunts you, true happiness, *peace*, will elude you."

Inane bullshit inevitably followed the harshness Nathaniel directed at me.

So fucking over it, I refused to address any of his comments from these past minutes. But he was still my kid brother, so I turned to him. “Do you want anything from the bar?”

“A Bohemia beer.” He placed two twenties on the table. “For both our drinks and the tip.”

Nodding, I grabbed the money to buy our beers, my head still spinning from my little brother’s revelations.

Chapter Eight

Noah

The moment I reached the bar, I saw her sitting on a stool like an angel dropped from heaven.

The bright blue of the backless halter she wore enhanced her gorgeous complexion. She had a smooth back that made me long to run my lips along the warmth of her skin. As when I met her, her impossibly curly hair, as black as the midnight sky, was piled on top of her head. Admiring the tiny waist that her skimpy top revealed, I stared at her plump ass. It had mesmerized me as she'd stormed out of my office.

Her profile was beautiful, unique, and stunning. She was picture-perfect sitting at the bar, unaware of my presence as I stood at an angle where she wouldn't see me unless she turned.

She'd plagued my thoughts for days. Once I entered the bar, I'd successfully pushed her out of my mind. Yet, here she was, in the flesh, to torment me again. As I stared at her, I searched for why she had me so fucking captivated. I'd thought it was her fearlessness. She had yet to notice me, but her nearness aroused me and made my heart race like a rediscovered ex-girlfriend I hadn't overcome.

Perhaps I'd finally gone fucking insane. Fuck greeting her. Swallowing, I stepped back to walk away, chiding my ridiculous pull to her and cursing my regret at the dirty game I'd played when she'd come for her interview.

She came from a family with five kids and was the middle child, with two of her siblings older than her and two of them younger. Her mother had been killed, her father died when Ryan was sixteen, and her oldest sister inherited the home in their father's family since the early 50s. Ryan's paternal grandmother had been a nurse, and her grandfather a physician. I was uncertain about her mother's parents, except they hailed from New Orleans.

I hadn't been able to stop myself from ordering an extensive background check after meeting her, one much more in-depth than an ordinary employee records verification. In the back of my mind, I understood the invasion of her privacy. It was supposed to appease my curiosity; it hadn't.

She shifted on the stool, craning her neck as she patiently waited for the bartender. Instead of heading back to the table, I stepped forward, pausing inches away from her.

"Ms. Hagen?" I murmured, breathing in her sweet scent that overrode the pervasive smell of cheap alcohol and greasy food.

She froze, sitting a notch straighter. For a moment, she didn't move, then she heaved in a breath and slowly turned to face me as shocked at hearing my voice as I was to see her. Her silver-gray eyes met my gaze and grew as wide as saucers. She looked me over, her shameless appreciation of me as impressive as her hell-on-wheels temperament.

Now that she was facing me, I studied her, thoroughly appreciating her thick hair, beautiful coloring, and curvy figure. The front of her halter plunged into a valley that afforded me an appreciative peek at her round breasts, and the hem stopped right above her belly button.

She attached no names to the design, but I was intimate with loss and the need to honor those who'd been stolen away. Even if I hadn't delved into her history, I would've known it was her personal memorial.

Her intense scrutiny of me mirrored my examination of her. Perhaps my fascination stemmed from her sincerity. Most women of my acquaintance enjoyed coyness. They offered wry smirks if they caught me admiring their charms, but Ryan appraised me measure-for-measure.

She licked her lips, and I groaned. When she didn't react, I decided the bar's noise swallowed the sound I'd made.

"Mr. Keegan," she said with a smile.

She was here, in front of me. I could rectify my stupidity and offer her another interview. There's no damn way I'd

pursue her while I employed her. Becoming another disgraced asshole pinned with sexual harassment charges wasn't on my bucket list. Nor would I ever consider marrying her. She was a working woman and proud of it. No matter my reasons, or if they were fair, legal, or rational, I didn't want the lady I married to have a career. But when we won the Amage contract, and Ryan's ended with KMG, I'd pursue a sexual relationship with her.

Goddamn, having her in my office was a fucking crapshoot. There was a fifty percent chance she'd end up hating my guts because I required near perfection and no excuses in the office. *Or* we'd end up fucking and ruin our working relationship.

Fuck, maybe I *was* obsessive and insane. Since the ball, my life had turned upside down. The Amage contract was in danger, while the upcoming twentieth anniversary of my mother's death overwhelmed me with grief. And I was turning into an inexperienced whelp with his first crush.

As much as I wanted to eliminate Ryan from my thoughts, I couldn't. I wanted *her* more. Fucking insanity. Ryan's replacement of my angel in blue was more senseless than my desire.

Perhaps the reality of *her* coconut scented hair and her beautiful golden skin banished a figment of my imagination. Ryan was much more serious and fierier, missing the stranger's sweet irreverence that briefly unfroze my emotions.

"How are you?" Ryan asked, her lyrical voice capturing my attention.

Her eyes sparkled and danced, entrancing me. She shifted, drawing my gaze to her tits. She was in this grimy little bar, dressed to give any man who laid eyes on her a fucking heart attack. She lacked nothing, perfect in every way.

A thought occurred to me, and I narrowed my eyes, tension dropping into my body. "What are you doing here?" I demanded. "Are you on a date?"

She went rigid. "This is the last place I'd expect to see you," she said, her voice cooling as she eyed me, "so I can ask you

the same thing. What are you doing here?"

Typically, this *would* be the last place I'd be. "I don't seem like a drinker?" I quipped, understanding her meaning. I hadn't chosen to be born into wealth; the fates had shined on me, so I respected what they'd gifted me.

"You don't seem like you'd frequent a dive bar."

Very perceptive of her. "I *don't* 'frequent' dive bars. I'm here with my brother."

Her dark, perfectly arched eyebrows drew together. "Oh." And then, "You have a brother?"

I nodded, pleased at her slight thawing. "Two of them."

"Can I get you anything, ma'am?"

The sound of that Southern drawl interrupted our conversation, and Ryan turned away from me. I lifted my gaze and saw the bartender looking Ryan over, as I had, and smiling at her. He was a dark-haired man in his early to mid-twenties.

"First drink's on the house," he said, the lust dawning in his eyes irritating me.

She nodded politely. "Just a Coke, thank you."

He nodded and frowned at me, glancing between us. "Are y'all together?"

"No, we're not."

Ryan's quick response deepened my annoyance, and I scowled.

"All right." Relief filled his returning grin. "A Coke, coming right up."

He pulled out a shockingly clean glass from behind the bar and filled Coke to the brim. The ancient beverage dispenser would fail an inspection if the health department ever subjected the place to one. He handed the drink to Ryan with another annoyingly syrupy smile.

"Here you go, uh...?" His words trailed off, and he looked at her.

“Ryan,” she supplied, taking a sip before grabbing at the wallet dangling from her wrist. “How much is it?”

“It’s on the house. Remember?” He held out his hand. “I’m Ian, by the way.”

“Thank you for the drink,” she said as she accepted his hand and shook it.

Resting his elbows on the bar, he leaned forward and whispered to her, their foreheads almost touching.

Her responding laugh sounded too authentic for my liking. Possessiveness rose in me at the intimate slant of the bartender’s body.

Apart from his brown eyes, this guy could’ve been mistaken for one of my brothers, he resembled me so closely. As I witnessed her responding to his flirtations, I understood I was physically her type. An upside to their fucking banter, I supposed. Except I could’ve done without their smarmy exchange. Fuck him and his corny lines. Her response to his country boy bullshit was humbling.

From the moment of my birth, everyone fell all over themselves to serve my every beck and call. Even if they didn’t know who I was, most people had enough sense to jump to my command the moment words left my mouth. People who worked for me knew the consequences of inaction. As for women, it was a new fucking experience to have one ignore me in favor of another man and a bartender to boot!

Clearing my throat, I stepped forward, irrationally jealous. I glared at the bartender. “I’ll have a rum and Coke and a Bohemia beer. And please, use decent rum,” I interjected, my cold displeasure loud and clear.

His shoulders stiffened, but he didn’t look away or move from Ryan. “I’ll get your order in a minute, buddy.”

By sheer will, I controlled my ire. Fuck, I’d walked up to the bar in a shitty mood. Ryan was like a beacon of light. But then this motherfucker interfered and now brushed me off. Most fucking egregious was the sonofabitch flirting with the woman I couldn’t forget.

“Your conversation with her can wait. I need service now.”
Having me wait was a fucking crime.

Sidling a glare at me, Ryan sniffed.

“I said to give me a minute,” the bartender barked.

“Unless you have a fucking good reason why I can’t get it now, your minute’s up.”

“I’m talking to someone, Mr. Rich Boy.”

I growled, but Ryan moved and transferred her frown to him.

“It’s okay,” she said, with less friendliness and, hopefully, less interest. “We can talk afterward. Mr. Keegan’s brother is waiting for him.”

Eyeing me with dislike, he sucked his teeth. For a moment, we engaged in a pissing contest. I returned his disdain, showing him, with a look, that our feelings were mutual. He turned away to do his damn job.

“What the hell was that about?” Ryan demanded the second he walked away.

“Service. I want my goddamn drinks. As the sole bartender, it’s his job to fulfill my order.” That reminded me. “Don’t ever offer anyone an explanation,” I said softly. “You let him know you’d talk after he served me. It should’ve ended there, Ryan.”

Her eyes widened at my use of her name. Hell, I shocked myself. A flush swept over her golden skin, and I leaned toward her.

“That’ll be 36.18,” Ian interrupted sharply, setting the rum and Coke and bottle of beer on the other side of Ryan.

I slammed Nathaniel’s two twenties on the ugly bar. If Ryan hadn’t been there, I would’ve asked for my fucking change. Ian didn’t deserve a tip.

He ignored my money and leaned on the bar again, smiling at Ryan. “What do you do for a living?”

The asshole didn’t bother to make sure I hadn’t stiffed him.

His cheesy attention wore on my fucking nerves. If I gave her a second interview, I had her number on file, so there was no need to lose my cool and make a scene in this godawful little bar over a woman I didn't know. Not that a fight would matter to their patrons, as I'm sure they were used to it.

"Never mind," he said before she answered, "I know your profession. An Earth angel."

Stalking to Ryan's other side, I snatched up the drinks, glared at Ian for humiliating the male species with such cliché pickup lines, and turned to walk away. Since he resembled me so much, Ian was undoubtedly a handsome guy. Those good looks were the only reason he dared to use such godawful come-ons.

"A goddess among us mortals," he added.

Fuck him. An unattractive man would've been laughed at for muttering those cringe-inducing words.

"I'm a marketing specialist," she said with pride, her words stopping me in my tracks and grabbing my attention.

His trite words didn't impress her in the least.

She lied to him—she was unemployed—so I started off again.

"At where?" Ian pressed.

"Sauncier."

That hated name froze me.

My suppressed anger flared to life. She hadn't wasted time seeking employment at my biggest rival. Nathaniel's words and Ian's antics fucked up my mood. Learning Ryan worked for Sauncier ruined my entire fucking evening.

She had a promising future and needed work. I let her slip through my fingers, so my unreasonable feelings annoyed me further. Goddamn. Across the board, I suffered illogical reactions to Ryan Hagen, so my response to her working for Sauncier shouldn't have surprised me. She would be an asset to them.

Before I reacted regretfully, I stalked to my brother's table, slammed the drinks down, and spun around, unable to pretend I hadn't seen Ryan.

"Noah!" Nathaniel called in bewilderment.

Ignoring him, I returned to the bar, relieved Ian helped another customer. His distraction freed Ryan to talk to me without interruption.

"You work for Sauncier?" I demanded with my trademark iciness.

She glared at me and narrowed her eyes. "How is that your business?" she replied, just as curt and cold.

"Sauncier and KMG don't have the best history," I explained, not offering further detail.

Her smirk was sexy. "Ahh, they're your rival," she drawled and shook her head. "I just have an interview with them."

"When?"

Irritation slid over her features. She finished her Coke and slammed the glass on the bar before she swiveled on the stool and faced me fully. "Again, how is that your business?"

"It isn't my business," I conceded, relieved she hadn't been hired and fighting lust at her nearness.

I hadn't gotten laid since the night of the masquerade ball to celebrate Tina's birthday. I rarely engaged in one-night stands and never had I not known who was in my bed.

But my sister-in-law's birthday was two months ago. Since I'd lost my virginity, this was the longest I'd gone without fucking. Of course! My celibacy explained my instant reaction to Ryan.

Relieved at the lies I fed myself, I'd remedy my abstinence as soon as possible. Many women would be happy to spend the night with me. I had fuck buddies, escorts, business acquaintances, socialites, committee partners, and old girlfriends.

It was just a matter of choosing someone. As faces and names ran through my head, I didn't feel even a stirring of excitement.

Arranging a rendezvous with anyone, if it wasn't *her*, didn't interest me, however. And therein lay the issue. A major fucking problem because I wouldn't lose her to Sauncier. I didn't give a fuck what it took to get her to work for me. The intent to offer her a new interview out of fairness and regret turned into a determination to snatch her from my rivals. If I had to offer her a million dollars, I'd find *any* position for her at my company if she couldn't work as my project manager for the Amage contract.

"I want to offer you another interview," I announced, playing it cool in a futile attempt at control.

I was that asshole who wanted it both ways—her under me while our hierarchy remained in place. Ignoring the thought of her *under me*, I continued. "I figured you'd prefer if the dates didn't clash."

She shook her head. "I just said I have another interview. I'm almost a shoo-in, so no, but thank you."

Before she'd uttered that hated name, Sauncier, and revealed her interview there, I realized giving her another interview was more of a fifty-fifty chance than a sure thing. I wanted her, and if she worked for me, seducing her wouldn't be an immediate possibility. Despite her qualifications, I still worried the stress of the position would be too much for her. The job might call for travel. Okay, as long as Claude Amage or Channing Powers weren't involved. I'd send her on my private plane and go with her. If something went wrong on the plane, I might find a way to protect her.

Fuck, maybe I should stick to my original plan and hire a man to fill the role. Days were flying by. I had one week to meet the Amage brothers' demands of introducing my project manager to stay in the running to win their contract. Also, other concerns in the company needed my attention. I needed to find a project manager as soon as possible.

“Ryan, if you take the position in my company, the world will be at your feet when it comes to an end. Doors will fly open to you.”

She lifted a brow. “Are you offering me the job or an interview?”

I didn’t want her at Sauncier. Offering her a seven-figure salary guaranteed she’d come to me. Money ruled the world, and Sauncier didn’t have the bank to compete with such an offer.

Ready and able to dangle the lure, I opened my mouth. She’d take the bait. Yet, the words refused to come. Her gray eyes, so silvery and expressive, ensnared me. Tempting her into a situation that might fill her with regret and dim the light in her eyes didn’t appeal to me. Her fucking talents and smarts deserved to shine. Creating a random position and sticking her in an unsuitable department would be a win for me, not her. Meeting with her and confirming she’d relish her duties as the Amage project manager was one thing. Throwing my wealth and power around because I hated those motherfuckers at Sauncier served only me, and such a savage move was unworthy of her brilliance.

“An interview.” I inhaled her coconut scent. Immediately, the ball came to mind, and I scrutinized her, searching for any signs she might be...Fuck. *No*. Absolutely fucking not. “I’m on a tight deadline and there’s a lot to do in a short time. I’ve evaluated your résumé, conducted a background check, and reviewed your portfolio. I’m sure you’ll impress me just as much as you already have.”

She raised her chin. “In case you’ve forgotten, you kept me waiting for almost five hours when I had an interview with your company.”

“Unfortunately, a matter I couldn’t ignore came up,” I lied. She’d never discover how deliberate my delay had been. “I’d like to redeem myself, Ryan.”

Incredibly, I saw her intent to decline before she opened her mouth.

“You’ll have two interviews if you accept mine,” I inserted. “You’ll have the upper hand and can weigh which company will be the best fit for you.”

That sparked her interest, and yet skepticism remained in her eyes.

“I’ll email you the time tomorrow, and I promise I’ll be there waiting for you,” I said, pulling out a business card from my jacket pocket. She didn’t take it, so I slid it next to her empty glass.

Turning halfway, she eyed the card for a moment. Conflicted emotions ran across her face. For several heart-stopping moments, I thought she’d refuse the card. Reluctantly, she grabbed it and pivoted back to me.

Several times, she gazed from me to the card before meeting my stare. “What if I don’t show up?”

If she hadn’t intended to come in for the interview, she wouldn’t have taken the card. Longing and vulnerability filled her liquid gaze. Whether she meant to, she’d dropped her guard and offered me a sweet, private glimpse of herself.

“If you don’t show, I’ll have free time. But, hopefully, that won’t be the case, and I’ll see you in my office soon, Ms. Hagen.”

Chapter Nine

Ryan

Quinn: Paul and I broke up 😞

“Shit,” I muttered groggily, blinked, and reread my sister’s text message. The ding alerting me to an incoming message had awakened me.

Sitting up, I rubbed the sleep away from my eyes. Before I fired off a response, I wanted to feel more awake.

Me: Are you okay? What happened?

Despite my sister’s gaggle of men, she formed attachments to those opposed to her lack of monogamy. Naturally, the end of those flings bummed Quinn out, especially when she cared as much as she did about Paul.

Quinn: He wanted us to be exclusive. I said I wasn’t ready, so he ended things.

Me: I thought you liked him, though.

Quinn: I’m still not ready to be exclusive.

I frowned at the screen, a sinking feeling in my gut. Paul and Quinn’s breakup left Sauncier hiring me a shaky possibility. If he was any bit the asshole I first thought him, his broken heart jeopardized my possible position. And with my interview in three days, that was the last thing I wanted on my mind.

Call me selfish because how the breakup affected me was my primary concern. Besides, I was used to Quinn’s revolving love life.

Swinging my feet out of bed, I grabbed my phone and drew in a breath, praying that the breakup wouldn't cause issues. Sure, Paul had only given me a chance to interview because of my sister. But their parting of ways didn't mean he'd snatch it away now.

Right?

I gnawed my lip, nervous at the thought of losing that opportunity. It would be a little insensitive voicing my fears to Quinn. Nor could I double-check with Paul, as that might appear unprofessional. So, waiting for Monday to roll around and hope for the best was my only choice.

My mind drifted to Noah and his offer. As promised, the next morning after our run-in, an email arrived from him, requesting we meet in his office Tuesday afternoon, the day after my interview with Sauncier. Our first encounter made me hesitant. At the bar, he'd been pleasant, *gorgeoussexydelicious*, I added in a rush. His friendliness might cease if he snagged me for his company. Overhearing me mention his rival precipitated his invitation.

I'd done a credible job of pretending to ignore Noah at the bar. Ian was cute and charming, but he wasn't Noah. Whatever that meant. My response to him just fucking galled me. Mr. Savage Suit played dirty fucking games, so he should've been the last person garnering my fascination.

He was gorgeous, with perfect symmetry to his face. His tanned skin offset those brilliant blue eyes and beautiful head of ebony hair. He had a straight nose, masculine jaw, and full lips that looked so fucking delicious I dreamed of tasting them. He was tall, muscled, and plain fucking *hawt*. More than anything, he was *familiar*. Maybe we'd been star-crossed lovers in another life. Perhaps that's why I contemplated overlooking the first meeting at Keegan Enterprises and accepting his offer for another one.

Besides, scheduling another interview was good. Noah's determination to best the competition gave me a safety net if Paul canceled.

There was also my reaction to Noah. He was *gorgeoussexydelicious*. I grimaced at my insistence on mashing the three words together. To me, it was so much more palatable, especially now that I was considering going on the second interview. At this point, it might be my *only* interview.

Standing, I tried to ward off any doubts as I went to my tiny kitchen to put on a pot of coffee and toast two slices of bread.

As my coffee brewed, I sat at the island separating my living room and kitchen and picked my phone up again, sending another message to my little sister.

Me: I have errands to run today. Wanna come with and talk about it?

Within seconds, she declined the invite, informing me she had other plans. I nodded to myself at her response and opened one of my news apps to scroll through the headlines. I wasn't that disappointed about her turning down my invitation. In all honesty, the offer was out of generosity more than a genuine desire for her to tag along. While I loved my sister and enjoyed spending time with her, I didn't want to hear her drone on about an asshole she was better off without. Fresh out of a fling, Quinn whined about dudes I'd never met. At least, I knew Paul.

The rich, smokey aroma of my favorite dark roast coffee filled my apartment, distracting me and watering my mouth. My morning cup of java wasn't technically a part of a healthy breakfast, but that was usually the only sustenance I opted for in the mornings. And toast, of course. Each day I woke up looking forward to my daily mug of bold, chocolaty, caramelly cup of joe, which contrasted beautifully with the simple, buttery flavor of my toast.

At hearing my toast pop up, I put my phone aside and grabbed a plate from my cabinet to put the bread on and a mug for my coffee. By the time I finished buttering my toast, my coffee had brewed. I poured a cup, taking a sip straight away. Maybe I was a coffee purist, but I loved black coffee and

couldn't stomach it if it had more than cream. Now, I was out, and I couldn't afford the luxury.

Returning to the island with my breakfast, I picked my phone back up and resumed my mindless browsing. This time, though, an article caught my attention. In large, bold font, a headline announced the CEO of Keegan Enterprises was... *something*. The name was too long for the article's delegated space. I stared at the caption, wondering what Noah had done to make the news.

My curiosity getting the best of me, I clicked on the article, my eyebrows rising at the entire headline. Now, the attention was understandable.

The article's opening boasted about the recent achievements of Keegan Enterprises and Keegan Media Group as one of the biggest advertising firms in New York City, and a very lucrative division of the corporation. However, the praise faded, and the author dove into the company's antiquated views of women in the workplace. My eyes roamed the article, my gut twisting at the company's history of sexual discrimination. Outside of secretaries and other low-level positions, women made up less than 10 percent of the company's hires.

And, even worst, the number was very intentional. The author of the article got in touch with former employees and interviewees. Male or female, they all said the same thing. Noah and other higher-ups worked around legalities with tardiness for interviews or cancelations for women applying to the company.

Noah trying to stop my professional advancement because of my gender, boiled my blood. And the more I learned about Keegan Enterprises' sexist pattern, the angrier I grew. At the conclusion of the exposé, red painted my vision.

The rumors surrounding Mr. Keegan were true. Disappointment overcame me, knowing he was indeed a sexist. It wasn't a revelation, but I didn't want to think the gorgeous man was a misogynist. My regret didn't quell my

anger he'd wasted my time during our first interview because I was a woman.

The article's author proclaimed the man behind the company's success was stuck in the 1960s, and after learning about their sexist work culture, I agreed.

Chapter Ten

Some weeks back, I wrote to you about my sister and the one-night stand she'd had with a stranger. You advised me to 'woman up'. Well, I haven't yet. Worse, I told her a bald-faced lie. She demanded I swear she hadn't done anything. Since I wasn't *in* the room with her, technically, I might not have fibbed. I have a terrible feeling this is going to come up again. If I ever slip up, she'll be furious. How do I make this right without losing her trust?

- An Incredibly Concerned Sister

You've sworn to a lie after she asked you a direct question, so you have every reason to be incredibly concerned. Frankly, if you were my sister, I'd beat your ass for hiding something so monumental. She has a right to know. Forget womaning up. Be a decent human and a good sister and confess, damn it! Confess. Do you hear me?

Con. Fess.



Noah

Reading *Ask Ida* had become a guilty pleasure. One, Soraya's answers amused the fuck out of me, but also, I longed for another letter from the concerned sister. Today, my wish was granted and yet, it left me as clueless as the first one. I'd shoved the first one in a desk drawer in my library. This one, and all others, if there were anymore, would meet the same fate. If I called Soraya and explained the situation, would she help me? Of course, there were ethics and privacy laws and all types of bullshit. And, maybe, I was better off not knowing the identity of the woman in blue. As a memory, she could be whoever I wanted her to be. But with a name, fuck, a *face*, reality would interfere, and I'd never recapture the sweetness of my fantasy.

My waitress walked toward me with my food, so I folded the newspaper and set it on the empty chair next to me.

"Here you are, Mr. Keegan."

I nodded and glanced at her name tag as she set my lobster roll and Dr. Pepper in front of me. "Thanks, Alice."

"Do you need anything else, sir?"

“No. Thank you,” I responded and picked up my sandwich as she walked away.

The afternoon was cool and sunny. Fall was only days away. Before mild temperatures disappeared, I enjoyed outdoors. Besides, it was Friday, and I’d cleared my schedule for a weekend dive trip to St. Thomas after ensuring Nicholas wasn’t using the Keegan boat. Lemon made a good dive partner and would accompany me.

Chewing thoughtfully, I wondered if Ryan would enjoy diving. Setting my half-eaten lobster roll aside, I scowled. Why the fuck did it matter? I’d never invite her on such an adventure.

Yet, *she* was the reason for this spur-of-the-moment excursion. Tuesday seemed days away. Well, it was since this was Friday, but the hours crawled by. I’d been restless since I’d left her in that bar. I’d returned to Nathaniel and told him we were leaving, not caring whether he’d finished his beer or not.

If I’d stayed, I wouldn’t have allowed that bartender to interfere with my time with her. The incongruity of my insta-attraction to her had me agitated and questioning my sanity.

Fuck, I could argue that sparks during first meetings led to lasting affairs. My two long-term relationships grew because of mutual interests.

But—

An alert for an incoming text message interrupted my thoughts, and I picked up my phone, seeing my brother’s name. Knowing he wouldn’t contact me unless it was urgent, I quickly read.

Nicholas: **Google your name and check the news tab.**

Noah: **Why?**

Nicholas: **Just do it.**

Following Nicholas's request, I Googled myself and went to the news tab, narrowing my eyes as I read over the trending headline surrounding my name.

The CEO of Keegan Enterprises is a Raging Misogynist: A Brief History of the Company's Sexual Discrimination.

What the hell?

My heart dropped as I looked over the headline again, a pit forming in my gut. While the headline was easy to ignore, I couldn't overlook its top search result.

I opened the article, curious to see why the author, one Ingrid Warrington, tarnished my name. I'd never met the woman, so revenge wasn't the motive behind the putrid exposé.

Initially, the article summarized the history of my company and our achievements. But praising Keegan Enterprises quickly turned into criticism. By the third paragraph, I had a sole thought: This was fucking bullshit.



Keegan Enterprises is a multinational conglomerate based in New York City. The corporation went from a small family-owned manufacturer of electrical components to an international juggernaut under the guidance of three men. The firm, established in 1958 by Archie Keegan, enjoyed a linear trajectory for a decade and a half. In the early 70s, Mr. Keegan diversified his holdings, acquired smaller companies, and doubled his personal wealth. Upon Archie's death in 1991, his younger son, Shawn, took over. His conservative approach to his father's business model cost the company millions. His legacy is Keegan Media Group, counted among the top advertising agencies in the world. Shawn handled Keegan Enterprise's IPO to

raise capital, strengthen credibility, and foster growth. Five years later, the company went private for one reason—control. Today, it is again publicly traded as a controlled company, a move with significant ramifications upon Shawn Keegan's death after a massive heart attack.

When Archie's grandson, Noah, inherited, he was already a company executive and a board member. If Archie laid the foundation that nearly crumbled under Shawn's hesitancy and lackluster leadership, Noah's shrewdness quadrupled his personal net worth and the conglomerate's assets. Last year alone, Keegan Enterprises saw a 30 percent growth. He was weened on financial statements, closing deals and bottom lines. Noah Keegan's name is synonymous with the 'B' word bandied about on many top CEOs. Brilliance.

Few know the real Noah Keegan. Those on the inside say he hides behind exclusivity, arrogance, and the knowledge he was the golden child. He holds his brothers and sisters at arm's length. Sources reveal his many rebuffs at his siblings' olive branch.

Given the cruel treatment of his family, it isn't surprising he propagates a practice his grandfather began.

Keegan Enterprises' long-running success and the historic transformations hide an ugly legacy. Each CEO clung to sexist, patriarchal thinking. This rings especially true for the newest CEO. Despite the substantial expansion under Noah, his opinions on working women are stuck in the 1960s. If your career aspirations go beyond receptionist, mailroom clerk, janitor, or kitchen staff, you need not apply. Keegan Enterprises doesn't want

you. Outside of secretaries and other low-level positions, women account for less than 10% of the company's personnel. 7.9%, to be exact. Under Shawn's stint, the dismal numbers were more than double. 16.1% of the company's hires were women nine years ago. It was still depressingly low, but once Noah was named CEO, women in upper management shrank with the same speed his wealth grew.

The few women in high-ranking positions report the casual and disgusting way the female anatomy is discussed, and the strict dress code women must abide by, whether salaried secretary or hourly wage temp. One former female employee, whose call to me prompted my investigation and speaking on the condition of anonymity, revealed the negligent reprimands handed out because of gender.

"If a skirt was an inch too short or heels a half-inch too high by company standards, they wrote us up." Through tears, she describes the emotional toll it took on her. The stress led to binge eating. "By the time I left, I'd gained twenty pounds. In the end, I don't think I was pretty enough to be a part of Keegan Enterprises. If you're a woman, over twenty-five, overweight, and a brunette, you don't stand a chance."

Another former employee, a sister in arms, says, "The worst part is how intentional the low percentage of female employees is."

An investigation revealed many women who scored interviews with the company but waited an unprecedented amount of time before anyone met with them. If anyone ever came. Most women gave up and walked out.

"Keegan created an elaborate plot to prevent women from being promoted or hired at the executive level," a former hiring manager informed me. "It was a hostile environment under his father and grandfather, but when he took over, it became toxic."

Records reveal Keegan Enterprises and its many subsidiaries has never given a woman a title with decision-making powers. Discrimination laws make it illegal to reject potential employees based on race, creed, or gender.

Mr. Keegan formulated a simple workaround.

"He instructed us to be late for the interviews or no-shows," another former HR executive explained.

His assistant, herself a former employee, said, "When there are openings at a Keegan company, interviews are easy to arrange. Man or woman, if your application is complete, your references check out, and you're qualified, a meeting will be scheduled. Once an applicant's gender is identified, the shenanigans begin. They book other meetings that interfere with interviews. Conference calls too important to miss. Any number of reasons."

The indefatigable scheme is a testament to Mr. Keegan's derelict character. The delays are always business related, easily proven if questioned.

"How many hours would you wait to interview for a job with ten other applicants?" the whistleblower asked. "Two? Three? Six? Everyone has their limits. The moment you walk out, you're no longer in the running. No one has told you to leave. You've

done it on your own free will. You aren't sent away because of your sex. The few women who wait are sent home disappointed. It's so sad. He's Noah Keegan, so he gets away with it."

Noah Keegan must be stopped.

His nonfeasance as head of a multinational conglomerate is wildly unprofessional, incredibly selfish and, frankly, heartbreaking. Such a significant company is committed to roadblock women's career advancements. For years, rumors of Noah Keegan's misogyny and intolerance of women in the workplace have swirled around. His behavior is no longer a rumor. It is now a proven fact.



By the time I finished the article, my blood was boiling. How dare that damned reporter? How dare she think she had a right to judge the happenings in my company based on fucking lies? I threw my phone down onto the table and, losing my appetite, pushed my lobster roll away.

Exaggerated versions of the truth or outright falsehoods polluted the exposé. But the public would not care about misleading statements. No one would give a fuck that KMG was my mother's brainchild. Going public as a controlled company was *her* idea. Without her, Keegan Enterprises would've crashed and burned in the decade after my father became CEO. That truth didn't fit the article's narrative, however.

Unfortunately, there were also undeniable truths, including the fact some fuckhead in my company documented the goings-on. Everyone had signed a non-disclosure agreement. I could sue the fuck out of every employee, current or former, who'd agreed to an interview.

Worse, Ingrid Warrington and her 'sources' had omitted how my mother had handled the company's global reach.

Picking my phone back up, I fired off a text to Nicholas.

I just finished reading it. Collect Jeremy, Andrew, Michael, Tina, and Megan. All of you meet me in my office to discuss our next move. I'm on my way right now.

I shoved my phone back into my pocket before getting my wallet. Tossing two twenties on the table, I stood, happy I opted to sit outside so I didn't have interruptions as I stormed off.

We had to nip this in the bud before it spiraled out of control. It wouldn't be long before other news outlets picked up the information from Ms. Warrington's article. She had published it this morning, and, five hours later, it was a trending topic. If we didn't proclaim Ms. Warrington's accounts false or launch a counterattack, Keegan Enterprises would be in deep shit.



As asked, everyone I summoned awaited me in the same room I'd met with the Amage brothers. They were all muttering in hushed tones, various devices and papers littering the table's surface.

"Noah," Nicholas greeted, his monotone as emotionless as his expression.

"What progress have you made?" I didn't waste time on pleasantries.

I positioned myself at the head of the table, directly across from my brother, who stood next to his red-headed wife, Tina. She was a part of that 16.1 percent of women hired by my father.

For obvious reasons, I hadn't wanted her in the company. Then, when I took over, I'd given her two weeks' notice. Nicholas and I had almost come to blows during his vigorous campaign on his wife's behalf.

He hadn't swayed me. Listening to her keynote speech at a conference we'd attended made me realize she was an asset to the company. Letting her go would've been foolish. Besides, Nicholas and Tina were the poster children for separating work and personal relationships.

Even though she'd kept her job and even though I praised her and told Nicholas how wrong I'd been to contemplate terminating her, he held a grudge. He was waiting to strike back in retaliation. Unlike Claude Amage, no one could remove me by an accumulation. I owned sixty percent of Keegan Enterprises. However, there were certain divisions where Nicholas could establish a quorum without me. They had been minor branches of Keegan Enterprises, so it hadn't mattered to me, such as Kee-Tel, our communications subsidiary.

Now, Kee-Tel had been presented with an opportunity that could make it a formidable force in the industry. I intended to buy out some shareholders to give me the majority I needed. That move wouldn't happen until next year. In the meantime, Nicholas could wreak havoc with my plans for Kee-Tel if he found a way to repay me for almost forcing his wife out.

If I hadn't wanted Tina in the company, she wouldn't have been. As usual, he wouldn't entertain my worries about her safety. He'd also pointed out her position as the president of Kee-Tel required some travel, but not enough for such concern. As for the effects on her health that I'd mentioned, he'd waved them off. She was young and healthy. For whatever reason, I adhered to my parents' wishes that none of my siblings discover Mother's heart attack.

"Megan and I have written our statements countering much of the article's claims," Tina announced, accepting a tablet from Megan, head of HR, and sliding it my way. "She typed them up for you."

I grabbed the tablet and read Tina and Megan's statements. As the only two women in executive positions, it was imperative they denounced the supposed negative experience of my female employees. Although neither one of their testimonials mentioned their coveted positions and how they

were treated with the utmost respect, their words sufficed for now.

I handed the tablet back to Megan and nodded. “Very good. Release the statement.”

“All right,” she said as she placed the tablet back on the table and bent her head to focus on it, her long blonde waves falling around her shoulders.

Her lingering hope she’d marry a Keegan didn’t escape my attention. She’d backed off me when I warned her of the danger to her job. She’d fucked Nicholas, although they all thought I didn’t know. He hadn’t left Tina. Now Megan had gotten her claws into Reid.

The room’s silence annoyed me. “Update me on what’s been done to control this shitstorm before it spreads.”

“While the ladies wrote their counters, the others researched the author’s background.” Nicholas motioned to the men at the table. “I am working on uncovering the supposed ‘former employees’ she repeatedly mentioned.”

“What did you all find?”

“I discovered Ingrid Warrington is a graduate of NYU and holds a degree in Journalism, as well as one in Gender and Sexuality Studies,” Jeremy announced, looking incredibly proud because of the information imparted. He was a junior executive in risk assessment. “Also in her author’s bio, she said that she’s been married for twelve years to one Don Warrington, who happens to be a board member at Sauncier.”

My eyebrows shot up before fury set in. “*What?*” Those dirty motherfuckers! How dare they have the nerve to do such a thing?

“We narrowed down what former employees she might’ve interviewed. She mentioned a woman who’d once worked here under a KMG HR manager,” Nicholas stated, handing me a folder.

I snatched it and flipped through each profile, recognizing almost everyone.

“It didn’t matter that all Human Resource executives reported to Megan,” he went on.

“I’m the only woman in upper management in Keegan Enterprises,” Tina added. “While Megan *is* a manager, her position only pertains to KMG.”

“This Ingrid woman interviewed former employees with ties to Markus Dorset,” Nicholas said again, referring to the KMG production manager who jumped ship to Sauncier.

“With everything we’ve discovered, we think it’s safe to say the article is a ploy by Sauncier to defame this company,” Tina said, stating the obvious.

“No shit,” I deadpanned, thinking of counterattacks.

Ryan Hagen floated through my mind. Ploy or not, the exposé would cause considerable damage. Publicly hiring a new female employee and collecting the statements of the other few women who worked for us to release might soften the blow.

“I have an interview with a possible female hire for the Amage account. She has potential, and I’m scheduled to meet with her on Tuesday.” Fuck, if she showed up. She’d given me no sign which way her intentions went. “If it works out, and we set up a press conference to introduce her, we’d devalue Ms. Warrington’s claims.” Some of them. “Regardless,” I went on, “I’ll ensure a woman fills the role.”

Sauncier’s declaration of war required tactical defense. Once we regained control, we’d go on the offensive.

“We uploaded our statements to our socials and posted on the website,” Megan announced.

“What are we doing about Sauncier?” Andrew questioned. “We can’t let get them away with this.”

“We aren’t.” Fuck diving. “Those motherfuckers know this means war.”

Chapter Eleven

Ryan

This day couldn't get any worse.

After reading the bombshell article on Noah's business practices, I tried my best to put him out of my mind and focus on the day's tasks. However, since I left my apartment to run my errands, everything ended in disaster.

First, the only card I had on me declined at the grocery store. Later, I discovered some bills went through earlier than expected. Though my lights and water would remain running until next month, my depleted funds forced me to leave behind a lot of items at the store.

Then, on my way home, Sandy began emitting a concerning noise. Fearing she'd break down in the middle of traffic, I pulled into a random parking lot. Unfortunately, the turn killed her, and the engine abruptly died. I couldn't restart her. My only choice was a tow truck.

Now, hours after I left my home, I'm pacing in a shabby repair shop and waiting for Sandy's diagnosis. More than likely, I'd have to leave her behind and call for a ride back to my place. I didn't have enough money for all my groceries, so I damn sure didn't have enough to cover an Uber or Sandy's repairs.

My phone rang, and I stopped pacing to dig through my purse for it. Once I grabbed it, I glanced at the caller ID. Paul's name flashed across the screen, and my heart dropped to my knees. A random call at two in the afternoon on the day he and my sister broke up seemed too coincidental. And with the way today was going, I didn't have much confidence he had positive news.

Pushing away my fears, I mustered bravery and pressed answer, my heart pounding as I waited for him to speak.

"Ryan," he greeted, his tone emotionless. "How are you?"

Fucking horrible.

“I’ve been better, but I know you didn’t call to ask me how I’m doing. What’s up?” I rushed out, wanting my theory to be wrong. Wanting this phone call over. Damn, wanting a do-over for the entire day.

“Smart girl. I regret to inform you that Sauncier is no longer hiring.”

Even though I suspected the reason behind his impromptu call, his words crushed me.

“Not even secretaries?” I squeaked, my voice shaky, the events of the day overwhelming me.

“Unfortunately, not. I wish you the best in your professional endeavors.”

Before I replied, the line went dead, raising my frustration even more. I wanted to scream and cry and curse. Instead, a stupid fucking tear rolled down my cheek. I was crying in the middle of a mechanic’s shop.

Of all the places to have a breakdown.

Angrily, I swiped at the stray tear and dropped my phone back in my purse. Walking to one of the plain black chairs, I plopped down into it and planted my face into my hands as more tears flowed.

As much as I disliked Paul, a position at Sauncier was precisely what I needed to get back on my feet. By month’s end, my coffers would be depleted. A few days ago, I’d forecasted being out of this financial hurdle by next month. Yet, the universe had other plans for me.

“Are you okay?” The man’s voice was familiar.

I swiped at my eyes and nodded, despite being anything but ‘okay’. “Today has been a little rough.”

I looked toward the voice, my eyebrows raising as I recognized the bartender from last week. He stood near the two vending machines, feet away from the small sitting area. Clearing my throat, I waved at him, searching for another topic to change the focus. “Ian, right?”

Recognition dawned in his eyes, and he nodded, a grin curving his lips. “That’s right. You’re...Ryan?”

“Yep. How long have you been standing there?”

“A few minutes,” he said, walking over to the seating area with a can of Pepsi in hand. Plopping down next to me, he opened the can and swigged before placing it on the small table next to his chair. He stared at me, curiosity in his mahogany brown eyes. “Do you wanna tell me why you were crying in the middle of a repair shop?”

My cheeks heated, and I once again placed my face into my hands, embarrassed. Before I answered, Ian spoke again.

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you; I’m just curious and concerned.”

“It’s okay,” I mumbled through my hands. After several seconds, I huffed out a breath. My arms fell to my sides. Hoping the mortification I felt didn’t show in my expression, I faced Ian. “Excuse my language, but today has been shit.”

He laughed, his mouth opening just wide enough for me to glimpse his tongue piercing, his amusement bringing a genuine smile to my face.

He grinned. “Care to elaborate?” he drawled.

Another deep sigh escaped me, and I shook my head. “Where do I even begin?”

“Wherever you’d like, darlin’. I’m all ears.”

Not since my mother’s death had I heard that. Usually, I was the earpiece for Quinn and Logan. His words unleashed a firestorm. I listed the ways the day fucked me over. Awakening to the unwelcome news of my sister’s text, the shitty news article, and everything else, until Ian approached me.

He inserted the occasional “shit” or “damn,” while I ranted. His eyes remained on me, and he nodded as I vented.

“Damn,” he said once I finished, shaking his head in sympathy. “That’s a lotta shit. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t cause it.”

“True, but I can still extend my condolences to you.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “Condolences?” I muttered. “That’s a little extreme. You make it sound like a close friend just died.”

“You get the point.”

I smiled at him. Sadly, our chat was the highlight of my day. “Yeah, I do.”

“In all honesty, you’re a brilliant and outgoing woman. I’ll bet money you’ll land a great gig somewhere.”

Noah Keegan flashing across my mind filled me with annoyance. That article had me doubly doubtful of going to the second interview. Except, I didn’t have much choice. No matter the article’s accusations, my financial situation was more pressing. My concern was paying my bills. If I accomplished that, I couldn’t care less who employed me. *Legally* employed me, I amended. I’m sure if I put out some feelers in my old neighborhood, I could find other means of earning money. And there was always the stripper pole. However, my sister didn’t need such an example. It would be a green light to decadence, and she already pushed the limits on mayhem.

Whether I liked it, the position at KMG might be my saving grace.

“Thank you,” I said, genuinely touched by the compliment.

After my fucked-up day, complaining to someone willing to listen worked wonders for my mood.

“No problem,” he replied, offering me a small smile as he pulled his phone out of the pocket of his jeans and fiddled with it.

“So, um, why are you here?” I asked after a few minutes of silence.

“Hmmm. I wonder, for what reason would someone be in the waiting room of an auto repair shop?” he drawled, a

cheeky grin on his face as he slipped his phone back into his pocket.

“Shut up, smartass.”

He chuckled, and I giggled at his deep, joyous rumble. The atmosphere and banter were so relaxed that we felt like the best of friends.

“I’m waiting for my car,” he answered. “It was supposed to be ready half-hour ago, but a last-minute repair should be done soon, so I’m just chilling.”

“Oh.”

After the engagement he’d shown me, I could only think of that reply. He looked at me with expectation, but I didn’t know how to extend the life of our chat. Talking to Ian was nice. With the conversation coming to its natural end, we fell into a comfortable silence. I pulled my phone out of my bag and played Subway Surfers, a mobile game I’d enjoyed since high school.

“By the way,” he said, breaking the relative quietness of the small shop. “Can I get your number?”

“Oh,” I muttered, surprised by the request. “Um, I don’t want to give you the wrong impression, Ian, but I’m not looking for anything romantic right now.”

I wasn’t looking for anything romantic with him. The only man on my mind lately was Noah Keegan.

“Oh,” he said, disappointment plastered across his face. “Yeah, whatever. Can I still get your number?”

I nodded, relieved at his acceptance of the news. “Sure, yeah. Here, just type yours into my phone.”

“All right,” he said, getting his phone back out of his pocket and unlocking it before passing it to me. “You do the same.”

After exchanging phones, I quickly added my number and name to his contact list. I finished before Ian did, so I handed his phone back and patiently waited for him to complete inputting his info. The moment he gave my phone back to me, a shop attendant with gray hair came out to fetch him.

Ian stood from the chair, paying the middle-aged employee no attention as he continued staring at me. “I guess my car’s done. Will I see you again, Ryan?”

“Yeah, for sure,” I answered, thinking of when we could meet again. “Maybe I’ll swing by the bar this week.”

“I’d like that,” he said as the attendant cleared his throat. Ian rolled his eyes at the not-so-subtle hint to hurry. “See you later, Ryan.”

He picked up his Pepsi and followed behind the older man, leaving me alone in the waiting room, with only my thoughts as company. However, I no longer felt as overwhelmed as I had just twenty minutes ago. Even if ninety percent of my day had been shit, I had one positive memory, thanks to Ian.

Chapter Twelve

I'm still hiding the truth from my sister and my life feels like a big old dirty ball of lies. To top that off, my love life is affecting her job prospects. A guy I was dating was going to interview her for a place in the company he works for, then he pushed for a commitment from me, and we broke up. In retaliation, he rescinded his offer. I'm exceptionally good at hiding my emotions, but I'm feeling guiltier by the day. What can I do?

- A Concerned Yellow-Bellied Little Sister

Dear Yellow-Bellied, Lily-Livered Little Sister,

I don't know what to tell you, Sis. Except grow a pair, face your sister, and own up to your crimes.



Noah

Before I knew it, Tuesday afternoon, AKA the time of Ryan's interview, arrived. It had been a busy few days as I met with division heads, department managers, and upper-level executives. Offering positions to women was a minor solution to a much bigger issue. Accusations of improper behavior reeked of sexual harassment. Did I overlook crass jokes? Guilty as charged. Did I manipulate the system and skirt equal opportunity legalities toward women? Again, guilty. No matter my reasons, I abused my power by carefully choosing my hires.

Maybe Graham *was* right, and my childhood trauma festered inside me. It was so fucking hard to ignore what happened when my siblings blamed me for our loss.

Nicholas wouldn't hesitate to stand by my side during any ramifications from the fucking exposé. He understood we were open to fines and lawsuits. We'd counter, but it would take time and resources from day-to-day operations. Our stronghold would weaken.

Despite *my* flaws, I didn't tolerate the type of harassment alluded to in the article. One reason I despised Claude Amage and Channing Powers so much was because of the

predicament they'd placed my mother in. I pretended not to know she'd slept with them to secure that first contract. I overlooked my father's knowledge of the proposition and his encouraging her to proceed.

We'd gone to visit her mother, dying of heart failure. As the firstborn, my father had expected a lot from me. Excellent grades. Social skills. Athleticism. Good taste. My mother planted herself firmly between us. She kept me with her as much as she could. Maybe that's why I always witnessed her triumphs and her tragedies.

Instead of staying at my grandmother's house as usual, my mother and I stayed in a suite at the Ritz. She'd thought I was asleep. I had been, but a sound awakened me, and I'd gotten up to investigate.

The closer I got to her bedroom, the louder the moans and grunts grew. With the door ajar, I peeped in her room, and there she was. No, there *they* were. I hadn't turned ten yet, so I wasn't aware of the concept of monogamy, but I'd been horrified all the same and cried out.

She'd stopped long enough to send me back to my room. Later, she'd come to me and explained it had been nothing but a business transaction. When she couldn't calm me, she'd called my father and told him to talk to me.

"As a woman, your mother is in a unique position to sway business deals in our favor," he'd said sharply.

In my estimation, she'd had the acumen to secure contracts and awards without regard to her sexuality. Though she had won on merit numerous times, she'd given her body and her soul to triumph at all costs.

It wasn't until after my father's death, when I'd found journals, and discovered the rift between my parents caused by the Channing and Claude incident.

Pressing my lips together, I closed my eyes and drew in a breath.

She hadn't wanted to whore herself out. Somehow, my father convinced her. But her affair with Claude lasted over a

year and deepened my parents' chasm. If not for my father's threats, she would've left.

He'd sworn she'd see none of her kids again. Most especially *me*. So, she'd stayed. Claude saw me as the reason my mother hadn't walked away from our family. To me, he was the motherfucker who'd brought sex into their business dealings.

I *hated* that bastard.

As much as I detested him and resented him, it took me years to acknowledge my mother accepted the proposition. She didn't have to adhere to my father's demands and could've walked away. Or ignored my father's insistence and told them all to fuck themselves.

But the only thing she loved more than Keegan Media Group, the division she'd created, was me.

I wanted to drag Ingrid Warrington to hell and back, along with anyone who'd helped her with her piece. Countering any lawsuits or suing for breach of non-disclosures risked exposing my mother's secrets, those known to me and those I'm sure she'd kept to herself. I'd never finished my father's journals and had burned them to ashes. Whatever records my uncle had in his possession, I'd also ordered destroyed.

As she had protected me, I would guard her memory and her legacy. I would protect women from predators like Claude Amage, see that they didn't ruin their health to win a brutal race, and keep them safe from unnecessary traveling.

After my mother's death, I never set foot on a company plane again. If not for my father's threats and my siblings' taunts, I wouldn't have flown commercial. I hadn't wanted my sisters on any airplane, but Dad and Nicholas had called me crazy and ignored my fear and my nightmares.

When I turned twenty-one, I received part of my trust fund and five percent of company stock. At twenty-five, another installment of my trust fund and another five percent of company stock allowed me to buy a private plane. Five years later, when I received the rest of the trust fund set up by my

grandfather and added to by my father, he had been dead two years and I'd gotten an additional forty-one percent of the company and most of his fortune. Upon my thirtieth birthday, I'd also received an inheritance from my mother and deeds to several estates in different locales around the world that had belonged to my grandparents. In turn, I'd easily been able to acquire additional company stock to afford me a comfortable majority.

In the Keegan family, firstborn sons were everything. They gave us the world. Even if we didn't ask for it.

I'd given one property to my sister and the jackass she married. Fuck Nicholas. He'd gotten jack shit from me. I'd sold another piece of valuable real estate and created offshore accounts for Nathaniel. He was burning through his trust fund at an alarming rate. By the time he turned thirty and received his last payment, he would be fucking broke. I didn't know how to handle the real estate proceeds, money he was unaware existed.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. 3:11, and Ryan hadn't arrived. Maybe she wouldn't. Undoubtedly, she read of our creative hiring practices that started with me, backed by Tina, and adhered to by the divisional HR managers.

Ryan wouldn't appreciate the bullshit, especially as a recipient of my behavior. I desperately needed her to accept the job.

No, scratch that. I didn't need *her* specifically to become one of my project managers. Yet, I wanted her to join my company. Sauncier would throw her to the wolves. Here, with me, I would be the wolf, and anyone who fucked with her, the sheep I slaughtered.

Another look at the clock revealed it was 3:13.

New York City had no shortage of stunning, witty, intelligent women, so Ryan shouldn't haunt me daily because she was in their number. Yet, she did, and each minute that ticked by and she didn't show left me agitated and at a loss.

Though her thick mane wasn't bone-straight, I fantasized running my fingers through curls just as ebony, with a similar coconut smell just as unforgettable. Her skin didn't sparkle with glittery makeup, but it was just as flawless and golden. Her eyes captivated me, unencumbered by the vagueness of a place too dark to gauge their color. Beyond surface-level beauty, though, how Ryan carried herself and the way she stood up to me without regard to my name or my power impressed me.

Despite how I wanted to deny it, she reminded me of the woman in blue. The idea was wild and improbable. Yet, each time I saw Ryan, I remembered *her*. Somehow, my mystery girl had swept into my life and stolen a piece of me before disappearing, lost to me forever.

Soraya had turned down my request. The information she received was confidential. Period.

A knock on my door ripped me away from my Ryan-filled thoughts. It was 3:16. Had she arrived? "Come in!" I barked.

The door swung open, and my secretary, Rosa Mikes, entered my office. Alone.

Disappointment punched my gut, and I frowned. "What can I do for you, Rosa?" I demanded. She had no reports for me, so she could've buzzed me from her desk.

"Sir, your three-o'clock is here," she announced, and my sudden relief left me lightheaded.

Sitting up a notch straighter, I fought a grin. Ms. Hagen had a change of heart. "Show her in, please."

"Yes, sir," Rosa responded, backing out of the door, leaving it slightly ajar.

Moments later, she returned with Ryan hot on her heels.

"Here you are," Rosa chirped, stepping aside so Ryan could enter my office.

"Thank you, Mrs. Mikes," Ryan murmured.

Rosa nodded. "Will there be anything else, Mr. Keegan?"

I dragged my gaze away from Ryan as I stood and walked around my desk. “Hold my calls for the rest of the evening. I have a meeting with Nicholas at 4:30 regarding Kee-Tel. I’ll catch up to him tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.” She shut the door, leaving me alone with Ryan.

She wore a muted caramel pantsuit paired with black kitten heels. A tight bun tamed her mass of curls, and revealed the tiny gold studs in her ears, her beauty demurred by minimal makeup. A brown, black, and white plaid oversized handbag served as a focal point and was the most memorable part of her outfit.

All in all, Ms. Hagen dressed as a proper businesswoman. But her professional attire didn’t matter. The form-fitting pants and tightly buttoned blazer didn’t hide the hourglass figure she’d been gifted and instead highlighted her shapely body.

I gestured toward the sofa with my hand. “Please, have a seat.”

She offered me a smile. A sense of déjà vu swept through me, but I ignored it. The scent of coconut trailed in her wake as she glided toward the sofa and sat, setting her handbag next to her.

Walking to the chair across from the sofa, I cleared my throat, hoping my rising cock didn’t burst my zipper. Either I’d accept I was drawn to her for no reason, or I’d make an ass of myself and ask her if she’d attended the ball. Somehow, I managed a welcoming smile. “Ms. Hagen, I’m pleased to see that you reconsidered.” Her acceptance of my business card pointed to favorable odds for me, but the woman was unpredictable.

“Things didn’t go as planned, so here I am.”

She hadn’t gotten the job at Sauncier. My smile turned into a scowl at the thought of those assholes and the damage they had caused. The value of my company wasn’t yet affected, but if outrage grew, it very well might be. The same couldn’t be said about my reputation. I was being crucified.

My feelings about women in the workplace were a poorly kept secret. I'd escaped public wrath and scrutiny, but Ms. Warrington's exposé put me in a sticky situation.

And, just as bad, Ryan had considered Sauncier a better opportunity than working for me. I might've understood her feelings, but I didn't cherish the idea of my company playing second fiddle to those scheming fuckwads.

"Mr. Keegan?"

Ryan's sensual voice pulled me out of my unprofessional mind wandering.

"Yes, my apologies. What do you enjoy in your free time?"

I wanted to delve beyond the generic information in her cover letter and résumé.

"I do yoga and meditation regularly, and I love calligraphy. I have several notebooks dedicated to it. Using a pretty pen to create a visually pleasing word is so relaxing to me."

"Must the pen be pretty?" I asked, amused.

"It's a plus, but no. I could use a basic pen from a value pack, but I prefer nice pens."

"Noted." I changed course. "Now, what's your biggest weakness?"

"Um...my greatest professional weakness is that I'm an extreme perfectionist. I believe a project will be subpar if I don't give my all, but I enjoy putting my energy into my passion, like marketing. If my work isn't as flawless as possible, I won't feel comfortable presenting it. My obsessiveness makes me a pain to work with though my end results are usually outstanding."

I found the interview process tedious. Half the answers were lies repeated countless times. No sane person revealed their fundamental flaws or their more lascivious enjoyments.

Her clichéd response disappointed me. "What an original answer."

Huffing, she frowned. “I said my *professional* flaw, Mr. Keegan. You’re going to be my boss, not my therapist. I have no reason to reveal an everyday flaw I struggle with, but I’ll appease your curiosity. My temper overrules good sense. If someone pisses me off, I don’t hesitate to set them straight. Care for an example?”

“You just gave me one, Ms. Hagen.” I mimicked her earlier monotone. Her verbal lashing recalled our first interview, when she cussed me out the moment I walked through doors I owned. “I apologize for my unnecessary comment. Because of it, I hold harmless your outburst.”

“Speaking the truth isn’t an outburst, but thank you for your kindness, Mr. Keegan.” Her voice dripped with scorn. “Next question.”

She looked so fucking annoyed with me. I squeezed the bridge of my nose. “Ms. Hagen, I believe we started on the wrong foot.” Again.

“No shit,” she grumbled, her eyes widening the moment the words left her mouth.

“Don’t worry about it,” I offered before she could apologize. “You’ll hear worse around here.”

“Does that mean I’m hired?”

“A few more questions to determine if you’re a proper fit. I’d also like to apologize for my behavior during our first interview.”

“You mean how you kept me waiting because of my gender?” she stated, her stare accusatory and unblinking.

“Ah. So, you’ve read Ms. Warrington’s exposé?”

“Yes. And although I suspect you’re doing damage control if you hire me, I thank you for the opportunity to work for you. And despite what you may think about my capabilities because of my gender, I promise I wouldn’t disappoint you,” she said with saccharin sweetness, and grinned, the picture of innocence.

God, what a smile.

“You know, Ms. Hagen, I could still change my mind,” I said coolly, though I felt no malice at her words. I was still her boss, and I didn’t tolerate disrespect from my employees under any circumstances. She needed to know her place. “I recommend you think before you speak to me.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Keegan, I’ll be extremely respectful to you on my first day and every day thereafter. Let the record show that I might wholeheartedly disagree with your practices, but a role at your company is very coveted, and I won’t take my job lightly or forget who’s boss.”

How the hell had she given me a dressing down without raising her voice or offering one affront?

“Tell me a little about yourself and the last job you had.” I knew a lot about her and her last position, but I wanted to hear it from her. It would also give me a chance to regain my equilibrium.

“I am twenty-six years old, I’m from Harlem, and I enjoy... reading.” The noted pause made her words sound like a lie. “I graduated from NYU four years ago with a business degree, with a concentration on marketing, and management & organizations.”

“You have two degrees?” How had I missed such impressive information on her résumé and cover letter?

She shook her head. “No. NYU’s business program allows two concentrations in that major. Until two months ago, I was a junior marketing specialist at T.S. Marketing. I loved the job. I loved the creativity, the research, the attention to detail, needed from me.”

“I heard the company is having financial difficulties.”

“Yes,” she said with a sigh. “Unfortunately.”

“T.S. Marketing isn’t on the same scale as KMG. Or even Sauncier,” I added grudgingly. “It is a niche market firm handling small cosmetic accounts.”

“In my nearly four years with the company, I worked on a dozen campaigns. Eighteen months ago, I was promoted to a team lead and oversaw seven accounts,” she responded.

“Three of which you acquired.”

Pride brightened her gray eyes, but she lowered her lashes and nodded.

“There’s no harm in boasting about your accomplishments, Ms. Hagen. I’ve read over your sample brief and reviewed your portfolio. Your former boss speaks highly of you. He sees a dazzling future ahead of you.”

“I’m sorry my time there ended. Mr. Smith was a great boss and fostered a wonderful working environment. But I am ready for more challenging accounts, which is why a position with you interests me.” She licked her lips and flushed at her unintended double entendre. “Er, job.” She drew in an agitated breath. “I desire a relationship with you. A pl-place in your company.”

“And I want to lock in your position with me,” I murmured, skirting inappropriateness.

Her gaze flew to mine. She licked her lips once more, drawing my attention to their dewy plumpness.

She wanted the job, not a fuck. I didn’t do office romance. In the past, I’d fired employees just for flirting. One had been Nicholas’s good friend, who’d fallen for a receptionist. Because he and my brother were friends, I’d ignored their burgeoning relationship. I’d looked the other way during their first and second breakups. When she ended up pregnant, he doubted his readiness for fatherhood. Nicholas believed I was blind. He fired the receptionist. I fired his friend, another sin he’d never forgive and awaited a chance for revenge.

If he detected the slightest hint of my attraction toward Ryan, he’d put her through hell. Then I’d have to kill him and ruin my fucking life. *Or* he’d threaten to expose me and incite mutiny thanks to my hard-nosed stance.

My gaze touched on her every detail. The curve of her chin and the beauty of her cheekbones. The shape of her lips and the elegance of her brow. The brightness of her eyes and the silkiness of her skin. She could serve as the face of the

perfume I wanted and sell millions of dollars' worth of product.

Each time I saw her, I remembered the ball and couldn't escape the small belief—hope?—Ryan stumbled into my room that night. Reason always intervened. She'd shown no recognition of me. Yet, if Ryan had been *her*, and Nicholas fucked with her...

What? Yes, what? Her career meant everything to her. Flaunting my own rules to pursue Ryan wouldn't have ended well. Unless she agreed to focus on philanthropy and forget working, disrupting my life was pointless.

Would it matter if Ryan had been the beauty in blue? If she was happy, could I demand she quit a profession she loved? If she wanted children, how could I deny her?

Those questions were as pointless as imagining Ryan as my girlfriend. She wasn't *her*. Nicholas and I had enough enmity without my poetic justice. He accused me of heartlessness, but he thrived on my misery. He'd find a way to weaponize Ryan against me.

It wouldn't matter how I'd looked the other way with Megan, despite my disgust at his infidelity. I returned to the interview.

"You worked on one perfume campaign."

Desire still flushed her cheeks and drew my attention to her mouth. "Yes."

I ignored the hot currents between us. "To which portion did you contribute?"

"As you implied, T.S. was a small agency, so most of the time I focused on the mood boards and ad copy. The client was friends with Mr. Smith and didn't have a huge budget, so we'd recently played with ideas for packaging. The winner of the best design would get a bonus and another promotion. I was a team lead, so I would've been promoted to an account manager. I was stoked for the opportunity. They let me go before I explored concepts."

“When you were not concentrating on ad copy, market research, design details and mood boards, what other areas of the campaign did you work on?”

“This account was labor intensive,” she admitted. “It should’ve brought in the most money, instead of the least amount as it did. The sample brief I submitted to you is a portion of what I wrote for this company.”

Markus Dorset’s games came to mind, and I scowled. “You can sing like a canary and whatever is in that brief is useless in court.”

She bristled. “It wasn’t legalities I spoke of, Mr. Keegan. It was ethics. Synthetic elements of a fragrance can have a scent mark, but no legal protections exist for a perfume.”

“In theory they do, Ms. Hagen,” I challenged.

“We aren’t discussing theories,” she snapped. “But absolutes. A fragrance is a blend of chemicals created in a lab. A scent is the result. However, a scent also refers to a natural smell. The scent of flowers in a garden, rain-dampened earth, freshly chopped wood.”

“If I wanted a perfume legally protected, what would you advise?”

“That you talk with your legal team since I don’t hold a law degree,” she retorted.

“Humor me. If I offer you the job and I tasked you with working with the legal department on behalf of a perfume, would you at least know the basics?”

She thought for a moment. “The composition of your fragrance can be patented.”

“The combination of ingredients,” I simplified.

“Yes,” she agreed softly, the sharpness in her voice gone, leaving behind a lyrical tone that aroused me. “Trade secret protection is best. If we filed a trademark, it would make the details of your composition public. Your strongest protection is in the design patent in packaging if you have a unique design or bottle. Or both.”

For a moment, I allowed her words to hang in the air. It gave me the chance to process her words. Forget my desire to sit next to her, draw her into my arms, and kiss her with reckless abandon. She drew in a breath, causing her tits to heave. While I licked the pulse point at her throat, I wanted to feel their weight in my hands.

“I have two positions open.” I debated on a cold shower or jerking off, since having her wasn’t an option. “Both are urgent and center on the House of Amage.”

“The perfume house?” she gasped.

“One and the same,” I concurred, and detailed the job.

“You had one person overseeing the special perfume and the marketing account, so why create two positions now?”

Discomfort was a novel experience for me as much as uncertainty on how to answer. Apparently, I took longer than necessary to reply because she suddenly narrowed her eyes.

“The article,” she guessed. “One position has become two so you can hire two women to show the world how unfairly maligned you are.”

I covered my admiration, and my fucking guilt, with a glare. “I *have* been unfairly maligned,” I stated coldly. “And if I hire you, I *will* expect you to attend a press conference that’ll introduce you.”

“That isn’t standard procedure. As I recall, KMG announces new hires on the company’s website and with a news release. Not full-court press.”

“I employ whatever resources are at my disposal to achieve the outcome I desire.” I gave her a level look. “The pace at T.S. Marketing is not what you’ll find here. The position or positions I am looking to fill will be high-intensity and high pres—” *Pressure*. Horror washed through me when the word registered. Precisely what had killed my mother—the pressures of being a businesswoman and a mother.

“Mr. Keegan? Noah? Are you okay?”

Ryan's concern pricked my dread. "Are you planning to have children?"

Her worry morphed into indignation. "Why? Are we about to discuss the maternity leave your company offers? Oh, no!" she gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. "Keegan Enterprises has no such thing because women are in the minority." Glaring at me, she sniffed. "My desire for children isn't your business."

A muscle ticked in my jaw, and I glowered at her.

"There's no looming threat of pregnancy to interfere with the work you require," she huffed. "God knows this is none of your business, but I'm on birth control."

The words bounced in my head and a dawning sense of...
Fuck!

"Too much information?" she ranted, unaware of my thoughts. "Good. Maybe, you'll realize what a chauvinistic jackass you are. I'd bet my fortune you wouldn't ask a guy if he planned to have kids."

"Did you just call me a chauvinistic jackass?" I asked, my brain slow to catch up because I was too busy studying her mouth, listening to the cadence of her voice and not her actual words, searching her eyes for any sense of recognition.

There was nothing. Unless I dreamed the entire encounter, Ryan either wasn't that woman or she'd been drunker than I thought and remembered jack shit.

"Ms. Hagen...*Ryan*...the work that'll be needed from you will be highly stressful. You'll barely get any free time in the first few weeks. There'll be long hours, short deadlines, and little rest. It'll require a lot of energy and thick skin."

"You make me sound like a Dresden doll," she complained. "I'm not that fragile. I won't break."

"Do you have any illnesses I should know about? Any heart issues?"

She frowned at me. "No. Do you?"

“We aren’t discussing me,” I said tightly, her reaction at my worry over her health making me feel like a paranoid jackass. I backed off. I didn’t intend to marry her, so my irrational concern for her was out of place. “What was the best thing about working at T.S. Marketing?”

“The work environment. Mr. Smith had an office, but we had cubicles and got along well. Mr. Smith’s generosity allowed me time on my assigned laptop for personal use. A perk I miss. My laptop is so old, I worried it would crash before I submitted my application package.”

Standing, I opened my coat and dug into my interior pocket for my cell phone before sitting again. “You’ll be happy to know you will get a laptop. It will be yours to do with as you please in your free time.”

The joyful surprise lighting her face made my idea worth it. Smiling, I opened my text app, chose the head of my IT department, my brother, and Rosa.

Purchase top of the line laptop for Ryan. STAT. I expect it to be at her apartment by the time she arrives home.

“What will you bring to KMG?” I asked, waiting for confirmation they would follow my directive.

She opened her mouth, but I held up a hand as Rosa answered.

I would think a MacBook Pro would work better for her in consideration of her position, Mr. Keegan.

Depends on what she’s hired for, my IT guy, Kim-Michael Lennox, added. We have departments that are strictly PC and others that are Macs.

Fuck, I don’t have time for this debate. Buy one of each for her. Just fucking handle it.

I shoved my phone back into its place, then looked at Ryan, who wore a look of serene patience.

“I haven’t gone into detail about the jobs. One is as pressing as the other. January 9th will be twenty years since my mother’s death, and I have been planning a limited-release perfume in her honor. Issues have arisen and we are going back to the drawing board. I no longer have a name for the fragrance, packaging, a logo. Nothing. I don’t care about the manpower or the cost, it must be done now, and I need a project manager. It is a short-term position and the House of Amage will be heavily involved. The other position is a long-term account manager. You would work on other campaigns, but your focus would be Amage and their fragrances. We were all but guaranteed the contract for their next pillar. Now, we’re fighting to win it. I need someone who’s tough and dedicated; and most of all, loyal.”

“What happens if you lose that account?”

“Nothing, except pigs will fucking fly.”

She looked at me a moment before she laughed. Her amusement drew chuckles from me.

“In other words, it won’t jeopardize the future of KMG.” She giggled. “It’ll just damage your ego.”

Fuck...Ryan’s *laugh*. “That’s one way to put it.” Not a hint of turmoil rang in my voice. Fighting memories of the ball, I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees. “Of course, the bottom line is important, Ryan. I won’t lie and tell you losing the Amage account won’t affect it. What I’m saying is, KMG isn’t dependent on that one account.”

“If KMG loses the account, then that means the new hire will not be needed if Amage is that person’s key client. Is that correct?”

I looked at her, but she took a play from my book and held up her hand.

“KMG is an entire division of the larger corporation, and you aren’t reliant upon Amage to keep KMG going, so there are other accounts and other managers and teams. I’m

wondering why you didn't hand off that crucial account to someone in-house. Job security is important to me."

Leaning back, I rested my ankle on my knee. "My account managers have been in place for years. Many of them have contributed to previous Amage campaigns. The brothers are aware of our talent and still decided to look elsewhere. If it is a matter of money, we could've adjusted our budget to suit them. I feel the only way to compete is to bring in fresh talent."

She nodded, her avid interest pleasing me.

"I never thought what would happen to my new hire if we didn't win the Amage account because it never crossed my mind that we'd lose the contract once we made our presentation."

She rolled her eyes and laughed again.

"But," I began with mock severity, "if that anomaly happens and we aren't awarded the contract, then..." It would be the perfect excuse to get her away from this environment and the ideal time to ask her out.

"Then?" she pressed.

"We'd review your work and go from there."

Her sudden disappointment left an unpleasant taste in my mouth. If I hired her, she'd have me a basket case in no time. Worrying about her health. Wondering about her identity. Wanting to always see a smile on her face.

"What are you thinking?"

Because clearly, by her distant look, something was on her mind. Guilt dropped into her features, and she glanced away.

"Nothing," she lied.

"Ryan," I demanded, "look at me."

Huffing, she turned to me and lifted her chin.

"I demand complete honesty. In all areas. What were you thinking?"

“Oh my God, you’re such a control freak,” she complained. “Most people at least offer a penny for someone’s thoughts. You demand to know them.”

“My mistake. A thousand dollars for your thoughts.”

Her mouth fell open, and she blinked at me.

Ignoring how badly I wanted to go to her and slide my cock between her luscious lips, I adjusted my body to pull out my billfold. After removing ten Benjamins, I placed them on the table and returned my billfold to my back pocket.

She glanced at the money.

“What were you thinking?”

“Money doesn’t get you everything.”

No shit. “Agreed, but it affords most things.”

“I said a penny.”

“To me, that is a penny.”

“You’re obnoxious.”

“If that’s how you feel, Ms. Hagen, who am I to change your mind?”

“I have principles,” she chirped, folding her arms.

“You also don’t have a job. Principles are fine if you can afford them.”

“I can’t believe you said that! Are you saying you’d think it was okay if I robbed a grocery store for food that I can’t afford?”

Interesting choice of words. “If you were hungry and only took what you needed, then yes.”

“Yes, well, I’d still end up in jail. Stealing is still a crime, no matter the reason.”

“Ryan, you’re here for an interview. If you want a philosophical debate, you’ll have to go out to dinner with me.”

“Oh, wow,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re good. Smooth as all get out.” She cocked her head to the side. “I’m

not saying I have any intention of saying yes to dinner, but if I did, would you still consider hiring me?”

“There’s a strict no fraternization rule in place at the company.”

“So, it’s either or?”

“My offer for a date was hypothetical.”

This time, her disappointment both relieved and satisfied me. No matter how calm and collected she appeared, she felt the spark between us, too.

“We are getting way off track,” I told her.

She swallowed, nodded, and glanced at the money again. “This is what I’ll bring to KMG,” she blurted, meeting my gaze squarely. “Dedication and hard work. If you require one hundred percent, I’ll give one hundred and fifty. The accounts I’ve worked on have been for small companies, privately held and mainly independent, so, yes, I’m a novice at such big campaigns, but I’m a quick study. I’ll be thrown right into the fire from day one, and I relish that challenge. I’m an excellent communicator and I don’t shy away from adversity. If you need me to do a press conference to discuss my position here, tell me the time and the place and I’ll be there. If you need me to fly to France and run through Grasse to discover fresh scents, I’m there, too.”

Admiration sank into me, and it shamed me how I’d tried to sideline this passionate woman. “Have you ever been to Grasse?”

She shook her head. “Besides being the perfume capital of the world, did you know Fragonard was born there? He was one of the last great painters of the *Ancien Régime*.”

“That’s not what I heard,” I disagreed. “He was one of the most prolific painters in the last decades of the Old Regime. His greatness is subjective.”

“His most famous painting is *The Swing*,” she informed me.

“I’m not a huge fan of late Rococo art.”

Her gaze touched on the abstract paintings in my office before she looked at me and lifted a brow. “I never would’ve guessed.”

“I’m not a fan of random trivia either,” I admitted, although I could’ve listened to her spout random facts...*Fuck me*. I refused to finish the fucking thought.

With each passing moment, the certainty that Ryan and the woman in blue were one and the same grew. It would explain so much while creating a slew of other problems.

According to Concerned Sister’s first letter to *Ask Ida*, the sister who’d had the one-night stand was ashamed of her behavior. No matter what reassurances I offered Ryan, I doubt she would ever want to be near me again. She would always associate me with that night. It would mortify her.

She was stubborn and proud, with a moral compass much more northward than mine.

Then, too, even if we overcame that, it still meant we’d been lovers, and that would automatically lock her out of the position. On the other hand, I was formulating a plan to hire her and then ask her out.

If I combined the positions as I’d initially intended, then I’d offer her a short-term contract and let her go when it ended. I’d work in bonuses and whatever the fuck else I needed to, so she wouldn’t ever have to work again. She was too fucking stubborn for her own good, so she’d never just take money because I wanted her to have it.

“You mention job security,” I said. “What about assuring my company you won’t suddenly retire?”

Her laughter came easily. “I don’t play the lottery and I doubt I have a long-lost wealthy relative to inherit from, so you don’t have to worry about such an occurrence,” she finished, still chuckling.

If I demanded the amount she’d require to never work again, I doubted she’d be so amused.

“My goal is to have a seven-figure bank account in the next five or ten years.”

“Quite a wide range. One million to nine million, nine hundred ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents.”

She scowled. “Seriously?”

“Since you didn’t consider—”

“Not that,” she snapped. “I meant, did you seriously just say all those numbers to make a point?”

“What didn’t you understand when I told you I’ll do anything to get what I want?”

“Including besting me in a conversation.”

According to her. Not that I intended to correct her.

“I was thinking five million,” she grumbled, giving me the stink eye. “Is that better?”

“Much,” I said agreeably. “Thank you.” I gazed at the money on the table, wondering how to convince her to take the cash. A bet, maybe? Without a reason to extend the time of the interview—my time with her—drew near. Besides, I had a lot to think about.

If Ryan was *her* and I kept the information from her, she’d never forgive me if she ever discovered the truth. I needed to discover, once and for all, if they were the same person. I’d have to call my cousin. Or D’Artagnan, according to the girl.

“I would like to offer you a six-month contract,” I told her.

She nodded. “I understand.”

“It is a trial period where we’d both test what’s best for all concerned. Once the contract ends and all has gone well, I’ll offer you a two-year contract.”

“I didn’t know signing a contract would be required. I thought it was at-will employment.”

“Generally, it is. But I’m wiping the slate clean with Amage and starting over. I’ve done the same with the position.”

She eyed me suspiciously. “Are you sure there aren’t ulterior motives?”

Oh, indeed there were. “None.”

“When is my first day?”

“When can you start?”

“As soon as possible,” she answered.

I got to my feet and walked to my desk, where I opened the locked drawer and took out a manila envelope with several documents and a USB drive where volumes of information about Amage were stored. I walked to her and held out the envelope. “I’ll see you Monday at 9:00 a.m. Unless the press conference is scheduled before then.”

Relief and joy lit her face, and she stood, accepting the envelope. “Thank you so much. You won’t be disappointed.” She gathered her handbag and stuffed the envelope inside, then zipped it closed. Considering the money a moment, she sighed, looked at me and held out her hand.

I appreciated her firm grip. “Congratulations, Ms. Hagen.”

“Thank you.” She dropped her hand. “Truly. This means a lot to me.” She cleared her throat. “There’s no tactful way to bring this up.”

“Your concern about tact shocks me, Ms. Hagen.”

Offering me a severe look, she sniffed. “The shade of it all.”

Her tone drew my laughter. “You are curious about your salary.”

“How did you know?”

“That’s the one discussion during an interview requiring the most discretion.”

She nodded. “Right.”

“What are your salary requirements, Ms. Hagen?”

Caught her off-guard, she blinked. As usual, she was quick on her feet. “At least the pay I received at T.S. Marketing.”

“Your starting salary was fifty thousand dollars a year. By the time you left, you were earning sixty-five thousand.”

“Yes. Sixty-five a year is my desire.”

“I see.” I kept my expression neutral. “About thirty-two five per position.”

Disappointment flitted across her face, yet she nodded again. “Yes.”

“That amount is what you need to live comfortably?”

“That amount is what I need to survive.” She frowned. “What do you mean by ‘live comfortably’?”

“Meeting all your obligations, with money left over to save a third of your paycheck and pursue recreations.”

“I learned a long time ago how to live frugally. I allowed myself a small bi-monthly budget for entertainment and clothes. All unused funds went into my savings, which I’m grateful for now.” She lifted her arm, pulled back her jacket sleeve, and revealed a gold watch. “I gifted myself this Coach watch for my 25th birthday. Saving for it took me a few months.”

Hiding my wince, I remained silent.

“So,” she said, dropping her arm to her side again, “I can expect a salary in the range of what I received at T.S. Marketing?”

I had some thinking to do, but I nodded. “You will receive bonuses with each goal you meet.”

“Even more incentive to succeed.”

She held out her slender hand again, and I gladly accepted it. Her touch signaled my cock, but I refused to release her until she ended our handshake. Later, I’d rub one out, pretending her full lips wrapped around my dick.

“Thank you so much.” Her voice was low and sexy, and her gaze burned into mine. “You won’t regret entering the 21st century.”

She turned away before I responded to her jab, so she missed my grin.

Pausing at the door, she turned to me again. Her slight smile drew my attention to her mouth. “I was thinking I’d search for

other employment while I worked on the account. That might not be necessary anymore,” she said. “I’ll see you Monday morning.”

Left alone, I shoved my hands in my trouser pockets and stared at the door, perplexed by her comments, until I glanced at the money and remembered my earlier demand.

Soft laughter escaped me. She’d thrown her gauntlet, sharing her thoughts in her own way and her own time. Clearly, she intended to challenge me at every turn. “Game on, Ryan.”

Chapter Thirteen

Noah

“It must be urgent for you to have sought me out,” my cousin, Reid, greeted me as I walked to the table he sat at with my brother, Nicholas. “Especially at the club. You rarely show your face around here anymore.”

Nicholas’s presence shouldn’t have surprised me. Those two were good pals. My cousin had an office in my building and was a junior partner in his father’s firm. Keegan and Associates oversaw two smaller subsidiaries of my corporation. Our in-house attorneys sometimes consulted my uncle and his stable of attorneys. *Quid pro quo*. That branch of the Keegans also served as my family’s personal attorneys. In return, they had access to our yacht, our planes, and our contacts. My uncle and his family could rent an island.

We could but it.

Like my father, Uncle Ed grew up learning the ins and outs of Keegan Enterprises. His calling hadn’t included the family business, and my grandfather disowned him.

My mother had convinced Dad to extend an olive branch to his older brother.

I pulled out my chair and sat as Reid summoned a waiter. “Whisky neat,” I told the fellow and watched as he scurried away to fill my order.

I glanced around one of the most exclusive men’s-only clubs in the city. It had an expensive initiation price and an annual membership fee in the thousands. Shades of browns and creams decorated the elegant surroundings, enhanced by muted lighting, and four-seat tables dotted on the floor. A circular counter, inlaid with marble, dominated the center of the room. The high-backed bar seats gave members the option of casual enjoyment or wheeling and dealing at the tables.

“The equipment was delivered to Ryan Hagen,” Nicholas announced after the waiter sat my drink in front of me and

walked away.

I nodded and tasted the whisky, savoring it after my long day. After the anticipation of Ryan's arrival dissolved into satisfaction that she showed up, I worked a bit after her departure. My concentration was shit, so I'd called Reid.

"Ryan?" Reid inquired, a strange expression on his face.

"Do you know her?" I asked, my hopes rising, as Nicholas said, "Hagen. Ryan Hagen, the woman meant to show the world that my brother isn't a fucking chauvinist."

Refusing to engage Nicholas, I remained focused on Reid. "Do you know Ryan?"

Nicholas snickered. "You mean, has he fucked her?"

"I mean, does he know her?" I gritted.

Reid thought for a moment. "No to both of you."

Disappointment hit me, but my demeanor remained unchanged. "I can't stay long."

"Shocking," Reid said with a straight face.

"Fuck off." I swallowed half the contents of my glass before setting it aside and thrusting my fingers through my hair. This hunt was fucking insane. My reasonable certainty at Ryan's identity should've sufficed. Except it didn't. "This is about the masquerade ball."

"The one you walked out on before we fucking sang happy birthday to my wife?" Nicholas asked, less-than-pleased.

"I didn't want to be there in the first fucking place," I said in a deadly calm tone. "I thought it was disrespectful and in poor taste, considering it was also Mother's birthday."

"What about it?" Nicholas bit out.

"Fuck all to do with you, Nick," I retorted, redirecting my attention to Reid. "You were with two women that night. Sisters." If Concerned Sister was, in fact, referring to Tina's party.

“I was with *one* woman that night,” Reid corrected. A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Who has since dumped me. Can you believe that? Me! One of the biggest catches around. *I’m* supposed to walk away.”

“*With* is relative,” I told him, not caring to hear how much he loved himself. “Were you ever in the company of a gorgeous woman in a blue ball gown? Long black hair. Flawless golden skin.”

“Q’s workaholic sister,” Reid stated.

“Q?” Nicholas asked. “Who the hell is that? You invited random women into my home?”

“She’d never been to a society event such as that,” Reid answered without apology. “She asked for an invitation, and I saw to it she got one.”

“What is her family’s name?” Nicholas demanded. “Where does she live? What’s her background? You didn’t bring her to party. You brought a whore to my house for a fuck and to impress her with all the obvious wealth.”

“Whatever is bothering you, get over it,” Reid said. “She wasn’t a whore. She *isn’t* a whore. She’s a makeup artist, and she was my fucking date, along with her sister. They arrived after Noah’s presentation, but they were with me in the fucking ballroom for almost an hour.”

“I didn’t see you with two women. I remember a girl in pink attached to your side like a suction cup. As much as I wanted to come to you, I was constantly interrupted.” A look of distaste came over Nicholas’s face. “You don’t have to say anymore. She isn’t from our set.”

Reid stiffened. “I’m fucking ignoring that, dickwad. If I presume your meaning, things can get ugly.”

“In terms of wealth,” Nicholas clarified. “A little sensitive, aren’t we? What did you think I meant?”

“Nicholas, shut the fuck up,” I barked. “No one there carried a neon sign announcing their net worth, so maybe he should speculate. That’s between the two of you. Address the matter with Reid as much as you’d like once I’m finished with

him.” I looked at Reid again. “Tell me about Q’s sister.” I wondered if he knew her full name and protected her identity.

“Why do you want to know about her?” Reid asked with suspicion.

“Because I fucked a stranger at the ball,” I snapped, frustrated at their stonewalling. I didn’t need the back and forth, just answers. “I think I’ve solved the mystery of her identity, but I want to be sure.”

“Who do you think she is?” Nicholas asked.

“You almost sound smitten.” Reid smirked.

Fuck, I was that and more. “*Smitten?*” I scoffed. Even if I could explain my feelings, hell would fucking ice over before I opened to either my brother or my cousin. “I have never been so enamored to chase any woman, and never will be. This is merely for confirmation.”

“Why is this suddenly a priority?” Nicholas asked, eyeing me.

Reid sipped his old fashioned. “Oh, I don’t know, Nick,” he drawled, after swallowing, “leave the old man alone. Being besotted by a woman may be just what he needs.”

“For?” Nicholas asked, beating me to the punch.

“It doesn’t matter,” Reid said with a sigh and glanced away. For a moment, he lost himself in thought before he drank again, then looked at me. “I’m with Nick. Why is her identity suddenly so important you ordered this meeting?”

Pausing, I hesitated. If I blurted Ryan’s name, then I’d have other problems. Mainly, her employment. While I could override any objections presented, it would set a bad precedence and feed the flames stoked by the article. Besides, one night of drunken sex wasn’t the issue. It was me. My reaction to her. My thoughts of her. *Both* hers.

“Do you know Q’s last name?” Nicholas said into the silence. “Fuck, what’s her first name?”

“Uh, well, sorry, no.”

Reid was lying. “I want the fucking truth now,” I ordered.

“We’d only been dating for about, uh, a month.” Reid glanced between my brother and me, then offered a careless shrug. “We hadn’t graduated to last names.”

Nicholas choked, narrowed his eyes at Reid, and opened his mouth.

“Not a fucking word,” I warned.

“What do you mean, Noah?” Nicholas snapped. “It is easy for you to demand silence because this asshole didn’t bring his piece of ass to your fucking place.”

“*She* made herself into a piece of ass, fuckwad,” Reid snarled, sudden anger flushing his skin. “I fucked up once or twice, so she walked away from me and has refused all calls.”

“Over the course of a month, you fucked up once or twice?” I asked.

Reid looked markedly miserable. “I don’t want to talk about her, Noah.”

“*You* sound smitten,” I said, surprisingly sympathetic.

“Speaking of smitten,” Nicholas spat, ever the asshole, “you *do* sound deeply into that state yourself, Reid, toward a woman whose last name you didn’t know.”

Reid drained his glass. “How the fuck’s a name important? If she’s a raving bitch, she could be a Rockefeller and I wouldn’t want her.”

“You haven’t been spotted anywhere in recent weeks,” Nicholas said, pointedly ignoring Reid’s explanation to glower at me. “There’s no woman linked to you in months. The only women you’ve run across are those interviewing at KMG, so give me her name or who you think she might be, and I’ll have Megan run a background check. We’re already graced with one of your obsessions. Mother. We don’t need to add another one to make us miserable.”

“You’re a fucking asshole,” I snarled, low, while even Reid winced.

Nicholas glared at me. “I’m beyond—”

“Leave off, Nick,” Reid interrupted. “We’re not here to discuss Aunt Réjane. We grieved in our way. At least give Noah that much courtesy.”

“I was to be keynote speaker at Impact, one of the most prestigious conferences there is,” Nicholas said bitterly. “On my way here, I got a call to uninvite me from addressing the attendees. Why? Because of your fucked up practices, Noah.”

“My ‘fucked up’—” I used air quotations — “practices aren’t anything new.”

“They may not be new, but they’ve never been public,” Nicholas countered. “So you see, Reid, Noah’s obsession, his *grief*, is more than I can bear.” His eyes blazed. “Do you know what the asshole wanted me to do? Bar my wife from going on a business trip? He’s fucking insane and fixated. He couldn’t have his fucking way and keep her out of the company, since our personal ties crosses yet another one of his fucking rules.”

“He has valid reasons for them, Nick,” Reid said. “Misinterpreting someone’s behavior could lead to a wealth of charges.”

“Against Noah?” Nicholas spat, then looked at me. “I’m waiting for you to fuck up. I wished you’d fucked Megan. I would’ve taken pleasure in running her off, just to make you eat your fucking rules.”

“Nick, shut it,” Reid warned. “You’re fucking drunk. Swallow your false bravado and shut the fuck up.”

“No. Fuck him.” He hadn’t turned away from me, so he continued his diatribe. “You sit on your throne, wishing they could remove me from the board. But I’m good at my fucking job. I wish I would’ve thought about going behind your back and swiping a majority of the shares like you did, asshole. Fifty-one percent wasn’t good enough for you. I’m waiting for you to fuck up. Find a woman desperate enough to marry you and then you cheat on her, and I find out. I’d sing like a fucking canary. Even better if you break one of your own rigid workplace rules.” He laughed wildly. “A little embezzlement.

Maybe, acting fucking human so overwhelmed with personal problems, they interfere with your fucking work. I'll write you up like you wrote Tina and me up. You didn't care what the fuck was going on."

"He's over imbibed, Noah," Reid said, as if I didn't hear my brother slurring. "He might not even remember all he's said to you tomorrow."

True. He was still a fucking asshole.

"Fuck you, Reid," Nicholas blared. "Don't fucking talk for me. You're nothing but a drug addict dickwad."

Hurt and anger crossed Reid's features, but my brother saw neither because he looked at me.

Nicholas jabbed me in the chest. "You're a fucking crybaby mama's boy. You had to steal the fucking company. You weren't satisfied with being the reason for Mother's death, fuckhead."

I got to my feet, braced my hands on the table, and leaned toward my brother. "If you don't shut the fuck up, I'll do it for you and make sure it's done so that your trap will be wired shut for months."

A muscle ticked in Nicholas's jaw. He knew he'd pushed me too far, however, and I was ready, willing, and able to deliver my promise.

"Jesus, calm the fuck down, both of you," Reid ordered. "You're drawing attention. Call our waiter over, Noah. It'll seem you were getting Nick's drink order."

Fury twisted my gut, but I backed away and glanced around. When I'd walked in, the place had been all but empty. Now, several tables were occupied, and businessmen sat at the bar. Reid was right, though. More than a few heads looked in our direction.

Drawing in a deep breath, I dropped back into my seat and signaled the waiter.

"Fuck, smile," Reid admonished. "You'll frighten Frankenstein with the look on your face, Noah."

“Yes, sir, Mr. Keegan, sir?” the waiter greeted.

He was new, so I didn’t know his name. “Another whisky for me. An old fashioned for the blond Mr. Keegan. Thank you.”

Nicholas cleared his throat. It was only after Reid’s lifted his eyebrows and made a slight nod toward the room at large that I placed the third order.

“Nicholas wants a martini, stirred, not shaken,” I said, anger in my voice.

Our uncomfortable silence lasted for several minutes after our drinks arrived.

“Is there anything you can tell me about Q’s sister?” Curiosity drove me to remain at the table with my brother when I wanted to punch him into the ground. “Was she in blue?”

Reid studied me. The only child of my father’s brother, he was Nicholas’s age. Any closeness between us faded years ago. As I isolated myself, he distanced himself. Lately, he seemed more introspective, even slightly sad.

“Who would’ve thought you’d fuck a random woman?” Nicholas sneered. “Please spare us the details. Give me a name and I’ll check into it.”

Again, Reid subjected me to scrutiny. “Once you do, throw away the file. Delete it from your database,” he advised. “We all know of the policies at Keegan Enterprises.” He gulped some of his cocktail. “Suppose this woman is *the one*? Having to fire her wouldn’t serve you well. If you didn’t fire her for the no fraternization rule, you would drive her away because of how you feel about women in the workplace.”

“I want you to pay me the speaking fee I lost,” Nicholas announced.

I frowned at him, but Reid spoke again.

“You’re head honcho, so you could override the former and go to a therapist regarding the latter,” he said.

“Fuck, no,” Nicholas growled. “He’s had me release some damn exemplary employees because they broke the rule. He doesn’t get a pass.”

“Unless I cut you a check,” I barked. “Then I’m sure your attitude would change.”

Reid tsked. “You’re flinging accusations and insults to Noah, Nicholas, and yet you’re a fucking hypocrite. Your fucking *wife* works there.”

“Dad hired Tina,” Nicholas said flatly.

“And Noah could’ve let her go.”

“On what basis? As far as I know, assholery isn’t cause for termination.”

“Yes, because I would’ve canned you years ago,” I said with alacrity.

“Goddamn, Noah. Do you have to sound so fucking eager?”

I smiled at Reid. “The thought lifts my spirits.”

“It would,” Nicholas shot back. “You have no family loyalty.”

“Why are you here?” I asked crossly. “I asked to see Reid, not *you*.”

“Reid and I are good friends. We meet here every evening before I head home to my wife.” Nicholas chuckled without humor. “Wives and friends aren’t concepts you’re familiar with. Do you need definitions?”

Long ago, I’d decided the barbs from my family meant nothing to remove their sting. Yet, Nicholas’s words, *Nathaniel’s* words, hurt. They blamed me for everything, but credited me for nothing, so I armored myself by adopting a mien of cold indifference. “Get the fuck away from this table or shut the fuck up. One more comment from you and I’ll see your membership revoked.” I smiled nastily. “It was on my recommendation they admitted you, Nicholas. Don’t make me regret sponsoring you.”

Nicholas snapped his mouth shut, purpling with rage.

“What does Q stand for?” I asked, ready to acquit myself of their presence. The reprobate and the fucking weasel. “Did the sister wear a blue gown?” Reid had never implicitly said she did. “Were they drinking champagne?”

Reid clenched his jaw, glaring at Nicholas, glancing between us again. “You’re a fucking asshole,” he decreed to my brother before responding to me. “I call her ‘Q’ for queen, but that isn’t the first initial of her name.”

Guilt flashed over his face, and I squinted, wondering if my imagination tricked me.

“Her name’s Jo...” He coughed. “Josephine. The sister wasn’t in blue. However, she *did* have dark, straight hair and golden skin.”

I’d expected Reid to cement my belief about Ryan. Instead, my disappointment felt like physical pain. Standing, I downed my whisky and walked out, glad I’d opted for a driver tonight.

Chapter Fourteen

Ryan

“Hello, beautiful. How’d it go?” Ian’s drawl curled around the words.

After spending my day on errands and preparing myself for my first day at KMG, my cell phone had rung. Ian fussing over me felt nice, even if I’d friend-zoned him.

“I got the job!”

“Aww, babe. That’s great. Nice work. How’s about celebrating tonight? Dinner, dancing, and whatever else we can think of to do.”

Though I heard the teasing in his tone, Ian was only half-joking. He was such a nice guy, and I liked him a lot. He wasn’t Noah, though. As much as I hated to own up to my weakness for the man, it was there. He was my boss now, so I had no chance with him. Not that I would’ve had one otherwise. But I just needed to get the job—him—behind me before I explored romantic involvements.

Based on Noah’s files, my workload promised to be as brutal as his expectations. An initiation period to ease me into my positions wouldn’t happen.

“I start tomorrow, Ian,” I said with regret. “I’m hanging home to complete my final two drafts of files I have to turn in.” And research Réjane Keegan, for a better sense of who she was, to incorporate into my concepts. “Thanks, anyway. Maybe, next time.”

“Come on, Hagen. I’m not taking no for an answer. This accomplishment calls for a celebration.”

“Ian!” I said with mock severity. “If you would’ve called Thursday or Friday—”

“Apologies, darlin’, but a man’s got to earn a living. And *you* could’ve called me.”

“It wouldn’t have made you any less busy. I figured what was up, so I immersed myself in my work files.”

“You need a break, ma’am. I won’t keep you out too long. Scout’s honor.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “You’re incorrigible!”

“I don’t know much about advertising, so I can’t estimate how busy you will be, but this might be the only time for a while to celebrate. You deserve a toast, honey. C’mon, don’t disappoint this country boy.”

“You’re so full of shit.” Suddenly, I looked forward to a night out to commemorate my feat. Somehow, I’d gotten hired at Keegan Enterprises. Reasons didn’t matter. My foot was in the door, and I intended to kick that bitch down. “Fine. You win, good sir.”

“Pick you up at eight,” Ian said, his smugness clear.

“Sounds like a plan. Now say goodbye so I can prepare for our date.”

“Sure thing, babe. But you’re gorgeous and we have five hours between now and the time I see you.”

“We’re celebrating, right? I want to look special.”

“Well, then, darlin’, who am I to stand in your way?”

“Exactly, so bye!”

“Bye, beautiful.”

For the first time in months, I felt carefree and lighthearted. Ian was right. I needed a break. The last time I’d enjoyed myself was at the masquerade ball over two months ago. I would make the most of the evening with Ian.

It was so fucking awful how we overlooked the good guys in favor of fucking assholes. Except, in my defense, I had no one else.

That Noah had a MacBook Pro and a Dell Alienware delivered to my door a few hours after I left his office meant nothing except he was a good boss.

Instead of opening the boxes at once, I'd opted on texting. I'd gotten his cell phone number from the card he'd given to me and messaged my thanks to him. His response had been almost immediate.

It's almost midnight. You could've thanked me at a reasonable hour.

Embarrassment had warmed my cheeks at his rebuke. I'd decided against responding. His answer deflated me, so I'd set the boxes on my coffee table, intending to sleep. Before the laptops arrived, I'd been pouring over the physical files, wishing for a glass of wine. Wishing, too, I hadn't been so fucking stupid and left the money Noah offered on his table.

There was pride.

And there was raging, stinking stupidity.

The ringing doorbell had interrupted my attention on the files and my anger at being a dumb bitch. Receiving the unexpected items stopped me from berating myself and appeared to be an extraordinary gesture. Instead, he'd only been an employer supporting an employee.

A bout of overwhelming sadness hit me, but another text from Noah lifted my spirits.

Why did you wait so long to text?

Wait? What did he mean?

They didn't arrive until five minutes before I texted you.

WHAT? You were supposed to have them by the time you arrived home.

I stared at his words and broke into peals of laughter. Before typing words, I sent him ten LOL emojis.

You're laughing at me?

Yes! Even THE Noah Keegan can't order such high-end laptops delivered in such an abbreviated time.

Good night, Ms. Hagen.

His terse response left me hollow. His signals were so fucking mixed I'm surprised my head wasn't spinning like that girl from *The Exorcist*.

Scowling, I'd simply responded, **Good night, sir.**

Of course, he'd wanted the last word.

Unless I give you permission to contact me after work hours, please refrain from doing so. This is unprofessional and unacceptable. Good night.

Ass. HOLE.

Fuck him. He wouldn't get the last word.

OK.

I'd powered my phone off. If he responded and proved my theory correct, I wouldn't have been able to sleep. Either we would've gone back and forth the entire night or *he* would've turned his own phone off. I shouldn't have worried. When I turned my phone on the next morning, I'd received nothing else from him. It had been presumptuous to think he'd engage in a texting battle.

Shoving those memories aside and storing away the day's purchases, I went through my closet and settled on two dresses. I couldn't decide whether I'd prefer the dark green off-the-shoulder cocktail dress or the elegant, black maxi dress. It would help if Ian had given me a damn clue about where he'd take me; I wanted to be appropriately dressed.

Not being able to decide, I left the outfits on the bed and hopped in the shower, taking care to exfoliate and meticulously clean every inch of myself. By the time I finished, I had turned my tiny bathroom into a sauna. I

wrapped bath towels around my body and hair, then got out my makeup case and set it on the bathroom counter. I couldn't beat my face if I didn't know what I'd wear. To solve my vain dilemma, I padded into my bedroom, where the two dresses lay side-by-side on the bed, and played Eenie Meenie Miny Mo. The dark green cocktail dress won. Because it was flashier than the black dress, I spent extra time and care in making up my face. My long, curly hair hung down my back. If I had time, I would've flat ironed my tresses as I'd had done for the masquerade ball. No matter. I looked damned good and heartily approved of my reflection in the mirror. I picked up my perfume and sprayed my wrists and behind one ear just as the doorbell chimed.

Perfect timing, Ian.

I quickly whiffed the other ear. Glancing at my watch, I grabbed my purse as I went to answer the door. "Right on time," I said to Ian the moment I opened it, beaming up at him.

"Every minute with you counts," he said with a smile.

I walked out into the hallway and turned my cheek to his descending lips. Though he knew I considered him only a friend, he'd continued his flirtations. I ignored his come-ons because I enjoyed Ian's company. We lived in our own little world, where he took his shot and I overlooked him with the same vigor. Our awareness of the fucky behavior had worked well. Tonight, though, there was a different vibe between us. One where he allowed me to see the disappointment on his face because I didn't let him kiss me on the lips. If I acted normal, maybe he'd whip himself back in place, too, so I pretended not to notice his letdown before closing my door and locking it tight.



We sat at one of the best tables in The Roman Pillar, Ian's favorite restaurant, as I learned while waiting for appetizers.

"Hagen, I have a wonderful evening planned. I hope you have your dancing shoes on." Even though the smoldering looks he gave me made me slightly uncomfortable, Ian's enthusiasm was contagious. "I called in a favor. After dinner,

we're going to one of the most exclusive nightclubs in the city."

"I am ready for anything that you are."

Because of Ian's endearing kindness and constant consideration, I tried to convince myself I'd eventually remove the friendship label and give him a chance.

Yet, gazing at him now, listening to his drawl, I knew I'd never develop romantic inclinations toward him. After the humiliation of my first sexual experience, I relied on practicality in my relationships. In the past, Ian checked off all my requirements. I would've settled into dating such a good, reliable man, a genuine gentleman. He wouldn't have pressured me for sex, understanding my six to twelve week waiting period before intimacy.

Despite my best efforts, though, lust overwhelmed me. Unfortunately, not for Ian.

All the names my parents called me...No, no, and no. I couldn't go there.

I touched upon the planes and angles of Ian's face, awaiting common sense to save me. It didn't happen.

He just wasn't...he wasn't...*Noah*. Whom I couldn't have. Noah. Was. My. Boss. It wasn't his fault he electrified me and fascinated me. I told myself he'd be a selfish lover, as controlled in bed as he was out. Nothing dampened my attraction. Overnight, I'd become that starry-eyed sixteen-year-old. I framed my desire as lust, though it felt much more profound.

It didn't matter. If Ian made an advance tonight, I'd reject him, possibly damaging our relationship. The idea upset me, and I prayed he'd not put me in such a predicament. Still, I couldn't string Ian along, so we'd remain friends while an unhealthy attraction tied my emotions. Such double dealing wasn't fair, and he had his own life to live free of games.

"Would you like to know what comes next?" Ian teased a little later, as we enjoyed papaya Tres leches. The Irish crème

liqueur coffee topped with mountains of whipped cream was itself a meal.

“Oh, how you intrigue me.”

Smiling, he studied me as he had the entire evening. “Just how curious are you?”

I laughed at his exaggerated leer.

“Why don’t you surprise me?”

Out of the corner of my eye, a gorgeous man sitting with an attractive blonde a few tables away caught my attention. My heart skipped a beat as recognition dawned.

Holy fucking shit, Noah was here, too!

“Ryan, are you alright?” Ian asked, concerned, as he caught my expression.

“Yes. Why do you ask?” I answered, sounding anything but alright and very distressed even to my own ears.

“You had a strange look on your face.”

“I did? I guess maybe I am a trifle strange,” I said, attempting light-heartedness, losing my battle to focus on Ian.

Like a moth to a flame, I was helpless *not* to look Noah’s way. He was here, and nothing else mattered. Except for the woman with him. And the sick feeling twisting in my belly.

This time when I looked his way, he headed in my direction, his escort trailing behind. Swallowing a gasp and desperate to act casual, I picked up my cup of coffee and sipped. It tasted thick and robust, the coffee’s hidden bitterness hitting my suddenly dry tongue. My hand shaking, I set the cup on the saucer.

Ian lifted a brow, then started to speak, but Noah’s arrival with his date interrupted.

“Ryan.” Noah held my gaze, his blue eyes inscrutable, before frowning at Ian. “Bartender Ian,” he said with obvious distaste.

Shady motherfucker.

Ian stiffened, and I shot Noah a glare for his rude ass greeting.

“I didn’t recognize you in the bar, but I know who you are now.” Ian glared at Noah. “I’ve seen you enough on the news.”

“Hello, Noah...Mr. Keegan,” I blurted, not liking the rising tension between the two men. There was no love lost between Noah and Ian. From the moment they’d met, they had engaged in a dick-sizing contest.

Noah pierced me with an icy gaze. “Shouldn’t you be at home, preparing for your first day on the job?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your damned business,” Ian snapped before I could answer.

Noah’s smile chilled me. “It certainly is since she works for me.”

“The hell you say!” Ian returned his attention to me. “Did you read about this guy’s business practices?”

A muscle ticked in Noah’s jaw, but instead of responding, they both turned to me. Two pairs of questioning male eyes demanded answers, but their mutual displeasure meant little. Noah’s nearness commanded my attention and heightened my agitation. My pulse pounded and my belly tightened. Somehow, though, I exercised perfect control.

With our text exchange uppermost in my mind, I ignored Noah and addressed Ian. Why I felt the need to explain myself to him or anyone else escaped me. I couldn’t process much else, except Noah. His cologne. His displeasure. His presence.

I drew in a steadying breath. “Ian, I applied for the position before the release of the exposé.”

“We’ll discuss this later,” Ian declared. “In private.”

“I beg your pardon?” Noah snarled. “You have nothing—”

“Excuse me,” I hissed, glaring at Ian, and not giving a fuck that I interrupted whatever Noah had been about to say. *They* could engage in their dick measuring contest. “There’s nothing to discuss, Ian,” I said flatly. “You don’t pay my bills. You

don't buy me food. You don't give me money. My work life and my personal life are two separate entities and if you can't remember that, I suggest you write it down and look at it every day. Don't ever interfere with my bag, mister."

"A bag?" Noah echoed.

"Money," I snapped, allowing him a cursory glare before I looked at Ian again.

His mouth was tight with displeasure.

"We'll discuss this later," he repeated, his jaw set. "It should matter to you how I might view whatever job you hold."

"Says you," I growled. "But no dick is that good." The words fell out of my mouth before I caught myself.

While Ian and Noah both looked ready to foam at the mouth, the feminine laughter redirected my attention to the silent green-eyed woman next to Noah.

I drew in an irritated breath. "Who's your date?"

Noah offered me a tight smile before pulling the blonde closer to him. She shot him a surprised look. "May I present Rosalie Howard?"

She sidled an icy smile to him before nodding.

A tense silence fell around us.

"Ian and I were just finishing dessert," I blurted, to fill the space with words and drown out the roaring in my head. If I wanted to be honest with myself, I'd admit to jealousy, but since I had no intention at self-evidence, I pretended not to care he was with such a gorgeous woman. Tall, thin, with diamonds dripping from her ears, neck, and fingers. "Would you care to join us for after-dinner drinks?"

"Another time." Noah's stare burned into me, left me feeling as if he undressed me in slow, agonizing degrees, until my body was as bare as my soul. "Rosalie and I have other plans."

The nape of my neck grew hot as my blush crept up my neck and into my cheeks at the insinuation in his deep voice.

Rosalie wrinkled her small, straight nose, but Noah commanded my focus, leaving me unable to puzzle over her displeasure. His eyes bored into me, searching for answers to questions he hadn't asked. But then he had enough and drew his gaze away.

Vaguely, I heard Noah and Rosalie's goodnights, and suddenly, through a haze, I realized Ian and I were alone again.

"What was that all about?" Ian demanded. "And you didn't tell me you were working for that asshole."

What *was* that about? If only I knew. I couldn't understand why desire and longing swept through me and set my body to burning every time I saw Noah. But I had no answer. Not for Ian and not for me. My indignation at Ian's nerve slid away.

In silence, I watched as the waiter cleared away Ian's coffee cup and empty dessert plate. When the man turned to me, I leaned away from the table to allow him space to clear my dishes, too.

"You seem quite upset at seeing Noah Keegan, Ryan," Ian observed once the waiter left us alone again. "What aren't you telling me?"

Noah had thrown me so off-kilter, I couldn't find any offense in Ian's possessive tone. "He's my boss now, so the less said about him, the better."

Studying me, Ian clamped his mouth shut.

The waiter brought a silver bucket filled with a bottle of champagne. He set two fluted glasses on the table and held the bottle out for Ian's inspection.

He nodded in approval and the waiter opened the bottle without the loud pop I so enjoyed when the removal of the cork released the pressure.

"Dom Perignon?" I looked at Ian, arched an eyebrow, and smiled. "I'm properly impressed." Though I wondered how he could afford the bottle on a bartender's salary, I could cross another champagne off my bucket list.

“It’s my intention to impress you,” Ian said, as the waiter poured the champagne and placed the bottle in the silver bucket before leaving.

Ian reached across the table for my hand. I allowed him to hold it for a second, then I squeezed his hand gently, and let go.

At his disappointed look, I laughed anxiously, closing my fingers around my glass.

Ian picked up his glass and raised it in a toast. “We can’t let this evening go by without toasting,” he said.

“By no means.” I raised my glass. “What shall we toast?”

“Your new job.”

“*Salut!*” I said, touching my glass to Ian’s.

“*Salut!*” he echoed.

Afterward, we fell into an awkward silence. Noah’s departure with his date dampened my evening, and I just wanted to go home. I traced my finger around the edge of my glass.

“I’m sorry about that hand thing just now. I hope you didn’t read anything into that.”

He looked so forlorn that I gave him a gentle smile and took his hand in mine. “Thank you for celebrating with me. Your thoughtfulness is sweet.”

“You’re an extraordinary lady, Ryan, and you deserve a special evening. I only hope I haven’t ruined it for you. You can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“I don’t, Ian.”

“Is there a chance for me?” he asked, pressing the issue.

Uncertain if I withheld a direct answer to spare him or because I needed a steadying force while I worked at Keegan Media Group bewildered me. I was no longer in the mood for dancing. “Let’s call it a night.”

“Very well. Please don’t let this change things between us, Ryan.”

“Of course not,” I murmured, and hoped that would be the case.

Chapter Fifteen

Ryan

“How do I look?” I asked Quinn, spinning around to let her examine the outfit I had chosen for my first day at KMG.

Prior to Ian inviting me out yesterday, I had spent my time tearing my closet apart searching for the perfect outfit to wear on my first day. I had gone back and forth between plain conservative pantsuits, colorful fabrics and various patterns, pencil skirts, and dresses that hugged and highlighted my curves.

Noah liking my ensemble had constantly run through my mind as I searched my closet. Not in the professional sense, but so he’d want to fuck my brains out. Difficult to do when picking clothes for the workplace.

Ultimately, I chose a black and white plaid skirt and a black silk button-up, paired with small silver hoops, 3-inch black and white pumps, and a large black leather purse able to hold everything I needed. Not in the mood to tussle with my hair, I fashioned the front half into a ponytail, while the back part remained untethered.

Quinn yawned and gave me a thumbs up, sipping the coffee I supplied her. At my urging, she had gotten up at 7:30 AM to make it to my apartment and judge my outfit. While I could’ve sent her pictures via text, she didn’t awaken until the afternoon, so asking for her opinion would’ve been pointless. Even a scheduled text would’ve been ignored.

“You look good, Ry,” she said around another yawn. “You’ll be the finest suit there, guaranteed.”

I cocked a brow and tasted my coffee. “I’m not in a suit, Quinn.”

She waved me off. “You get what I mean. By the way, is it fine if I nap here when you leave? Logan’s girlfriend is still at the apartment, and they kept me up all night with their fucking. It was disgusting.”

“Uh, unnecessary information,” I answered, nearly gagging at her words. They were grown and dating, but I didn’t want to imagine my siblings doing the nasty.

“At least you didn’t have to hear it. The damn hypocrite would’ve had a fit if the roles were reversed.”

“You can nap here.” I ignored her comment. “But if anything’s missing, it’ll be your ass,” I warned, thinking back to the times when my belongings mysteriously disappeared after Quinn had unsupervised access to them. While said items always popped back up after a while, I didn’t appreciate Quinn swiping my stuff at her whims.

“I never steal. I’m too pure for that,” she muttered, shoving pillows and drugstore bags aside and laying back on my couch. Items spilled onto the floor.

“Girl, watch it!” I exclaimed, hurrying to collect the fallen things, and bringing them to my tiny dining table. “If you break anything while I’m gone, you’re replacing it.”

“Sorry, sorry,” she said sleepily.

“Also, my lock’s been acting weird, so double-check that the door’s secure when I leave. This isn’t a neighborhood where you can sleep with the doors unlocked,” I said, realizing she had yet to find my key.

“Got it,” she answered, sitting up and gulping down the rest of her coffee. Standing, she brought her cup to my kitchen sink, then walked over and hugged me, resting her head on my shoulder as she did when we were kids. “Good luck on your first day. Make me proud, sis.”

I hugged her back, smiling at her words and gesture. “I’ll do my best, Quinn.”



“Here you are,” Mrs. Mikes said as she escorted me to Noah’s office, lightly tapping on his door before turning on her heels and disappearing down the hallway.

I breathed a sigh of relief she hadn't lingered. Maybe I was just petty, but since I read the exposé, I wasn't too thrilled with Mrs. Mikes. While we didn't know each other prior to my interview, as a woman, I would've expected her to be against a scheme that held other women back in their careers, instead of being complicit. Or, maybe, complacent.

Either way, she had shitty behavior.

"Come in." Noah's distinct, sexy grumble filled me with desire.

Mentally, I kicked myself. The fucking hypocritical asshole! He'd seemed more than a little jealous over my date with Ian, throwing a fit on the sly by being unnecessarily rude to him.

Hours later, I still couldn't believe how Noah had addressed my date. *Bartender Ian?*

Oh, the fucking shade.

His date with another woman removed any possessiveness I might've allowed him.

At his go-ahead, I opened the door and at once noted the beautiful woman seated in front of his desk. My executive's bag holding the MacBook and all the files suddenly too heavy for my shoulders, I paused.

Her blonde beach waves and fair skin tone glowed despite the staid navy skirt suit that revealed her long legs.

"Ms. Hagen, meet Ms. Megan Buford," Noah said, nodding his head toward the woman. "She will oversee your press conference scheduled for this afternoon."

Shit, I'd forgotten about that.

Megan Buford smiled at me, before refocusing on him, her look of longing relaxing me.

I feel you, girlfriend.

Unaware or not fucking caring about the lust he garnered, Noah jutted his chin in my direction. "Miss Buford, this is Ms. Ryan Hagen."

She nodded in my general direction, fixated on Noah. I closed the door.

He tracked my approach, not glancing away as I sat in the chair next to Megan's. His startling blue eyes held me captive. Butterflies fluttered in my belly. I didn't know if I wanted to blush, giggle, or strip. He was so—

Oh, hell no. What the fuck was my problem? I was a grown ass woman. I didn't simper or suffer bugs swooping in my stomach like Mary fucking Poppins, especially over Noah Keegan. My boss. *His* employee.

I scowled at him and grudgingly cheered when approval entered his eyes. Because why not? I *had* spent a long time rummaging my closet for an outfit he'd like. My behavior reminded me of Quinn's at the beginning of a new relationship.

I gritted my teeth.

No, not Quinn. Never her. My little sister was bold and bright and beautiful, unashamed of desire. I admired her. Even envied her. At the time of our parents' deaths, she wasn't sexually active, so they'd never discovered her lovemaking. Shamed her for it.

Quinn and Dad had been remarkably close. I worried she would grieve to death after he was killed. It had taken me months to coax her back into the light. By then I was so exhausted, I felt twice her age and positioned myself as her mother figure. That's when what Mama would've expected from Quinn took root in me. Like the fight between Beefy and Lanky the other night, my mothering Quinn was so out of hand, I didn't know how to reverse course.

Sighing, I sat my bag on my lap, refusing to look at Noah. No matter how much the confrontation with my parents taunted me, I wanted...

I wanted...

I wanted to *fuck* him.

I froze, waited for a fucking demon to open hell, and yank me in for my whorish thoughts. Of course, it didn't happen.

Using my Rabbit and fantasizing about Noah was nonsensical. Playing with my pussy wasn't shameful. After all, a man who wasn't my husband didn't have access to my body.

However, if I was married to a man like my brother-in-law, that motherfucker wouldn't have access to my body either.

I swallowed, confused. My attraction to Noah jumbled my common sense. The more access I had to him, the greater my lust would become. Each heightening of my desire would swamp me with horrible memories.

Megan turned to me and smiled, revealing perfect teeth.

Though I returned her smile, her beauty intimidated me. Yes, I was attractive. But Megan, like Rosalie last night, was blonde, svelte, and tall. Both women belonged on a high-fashion runway. Based on his date at the restaurant, Megan fit Noah's type. As gorgeous as she was, he must have noted Megan's looks.

Bullshit I never thought myself capable filled me. Shame was preferable to jealousy and insecurity.

What? Had I lost my fucking mind? I preferred none of the above.

"It's nice to meet you, Ryan," Megan said, her voice accented.

"Likewise," I responded in a tone dripping with sugar, trying to overcome my irrational jealousy. "Where are you from?"

"London. And you?" Her voice had a soothing quality.

"Born and raised in Harlem."

"They'll be time for small talk later, ladies. Time is money." Noah got to his feet, and we stood, too. "I'll be showing you around, Ryan. I've cleared my schedule just for that purpose." After buttoning the tailored coat that matched his trousers, he came around his desk and offered me his hand. The scent of his cologne wafted over me and his grin, so sexy and arrogant, drew my attention to his mouth.

"Welcome to Keegan Enterprises."

I took his hand and shook firmly.

Regrettably, he released his hold on me. “Here, we’re a family.”

The corners of my lips turned down. Every job I’d ever had, management proclaimed their underlings part of the ‘family’. His fucking cliché was a major red flag, signaling a hostile environment. Except for Trent Smith, I learned that truth the hard way.

Noah sounded unconvinced by his own words. I fought to not roll my eyes.

“You are an up-and-coming young executive, and I look forward to our collaboration.” Noah’s inscrutable gaze switched to Megan. “You’ve already proven your worth as head of HR, Miss Buford.”

“Thank you, Mr. Keegan,” Megan cooed, her accent giving her a sophisticated, continental vibe. “It’s a pleasure and an honor to work under you.”

Excuse me?

‘Mr. Keegan’ lifted a brow, her innuendo not lost on him.

She flushed prettily and batted her lashes, then smiled at me. “I’ve looked at your portfolio, Ms. Hagen. You’ll be an asset not only to Keegan Media Group, but to the entire corporation.”

“Thank you, Miss Buford.” I thought of the exposé. To counter the explosive accusations, I’d be the company’s sacrificial lamb, shoved in front of the world without a chance to grasp the work environment. I forced myself to smile. “Mr. Keegan, thank you so much for giving me this unlikely opportunity.”

He picked up on my wryness and amusement lightened his features. His face had perfect symmetry, an aquiline nose, a masculine jaw, and a stubborn mouth. Each time we locked gazes, his blue eyes burned into me, searching my soul, seeking answers, demanding acquiescence.

“Well, Ms. Hagen.” Displeasure reeked in Megan’s tone. “I’m sure Mr. Keegan appreciates the kind words.”

“Megan’s right.” Noah didn’t spare her a glance. “You’re very welcome, Ms. Hagen. Any questions?”

My pulse beat a rapid tattoo. His singular focus—me—gave me a rush. Whatever my parents might have thought of me didn’t matter. Apart from that one incident, I’d conducted my life above reproach. I’d never act on my attraction to Noah.

His eyes smoldered, and I realized I hadn’t answered him. “No questions at this time.”

“Excellent. Megan, call me when you’re ready to prep her.”

“Not for a couple of hours yet. But I’ll need to borrow her to sign paperwork when Reid arrives.”

I lifted an inquiring brow.

“The contract,” Noah clarified. “Remember?”

“Yes. Of course.”

Megan gave me a tight smile. “I’ll be in my office.”

Alone with Noah, my uncertainty returned.

“Ms. Hagen? Are you ready to start your day?”

I nodded.

“Then by all means let’s begin.”

Gathering my bag, I followed him out of the office. Trekking down the long, maze-like hallway, I admired the width of his shoulders and the trimness of his waist. The pumps I wore gave me a height of about 5’9, tall for a woman by most standards. Yet, Noah’s six plus feet dwarfed me.

He stopped at one archway and placed his hand at the small of my back to guide me through. In turns, I applauded my layers of clothing and fought away a tremble at his touch. Rows of desks and four closed doors caught my attention. Several workers, all men but for two, gaped. Besides disbelief, their expressions didn’t inspire confidence.

Instead of a modern media department, it disappointed me to find a veritable scene from *Mad Men*. Swallowing, I gazed at Noah, hoping he allowed me to select my desk from the two vacant ones.

“KMG?”

“No,” Noah responded, offering no further explanation as he turned us toward everyone. “This is Ryan Hagen. She will be the account manager for my mother’s perfume and the Amage account.”

Some flung ‘welcomes’ my way, but the majority regarded me with displeasure.

“Thank you for such a warm reception,” I said sardonically. “I endeavor to exceed such overwhelming expectations.”

Noah’s surprised laughter at my words garnered closer scrutiny, even a few smiles.

“This way, Ms. Hagen,” he ordered, oh-so dashing in his tailored suit.

He’d said this wasn’t the advertising division, yet we walked further into the area.

All eyes were on me. A quick tally revealed two women besides me in this section. A smattering of secretaries sat outside executive offices, noted as we’d traversed the hallway. There was also Megan and Mrs. Mikes. Other than that...

Wow!

Most of my coworkers were middle-aged men with a very particular look, one I drastically deviated from.

Noah ignored the stares and led me to the door farthest away, in its own corner. He pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked the knob before walking in and flipping on the light. The room held a desk, two chairs, and a small bookcase. Even without decorations, I appreciated the coziness.

“Ms. Hagen, your office,” Noah announced, shocking me.

An office of my own! I squealed in delight.

Though I'd be feet away from a bunch of unfriendly older men, having my own personal space overjoyed me. Considering my small cubicle at T.S., the upgrade to an office was a big deal to me.

"Can I decorate? Give it a more distinctive touch?"

The smoldering glint in Noah's eyes made my breath catch. I froze.

"You're welcomed to bring whatever makes you most comfortable."

Only him—his look, his voice, his scent—would leave me helpless to resist his topsy-turvy behavior. "The key," he said, holding it out to me.

"Thank you." When I accepted the key, our fingertips brushed, and my gaze flew to his.

He looked at my lips, and I parted them at the gleam in his eyes. Somehow, Rosalie's image rose in my head, and I forced myself to turn away, pocket the key, and then set my bag on the desk.

"I brought the MacBook," I said, breathless despite myself. "But if you'd like me to bring both of them, I can."

"Which do you prefer?" he asked, turning to me, the desire on his face making it hard to concentrate or shore up my resolve.

Folding my arms, I leaned against the, *my*, desk. "I've always wanted a MacBook, but they were out of my price range. I never thought I'd fall in love with a machine, but it has been such a pleasure to work on it. I have read and reread what you sent home with me. I have several outlines and mood boards for your review."

"We'll meet after the press conference."

"Congratulations, Ms. Hagen," Megan said as she sailed into the office, in front of a man with blond hair and green eyes and holding a briefcase. "You're lucky to have your own office. At the beginning of my career, they forced me into a cubicle," she finished with an airy laugh, glancing around. "It

is *small*, isn't it? Not large enough for the four of us to comfortably fit."

"Then leave," Noah said with finality. "I'll call you if you're needed."

Chin high, she left as she'd arrived, with unerring confidence.

"Reid Keegan, this is Ryan Hagen," Noah said after he'd closed my door.

He was almost as extraordinarily handsome as Noah. And like with Noah, a sense of having met him before swept over me. But he showed no sign of recognition. Besides, I promised Quinn I'd forget my suspicions that I'd fucked a stranger. Speculating if I slept with Noah, my boss no less, or whether I'd met Reid, broke my pledge to my sister. She said I hadn't had sex at the ball and I'd vowed to believe her. Instead, my thoughts were luring me down the unlikeliest path possible.

I hadn't slept with Noah! I didn't know Reid! And if I ever threw that nonsense at Quinn, she had every right to kick my ass.

"A pleasure to meet you, Ryan," he said.

"Same, Mr. Keeg...you're a Keegan?"

"He's my asshole of a cousin," Noah grumbled. "But also, a family attorney. Reid asked if he could handle your contract." He glared at the man, who offered him a careless smile. "Nepotism at its finest, Ms. Hagen. He's best friends with my brother, so of course Nicholas would direct Megan to allow Reid to handle this."

"Nick thought it best if we formed a show of support, considering the rumors," Reid drawled. "What better way to do this than have me draw up the contracts?"

Displeasure wafted from Noah as he addressed me again. "My father was a businessman. My uncle was a lawyer. The sons followed in their father's stead."

Reid handed Noah a folder. "See if I've omitted anything."

While Noah opened the folder and Reid turned his attention to me, I tried to imagine him as

D'artagnon?

I swear...oh fuck. *Drop it, girl.* Quinn swore to me nothing happened.

“Everything’s in order,” Noah concluded, closing the folder and returning it to Reid.

“If you’ll sign by the ‘x’s, Ms. Hagen, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“I’m not signing anything until I read the contract.”

“You insult me, Ryan,” Noah said. “You’re implying I intend to put you at a disadvantage. We don’t have time for you to read the document, so please sign it and we can continue.”

“No. Rule number one of dumb motherfuckers is *not* reading legal documents.”

Reid choked out a laugh, but Noah glowered at me.

“You aren’t dumb, but you’re very mistrustful.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Have you given me a reason to trust you, Noah?”

“I have other appointments, Ryan,” he replied. “Sign the fucking contract. Otherwise, you won’t be able to represent the company at the press conference. I won’t continue the tour because you still aren’t my employee.” He paused, waited, visibly gnashing his teeth together when I refused to relent. “I’ll also be forced to take the fucking key back because this won’t be your office.”

He was the most savage asshole I’d ever met. Maybe I was insane. I walked away from a thousand dollars but couldn’t bear to lose this small office. For whatever reason, tears rushed to my eyes when Reid smiled and offered me a pen and the folder.

I snatched both from him. “I want five days to read over this contract and then tear it up if I don’t like the terms,” I said

thickly.

“Three,” Noah countered, a strange look on his face. “Unless you have the reading skills of a four-year-old, it shouldn’t take you any longer than a day, so consider yourself a beneficiary of my generosity.”

Glowering at him, I laid the folder on the desk and opened it, signing wherever the post-it arrows guided me. Once I finished, I returned folder and pen to Reid Keegan.

“Thank you, Ryan,” Reid said politely. “Megan will bring you to my office prior to the press conference.”

“That’s right. Somehow, a negligent, reckless ass like you has an office at the law firm and another one in my company,” Noah jeered.

His ears turning pink, Reid scowled, but didn’t address Noah. He continued to talk to me. “We’ll give you a quick course on what we expect you to say, and what is forbidden. I’ll also have a list of the invited reporters, all slanted in Keegan Enterprises’ favor. This is a big deal, so I don’t doubt reporters engaged in a war with the company will try to sneak in.”

“You’re not inviting Ingrid Warrington?”

The prospect of not inviting the reporter and addressing her in person shocked me.

“Don’t utter that woman’s name in my presence,” Noah spat.

Offering him a severe look, I drew myself up, angry and emotional. Did I have to ask why I was upset enough to cry? My friendship with Ian was damaged, and my new work environment was unpleasant. Noah was *Noah* and overwhelmed me. Reid Keegan reminded me of *that* night when I thought I’d put it to rest.

Besides the incredible sex, the connection lived in my memory. It was something I’d never felt before. The thought startled me, revealing the truthfulness of my sister’s avowal. Of course, only a dream explained the perfection I remembered.

Lust and some Freaky Friday type shit justified my response to Noah. The woman invading me couldn't stop thinking about her guy, uh, *a* guy. My jealousy and desire for his approval fit neatly into his views about women. And my near tears catapulted my independent woman, bad bitch mentality back to the '60s. The 1860s or the 1960s, I wasn't sure.

"I've had enough of your bullshit, Ms. Hagen." Noah's furious voice seeped into my brain.

The shock on Reid's face mirrored my own. Taken aback by Noah's anger, I stared stupidly.

"You're standing there in a snit and pouting because you have yet to understand your place."

Wincing, Reid closed the door. "Noah—"

"Stay the fuck out of this, Reid," Noah ordered. Anger darkened his eyes. "I've been talking to you, and you've been ignoring me."

"I'm not ignoring you," I said with a sigh, deflated. I needed to get through the day until we met later, and I made my presentation. As I worked at what I love, I wanted a challenge. All else was periphery bullshit. I had to remember that. I walked to my desk and sat in the chair matching the visitor's. "It would be a clever idea to have Ingrid Warrington front and center to show you have more class than her. I said, not looking at Noah or Reid. "She published her exposé by speaking to disgruntled employees," I stared at the hospital white wall. "Of course, they're going to sing like a fucking canary. Embellish shit too if I had to guess." Before I brought my elbow to my desk and rested my chin in my hand, I shifted in my chair, wondering if I could buy an office chair with wheels. "What she did is so fucking low. It doesn't matter how truthful it is. If she wanted a well-rounded piece, she would've given you the courtesy of a rebuttal. So, that would be a win. Second, you're sticking me in front of the world *to* refute her claims. If she isn't there, she has more fodder. She can accuse you of hiring me in direct response to her article. While that is the truth, she should be there to get her chance at questions."

“This woman seems vicious,” Reid said. “She will tear you apart.”

I continued to stare at my wall. “She can try.”

“Ryan, look at me,” Noah said in a masculine, coaxing voice that sent a shiver through me.

Whatever else I might be, I’d never been a coward. Unsteadily I got to my feet, pasted a smile on my face and raised my gaze to Noah. “It is up to you, of course. It is my humble opinion this is your moment to shine *and* face off with your public enemy number one.”

Noah stared at me with a mixture of concern and concentration. Wildness tinged his gaze. “Are you well?” he asked. “Do you need an ambulance?”

“What?” If his look hadn’t matched his frantic tone, I would’ve thought he was joking. But his concern was genuine. “I’m fine.”

He wasn’t listening, or he didn’t hear me. He took my hand and led me back to the chair. His grip tightening, he guided me down, then placed his hand on my forehead.

“Your temp seems normal.”

He kneeled in front of me, leaned forward, and placed his ear against my chest. I’m not sure he even realized his actions.

He got to his feet and frowned at me. “Do you feel faint?”

When I glanced at Reid, he looked so torn, caught between pity and worry. And I knew Noah had experienced trauma. I sat perfectly still, allowing him to place his fingers at the base of my throat, feel my forehead again, and try to listen to my heart.

Whatever had happened to him had scarred him to his core. My heart hurt for him. I wanted to touch him. Run my fingers through his inky-dark hair. Plant soft kisses along his powerful jaw. He got to his feet and shoved his hands in his pockets.

I searched for a way to ease him and break the heavy tension. Over the years, I’d had to soothe and comfort Quinn and Logan for a variety of reasons. Each time had seemed so

tough. In comparison to my current situation, those times were much easier. I was well acquainted with my sister and brother, so I knew how to react. Now, was different.

I cleared my throat. "I'm fine."

"One minute you were arguing with me and being *you*, and the next moment, you were in your chair, staring at the fucking wall, pale and sad. Muted," he added.

"I'm just..." *Tired*. If I'd finished the sentence, it would've been a mistake. He might've even sent me home.

"Just what?" he urged.

"Just talking and thinking. As we discussed Ingrid Warrington, I wondered about the possibility of buying my own executive's chair. I was also thinking the walls are the white color hospitals used decades ago. Modern facilities have decided relaxing colors might aid a patient's recovery."

He looked skeptical at my unnecessary trivia, so I blurted the first thing that came to mind.

"I was also wondering if Quinn would ever find my fucking door key. You have an irresponsible sibling, too, Reid?" I asked at his pained expression. "That was the second copy of a key I'm not supposed to duplicate. If my landlord finds out, I'm out on my ass. He isn't the nicest guy."

Noah squinted at me, back to himself again. "What's his name?"

"Redman Olive." I rolled my eyes. "He enjoys being called Red Olive. The fucking jackass." Fuck. I scrubbed a hand over my face. If the company withheld a week's pay, my rent would be fucking late. Asshole would follow eviction protocol the day after my missed payment. I would be well within the allotted timeframe of the 14-Day Notice to Pay I'd receive. Now, if I *didn't* get paid until after those fourteen days...

"I don't like the look on your face," Noah said.

"I'm not unwell. I'm just wondering if I'll receive my first paycheck in time to prevent Redman from trying to throw me out."

He glowered at me, mercurial motherfucker that he was. “Text me his contact information.”

I pursed my lips, then folded my arms. “You told me not to text you.”

“I told you not to text me unless I gave you permission.”

“The word *permission* really, really annoys me. Truly,” I added for dramatic effect. “It just pisses me the fuck off.”

“Although that’s a *you* problem,” Noah said, borrowing my line, “I’m curious to know what about the word sets you off?”

“It implies I don’t have full agency, so I must wait for your consent.”

“That is of no concern to me, Ms. Hagen,” Noah said, once again fully possessed of his Noah-ness. “And you’re twisting the meaning of agency. My phone belongs to *me*. Therefore, I have the right to tell you when, or if, you may call me. Just as you would in a reversed circumstance.”

“But—”

Noah raised his hand. “Enough. Send me the information *now*. Then we will resume the tour. We’ve spent way too much time in here.”

As I typed Redman’s information, Noah frowned at the vent in the ceiling. “I don’t think you can have this office,” he announced as I pressed send.

My heart dropped at those words, and I jumped to my feet. I ignored the flash of anger and the bout of suspicion he’d baited me with the office, so I’d sign the contract. “No! You can’t...” But he could. My throat worked as my mind searched for arguments.

“I didn’t say you couldn’t have any office. I said you can’t have *this* office.”

“Er, why?”

“It is so small,” he answered. “The heat will overwhelm you. When the door is closed, it will be too stifling, especially if you aren’t alone.”

Not responding, I sidled a glance at the door. Yep, it was closed, and I wasn't falling in a dead faint, overcome with heat, or engulfed by the toxins of more than one body.

"I like this office," I said honestly, then indicated the room with a grand flourish of my hand. "The three of us are in here and we, *I*, am perfectly okay. Truly."

He hesitated.

"Do you think I wouldn't tell you if I had an issue? *Me?*"

The tension in his shoulders eased, and he smiled. "So true," he conceded, digging into his back pocket and coming up with his billfold. He emptied it of its contents and held out the little stack to me. "For whatever you want to buy for your office. I'll have accounting reimburse me. You're temporary, so you don't have a company budget. Submitting an itemized list with SKU numbers and stores and prices would take two or three weeks for approval and infringe upon your time for work."

"How much is that?" I squeaked, glad for the explanation but not giving it much consideration.

"About two thousand dollars."

My eyes widened. "Jesus, why do you carry so much cash around?"

"A holdover from when my mother was alive," he said absently, turning and dropping the money on my desk. "She always carried a lot of cash. She believed any situations might arise where physical money was needed. I never forgot that lesson."

He brushed past me, opened the door, and walked out the office.

Reid raised the folder he still held. "I'll have your copy within three days," he promised, then nodded to the money.

"I only wanted a chair and a painting," I said before he could speak. "I don't need all that money. Three hundred dollars tops."

"Then keep it for your petty cash," he advised. "Or use it on whatever you need, Ryan. Noah doesn't give a damn as long

as you're comfortable."

"Does he do this for all his employees?"

"Does it matter?"

"If I want them to regard me with fairness, then my treatment from him must be equal."

Reid stared at me. "He doesn't see you in the same light he sees anyone else."

"Meaning?"

A sad half-smile lifted one side of his mouth. "Not what you're thinking," he said after a moment. "I only meant you're the answer to his prayers."

"What the fuck—?"

"He wants that Amage contract, and he wants Aunt Réjane's perfume available on January 9th, Ryan. Let me stop with the theatrics. A holdover from my college days. I'll put my meaning in simpler terms. If you requested a meal of avocado toast and yak milk for the duration of your contract and it meant your ideas were flowing, then you'd have avocado toast and yak milk three fucking times a day. Do you understand now?"

"Yes."

He walked out.

Not wasting time, I stuffed the money in my purse, grabbed my cell phone and hurried into the hallway, locking the door to my office.

Noah's texting halted the question I had for him. The moment he shoved his cell phone in his pocket, I asked, "Are you okay?"

He started off. "Never better." He didn't speak again until we entered the main hallway, and he pointed left, though we turned right, toward his office. "A small lounge is there. You can't miss it. 'Breakroom' is inscribed on the door's window."

Mrs. Mikes sat at her desk, focused on the computer screen, the warm décor inspiring ideas for my office.

“Rosa, Ryan Hagen is my new project manager for Amage.”

A tight smile and curt nod were the only sign she'd heard. “Ms. Hagen.” Her politeness bordered on chilly.

I deigned a nod. “Mrs. Mikes,” I returned, just as cool.

So far, only Reid and Noah showed me a modicum of civility. Mrs. Mikes had a lot of fucking nerve, considering she'd aided Noah's bullshit at my first interview.

“Buzz Mrs. Mikes anytime. She will aid you until you get a secretary of your own.”

Fuck, I'd have better results summoning the fucking Sea Witch. Pushing aside the thought, I zeroed in on a more exciting prospect. “I'm getting my own secretary?”

“Yes. If your contract is extended.”

I did a mental fist pump.

“Restrooms are right down there.” Noah pointed toward his office. “Take a right, and you'll see them.”

He turned to the elevator and pressed a button.

The doors opened, and like a perfect gentleman, he allowed me to enter first, positioning himself beside me.

He smelled fucking amazing. Once again, I noted how his cologne was vaguely recognizable, but each attempt to identify the brand drew a blank.

Various spices and the hint of cinnamon reminded me of Armani's home-baked goods. Of all things. But it had been weeks since I'd babysat for her, and I missed her.

“Floor two,” the robotic monotone announced as the elevator halted and the doors opened.

We stepped out and Noah guided me around. Aside from pointing out restrooms and the offices of his three closest associates on this floor, there wasn't much to show. The offices of Keegan Media Group were on the fourth floor, but the second floor held the accounting department, which was good to know.

He moved with purpose to a large archway. Just beyond was an opened eating space with a windowed, ultramodern kitchen in the middle. Vending machines and trashcans against the wall led to the manned cash register. Several electronic screens displaying menu items hung on walls near the kitchen, with tables throughout the rest of the area. A lengthy line of people waited to be served. They cast curious glances our way. Several floor-to-ceiling windows allowed natural lighting to stream in and diners to see the constant hustle and bustle of the city. It made the colossal space seem even bigger.

His gaze lingered a moment longer than necessary. “This cafeteria runs from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Have you eaten today?”

In my rush to look extra presentable and arrive on time, my breakfast comprised coffee and nothing more. Not even my usual toast.

“Would you like to eat—” His ringing phone cut him off. Sighing, he removed it from his pocket and glanced at the screen. His face darkened as he read the name. Answering, he walked away, his body tensing as he chatted to whoever was on the other line.

“What?” Noah growled.

My eyebrows raised in surprise at his anger.

“Don’t you fucking dare!” His yell drew more attention.

Awareness of his surroundings dawned on him because he quieted down, storming out of the cafeteria. He paced in the hallway, his toned-down conversation not allowing me to hear and sate my confusion.

“An urgent matter has come up,” he said once returned to my side. “Grab a bite to eat before returning to floor twelve. I’ll call Megan to let her know an emergency has come up and you’re available to prep for the press conference.”

He hurried away and disappeared down the hallway. His sudden exit wasn’t my business. I inspected my surroundings, pretending curiosity didn’t eat at me. The middle-aged male suits staring my way left me as uncomfortable as I’d been on the twelfth floor when it happened, so I left the cafeteria.

After a bathroom break, I returned to the hallway outside of the cafeteria. As I contemplated my next move, a light cough got my attention, and I turned.

Megan smiled, her friendly expression comforting among the sea of scowls and ogling. I needed the congeniality right now.

“Would you like to get a bite to eat? My treat.”

My stomach grumbled at the thought of food. “Yeah, that’d be nice.”

Chapter Sixteen

Ryan

I tapped my foot against the cafeteria tile and sighed in frustration as Megan and I awaited a turn to choose what we'd eat. In the twenty minutes since Noah abruptly left, we had spent our time idling in the slow line, subjected to more than a few stares.

No. Not *we*. *Me*.

I'm sure everyone knew Megan. But I lifted my chin and offered pointed glances at as many assholes as I could. They didn't know me and yet they were judging me for whatever reason. That alone spoke volumes about the accuracy of Ingrid Warrington's article. Still, I wasn't an I.W. loyalist. I couldn't be. She wouldn't sign my checks or authorize direct deposits. Besides, the more I thought about all the ugliness the article revealed, the more I realized she'd served up a steaming pile of horseshit. She could've offered Noah a chance to respond.

"The food smells delicious," Megan said, leaning down so I'd hear her over the cacophony.

My mouth watered and my stomach growled at the pleasant smells dancing around me. Only the promise of tasty food gave me the strength not to lose my patience. "It does. What are you having?"

She glanced at one of the electronic menus plastered on the wall, then looked at me again. "The garlic shrimp and fresh spinach pasta."

It could've been stale pasta, and the dish still sounded fucking amazing. "Fresh spinach pasta?"

"Ummm," Megan responded. "Noah... Mr. Keegan," she amended with a small smile, "doesn't have just a cafeteria with delivered food service. The company has several high-end chefs."

"They cook the food on-premises?"

“Those double doors at the far end of the room leads to the kitchen. Besides this floor’s, there’s a kitchen on the fourth floor, the eighth floor, as well as the seventeenth, nineteenth, and twenty-sixth floors. The fiftieth floor was supposed to have a restaurant open to the public with rooftop dining as a possibility.”

“Why are those floors important enough for separate kitchens?” I asked, not bothering to comment on the planned restaurant, though curious why it was scrapped. On the surface, the project sounded as if it had enormous potential. But I wasn’t a restaurateur or a real estate developer. “Keegan Enterprises takes up all fifty floors?”

She grabbed a tray from the stack and set it on the serving counter. We were making progress, though no plates or utensils were in sight. Once I grabbed a tray, she answered.

“Floors forty through forty-five are luxury apartments. Floor thirty-nine is where the leasing office, condo manager, lobby, security station, mailroom, fitness center, and a couple of other rooms are located. There’s restricted access to all six floors.”

“I might have to tour this place,” I said with a giggle. “It would save so much time if I lived in the same building as my job.”

My teasing tone should’ve alerted Megan I was joking. Instead, she gave me a tight-lipped smile.

“From what I understand, you’re in a trial period, Ryan. Should you become permanent, I doubt your salary would cover the monthly rent. Our units range between six and seventy-five thousand dollars a month. If it is out of *my* price range, it is out of yours.”

I didn’t want her as an enemy, but boundaries needed to be established from day one. She couldn’t walk all over me. It didn’t matter that she was my superior. I allowed no one to treat me as *lesser*.

“I’m joking. I should’ve made that clear, so you’d understand it,” I said with a laugh, hoping she picked up on the shade.

“You need to work on your comedic skills, hun,” she said, chuckling.

I decided commenting would be a waste of breath; her mind was made up. “How much garlic is in the pasta dish?” Food was a safe topic. Resorting to discussing the weather was status quo and boring as shit.

“Yes, I forgot your unfamiliarity with fresh pasta.”

I frowned, but her head was turned away.

“Our chefs make the pasta here on the day the dish is served. Dried pasta is easier, and more shelf-stable—”

“Dried pasta also uses semolina flour,” I gritted, offended at her assumptions. “And there are certain recipes that work better with dried pasta, especially with heavier sauces because fresh pasta will disintegrate quickly.”

She swung her head in my direction and lifted a brow. “What a font of information you are,” she cooed. “Charming.”

I glared at her.

Unfazed, she slid her tray forward. “The recipe calls for garlic, an onion, EVOO, butter, jumbo shrimp, pepper, salt and the pasta.”

Despite her attitude, the dish still sounded fucking amazing. Though the meal wasn’t fit for breakfast at all, thoughts of all the ingredients combined appealed to me and my empty stomach. “Sounds delish.” If you want friends, show yourself friendly, right? I’d try it and see how it turned out. “I’m surprised they’re serving the dish so early, though.”

“No complaints from me. I’m not that big of a fan of breakfast foods.”

My eyes widened. “Who doesn’t like breakfast foods?” I asked in outrage.

I loved breakfast. Whether eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes, waffles, toast, or grits, I’d happily wolf it down, no questions asked.

“Me,” she quickly responded, a small smile coming over her full lips.

Progress or pandering? I’d vote her smile as progress since she didn’t have to cater to me for anything. Relaxing a little, I forged ahead. “Not even pancakes?”

“Pancakes and waffles are alright sometimes.”

“That’s acceptable,” I teased, shaking my head.

“Thank you for your kindness, ma’am,” Megan quipped with a regal nod.

I grinned, more at ease, cheering our turn had arrived.

“Morning, Miss Buford,” the portly server greeted, his gaze roaming between us. “Are you two ladies together?”

“Yes, Billy,” Megan confirmed. “I’ll have the garlic shrimp spinach pasta, please,” she said, then looked at me as Billy leaned behind the counter and came up with a ceramic plate.

Well. Okay. No lowly mess trays.

He heaped a pile of pasta on the plate and handed it to Megan. It smelled divine and looked fucked-up. The fresh pasta had been overcooked and now resembled a glob of starch.

I glanced at the electronic menu on the wall behind Billy. “I’ll have the spinach ham omelet with Swiss cheese.”

Billy offered me a blank stare. “You temps are all the same,” he said with disgust, then nodded toward the left side of the room. “Line for that is over there. That’s a specialty dish and must be prepared as ordered.”

I peeped around Megan and sighed at the line for the station he indicated.

“Here, we have this pasta, beef stroganoff, chicken tetrazzini, fried chicken, French fries, and corn.” He assessed the chafing dishes on each side of him. “You’ll have to go back to the end of the line if you want anything you passed up. Besides the omelets, there’s also a wrap station, a fruit bar, and a salad station.”

“Can you please get Ryan’s omelet, Billy?” Megan asked. “She’s Mr. Keegan’s hire as the new project manager for Amage.”

I’d never seen anyone go from motherfucker to ass kisser so quickly. His horrified expression satisfied me to no end.

“Oh, my gosh. I’m so sorry, Ryan.”

“I’m *Ms. Hagen*,” I stated. If I wanted respect in this place, I needed to set boundaries. If *they* wanted my respect, they needed to treat me with civility.

“Yes, yes, ma’am, of course,” he said, tripping over his words. “Meal’s on the house, Ms. Hagen, ma’am, to congratulate you on your new position.” He looked at Megan. “I’ll be honored to pay for yours as well, Miss Buford. What would you like to drink?”

“A Coke, please,” Megan responded.

“A cup of coffee for me,” I said. “Black, please.”

Megan wrinkled her nose. “You like black coffee?”

“Yep. It’s my favorite.”

“Coming right up,” Billy said. He whispered to the man next to him, then broke away from the line of servers.

As Megan lifted her tray and turned toward the table, the anticipation of my omelet and the bitter, rich flavor of my coffee had me almost drooling. I was hungrier than I thought.

We found a table for two next to a window. I barely had time to enjoy the view before Billy bustled over, carrying a tray with my omelet, two rolled white napkins, a canned Coke and a glass for Megan, and my coffee.

“Do you need anything else?” Billy asked after serving us.

“No,” I responded because he was looking at me. “The omelet smells delicious.” The wafting steam teased my senses.

He smiled. “I personally prepared it.”

“Thank you,” I said, unwrapping my napkin and revealing the cutlery. “It is much appreciated. I’m starving.” I laid the

napkin on my lap and picked up the fork.

Billy lingered.

Stabbing a piece of egg that dripped with cheese and held bits of spinach, ham, and parsley, I stuffed it into my mouth, then washed it down with coffee. “It is every bit as good as it smells, Billy,” I said truthfully.

“Just the way you like it?” he asked, visibly sagging with relief.

“It’s delicious, though I wish onions and mushrooms had been available.”

He swallowed. “I can take that one away and prepare a fresh one for you.”

Instead of eating more of my omelet, I paused, suspending my hand in mid-air. “This is fine. I didn’t ask for either and you aren’t a mind reader.”

“Yes, ma’am, Ms. Hagen, exactly right.” He dug into his pocket and came up with a card. “I’m line manager, ma’am. If you want anything special for the day, contact me and I’ll see that you get it. If you’re too swamped to come to the cafeteria, I’ll be happy to serve you in your office. This is my card. It has my cell number, email, and my office number with direct extension—”

“Ryan won’t be in one of the open areas,” Megan inserted. She’d been busily eating as if she couldn’t care less about my exchange with Billy. “She has a private office, so only your direct extension is needed.”

“Oh, Jesus.” His eyes bulged, beads of sweat popping out on his brow. A private office for a new hire meant something.

She offered a small smile, but her eyes gleamed with malice.

I should’ve enjoyed the asshole’s misery. “I don’t have a phone line in the office.” I plucked the card from his fingers since yellow-bellied horror overtook him. Shoving another bite into my mouth, I laid my fork on my plate, took my cell

phone from my pocket, then snapped a photo of the card. “Do either of you have a pen?”

Billy produced one in seconds.

I took it from him and wrote my email and cell number on the card, then handed both back to him. “I prefer texting,” I admitted. “For the time being, I only have the company email ___”

“It hasn’t been activated yet,” Megan informed me. “I was just processing your contract when Noah called and said you were all mine for a few hours. Your company email will be available by the end of tomorrow. You’ll also receive your business cards and your office lines with pre-programmed direct extensions to Noah and Rosa. The rest of us plebeians have four-digit extensions.” She returned to eating.

Billy was as white as a sheet. Despite the sheer assholery of almost everyone here, my position in the company was more prestigious than I realized. Then, it came to me. I was a step away from executive status, only needing discretionary hiring and firing powers and several people under me.

“Billy?” I said, feeling a little guilty at how I’d snapped at him. “We got off on the wrong foot. You’re welcome to call me Ryan. I was angry over your attitude.”

He nodded vigorously. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you, ma’am.”

He wasn’t so solicitous because of what I’d said. It was because Noah had hired me. From now on, it would draw a line between us. He would bend over backward to please me, fearing reprisal. And I would forever suspect his solicitousness was because he didn’t want to incur Noah’s wrath, not because Billy liked or respected me.

“If there’s nothing else, I’ll leave you both to enjoy your meal.”

Seconds later, he scampered away. My omelet had lingering warmth, so I dug in before it grew cold.

“I wonder where Noah went,” Megan said as she twirled the last of her pasta around her fork and brought the food to her mouth.

She said his name with such casualness. It wasn't my place to comment, but it made me wonder at the status of their relationship.

"Me, too," I confessed, draining the last of my coffee. "I hope everything's alright. It sounded like an emergency," I replied after a moment, apprehension tinging my words even as doubt crept into me.

My original experience with him tainted my views and made me wonder if an actual emergency had arisen. Yet, I was concerned, too. From what I gathered, he didn't place much above his job, so his angry departure alarmed me.

Finished with the pasta, she rested her fork on the empty plate and daintily dabbed at her mouth. "You and Noah seem very familiar with one another." She opened her can of Coke and poured it into the glass.

That I had the same thought about *her* relationship with him put me on alert. Perhaps jealousy motivated her hot-and-cold treatment of me. On the other hand, she'd informed Billy of my identity and asked him to get my omelet when she could've remained silent.

"I had an interview with him a few days ago," I revealed.

She sipped her Coke. "I see. What happened the first time you were here?"

"He kept me waiting five hours."

"Now I understand all the unusual bonuses built into your contract. You couldn't pass up what he's offering." She tittered. "I'd be open to a little bribery as well."

Unusual bonuses? Noah mentioned bonuses for each milestone I made. To me, that wasn't out of the ordinary. "What are you—"

"Amage is notoriously difficult to handle," she went on, talking over me. "So, of course, your bonuses look good on paper, but earning them will be a problem for you."

Her mocking glint revealed her real feelings about me. If I asked her to explain what she meant, her derision would only

grow. The warm smile and cheery invitation to eat was nothing more than a ploy to lull me into a false sense of friendship.

“Reid tells me Noah ordered him to invite Ingrid Warrington to the press conference. At your urging.”

“Yes,” I said with a nod, uneasy at her hardened tone. “Why bar her? She should be here to ask any questions she might have.”

She leaned forward. “You’re a naïve little fool. That woman is going to rip you to pieces and Keegan Enterprises along with it.”

With so much hostility around me and Megan’s executive position in the hierarchy, I ignored her name calling. No one would goad me into insubordination or any other misstep. Only Noah had that power; he frustrated me to the extreme. Besides, he’d elevated me to this position. I’d only allow him to topple me. I cleared my throat. “Noah wouldn’t have given the go-ahead if inviting Ingrid wasn’t a wise move.”

“*Mr. Keegan* is drowning in grief, and he has been for a very long time,” she snarled. “His brothers are assholes, and his father was as cold-blooded as a fictional villain. Noah wants to honor his mother. Period. He sees you as a stopgap to that awful article until the furor abates. He isn’t thinking clearly, so he’d agree to any suggestion.” Her eyes narrowed. “Unless there’s another explanation?”

Either her implication I fucked Noah for the position shocked me silent or the promise to myself to protect my place in the company. Otherwise, I would’ve muttered more than, “Excuse me?”

She pressed her lips together, blinked, and heaved in a breath. “That was unworthy of me. Forget the insinuation.” She rearranged her hair to cascade over one shoulder. “Noah hates drama. If he learned of our spat, I would be written up and you’d be subjected to immediate termination.”

Her embellished account would paint me in the worst possible light.

“What did you think of Ingrid’s piece?” she asked, in complete control of her anger and dislike.

She was baiting me.

“Well.” It took a moment to collect myself and play her duplicitous game. “The article was eye-opening, but unsurprising. I’d drawn the same conclusions beforehand.”

“Is it your intention to sabotage Keegan Enterprises? Is that why you insisted that woman attend?”

“Of course not!” My voice was firm but cordial. “Why would I bite the hand that feeds me?”

“As far as I know, you haven’t been fed yet.”

Anger sweeping through me, I stiffened. “Megan, you think I’ve slept with Noah to get the job.”

“Jobs—” she spat.

“Jobs,” I echoed sweetly. “That isn’t true, so please refrain from spreading such a malicious rumor. My resumé, body of work, and my job performance at T.S. Marketing got me here. I have never, and will never, have an intimate relationship with Noah.” My regret was beside the point.

“As if he’d fuck someone like *you*.”

Oh, no, this bitch didn’t. I could take the comment many ways, but she forged on.

“Both Tina and I released statements refuting Ingrid’s claims, but the public is firmly on her side. Our Kee-Tel stocks are still down on the market. Your confirmation of that article will be the death knell for Keegan Enterprises’ publicly traded subsidiaries.”

I couldn’t hold my tongue any longer. My heart sank and hurt or did something fucked up that left me with an ache, but I couldn’t allow her comments to go unanswered. “Listen, lady. I don’t know what kind of Machiavellian brain you’re rocking, but I don’t have the time or the money to engage in such a scheme that would have me as a double agent. Ingrid’s spy and Noah’s project manager.”

“You obviously don’t hold Noah...Mr. Keegan in the highest esteem. There must be an underlying motivation for you to return.”

“The prospect of hunger and homelessness,” I snapped.

She ignored me. “Why’d you come back for another interview?”

“I need to survive. To do that, I need the money. Another promising job opportunity fell through, so if I wanted to stay in advertising, KMG was my only possibility.”

“Bollocks!” she hissed. “KMG might be your best option, not your only one.”

“Wrong words. My mistake,” I sneered. “Whatever the case, I would’ve been in a horrible predicament, so I chose to accept this position.”

“Where you think a raging sexist is at the helm.”

“You’re putting words in my mouth,” I said evenly. They might’ve been correct, but I hadn’t said them to *her*.

Besides, my attraction to Noah made me more permissive with him. Hypocritical bullshit, but true. After what happened in my office, I wondered if the circulated story had a deeper origin. His mother, for instance. I needed to dig into his background.

Megan slid her chair back and rose to her feet, looming over me like a modern Milady De Winter. She glanced at her watch. “It’s a little after twelve. Let’s go to my office. I need to call Celine with your dress size. While we wait for everyone, we will rehearse what I expect you to say at the press conference.”

I stood. “My outfit is fine, thank you.”

“Your skirt is patterned and your blouse is black. An elderly matron wouldn’t wear their hair in such a style. Your shoes are two-toned. What little makeup I see gives you a washed-out appearance and doesn’t hide the bags and circles around your eyes or your dry lips. And your sad, little earrings are unbecoming your position. You look like a cleric from a department store business office.”

It took effort to hide how much her words devastated me. “If you truly thought I was out to destroy Noah’s company, your behavior wouldn’t change my mind,” I snapped. “It would strengthen my resolve to bring it down.”

She glared at me.

Wanting to cuss her the fuck out, I lifted my chin and returned her putrid look.

In the few scant hours since reporting on my first day, a plethora of shit was exposed. About myself, Noah, and the atmosphere. Megan, a woman like me, had no reason for her hostility. Neither did Mrs. Mikes. My attraction to Noah had no root cause, as I’d convinced myself. It happened the moment I met him *just because*. And my self-esteem, aided by the pride I took in fashion, wasn’t as cemented as I’d believed. Otherwise, Megan Buford’s brutal analysis of my appearance wouldn’t have crushed me and undermined my confidence.

Chapter Seventeen

Today, my sister starts a new job, and I'm so happy for her and proud of her. I may write back to tell you how it went. In time, I hope to forget my deception. I've decided to not ever tell her. I just can't risk losing her. But I need your advice on another matter. The man I attended the ball with turned out to be a cheating liar. I can't forget him. He calls from time to time but I refuse to answer, though I would like to work things out. In his last voicemail, he apologized to me and said we should meet for a drink. Should I?

- A Still Concerned Sister with a Broken Heart.

Sis,

I'm going to invoice you for therapy fees. You've surpassed your quota of free guidance from my column. Seriously, though, without specifics, I cannot give you sound advice. Cheating is a big red flag. It is better to have a broken heart now than a shattered soul later. If you need closure, meet with him once, cut your losses and move on.



Noah

I threw open the doors to the Louis J. Lefkowitz State Office Building housing the New York City Marriage Bureau. Storming down the hall to find my brother, I fought my fury.

It was just after noon, and my horror at Ryan's teary gray eyes, the sheer terror she'd taken ill, had almost ruined my day. Realizing she was fine had eased me and the continuation of the tour had lightened my mood again.

Then...

Then... Nathaniel thought it reasonable to have a courthouse wedding on a random Monday morning. And to sweeten the fucking pot, he interrupted my tour with Ryan to ask me to witness his marriage to his pregnant girlfriend when he didn't know if the baby was a Keegan.

His shenanigans had pulled me away from Ryan when I'd wanted to be there to help prep her for this evening, especially

since I'd given the go-ahead for Ingrid Warrington's attendance.

I never wanted to see tears in Ryan's eyes again, ever, in life, especially if I caused them. It was a principle I practiced toward women. But Ryan's crying affected me differently.

Walking into my office, she had been a vision. Half her hair was tied and swept from her face. Her unbound waist-length curls made me long to tangle my fingers through the mass.

Somewhere, she'd broken a fucking crime the way her form-fitting patterned skirt and silky top clung to her curves. for her to look the way she did. It had taken all my strength to stay focused with her feet away from me. Despite my best efforts, though, thoughts of fucking her had infiltrated my mind with every glance in her direction and every whiff of her coconut scent.

The entire night thoughts of what that corny bartender and his sickeningly syrupy drawl might convince her to do plagued me. Unfortunately, the background check I ordered revealed he was indeed a Southern boy, though he might've laid the accent on a little thick to butter her up. I'd spent a good portion of my morning plotting his murder, but all thoughts of bodily harm disappeared when she arrived.

But then, my brother's stupidity took me away. A crime on its own, adding fuel to my need to throttle him until he saw the error of his misguided ways.

Was he fucking insane, giving into his girlfriend's every whim without confirming she carried his child? He had refused my offer of an immediate paternity test, all expenses paid by me, so he wouldn't have any guarantee that he was the child's actual father. Yet, instead of stopping to think for a goddamn second, he'd made the choice to fucking marry her! If Nathaniel entered a legal union with the damned woman, she'd have unfiltered access to his funds. I'd bet my ass he hadn't had a prenup drawn up.

"Nathaniel!" I yelled, catching sight of the idiot standing before the judge with Alessia at his side. Another woman stood at her side, more than likely the required second witness.

My brother had his arm wrapped around her slender waist, her body still not showing any signs of carrying a human life. Nathaniel sported a black suit and tie, the unbuttoned jacket revealing a white shirt. Alessia wore a dress with lace detailing that clung to her every curve. The white material made her subtly tanned skin and light brown hair glow.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I snarled, stopping inches from him. Furious with my brother, I ignored the gasps of Alessia, the stranger, and the judge.

Nathaniel glared at me, releasing his grasp on Alessia. He pushed me back, and, out of instinct, I swung on him. Narrowly avoiding the blow, he positioned himself to throw his own punch. The stranger slunk away. My fists remained raised. Before I decked him, Alessia inserted herself between us and threw her arms around Nate’s torso.

Furious he’d evaded my hit, I stepped toward him, knowing I could knock his ass out without hurting her. I’d been in my fair share of fights in my lifetime. Not that Nate or any of my other family members knew.

“Back up, bro,” he snarled, unable to escape his clinging girlfriend.

“Sirs,” the judge, an older gentleman with balding gray hair, butted in before I could beat Nathaniel’s ass for the disrespect, consequences be damned. “Mr. Keegan and Mr. Keegan, I will have order, so settle down.”

The man had never met me, but he knew who I was. Of course, he did.

“This should be a happy day,” he said, still glancing between us. “Not a cause of such contention.”

Fuck being happy. I was livid. “It would be a happy day if he wasn’t marrying a fucking gold-digger!”

“Watch your fucking mouth!” Nathaniel roared, stepping toward me, while Alessia sniffled, “I’m not a fucking gold-digger!”

Ignoring Alessia’s automatic lie, I braced my feet apart, ready to beat some goddamn sense into Nathaniel. Did he

believe I'd OK this impromptu marriage?

Before I accomplished my goal, Alessia grabbed his jacket, melodramatic sobs escaping from her. Her eyes were fucking dry!

Wrapping his arm around her, he pulled her against him. Her fucking sobs worsened.

"Babe, tell him I'm not a gold-digger!" she demanded through dramatic hiccups, hiding her face in his jacket.

"She's not a gold-digger, Noah," he echoed. "We already fucking went over this!"

"Oh yeah? Why else would she want to be married to you after you fucked her best friend? It's a fucking Monday, for Christ's sakes! Why did you let her talk you into this?"

"She didn't talk me into shit. I suggested it!" Nathaniel rubbed his still-crying girlfriend's back. "I have no clue why I asked *you*, of all people, to serve as my witness."

"That makes two of us. You have four other siblings you could've called as well as an irresponsible cousin who doesn't give a fuck about consequences for his actions. Instead, you interrupted my day with this bullshit."

"Gentlemen!" the judge yelled again, his annoyance indicating he was fed up. "Can we please proceed—"

"No, fuck no," I snarled. "I object."

Fury contorted Nathaniel's face. "You're just pissed she doesn't want a paternity test!" he spat, as if that alone upset me.

Nope, it was his fucking stupidity.

"You're goddamn right I am! You have no guarantee the child is yours, and here you are, ready to give her access to your ever-dwindling trust fund. And I'm warning you, Nathaniel, if you go through with this, you're never getting a damn bit of help from me ever again!"

Hurt and anger flashed across his face, the pain in the blue eyes mirroring mine, sending an unusual pang of guilt through

me.

“Fine by me. We don’t need it.” His confident words contrasted his expression.

“Excellent,” I replied coolly, trying to push aside my unwelcome remorse. It was my duty as the family cash cow to abide by checks and balances to safeguard the Keegan fortune.

Nathaniel was the aimless spendthrift. At least Nicholas and my sisters had their own money, running to me to supplement whatever other financial relief they sought. Case in point, Nicholas’s demand I pay the speaker’s fee he’d lost out on because of that article.

He could fuck himself. He asked for, and got, almost as much as me during such appearances. While I limited my access to command a higher price, Nicholas didn’t. It shocked me he received seven hundred fifty thousand dollars. He was a keynote speaker at least five times a year. Didn’t he understand the basics of supply and demand?

“Leave, Noah,” Nathaniel ordered.

Maybe I’d never taken the time to pay attention to how my abrasiveness affected Nate. Today, I saw his disappointment and hurt. Perhaps he was even a little lost.

It didn’t take a fucking crystal ball to know the reason I viewed him through a different lens.

Ryan. That woman, that woman, that woman.

That woman was going to run me fucking ragged with thoughts of her and her disapproval serving as an angel to my fucking devil.

Fuck. It didn’t matter. Ryan’s unfiltered condemnation of my behavior or even Nathaniel’s offense. Marrying Alessia was a fucking mistake.

Perhaps my irrational ‘mommy issues’, or however Nathaniel phrased it, guided me, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t. My most pressing concern was preventing my little brother from making one of the biggest mistakes of his life. Using his only source of income, and dedicating valuable time he’d

never get back on a woman with unknown motives, would ruin him.

“What in God’s name possessed you to marry on today?” I asked, breaking the tense stillness of the room.

Before he answered, Alessia took in a shaky breath, stepped away from Nathaniel, and faced me. My last few minutes had passed with little attention on her, so her red eyes and wet cheeks surprised me. It appeared she’d been crying buckets. Actual tears.

I frowned, awareness of someone else’s pain and feelings seeping into me.

She sniffled, and more tears slid down her face. I grabbed the silk handkerchief from my jacket and handed it to her.

“We discussed your mother,” she said, her voice breaking, “and how brief life is. Here today and gone tomorrow.”

Her miserable whisper settled into me. The mention of my mother sent an array of feelings through me, but *something* was missing. Maybe it was the bitterness I’d felt for so long. Or, possibly, another woman, *two* other women, commanded my attention. As fucked up as that sounded, the day I’d found out about her death and all her misery before the plane crash I carried on my shoulders, slipped into the background.

The girl in blue was a sweet, sacred memory and the firecracker I’d recently hired was a challenge well met. If I knew nothing else about Ryan, I *know* she would’ve handed me my ass on a fucking platter for my handling of this entire situation. And my sweet angel at the masquerade? I had the feeling she would’ve expected better from me, too.

Sighing, I rubbed the back of my neck and looked at Alessia again.

“We decided to go for it,” she said the moment she saw my attention had returned to her. “I know you’re against Nathaniel and I being together, Noah.” Another sob escaped her. “I’d never do anything to hurt your brother. I love him and he loves you. He told me all the awful things he said to you at the bar, but he worries about you. He just wants you to be happy. He’s

wanted to ask you about her, since you and she were the closest, but he's concerned about how that'll affect you."

I winced. Not once had I ever offered to answer questions he might've had about Mother. I glanced in Nate's direction, but he clenched his jaw and hung his head.

"I don't want our marriage to cause a rift between the two of you, so we can postpone the ceremony until the DNA test is done."

She looked and sounded so devastated, much like my mother in times of distress.

No, not my mother. *Our* mother. She'd belonged to Nicholas and Rosalie and Nathaniel and Remy.

How would our mother feel about Nathaniel's courthouse marriage? About Alessia? Would Mother care about a bottom line or about the emotions involved?

Undoubtedly, she'd place Nathaniel's happiness ahead of all else. A pit opened inside me. Money would never trump her children's peace and contentment. Though a businesswoman through and through, she always prioritized our well-being. After all, that had gotten her killed.

"Postponement is unnecessary," I gritted, "proceed."

Nathaniel and Alessia breathed sighs of relief.

"I'm still against you two marrying so hastily."

"Oh my God, Noah—"

Alessia placed a finger on Nathaniel's lips and silenced him. "He's given us the go-ahead. It's what you wanted."

"He hasn't," Nathaniel protested.

She nodded, and sadness enveloped her. "You care about your brother. He's important to you, so he's important to me. He's right. Today was spur-of-the-moment. We can't marry today." Her lips trembled. "Let's get the paternity test. Then we'll plan a proper wedding ceremony before the baby is born."

It was rare someone rendered me speechless, but my brother's girlfriend achieved the impossible and stole my ability to say a fucking thing. Nathaniel's surprise mirrored my own as we focused on her.

My brother looked so frustrated and defeated. "Are you sure, Al?"

"Yes," she said hoarsely, raising her tear-filled gaze to me. "Please order the DNA test as soon as possible."

"Excellent." What else could I say? She'd shocked the fuck out of me. With Nathaniel so dead set against my demand, I hadn't expected her quick capitulation.

There was a genuine possibility that I had wildly misjudged her.

Chapter Eighteen

Ryan

I didn't have a moment to think or to breathe or to let it sink in that I was in a new world, another level of business, where a fast pace, abrasive executives, and glaring *isms* existed—chauvinism, sexism, and classism. If I didn't woman up and put on my big girl panties, they, Megan especially, would chew me up and spit me out.

For two solid hours, she picked apart my delivery of her carefully crafted statement. She interrupted me so many times, I feared everything, except the first paragraph, would be lost to me. She called my voice flat. No inflection anywhere, she said, as if I gave a high school speech or read from a script. Never mind I was, in fact, reciting words *she* wrote. Other times, she sneered my focus remained down too long and my voice was too low, shouting to me the mics wouldn't pick up a whisper. Her complaints were long and varied.

At one point, I was a taunt away from bursting into tears. At my watering eyes and traitorous snuffle, she smiled. The satisfaction in her eyes would stay with me forever. Unable to bait me into blurting a few regrettable words, she'd decided to break me.

A little kernel of doubt entered me. Her behavior had whiffs of Noah's tactics to drive away female applicants. But common sense prevailed, and I reminded myself of Noah's very real and very tight schedule for me. He'd given me pages and pages of files, and a flash drive with documents meant only for KMG employees.

He didn't dictate her behavior. It might've been because of him, but Megan authored her own viciousness. She didn't care what I said or how I spoke. It didn't matter if I stood ramrod straight, head high, and shoulders proud. She rebuffed my attempts at small talk and took issue across the board. It was so tiring. If this indicated the tone of my career at the company, I needed to reconsider my employment.

“Stop fidgeting,” she snapped from her place on her peach and gray sofa. Her office wasn’t as big as Noah’s, but still spacious. The peach and gray décor and furnishings had a coolness that matched her personality. “You stand with composure no matter what is going on around you.”

Her words rekindled a small fire within me. Hopefully, it wouldn’t peter out and instead grow into a massive conflagration that burned this bitch alive. “Megan.” The strength of my tone surprised both of us. Her eyes widened. “If after two hours you aren’t satisfied with my performance, the issue is *your* writing, and not my delivery.”

Folding my arms, I didn’t flinch at her haughty glare. Instead, I went silent, standing in the middle of her office, awaiting Reid. Nicholas and his wife, Tina, were there. She was texting on her phone, while he looked a little bored and vastly irritated. His close resemblance to Noah shocked me, except his eyes were green and Noah’s were blue. Nicholas was handsome but Noah was gorgeous, even if they had the same dark hair cut in similar styles. Leaning against Megan’s desk was a makeup artist and a hairstylist. At the side of her desk, in the space between it and the wall, was a rack of clothes, several boxes of shoes, and the woman who’d direct my choices.

They were to be my audience during practice run number two trillion. All eyes were on me, which made me want to hide in Megan’s office bathroom. Under her desk. Behind her sofa. *Anywhere.*

Not much intimidated me. This did. The unfriendly faces and heavy silence wore on me. The realization that Keegan Enterprises had a lot riding on this press conference, and *my* delivery, scared the shit out of me. If I didn’t convince the world of the company’s wonderful atmosphere no matter one’s gender, I’d harm everyone, from the top tier executives to the line cooks and janitors.

It all rested on my shoulders.

Admitting Noah’s presence would soothe me was humbling, but he wasn’t back yet. We crossed swords, yes. However, he

undoubtedly respected my work ethic.

“Where the fuck is Reid?” Nicholas exploded. He threw me an ugly look. “I have to make certain the reporters *I* specifically requested have the proper credentials for admittance.”

“He called me from the lobby and told me he had to take care of something.”

Though she continued texting, Tina remained aware of the goings-on around her and frowned at Megan’s explanation. “What woman is he fucking now? One day, his dick is going to fall off.”

Yawning, Nicholas folded his arms and smirked at Megan. “Seems you’ve missed out on another Keegan. No matter how you try, you can’t snare one for yourself.”

She glared at him. “Noah and Reid are both single,” she snapped. “I have as much chance as the next woman.”

“Yet, you still work,” Tina replied, finger combing her red hair and using her phone as a mirror. I did it all the time with my camera app. She pressed her lips together, then offered Megan a sugary smile. “You haven’t squirreled away enough income to quit and work around Noah’s strict rules about workplace behavior.”

“Tina—”

The opening door interrupted Megan.

Quinn walked in, wearing a denim jumpsuit and matching boots. I’d texted her an invitation to the press conference for moral support.

“Sorry I’m late, everyone,” Reid said tightly, following my sister and barely acknowledging me as he headed to the lone empty chair in the sitting area.

“Excuse me?” Megan said to Quinn. “The housekeeping services are on the other end of the hall.”

Reid winced. Quinn glanced over her shoulder, then looked at Megan again. “If you know the location of where you’re supposed to be, get your ass up and go there.”

“Call security, Tina,” Nicholas ordered. “What’s your application number?”

“Assho—” Quinn snarled as Tina pressed a button on her phone and I blurted, “That’s my sister. I asked her to come as moral support at the press conference.”

Tina, Nicholas, and Megan looked at me.

“Recent development. Hold off a second,” Tina said into the phone, then disconnected.

“This is a private event,” Tina told me.

“But—” I started.

“Who the fuck gave you the authority to invite anyone?” Nicholas demanded. “Noah didn’t. He’s dealing with our asshole younger brother, who thought today perfect to marry a gold-digging whore.”

I couldn’t do it. No amount of money was worth the brutality of these circling vultures. Vaguely, I heard Reid’s chiding tone, but couldn’t understand the words.

“She’s going to fucking ruin us,” Nicholas said. “Look at the baffled look on her face and how she’s just standing there like she doesn’t have a brain in her head.”

Quinn gasped.

“I quit.” I allowed the paper with Megan’s typed statement to flutter to the floor. “Fuck all of you, but especially you, Megan.” My voice trembled. “You’ve subjected me to your insults for hours. It isn’t *my* fault Noah hasn’t fucked you. Whether I’m here or not, he doesn’t want you. He can see into your bitter, spiteful soul.”

Her mouth opened in shock. Turning the tables satisfied me.

Quinn rushed to me and hugged me, cocooning me in warmth and protection. “It’s okay, Ry,” she whispered. “Let’s get your things, and find Sandy, so I can drive you home.”

I nodded, mute. Too stunned to cry or speak.

“Fuck, Noah will hang us,” Tina said. “She can’t quit. We need her to reverse the damage—”

“Then you should’ve fucking acted like it, bitch,” Quinn threw over her shoulder as she dragged me out the door, but Reid’s voice carried into the hallway.

“Ryan, please, come back in. Let me talk to you a moment.”

An odd note rang in his voice. Not demanding. Not authoritative. Just miserable. The heartbroken type, recognizable because Quinn sounded the same with each failed relationship.

“Please,” he said again. “Only Noah can fire you. If he discovers today’s events, he won’t reprimand you.”

I backed to the office and stopped in the doorway before turning. Reid still sat amongst the others. “Clearly, such protection doesn’t matter. Who cares if no one else can fire me? Everyone can abuse me.”

“That isn’t true,” he countered.

Tina glanced from me to Reid. “It’s how we all get along.”

“You’re dysfunctional motherfuckers,” Quinn called from the hallway.

Nicholas stiffened, Tina sniffed, and Megan glowered.

“Noah needs you,” Reid said quietly.

Emotion filled his voice, the truth deeper than the surface meaning of his words.

“A lot’s riding on your press conference,” he continued. “Our press releases have had insignificant effect. Imagine the fallout if we cancel your event because you’ve quit?”

Quinn stomped back into the office. “How the fuck is that her problem? Maybe you should’ve explained the urgency to *them* before they got to my sister.”

“You’re not helping, Quinn,” Reid snapped with surprising familiarity.

“Fuck you, Reid,” she retorted. “I’m not here to aid them or *you*, asshole. I’m here for my sister. Find another bitch to fuck since you’re such a fucking man whore. Stop thinking about my pussy and leave me the fuck alone.”

Megan jumped up. “*What?*”

Reid choked, the color leeching from his face.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, in the middle of a nightmare that destroyed my coveted position. I stared at Reid, thinking of the ball. Noah. Me. “You’re him,” I breathed. “My sister’s date at that masquerade ball.” Which meant... “You lied to me, Quinn.”

Her anger morphed into exasperation. “No, I didn’t.”

Reid lied, too.

Background voices blurred in my head. I didn’t care about Megan’s screeching or Nicholas’s anger, since their soap opera had no bearing on my life.

“Fuck you, asshole,” Quinn snarled.

At first, I thought she spoke to Reid, but her gaze blazed at Nicholas.

“Leave Quinn alone before I break your fucking face,” Reid snarled, no longer the charmer.

“Quinn?” Nicholas sneered. “Q?”

“Reid has never called me ‘Q’, fuckhead,” Quinn blared. “Furthermore, since you wouldn’t give someone like me a fucking invitation to your raggedy fucking house, what the fuck is it to you where the fuck Reid took me?”

“Would someone care to fill me in?” I demanded.

“There’s nothing to fill in, Ryan,” Quinn said flatly. “I didn’t lie to you about anything. It is the universe’s ‘fuck you’ that they had a masquerade ball too.” She glowered at Nicholas. “Don’t get it fucking twisted,” she said bitterly. “We wouldn’t have wanted to come a party you hosted, so touting its exclusivity is unnecessary, motherfucker.”

Nicholas glared at her, sweeping her with an insulting glance. “What did—”

Quinn interrupted him. “Reid, would you have thought enough of me to bring me to such an exclusive gala *and* allow me to bring my sister?”

He glanced between us. Swallowed. Met Quinn's gaze. When she lifted her chin and folded her arms, he looked at Nicholas who was studying me with frightening intensity.

Reid stiffened. "No, I wouldn't have, Quinn. No offense, but you would've been woefully out of place."

I focused on Reid's voice, trying to remember how Quinn's date had sounded that night. Nothing but mist and fog shrouded my memories.

"Your date had dark hair, came alone, and wore a green ball gown, didn't she, Reid?" Tina inserted. She smiled at Nicholas. "You were fucked up, love, but I can assure you I've never seen Quinn or Ryan before today." She smirked at me. "They're from the wine cooler and popcorn set. Unlike us."

Fucking bitch.

"You're right, honey," Nicholas said with a sigh.

If I hadn't been taking in the entire scene, I wouldn't have noticed Megan's brief hostility at Nicholas's tender words.

"Ryan?" Reid called, capturing my attention. He stood and walked to us. "Your sister and I have slept together," he admitted, low. "About a year ago, we dated for a few weeks, but I fucked up. I call her sometimes, hoping for another chance. She always refuses."

Sly looks or furtive glances didn't pass between Reid and Quinn. My sister's face held no deception. Only concern for me. More than that, Tina killed the last of my suspicion. Quinn had worn pink with hair to match.

Reid raised his arm and looked at his watch. "You have two hours to get ready."

"I never said—"

"Please," Reid interrupted. "We haven't shown ourselves to be any different from what the article claimed. That's unfortunate. This won't happen when Noah is present. With or without him around, you have carte blanche to strike back however you choose."

“Noah doesn’t know of the hostility?” I asked with incredulity. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Megan’s always on her best behavior in front of him. Tina pulls in her claws and doesn’t reveal she caught Megan giving Nicholas a blowjob, then watched as Nicholas ate Megan’s pussy. Tina lost a baby over this. Noah doesn’t know because he doesn’t get along with his brothers. They look at him as a traumatized mama’s boy who refuses to get help.”

I opened my mouth to speak, although I wasn’t sure what I’d say. Reid, however, must’ve seen something in my face and decided I needed more convincing. He forged on, his words quick and desperate.

“Aunt Réjane and Noah were close. He was supposed to go on a business trip with her, but was sick, so she went alone. When he developed a high fever, she left early. Her plane crashed. Noah blamed himself. I don’t think he’s ever forgiven himself. There’s so much—” He ran his fingers through his hair, then stepped closer to me and put his hands on my shoulders. “Ryan, please, listen to me. No one knows this, except Noah, my father, and me. His parents took this secret to their graves.”

As Reid told me the details of Noah’s mother’s heart attack and how his siblings blamed Noah for her death, it all suddenly clicked for me. His attitudes about women in the workplace. The need to protect cloaked in a mantle of chauvinism. He could’ve revealed all the dirty secrets and lies that had shaped him to become the man he was today. His mother had proof in documents, photos, and secret recordings she’d turned over to her brother-in-law. Reid’s father had informed Noah about the wealth of evidence after Shawn Keegan’s death. Instead of exposing his family’s secrets, he allowed the world to think the worst of him.

“He needs you,” Reid repeated. “He thinks my father had everything destroyed, but he kept them on hand. Unlike Noah, who destroyed Uncle Shawn’s journals.”

“Why? To blackmail him? If Noah wanted them destroyed, his orders should’ve been followed.”

“He has no intention of using them against Noah, Ryan, so that isn’t important. If you walk away, Noah’s reputation will never recover. What his mother sacrificed, what *he* sacrificed, will crash and burn. These are serious allegations. We’re open to lawsuits, fines, and devalued stock.”

“Noah knows this,” Quinn hissed. “Why should the onus of saving him be on my sister’s shoulders?”

We both ignored her.

“My sister stays and is welcomed here anytime,” I said, my tone brooking no room to negotiate.

Reid nodded. “Anything you want is yours.”

I snorted and told him about Billy. “I think you’re sincere, even if the driving force behind the offer is still Noah.”

“You know what my sister wants?” Quinn inserted. “That bitch let go.”

Although Reid stood in front of us and blocked our line of vision, Quinn still nodded in the general direction of Megan. Because she’d sat on the opposite side of Tina and Nicholas, when my sister tipped her head that way, I knew who she meant.

“Is that what you want?” Reid asked, his eyes grave.

“Fuck yeah,” Quinn answered for me.

I wanted Megan gone more than anything. Yet, I shook my head. “It still won’t help the company if one of its female executives is let go, while I’m being paraded in front of cameras as a counter to the article.”

Releasing a sigh as his shoulders relaxed, he nodded. “Then you must play nice with her. Noah thinks he’s left you in excellent hands. None of us wishes to incur his wrath. Discovering Megan’s treatment of you would be seen as a betrayal. She’d be lucky to get a job attending to sewers.”

“Okay.” I sighed, trying to ignore my growing disillusion. When reality crushed expectation, it fucked with your head. “I’ve been trying to play nice.”

“I know—”

“What the hell did she do to you?” Quinn interrupted Reid.

“It’s silly,” I mumbled, then launched into how she’d criticized me inside and out, up and down, and all around.

“Are you kidding me? Hello? We have a sister named Armani and a brother-in-law who should have his mouth sewn shut. You handle them well.”

“I don’t have to see them every day,” I reminded her. “Nor do they remind me what’ll happen if I don’t do exactly what is expected of me.”

Quinn rolled her eyes. “Let’s ask a connoisseur of women.” She smirked at Reid. “Love, do you find anything wrong with my sister’s attire? To me, she looks the ultimate businesswoman.”

“She does,” Reid agreed. “There could be some changes, though.”

“Right. I’ll practice my speech, then we can give me a makeover. I wonder if there’s enough time to flatiron my hair.”

Reid and Quinn exchanged a look.

“No,” she said decisively. “You have gorgeous curls. Celebrate them.”



The outfits Celine the stylist brought for me were singularly horrible. Undoubtedly expensive and from world-famous designers, the styles turned me off. Further proof Megan wanted to sabotage me. Dresses with voluminous pleated skirts, balloon sleeves and collars, shared space with too long trousers paired with oversized jackets in shades of blue and gray. Minutes were flying by, so I didn’t have time to stay in my feelings.

Just as I was about to choose a navy dress with shoulder pads, puffed sleeves, and a skirt that hadn’t wasted material even a scrap of material, a royal purple tuxedo mini dress

caught my eye. It was the last one on the rack. If they had shoved the other outfits against it, I never would've seen it.

"I want to wear that one," I said, nodding to it.

Megan and Tina stopped whatever they'd been discussing with Celine and her assistant. They all looked at me before Megan turned accusing eyes toward the stylist.

"You can't—"

"We don't have time to argue, Megan darling," Tina chirped. "If she wants to wear that, let her."

"That is the most expensive," Megan said brusquely. "If you damage it in any way, you will be required to pay for it."

"I didn't ask for a makeover in the first place," I retorted.

"You didn't ask, but you needed it," Megan said, always ready with a reply.

Nicholas had left after my disastrous rehearsal. I forgot entire sentences, left out crucial words, and barely paused for a breath. Deep inside of me, my dread grew as I veered toward imminent disaster. Reid and Quinn had disappeared not long after. He needed to get downstairs and attend a few things, including a pass for Quinn identifying her as an invited guest should security question her for any reason.

Their departure left me alone with Megan and Tina. In turns, they traded barbs and insults, and then abruptly banded together to focus on me. My hair and makeup had been perfected, so I only needed to choose my shoes before I changed. I settled on the metallic purple lace-up sandals more appropriate for a cocktail party, but the alternatives were pointy-toed short boots, platform heels requiring death defying stunts to walk in, and flats.

"Well, imagine that?" Megan said, her displeasure clear. "You have lovely shoes to match the dress Ryan chose."

Celine gave Megan a sheepish look. "Sorry," she mouthed.

The next argument arrived over the jewelry at hand. Celine insisted I needed pieces that matched the dress. Megan shot her down, unless I guaranteed I'd pay for damaged or lost

items. Tina stepped in and overrode Megan, so Celine brought the jewelry to me.

The time arrived to go down to the lobby. If I had been headed to my own execution, I wouldn't have felt such dread. When the elevator doors opened, a small crowd awaited us. Several bodyguards, Noah's secretary, Reid, Nicholas, a couple of faces I'd seen in the area outside my office, and a few people I didn't know.

"Are you ready, Miss Hagen?" a man with a suit on and a small mic clipped to his tie asked.

No. "Whenever you are," I voiced.

As I followed him, the other two bodyguards flanked my sides.

"I know you're nervous, Ryan," Reid said from behind me, "but we all have the utmost faith in you. You can do this."

We'd see how he was feeling *after* I stumbled through Megan's hollow words. "Thank you for your vote of confidence, Reid," I said as shutters clicked, and flashbulbs turned the situation surreal. They'd spotted me and were hurling questions my way.

Even if I wanted to pause, I couldn't have. Nothing stopped the forward motion until I stood next to a podium as Megan stepped behind it, unperturbed by the unending camera sounds. I saw no evidence of a microphone, yet when she spoke, her voice carried over hidden speakers.

My sister sat in the front row at the end. She blew me a kiss and gave me the thumbs-up sign. I nodded, but the pit of my stomach was tight. I didn't see Noah.

I'm not sure if that was good or bad.

Megan droned on, extolling my virtues and my education and my sense of humor, going on and filling in the blanks when she didn't know jack shit about me. Instead of taking the time to tear down my confidence, her ass should've been getting to know me.

“Please join me in welcoming our new Amage Account Executive, Miss Ryan Hagen.” Offering a brilliant smile, she indicated me with a flourish of her hand, then turned fully and joined in the applause. “We will take a few pre-screened questions once Ryan finishes,” she announced, then stepped aside.

Nodding at her as we traded places, I drew in a deep breath, set down the typed statement, cleared my throat, and smiled. The small microphone rising from the lectern barely registered. The faces staring at me showed various emotions. Curiosity, amusement, and derision. Only Quinn’s was friendly. Ingrid Warrington sat front and center, wearing a navy pantsuit. She regarded me with such disdain, I wondered if Megan was right.

“Good evening.” The frantic camera sounds quieted; the sudden silence overwhelmed me. A quick glance down reminded me of my next words. “Thank you for your warm welcome, Miss Buford.” She’d insisted on that exact line. “I am excited and happy to join Keegan Enterprises—” *Shit*. “I-I mean Keegan Group Media...Keegan Media Group,” I amended, doing my best to ignore everyone—their expressions, their titters, and their murmurs. Another sneak peek stirred my brain. “I have enjoyed the...the rigorous interview process o-over these past weeks and appreciated everyone’s patience and...and...and w-willingness to teach me the ropes at KGM...uh, KMG. I kn-know Mr. K-keegan took a tremendous risk by hiring me. M-my previous p-position could in no way prepare me f-for the demands I will find as p-part of the Keegan team. Keegan Media team.” I swallowed. “Keegan Media Group team.” My toes curled in my sandals, and it took everything in me not to shake. The purple choker felt constricting. Whatever I was supposed to say next dissolved into nothingness. I couldn’t remember any of it.

Then I looked at Quinn. On her face, I saw encouragement. She was the embodiment of what I’d preached to her. What our mother had instilled in me. No one could tear us down without our permission. They could try, but if *we* allowed the hate and scorn to affect us, we had a hand in our downfall. One of the most important things I’d impressed upon Quinn

was honesty about herself. It was the only way to be happy and authentic with anyone else. My sister lived life as she saw fit and walked in her own truths.

Megan stepped beside me and tried to insert herself in front of me.

“No,” I protested. “I’m fine, Megan, thank you.”

She blinked. Unless she wanted to create a media storm, however, she couldn’t rain harsh words my way. She did the only thing she could: smiled and stepped away.

I grabbed the two pages, lifted them into the air and tore her words to tiny scraps of paper.

“This is my first day and nerves overtook me. Megan took time from her myriad obligations to help me.” I turned in her direction, although I didn’t look directly at her. “Thank you for what you’ve shown me. You were the best teacher to share the many eye-opening experiences.”

Facing forward, I stayed silent a moment, hoping my words sunk in.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m Ryan Hagen, and it is my distinct pleasure to say I’m a part of Keegan *Media* Group—” I grinned. “See? It took a moment, but it clicked in my brain.”

A smattering of chuckles greeted that.

“It was Noah Keegan who hired me. He interviewed me. Twice. We didn’t see eye-to-eye at that first meeting, and I walked out. He kept me waiting for five hours. It was frustrating and annoying.” I met the gazes of some journalists, but most especially Ingrid Warrington. “Was it for the reason *you* claimed, Ms. Warrington? No. Mrs. Mikes kept me informed every step of the way. She was solicitous and went out of her way to check on me. When Mr. Keegan arrived, he apologized and explained a company emergency delayed him. As the boss, he owed me no explanation. His time is his own.”

The reporter and I engaged in a staring contest. She didn’t believe me. Dragging my gaze away, I glanced at Quinn again, before assessing the room at large. Their rapt attention

encouraged me to continue. Some held notepads, but most had tablets and cellphones.

“Mr. Keegan overlooked my hotheadedness and judged my work instead. I enjoyed my tenure at T.S. Marketing. The company is a small niche firm, fostering creativity and growth. Without Mr. Smith’s faith in me, I wouldn’t be standing before you today.”

There was scribbling and the resuming of the camera noises and bursts of light.

“In the coming weeks, I have a full schedule ahead of me. I look forward to the challenges ahead, and I am grateful for the opportunity to work at such a prestigious and innovative company. Thank you.”

The moment those words left my mouth, questions flew at me from all directions, so when Megan came to the podium, I stepped aside.

“We will take a few select, pre-screened questions,” she announced, then directed an assistant to bring a microphone to the man she pointed to.

“Pre-screened?” I whispered to Reid.

“Megan’s doing,” he replied.

“They invited here me,” a cool voice said, “and yet I wasn’t given the opportunity to submit my questions.”

“They added you at the last minute, Ms. Warrington,” Megan said in the same tone the reporter had used. “Be lucky that you were.”

Ingrid Warrington stiffened. Hostility radiated from her, and I questioned the logic of battling her in front of the world. Then I thought of Noah and Reid’s revelation. I’d at least try a defense of him. When Megan stepped aside so I could answer one of her pre-screened questions, I directed my attention to Ingrid.

“I wanted you here, Ms. Warrington. I wanted you to question *me*, instead of gathering skewered information that might cast me in the worst possible light, with no chance for a

rebuttal.” I lifted my brow at her. “The floor is yours, so ask me and I will answer to the best of my ability.”

“Ryan!” Megan said sharply, rushing to my side. “Don’t. She isn’t on—”

“Your list,” I finished for her, the smile frozen on my face. No one had cut the mic. Any rebuttal on my part would carry as much as Megan’s annoyance. “I know you’re trying to protect me, but this must be done.”

My words caused bedlam. Questions were tossed at me, flashbulbs almost blinded me, and shutters clicked at rapid speed.

“Everyone, please,” I said, without effect. Uneasy, I glanced at Megan. Her attention was elsewhere. “Unless your uproar settles, I cannot answer questions.”

That statement worked better. Some noise fell away.

“I will answer as many questions as I can,” I said, “once we proceed.”

Again, my words were adequate. Like a receding baseline, the noise faded. I nodded to Ingrid Warrington.

She stood and waited for a mic. “You extol the virtues of Keegan Enterprises as if we should believe a dilettante such as yourself, Ryan. We are aware of why you’ve been hired and paraded in front of us. It’s interesting how you glossed over Noah Keegan, not touching upon his philistinism. As any good cipher.”

“Excuse me, *Ingrid*,” I interrupted, my temper rising. “If you would pause between each of your—”

“No, excuse *you*, Ryan,” she shot back, her eyes blazing. Her issue with Noah was personal. “I don’t expect a reply from you. Noah Keegan hires subpar *men* because he hates women—”

I laughed. “The last time I checked, I had lady parts underneath my clothes.”

Although my genuine amusement garnered chuckles from others, it infuriated Ingrid. I was standing with a lectern

inhibiting me. Everyone clearly read her body language, so I stepped from behind the podium and addressed her.

“I told you.” Somehow, Megan looked friendly *and* triumphant. “You’re a little fool.”

“And you’re a fucking bitch.” Hoping I achieved her deceptive manner, I sailed past her.

Reid stood in front of the lectern, a small microphone in hand. “A hot mic is your worst enemy,” he told me, clipping it to the lapel of my dress. “Take care,” he warned me.

I nodded.

“A small tidbit to keep in mind,” he said. “Ingrid’s husband applied for a job in the company. He didn’t get it and now works for Sauncier.” He smiled and nodded to someone behind me. “You’re live.”

His voice carried over the speakers as he returned to his place among the executives standing on each side of me.

At some point, Ingrid had stopped talking, or I had stopped caring and tuned her out.

“Let me address your first statement.”

“You remember what I said? Shocking. Everyone I interviewed, all credible contacts, said the women on staff are little more than airheads. Either here through nepotism or because they’ve used their bodies and continue to do so.”

As much as I disliked Megan, I didn’t doubt her education or her skills. More so because she worked here.

Ingrid fell silent.

“Are you ready to hear my response?”

“You will not change my mind, Ryan.” She glanced at me from head to toe. “You are a cookie-cutter example of the type of women hired. You don’t come close to a professional, dressing in such a suggestive manner. Your dress is so short most of your thighs are exposed.”

I glanced down. “I like my legs. They are beautiful if I say so myself.”

She glared at me. “You’re pathetic. It doesn’t matter what spiel you’ve been groomed to spout. Not to me or anyone else.”

Her insults were best ignored. *We* had become the story. “You’re a freelance journalist, are you not?”

“I am,” she said, reeking of superiority. “I am my own boss, set my own hours, and choose my own stories. I am any woman’s inspiration.”

“Or a cautionary tale,” I responded, wondering if she’d written the piece for her own revenge or at her husband’s urging.

“I beg your pardon?” By her indignation, she genuinely believed herself above any woman who worked for Noah.

“Pardon not granted. You’ve become an inspiration because of a story you wrote assassinating a man’s character.”

“Character? How much extra were you paid to feed that line to us?”

“My opinions are not for sale, Ms. Warrington,” I said evenly. “While you think of me as a dilettante, I’m neither an amateur nor unskilled. I earned my degree through hard work and dedication. My sister and I—” I nodded to Quinn— “lost our parents at a crucial time in our lives. An older sister was a newlywed, an older brother was in college, and I was in high school. Quinn—” Another nod in her direction— “was thirteen and our little brother was eleven.”

Some photographers homed in on Quinn, momentarily abandoning my showdown with Ingrid Warrington.

“My parents taught us the value of an education and instilled in us a drive to succeed. For you to reduce their lessons to what’s between my legs is insulting and disgusting.”

“Quite the sob story,” she mocked.

“I consider it a success story.”

“Spin it how you want, Ryan. Why else would you blab your poor little background if not to garner sympathy?”

“Not for sympathy. As encouragement. Do you know why *I* don’t think *my* story is a ‘sob story’?” I used air quotations.

“This should be good. Your proselytizing is more annoying than anything else. But please, tell us before we perish from curiosity.”

While she spoke with all the melodrama of a D-list actress, I kept my voice even. “We kept it in the family and worked to be where we are. We held on to what our parents taught us and prevailed. Why? Because we had a sound foundation because of our mother’s and father’s love and devotion to each other and to us. The five of us triumphed after their deaths *in spite of* our situation. Not because of it. We didn’t broadcast our grief and pain, seeking monetary gain.”

“I see. In other words, when money is raised for children who’ve lost their parents, families devastated by unforeseen tragedies, they are using trauma for profit.”

She would not box me into a corner. Fuck her. “You’re putting words in my mouth. I would think, as an independent reporter, you would know what I mean. My statement was in response to your accusations. What I said relates to my life and my situation. No one else’s so please refrain from speaking on matters unknown to you. Most topics are out of reach for your comment.”

Laughter rose around us.

The hatred in her eyes burned through me.

I cleared my throat and continued, damning her husband. His poor interview rooted her viciousness. “As for your accusation that I am a *cipher*, are you calling me insignificant? A nobody? A nothing or a nonentity?” I smiled at her surprise. “One can only assume you peppered your diatribe with such words to expose my ignorance. So sorry to disappoint you. Calling Mr. Keegan a philistine was a little beyond the pale. Is it because of his wealth? I suppose you see him as a jaded, materialistic, uncouth chauvinist.”

“You’re being kind in your assessment,” she said coldly. “He’s manipulative and awful. His own family disdains him.”

I sighed, holding in my true feelings. Here and there, I read about media etiquette, so losing my cool would spiral out of control. The power of the pen was in their hands. Words were a powerful persuader. Once public opinion turned against me too, all might be lost for Keegan Enterprises. “Admittedly, I am a new hire, but either they are excellent actors or they—”

“Or actresses,” she cut in. “Your own lack of respect for your gender is telling.”

“I’m not apologizing for my choice of words, especially to you. You have tried to humiliate me because of my clothing. You’ve demeaned every woman employed by Mr. Keegan and insulted my intelligence, ignoring this company’s talented and hardworking female staffers. Tina Keegan is the president of Kee-Tel. This isn’t a child’s game, Ms. Warrington. Whatever else you may accuse Mr. Keegan of being, a fool he is not. He wouldn’t allow anyone a place in his company if they were not competent.” Fuck, I was so fucking glad I’d sifted through the information Noah gave me. “Mrs. Keegan is the wife of Mr. Keegan’s brother, but unless you’re a novice, a *dilettante*, you understand the rules of business.”

She looked over my shoulder toward Megan and stared, before narrowing her eyes. A moment later, she pulled out her cell phone and looked at something, before placing it in her empty chair.

Now that I had her full attention again, I arced my hand through the air. “Given the wealth of artwork throughout the building, I challenge you to tell me he doesn’t care about the arts.”

“These are reprints belonging to the company.”

“So now you’re accusing him, and by extension me, of being a liar?” Not allowing her time to answer, I shook my head. “I assure you, the fabric of our moral fiber remains intact. The works are originals and are from Mr. Keegan’s private collection.”

Again, known to me because of my homework. He encouraged his employees to support artists and sculptors, especially local rising stars. I detested abstract art. Suddenly, I

realized why he encouraged such support. Somewhere in the documents, I'd read his mother fostered his love.

"You know a lot about Noah Keegan, to say you're only an employee," she sneered.

"I know no more than every other employee, Ms. Warrington. But I digress. Rosa Mikes is Mr. Keegan's long-time assistant." With a slight turn and a sweep of my hand, I indicated the woman's general direction. "She would not be here if she didn't have exceptional organizational skills, a no-nonsense attitude, and a character above reproach." I paused, needing a moment before I extolled the virtues of the next woman. "And what of Miss Megan Buford? She has a BA in Organizational Skills and minored in marketing. From what I've seen today, she deserves to be right where she's at." In fucking hell, but I couldn't say that. "There are other women employed here." Not many. I had to work with what I had, however. "Before you say there aren't many in executive positions, let me ask you: do you think your poorly researched piece would *encourage* applications for our sex? Suppose the unfair rumors and assertions, circulated for years, and reinforced by your grossly negligent exposé, are scaring off qualified female applicants?"

My point made, I no longer needed to stand so close to her. I'm sure she wanted to engage more, and I was equally sure I'd created enough doubt for the upcoming news cycles to report a different spin. Reid's information wasn't required. Why play her dirty game? Besides, I'd hear from Ingrid Warrington again. We both crossed lines today.

Returning behind the podium, I glimpsed Megan, as white as a sheet and her expression frantic. Curious, I glanced around but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Bored coworkers, chattering reporters, busy photographers, and still no Noah.

We were supposed to meet to discuss my ideas. Maybe his absence was good. Today had been worth shit. I hadn't had a chance to fine-tune my presentation. Sighing, I faced the media people again. "I'll take a few questions."

I pointed to a reporter with a welcoming smile and a friendly expression.

“Thank you, Ryan,” she said as she stood. “I’m—”

“You’re a fraud, Ms. Hagen,” Ingrid Warrington interrupted, getting to her feet again. “Setting yourself above reproach with all the skeletons in your closet.”

“Nice try, but my life is an open book. I have no stray bones for you to dig up and twist to fit your nastiness.”

“At least I don’t claim perfection.”

“That’s ridiculous. No one is perfect.”

“According to you, your family is. *You* are.”

“No, I’m not,” I said in exasperation, vaguely aware of a sudden uproar. The intermittent shutter clicks and flashes of light went wild. Fuck, this argument would be front page news.

“Either you’re a liar or a fool,” she told me. “Your parents didn’t die in an accident, Ryan. That car crash was intentional on your father’s part. They found a note at the scene—”

“You’re a liar,” I interrupted, but my voice sounded small and faraway and horrified. If I hadn’t known my father’s history, I would’ve laughed off her implication.

“Your argument isn’t with Ryan,” Noah snarled, suddenly next to me. “Unless you wish to be sued—”

“It’s public record,” she said in triumph.

“Ryan?” Quinn called, a combination of shock and concern on her face. She rushed toward me. Reid met her at the rope that had separated us from the reporters. Once he allowed her entry, she rushed to me. “Ryan?” she said in a teary voice, taking my face between her hands. “Don’t faint. You’re so pale—”

“Ryan?” Noah called.

I blinked at him, unable to process the concern I heard in his voice or the stone-cold fury on his face. My eyes felt wet, but no tears fell.

“You’re Quinn?” Ingrid Warrington’s voice bounced in my head. “The one who whored herself out to Reid Keegan so Ryan could get the job? Excuse me, the one who slept with Noah and Reid months ago at a party.”

“What?” I squeaked, somehow as horrified by that prospect as I was by my parents’...

A sob escaped me; around me, chaos erupted. Noah roaring words. Men yelling. Crashes and curses.

“Let go of me, Reid!” Quinn shouted.

“No. She will charge you with assault.”

“Good, because I intend to fuck her up,” she growled, and the hot mic caught her words.

“Shut up,” Reid snapped.

“You have two fucking seconds to get that bitch out of here, or you’re going to be sweeping pieces of her from every surface in this place after I drag her from one end of the building to the next, beating her ass.”

“Lay a hand on me. Show the world what thugs you are,” Ingrid shouted.

“Oomph!” Reid grunted.

My sister flew past me in a blur of motion, mobilizing me like nothing else could.

“No! Stop!” My yell slowed Quinn down a fraction. Her barreling to destruction was like a bucket of freezing water. Ingrid’s claim Quinn slept with Noah didn’t matter. I stumbled forward. “Stop, Quinn,” I ordered as my phone rang. “Stop.”

She skidded to a halt. The moment she turned to me, the fight left her, and her lips trembled.

The day we buried our parents was the only other time I’d seen such devastation on my sister’s face. I shuddered, wanting to cry and fall apart. My sister needed me, though. The reminder soothed me. Calmness came over me, allowing me to tuck away my pain.

Lifting my head high, I walked to Quinn and wrapped my arms around her. “It’s okay, baby,” I whispered.

“That’s why he said I couldn’t go,” she sobbed. “If I’d insisted on going, would I be with them, away from all the grief?”

“We don’t have proof about her claim,” I told her.

“You know they’re true and so do I. He had been so unhappy for so long.”

“Quinn—”

“No, Ryan. You know it’s true.”

“I don’t,” I said fiercely. Because I didn’t.

She yanked herself out of my arms. “Take your fucking rose-colored glasses off. Face reality. Your martyrdom is just an excuse to convince yourself you were doing what Mama and Daddy wanted. You don’t want to believe what that woman said, because then you’ll have to admit the same fate awaits you. He gave up his dreams because Mama ended up pregnant.”

“I haven’t given up my dreams!”

“Dreams?” she screeched. “For yourself? You’re scared to live. You’re nothing but a fucking bore. Worried about your past compoment. Worried about your present behavior. You’re miserable!”

This was spiraling so fucking far out of control, but I didn’t know how to stop it and refused to dignify her charges with a response. “I have the degree I always dreamed of and a job at one of the most prestigious companies in the world.”

“You’ve given up,” she insisted in a teary voice. “You have no spontaneity. No gaiety. Everything is about me and Logan —”

“Excuse me for caring,” I said sarcastically.

She covered her face with her hands and sobbed a moment before looking at me. “Daddy cared, too. Daddy put her before himself. Mama wanted him to stay in the city, so he did and

married her. Not caring what a slow death he'd condemned himself to."

I clung to one truth. "We don't know if her information is true." Though deep down I *knew*. Everything she said was factual.

"Fuck you," Quinn cried. "Fuck you, Ryan. We know. You're saying that for your benefit, not mine. I saw you. Your shock and pain. You were a moment away from fainting. One day, that's going to fuck you in the ass. Everything, all you've ignored, is going to bubble over and leave you just like him. *Them*," she snarled, tears pouring down her cheeks. "Dead!" she shouted, shoving my shoulder. "Dead like him. Then you'll have left me too, goddamn you."

She doubled over in pain, then fell to her knees, falling apart on live TV.

Before she ended up in a heap on the floor, I kneeled and hugged her to me. As much as I wanted to ignore them, my own tears were hot on my cheeks.

Quinn's heart-wrenching sobs echoed through the lobby. I combed my fingers through her hair, singing a lullaby my mother sung to us. I was terribly off-key; Mama had a beautiful singing voice.

"Ryan?" Reid crouched behind Quinn. "Noah is fit to be tied. We managed to get him on the elevator."

I continued singing.

"What can I do to help?"

"Kill that bitch," I said with surprising swiftness and particular viciousness.

"I'm so happy your mic has been cut."

I didn't care.

"Noah wants to talk to you in his office."

"I'm not leaving my sister."

"I'll look after her."

I snorted.

“We will find the truth about your parents, but what she said about Quinn sleeping with me and Noah for you to get this job is bullshit. I can swear that she’s never slept with my cousin. She’s never met him.”

Quinn dragged herself out of my arms and sniffled. “Reid has never brought me to an event where I might meet any of his family,” she said hoarsely.

“I know,” I said truthfully, my sanity returning.

Reid got to his feet, leaned down, and scooped Quinn into his arms. Instead of protesting, she leaned her head against his shoulder. “I’m in excellent hands, Ryan,” she said tiredly. “You should see what your boss wants.”

As I stood and brushed off my dress, I saw that my borrowed bracelet lay in pieces on the floor. The day dawning with such promise had descended into madness.

Chapter Nineteen

Noah

“Get the fuck away from me,” I snarled, knocking away Nicholas’s hold on me the moment he and Nathaniel hustled me into my office. They’d refused to release me in the elevator and damned near dragged me off and down the hallway. At my door, Jose had been waiting to unlock it. Now, the three of them and a host of other men crowded me.

My reaction to Ryan’s pain and shock had been visceral. I hadn’t thought. I’d acted, until Reid and Nicholas intervened—*interrupted*—my fury, warning me to withdraw and reorganize before the press forgot Ryan and focused on me.

“They will tear her apart,” Reid had warned me, “if they note how you are reacting to a woman supposedly only your employee.”

“Now I understand all the allowances,” Nicholas cut in. “You want to fuck her. Congratulations. You’re human after all. But Reid is right. Further, the company will never recover from accusations of sexual misconduct.”

“And the world won’t appreciate her talents, Noah,” Reid added. “They’ll believe it was her skill on her back that won her place in KMG, answerable only to you.”

It was those words that had decided me, so with little ado, I’d allowed Nicholas and the security team to escort me to the elevator, vaguely aware of voices and sobbing.

After taking Nathaniel and Alessia to a lunch that lasted longer than expected, I’d arrived minutes after Ryan had taken her place at the podium and dove into her speech.

I’d had every intention of introducing her and standing at her side while she spoke. Instead, I’d taken the opportunity to get to know my brother’s fiancé. She had seemed so genuinely hurt by my accusations and Nathaniel had looked so crestfallen, I hadn’t been able to hurry back to the office. He

had depended on me to serve as his witness, or else he wouldn't have called me.

Guilt was a rotten emotion. By the time I summoned my driver, there were only forty-five minutes until the press conference. Alessia hadn't wanted to attend, so once my driver dropped off Nathaniel and me, he brought her home.

Beginning the press conference with me already present was one thing. Walking in while it happened would've stolen Ryan's moment to shine. I'd had my driver drop us off in the parking garage and entered the building via that route, where members of building security met us and ushered us to their office. Ryan's nervousness surprised me. Unable to see her struggling over words, I texted Megan to cut Ryan's time and answer questions until I arrived to take over.

But Ryan, dedicated and determined, regrouped, and found the courage to start over. She'd been knowledgeable and succinct, demonstrating her quick thinking to Ingrid Warrington's questions. Until the reporter revealed a fact I'd wondered if Ryan knew.

The shocking way she'd blurted the revelation took me a moment to register. Just as they had, a camera panned to Ryan. She hadn't known the truth behind her mother's murder and her father's death. No one had ever shown the suicide note mentioned in the incident report to her. Ingrid Warrington had exposed a dark family secret on live television.

"Where's Ryan?"

No one answered. Fury roared through me. I'd never wanted to destroy a woman as much as I suddenly craved to annihilate Ingrid Warrington.

"Ryan is where she's supposed to be," Nicholas answered coldly. "Downstairs at the fucking press conference."

"Fuck you, Nick." I glared at Jose. "Get down there and get her upstairs."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Kee—"

"Leave her where she is, Jose," Nicholas interrupted.

I shoved Nicholas, then decided I needed him within a punch's reach. Yanking him by his tie, I pulled him closer. The knot in the silk tightened around his throat. I didn't give a fuck. "Stand down. Call Reid and tell him to send Ryan to me."

"Noah, let him go," Nate cried. "You're strangling him. He's turning fucking purple."

Blinded by rage, I didn't see it. Nathaniel tried to jerk me away but couldn't. Nicholas attempted to pry my fingers from his neck. I wouldn't release him.

"What the fuck did you do, fuckhead?" I was sure he'd orchestrated the travesty in the lobby. "You gave Ingrid—"

Nathaniel and Jose pulling me away interrupted me. Nicholas stumbled back, doubled over, racked with coughing.

"Mr. Keegan, sir," Jose started, drawing my attention to him. "We've called Wilbur. He should be arriving shortly."

"I didn't ask anyone to call my driver."

Jose cleared his throat. "Mr. Nick instructed me to do so."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nicholas accept a bottled water from one of the security guys. "You're fired," I told Jose, stepping away, only to have Nathaniel rush in front of me and blocking direct access to Nicholas. "All of you are terminated."

The men shifted, glancing between each other. Jose lost the color in his face. In the back of my mind, I remembered he had a wife and four or five children. He'd worked for me for nearly seven years and had always been on top of his game. Except tonight. He'd failed Ryan, so he'd failed me.

"You can't fire these men," Nicholas snapped, hoarse but unfortunately conscious.

"I can do whatever the fuck I want to," I reminded him.

"Under what circumstances are you letting them go?" he asked me.

That was a no-brainer. "Dereliction of duty."

“To whom?” Nicholas demanded.

The image of Ryan, frozen by shock, so pale I thought she'd collapse, rose in my head. My first thought had been to go to her, but then that woman, putrid, foul, and miserable, continued her fucking torment. Before I had the chance to blast her, Nicholas and Nathaniel were manhandling me, forcing me to leave Ryan alone in that fucking den of wolves.

“Ryan.” Her name fell from Nicholas's lips in triumph. “She sucked your cock.”

His words reignited my fury, and I barreled toward him, backhanding Nathaniel to clear my path. I didn't stop to threaten but punched Nicholas' jaw quickly following with a blow to his gut. As he crumpled, I reached for him, but Nathaniel and Jose interfered again and dragged me away.

“Stop, Noah!” Nathaniel ordered, unable to keep me in his grip because Jose released me as soon as they placed some distance between Nicholas and me. “You've lost your mind.”

“No, he emptied his balls,” Nicholas said, staggering to his feet.

“Fuck, Nick, shut the fuck up, dude,” Nathaniel said at my growl. Even to my own ears, I sounded like a mad dog. “Noah's going to kill you.”

“Fire her,” Nicholas said coldly, “or I swear I'll tell the world it wasn't her bitch of a sister who fucked you, but Ryan herself. I'll call an emergency meeting and present the other qualified candidates you passed on.”

Animosity aside, I'd never felt one way or the other about Nicholas. Definitely not the hatred flowing through me. It vibrated through me like a call to arms. I couldn't think beyond Ryan's pain and humiliation, captured for the world to see. I was livid. With Ingrid Warrington. Nicholas. Jose. Megan, Reid, Tina, and myself. Especially myself. I should never have given Ryan the job. It was too much for her, left her exposed and vulnerable. I intended to fire her, but it wasn't Nicholas' call, so I refused to give the asshole the satisfaction

of my agreement. “Back off, Nicholas, or I’ll reveal your fucking affair with Megan to the board and the world.”

His shock was my reward for keeping the information to myself. “You’d humiliate my wife to have your fucking way?”

I barked a laugh. “The fucking irony. You’d humiliate Ryan for the same reason. No, excuse me. You’d humiliate her to satisfy your fucking vengeance, so choose, motherfucker. Revenge on me or protection of your wife’s pride. Who, might I remind you, is already aware that you fucked Megan Buford.”

Nicholas choked “Did Tina tell you?” he demanded.

“No,” I said coldly. “No one told me. It’s my fucking company and as unfortunate as it is, you’re my brother. It’s my duty to know. By the way, I hired Ryan because of her talent. Her portfolio is in the company files. Our relationship is strictly professional. Before you make a bigger ass of yourself and open yourself to a lawsuit by defaming her character, get your fucking facts straight.”

“If you haven’t fucked her, you want to,” he declared.

“Untrue.” Any more than the one word might’ve revealed the lie.

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t give a fuck.”

“Nicholas, back off,” Nathaniel said. “You’re out of line on so many levels. Talking about an employee with such disrespect and in front of other employees. So what if Noah is hooking up with this Ryan chick? She’s fucking gorgeous.”

I frowned at him, but he ignored me.

“If she wants him too and Noah is finally happy, why would you want to block that?”

Nathaniel’s words surprised me, and I blinked at the reproach and concern in his voice. Yet he didn’t notice, still focused on Nicholas.

“Happy?” he scoffed. “Noah? He’s spent almost two-thirds of his life mourning a dead woman. It doesn’t matter who pitches pussy at him. He’s nothing but a miserable boy, haunted by a mother whose death he caused. If he hadn’t whined for her to come home, she wouldn’t have gotten on that fucking plane. She’d still be alive. Her blood’s on his hands. He’d already stolen her love from us. Karma repaid him by taking her from him.”

Bitterness gleamed in Nicholas’s eyes, but his words pinned me to my spot. We stared at each other, all the ugliness once again out in the open, poisoning any strides we’d made in the last few years.

“Noah, we need to talk among ourselves,” Nathaniel whispered. “Tell the men they aren’t fired, then make them leave. Fuck, you should thank them. They saved you from more bad press and murder charges.”

The words dragged my attention away from Nicholas, and I nodded. Nathaniel was right. “Jose, gentlemen,” I began, turning to them, surprised to see at least a dozen men in my office. I hadn’t realized so much security followed us. “I spoke prematurely. Thank you for seeing to my well-being. Your jobs are secure. Expect bonuses. Please adhere to the NDAs you signed upon your hiring. You’re dismissed for the evening. Jose, before you go, call Reid and have him send Ryan to me. Inform Wilbur I am not ready to leave.”

I sounded like an automaton. Emotionless. Robotic. I needed to see Ryan, but knowing I intended to fire her left me hollow inside.

“I’ve already called Mr. Reid and Wilbur, Mr. Keegan,” Jose said, his concern directed at me as surprising as Nathaniel’s.

“Thank you,” I said, hiding a grimace as his worry turned into astonishment. I thanked no one for following my orders. Fuck. Ryan would hand me my ass on a platter. Again.

Once the others left, Jose turned toward the door, but I wanted to be a man Ryan admired. “Jose, tell—” I searched my brain for his wife’s name. I’d met her several times at company events. At his expectant look, I cleared my throat,

relieved when her name popped into my head. “Say ‘hello’ to Noella for me.”

He smiled. “Yes, sir, Mr. Keegan, sir. Will do. See you in the morning.” He left me alone with my brothers.

“Get out.” Seeing Nathaniel’s shoulders droop made me amend my order. “Get the fuck out, *Nicholas*.” Turning, I stalked to my desk.

“You want her,” Nicholas spat, still hoarse from my near strangulation, but otherwise unscathed.

“What if he does?” Nathaniel demanded.

“Shut the fuck up, Nate,” Nicholas said. “You’re an irresponsible piss ant. You’re not part of the company, because you’re too fucking stupid. You have the brain of a fucking rock.”

Nathaniel *was* irresponsible, but he was also so much gentler than Nicholas and I combined. I disagreed with his impulsive decision to marry his pregnant girlfriend, yet it was out of honor. Misplaced or not. Seeing the hurt in Nathaniel’s eyes at Nicholas’ words didn’t help my fucking mood. “Nate is careless, but he isn’t stupid, asshole. He’s good with numbers and he’ll have a lot to offer if he gets his act together. Stop insulting him, Nicholas. Out of the two of you, you’re the fucking moron. I’ve told you to get the fuck out of my office twice and yet you’re still here.”

Nicholas threw me a dark look, while Nathaniel’s was grateful.

“I want Ryan Hagen fired,” Nicholas said. “You don’t deserve happiness. I want to see you miserable for the rest of your fucking life. You almost ruined Duke, my best friend. You put me and Tina through hell every fucking time she has to go away. Mother took you on vacations, but barely had time to read me a fucking book. She gallivanted across Europe with you for weeks, six months before her plane crash. She couldn’t even take my fucking calls for the first two weeks. Dad said she didn’t have time for us because she was with *you*. I was ten, Noah. My only crime was I wasn’t you.”

Even if I'd still had the medical records and other documents proving she'd had a heart attack, I wouldn't have shown them to Nicholas, Nathaniel, or my sisters. I'd given my word to my parents that I'd take my mother's secrets to my grave, and I would.

"Fuck, Nick, I got on Noah's ass to go to counseling," Nathaniel grumbled. "Maybe, I was talking to the wrong brother. Your bullshit doesn't help Noah. Find a therapist or shut the fuck up about it."

"You don't tell me what to do, Nate," Nicholas sneered.

"You might not follow what I have to say, but you can't tell me what the fuck *to* say," Nathaniel retorted. "You're not Noah."

Nicholas smirked at me. "I don't control the purse strings."

"No, fuckhead. I didn't mean that," Nathaniel said. "You're a selfish fuck. That's what I meant."

Nicholas and I exchanged glances, then stared at Nathaniel.

"You aren't Noah," he said, doubling down. "I call and he comes running. It doesn't matter the time of day. And it isn't only me he'll drop everything for. He's done it for you, Rosie, and Rem. He does it for Tina. He looks after us and is there for every family meeting, birthday, or milestone. That's more than I can say for you."

"You were barely out of diapers when Mother died, so you're talking out of your ass, Nate," Nicholas said.

"She was my mother too, dickhead," Nathaniel said in frustration. "What's wrong with you, Nick? You might've been a kid, but so was Noah. He was twelve. It wasn't his fault Mom favored him. If I'm the fucking idiot, that should be an obvious fact, genius."

"Knock, knock," Megan said as she strutted through the open door, halting upon seeing Nathaniel.

He smiled at her. "Hey, gorgeous."

A blush stained her cheeks, and she lowered her lashes. "Hi, Nate."

“Besides Uncle Ed, you’re the only Keegan with a cock Megan hasn’t fucked, Noah,” Nicholas announced.

“You’re mean, Nick,” Megan croaked, glancing uneasily at me.

“And you’re a whore,” Nicholas said without apology.

“Enough,” I ordered as Megan’s face crumpled. “You will respect Megan and every other woman, Nicholas.”

“As you do?” he mocked. “How the fuck do you respect my wife by hiding my affair from her?”

“She’s your wife, fuckhead,” I snapped. “It’s up to you to police your cock and, as unfortunate as it is, *you’re* my brother.”

“More’s the pity,” he agreed, echoing my sentiment. “Allegiance to me has nothing to do with your silence. It’s because you want her to suffer for being a working woman.”

“Nick—” Megan started, snapping her mouth shut at his glare.

“Tina isn’t my wife, Nicholas,” I said. “She’s yours, so she can work to her heart’s content.”

“Really? Every time she leaves for a business trip, you curl up in a corner with your blankie and teddy bear, worried the plane’s going to crash.”

“Jesus Christ, Nick, you’re possessed,” Nathaniel said with disapproval.

“This is going no fucking where,” I said.

Our public cordiality would remain a façade. In private, we’d never like one another. At this point, neither of us would mourn the other were we to die. Nicholas looked ready to murder me. I, too, could’ve killed him and felt no remorse, but I knew the heat of the moment had me homicidal. Once I saw Ryan and assessed her state myself, I’d calm down.

Needing to restore control, I looked among my brothers and Megan, noting their collective unhappiness. In addition, she appeared humiliated. The problem dawned on me, and I

scowled. Between my brother and Megan Buford, I'd prefer to see the back of Nicholas. Unfortunately, my father made sure that wasn't possible. "Miss Buford, you're fired—"

"Are you out of your mind?" Nicholas demanded. "Do you know what will happen to us if you terminate Megan after that scathing article?"

"The same thing that would happen if Noah fired Ryan after her first fucking day?" Nathaniel asked with biting sarcasm.

Nicholas glared at Nathaniel but had no response. "What do you want, Megan?" he asked.

She licked her lips, her gaze roaming from me to Nathaniel and finally to Nicholas. "I thought Reid might've been in here. We need to talk but he's disappeared."

Folding his arms, Nicholas leaned against the wall. "I'm hurt. Three weeks ago, you fucked Nate and me on the yacht for an entire weekend because you couldn't pin Reid down. Now you're searching for him."

Instead of responding to Nicholas, Megan gave me a tentative look. "It isn't what you think, Noah. Give me a chance to tell my side of the story."

"Megan—"

"Please, Noah," she interrupted on a whine. "We can go for drinks and—"

"Christ, woman, you have balls," Nicholas said in disgust.

She ignored him. "I'd also like to discuss Ryan Hagen with you, Noah."

"What about her?" I asked as Nicholas's cell phone rang.

He walked to the other side of the office, near the small conference table and answered.

"We can't let her go immediately," Megan said. "As Nate pointed out, it wouldn't be a good look for us. But she is a loose cannon. She ignored all protocol during her training and at the press conference. I recommend searching for someone

else. She isn't a good fit for Keegan Media Group. If you can't let her go, I'm requesting you give me the authority to do so."

"I'm going to pretend this conversation never happened, Miss Buford," I said as Nick rejoined us. "Ryan did a superb job and has a bright future ahead of her. Is there anything else?"

"No, sir," she said, the wind taken from her sails.

"Get out."

Unlike Nicholas, Megan complied immediately.

"Ryan's on her way up," Nicholas said once we were alone.

"Keep your cock in your fucking pants, Nick. You're married. Respect your wife and your vows." I glared at Nathaniel. "You fucking asshole. You were determined to marry Alessia today but you're still fucking other women?"

"I haven't touched anyone else since that weekend with Megan, Noah," Nathaniel said. "I swear."

"What the fuck do you mean, Noah?" Nicholas asked, then looked at Nathaniel. "You were getting married today?"

"Yeah. Alessia's a great girl. And she's pregnant with my kid."

Nicholas drew in a deep breath. "We're talking when we leave here," he announced, then went to the couch and sat. He smirked at me. "Just as soon as we finish with Ryan. She can suck my cock while you fuck her, Noah."

I stalked to where he sat and used his tie to yank him to his feet, then shoved him toward a window. He stumbled back but I moved fast and grabbed him again. This time, when I pushed him backward, he bounced against the glass, his head hitting it with a resounding bang. "Walk out the door or fly through the window," I told him, reaching for him again, fully prepared to murder him. I had enough money and connections at my disposal to ensure that I wouldn't be charged. "Your choice."

Evading my grasp, Nick scrambled toward the door.

“Don’t fuck with Ryan, Nicholas,” I roared. “You’ve crossed a fucking line.”

“Is it her big ass or her big titties—”

Nathaniel clapped his hand over Nicholas’ mouth. “You’ve fucked with Noah enough tonight, so stop. There’s no need to disrespect that girl.”

Slamming Nate’s hand away, Nicholas glared at him.

“Can’t you see what Noah’s doing, Nick?” he said quietly.

“Noah?” Ryan’s voice floated to me, interrupting Nicholas’s answer, and my entire body came alive. She was down the hall, almost within reach. “Mr. Keegan?”

“Come on, Ryan,” I called, unreasonable anger invading me again.

“What is Noah doing, Nathaniel?” Nicholas asked.

“Noah doesn’t like our betrayals to the women in our lives, but we’re his brothers. Right or wrong, we have his loyalty. Doesn’t that count for anything in your eyes?”

“No,” Nicholas said without hesitation, and stormed away.

Chapter Twenty

Ryan

My solitary ride on the elevator took forever. I didn't want to see Noah. Or anyone. I needed to talk to Armani. She'd been blowing up my phone, giving me every opportunity to question her. I just didn't want to. Truth would set me free or cast me deeper into hell.

Quinn's pain, *my* pain, was self-inflicted. If I hadn't insisted that wretched bitch attend the press conference, none of this would've happened. Cocksure seemed morbidly applicable, even if I lacked the appendage for literal interpretation.

Thoughts turned over in my head, colliding with each other. Despair made my body shudder. I wanted to go home and...? Cry? Stare into space? Throw all breakable objects against my wall?

The answer eluded me. My lack of wanting to face Noah didn't. Maybe he wanted to chew me out. I'd ruined what was supposed to have been his absolution. Worse, my personal life had intruded.

Maybe he intended to fire me. Almost the entire day had been shitty. To say I'd badly handled each blowup would be a sad understatement.

Or, maybe, after castigating me, he'd want to go ahead with the design meeting he'd arranged with me this morning. Except I couldn't work tonight, a fact I hoped he'd understand. If nothing else, I needed to go home and process everything. The entirety of today.

The elevator halted on the twelfth floor, and I stepped into the deserted reception area. Mrs. Mikes must've already left. After hours lighting turned the normally warm décor into quiet peace. The safety and comfort were deceptive. Mrs. Mikes was as cozy and supportive as a barracuda.

Voices emanating from Noah's office broke through my malaise.

“Noah?” I called, not wanting to barge in since he wasn’t alone. There was at least one other man with him. “Mr. Keegan?”

“Come in, Ryan,” he ordered, his voice chilling in its cold fury.

Lifting my hand to rub my aching head reminded me of the broken bracelet. I’d borrowed over nine grand in costume jewelry. Now, I had to find thirty-five hundred dollars because of damages to one piece. With a base salary of five grand a month, I would have to use the last of my savings to cover all my expenses for the month.

I sniffled.

“He’s waiting for you, Ryan,” Nicholas Keegan barked, snapping me to the present as he jabbed the elevator call button.

Another man stood behind him, his expression much friendlier than Nicholas’s.

“Did you hear me?” he demanded.

“Yes,” I said dully, turning toward Noah’s office, grinding my teeth to hold in my tears.

“Close the door, Ryan,” Noah ordered once I walked into the room, finding him leaning against his desk, arms folded, his expression thunderous.

After complying, I stood silent, uncertain, uneasy, and heartsore.



Noah

Ryan stood in silence, unshed tears glistening in her gray eyes. Her pain only added to my fury. As livid as I was with Ingrid Warrington and everyone else, I was angry at Ryan, too. Had she not been in the workplace, she would’ve been protected from such virulence.

“Have a seat.” Hearing the coldness of my tone, I straightened from where I’d been leaning on the desk and

nodded to the sofa.

Once she sat, I walked to the same chair I'd sat on during her interviews and dropped in it. There was much I wanted to say, including I intended to ruin Ingrid Warrington, her husband, and any other asshole who'd played a role in today's travesty. More than that, however, *you're fired* hovered on my lips.

It didn't take a mind reader to know what an emotional toll the last few hours had taken on Ryan. Her vulnerability engaged all my protective instincts.

"Ryan."

A tear slid down her cheek.

"You've had an eventful first day in my employ," I said, wondering if I possessed the willpower to continue pretending her devastation didn't affect me. "We need to reevaluate your place in the company."

Another tear fell; she swiped it away with the back of her hand. "Don't," she said in a watery voice. "You can't let me go based on one day's performance. Besides, I signed a contract."

"The terms of which state you can be terminated should I see fit," I lied. That statement wasn't in *yet*. "There is a severance package," I added, another untruth.

She wanted five million to retire. I'd give her twenty. Buy her a house, a new car, a yearly wardrobe, pay for extravagant vacations. *Whatever*, just as long as she didn't have to suffer the grind of a career.

"I don't want a severance package," she snapped around snuffles. "I want my little office and a chance to prove myself in your company."

"Ryan—"

"You're on a deadline too," she pointed out, her chin wobbling. "You need me as much as I need you. My first day has been a major disappointment. I just want a do-over. I know I made a subpar impression today. Let me redeem myself and prove I'm not a whiny crybaby."

Of course, she wouldn't realize my actions were meant to protect her and not a *reaction* to the press conference.

“At least allow me to make the presentation at Amage, then if you're still unhappy, I will accept your severance package.”

I have no idea how the fuck she goaded me into doing uncharacteristic shit, but I nodded.

“Thank you,” she said bleakly. “This means so much to me.”

Instead of answering, I said, “you were unaware of the specifics of your parents' deaths.”

Her nostrils flared, and she drew in a sharp breath. “I want to talk to my sister, so she can deny everything that was said today and tell me it was just the product of viciousness. But deep down...” Her trailing voice allowed a sob to escape. “My father...I can't believe...no...my mother...” Whatever point she was trying to make wouldn't fully form.

I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't sit idly by and watch her fall to pieces, so I moved next to her and pulled her into my arms. She buried her face in the bridge between my neck and shoulder. Sobs tore through her, shaking her body.

I threaded my fingers through her hair and whispered words of comfort to her. At what point my solace turned into physical need, I'll never know. But suddenly our mouths fused together, and my tongue swept into her sweet recesses. The tip of my tongue stroked the roof of her mouth and the softness of her inner cheeks. Her coconut scent brought back memories I tried so hard to forget. Even as I lost myself in her smell, I couldn't deny the sense of familiarity rising in me at our frantic kisses.

Consciously, I might continue to deny the truth because of all the ramifications involved. Deep down, though, I knew Ryan was my lady in blue. My body wasn't deluding me as my brain and my cousin insisted upon doing.

She whimpered, and I pulled away, fighting for sanity. The sight of her kiss-plumped mouth and passion-dark eyes sent blood rushing to my cock. We were both panting. Just as I was wrestling my desire under control, she licked her lips and

tipped her head toward mine. It was the encouragement I needed to justify my actions.

I wanted her too fucking bad to continue to pretend otherwise. After pushing the coffee table away to give myself room, I slid to my knees, admiring her gorgeous legs.

My anger had momentarily stolen the memory of my first glimpse of her outfit. If I hadn't been wearing the coat to my suit, my hard-on would've been on display.

Kissing the warm skin on her thigh, I placed my hands on her knees and parted her legs. Considering the designer clothes she wore, her serviceable cotton panties shocked me, but the scent of her arousal watered my mouth.

Too impatient to bare her, I pushed the seat of her underwear aside. Her glistening pussy lips invited me to taste. Obliging, I swiped my tongue along her seam.

“Fucking delicious,” I growled.

She trembled.

Wanting no hindrance, I ripped her panties away and used my shoulders to widen her thighs. The closely cropped mat of hair on her mound gave way to clean shaven pussy lips.

Resting her bare feet on the edge of the sofa, she used her fingers to open herself and reveal her swollen clit. “Lick me off.”

“Gladly,” I responded, sliding two fingers inside of her and caressing her slick heat while I lapped her pussy. Her breathy sighs turned into arousing moans.

She lifted her hips and rocked against my tongue, threading her fingers through my hair. The faster I licked her and finger fucked her, the quicker she moved and the louder her cries became.

Instead of allowing me to oblige her demand, she lowered her legs and pulled away from my mouth. Before I could question her, she leaned down and brought her lips to mine, not protesting when I took control. My balls throbbed at the

knowledge that she was tasting her pussy juice as she kissed me.

Her hand caressed my jaw, her gentle touch firing my blood.

“Stand up,” she said against my lips.

Hating to stop kissing her, I did as she asked, even though I wanted to fuck her so badly, my cock was hurting. She slid to her knees and began unbuckling my belt. I pushed her hands aside and finished the job, stopping only when she had full access to my member.

“Oh my,” she whispered, lifting an astonished gaze to me.

I smirked at her, wrapped a hand around my cock base, and guided it to her lips.

She tongued my crown.

“Fuck,” I said on a strangled groan.

At my words, she deep throated me. The sensation stole my reasoning. She sucked me with enthusiasm, on her knees, and focused on my pleasure. I gripped her hair and pumped into her mouth. She adapted to my tempo, and I growled at her hard, fast draws.

Somehow, I grunted, “I’m about to come.”

Instead of retreating, my words sent her into a frenzy, and I blew my load into her mouth. She swallowed my cum and didn’t stop until my body spasmed from the sensation in my cock head and I pulled out of her mouth.

Breathing heavily, she settled back on her haunches.

Wishing for a fucking bed, I bent and scooped her into my arms and placed her on the couch. This time when I kissed her, there was no despair I was trying to comfort. It was only us, *her*, and the fact she’d driven me fucking mad. She was a sweet, generous lover that I wanted to devour.

The moment I sat next to her, I leaned over and ravished her mouth before trailing kisses down her neck. Impatient, I grabbed each side of her dress’ neckline and yanked. The sound of the fabric ripping unleashed primal need in me.

Ryan had a different reaction. “No!” she cried, sitting up and frantically inspecting the material. “A button is gone too.”

“It isn’t the end of the world, sweetheart.”

Ignoring my attempt to kiss her again, she slid to the floor and crawled on her hands and knees. “I can’t find the button and...”

Her sobs made the rest of her words nonsensical.

I went around the table and blocked her desperate search. Instead of tucking away my hard, exposed cock, I scooped her up again and returned to the couch with her.

“Take deep breaths, Ryan,” I ordered her, “and repeat what you said.”

“Somehow, the bracelet that was loaned to me is broken.” Her voice wobbled. “Megan told me how much it cost.”

I still wasn’t making the connection. “And?”

“Thirty-five hundred dollars is a lot of money. I’m going to have to use the last of my savings just to make rent, even if I last here a full month. And now...now...the dress...the only bright spot in today has been here in your office. Even that doesn’t matter now. I wish I’d never gotten out of bed. Or I could rewind the clock. It doesn’t matter if that meant we wouldn’t make love. At least I wouldn’t face the prospect of homelessness.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Ryan?” I demanded, knowing I was missing a crucial piece of information and her reason for rambling.

“The dress, Noah. The dress and the bracelet. I couldn’t afford the pretty lingerie.”

That explained the cotton panties, although she still wasn’t making any sense. My orders to Megan had been to allow Ryan to choose whatever clothes, jewelry, and shoes she wanted. Advising Ryan on the best colors for TV slipped my mind. Purchasing clothes seemed easier than sending Ryan home to change. While Reid had been with Ryan in her office, I’d given Megan my directive.

Ryan leaned her head against my shoulder. She moved, her ass brushing against my cock. When she did it again, I realized she was trying to make herself comfortable. She was torturing me, however.

Just as before, the mood between us shifted. Maybe she just needed succor from her turmoil. She slid her hot pussy down my cock. Our groans melded as I buried myself to the hilt inside of her.

My hands gripped her waist as she rode me, tightening her pussy walls with each downstroke. She didn't protest when I turned our bodies and guided her back, leaning her head against the arm of the sofa and taking control.

I pumped into her, growling in approval each time she met my thrusts with one of her own. Although I still wanted to lick her pussy for hours, nothing would ever compare to being inside her. Slipping my hand between us, I fingered her clit until she lost all reasoning and her eyes rolled back in her head. Her pussy juice drenched my cock, and I plunged into her, hard and deep. My body shuddered as my cum exploded into her in an endless fountain. Empty, I collapsed on top of her, long enough to catch my breath, not wanting to rest my weight on her for too long.

Pulling out of her, I sat next to her, admiring the view her spread legs offered of her well-fucked pussy, cum dripping from her. Too tempting to resist, I leaned over and swiped my tongue over her clit.

She moaned.

Spreading her lips with my fingers, I sucked her nub until she went into a frenzy, then I relented and blew on her slick flesh. She whimpered and trembled, gasping as I licked her, unable to get enough of her taste, not stopping until she screamed my name and orgasmed.

Once my nuts stopped tingling and my pleasurable overload receded, I carefully tucked my member back into its confines and adjusted my clothing. Taking a cue from me, Ryan got to her feet.

“I need a bathroom,” she said softly.

“It’s there.” I pointed to the lone door on the opposite side of my office. “It has a shower as well.”

Drawing in a deep breath, she closed her eyes a moment before looking at me again. “I...” She glanced down at her dress again. “A shower would be nice. My clothes are in Megan’s office, and I wouldn’t want to damage this dress further with, er, stains.” Color swept into her cheeks, but a small smile broke through her sadness. “Although I doubt my outfit would be the subject of any type of political inquiry.”

I grinned, amused. “You’re safe. Politics isn’t my realm.”

She pursed her lips.

“I have clean T-shirts and sweats you can borrow. Or I can call security for a key to Megan’s office so you can get your things.”

“No,” she said. “Absolutely not.”

Her vehemence surprised me.

“In that case, you’ll find whatever you need in the drawers and closet in the bathroom.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Alone, I shoved my hands in my trouser pockets and paced.

A picture formed in my head, and I suspected the basis of Ryan’s meltdown over a fucking dress.

The sound of the shower fired my imagination. Ryan peeling away her dress and baring her beautiful, golden skin. Her flush of desire deepening from the warm water.

Blood filled my cock again, but I refused to join her in the shower. Fucking her wouldn’t solve the storm brewing.

I thought Megan knew I was off-limits, stayed away from Nicholas in fear of Tina’s wrath, and kept herself busy with my cousin. If nothing else, I believed she valued her job after my ultimatum.

Apparently, I was mistaken on all accounts.

Ryan didn't take long to clean herself up. She'd rolled the legs of my sweats up so many times, a wad of material circled her ankles. My T-shirt hung midway down her thighs. She'd twisted her hair into a messy bun, while she'd washed away most of her makeup.

"I have to go to my office to get my purse," she said, clutching the dress to her. "Luckily, I remembered to bring the key with me and not leave it in the pocket of my skirt."

"Smart move," I told her.

She lowered her lashes and thought for a moment before searching my face. "What now?"

Yes, what? First, I needed to talk to her sister. Reid might be a lying sonofabitch, but Ryan's sister would tell me the truth if she was Concerned Sister.

In all fairness, I should've just asked Ryan about that night. I should've told her the truth about my knowledge of her parents' deaths. I withheld the former because of her anticipated reaction.

Beyond that was my hard and fast no fraternizing rule. Of course, I overlooked the shenanigans of the trifling trio.

Yet, I couldn't see myself agreeing to Ryan continuing to work if we were in a relationship. Today's events only reinforced that idea.

"We pretend no carnal knowledge of each other, Ms. Hagen."

She swallowed. "Right."

"Will you be able to do that?"

"I'm going home and drown myself in wine," she replied. "When I wake up tomorrow, I will pretend today never existed. None of it," she added with vehemence.

I doubted that, but changed the subject. "Explain to me about the bracelet and the dress."

"I'll take up the matter with Megan. Nothing to concern yourself with, Mr. Keegan."

“I am your boss; therefore it *is* my concern.”

Shifting from foot to foot, she stared at me, debating my sincerity. Finally, she nodded. “Megan told me about the terms of wearing the clothes. They were on loan to me and anything that I damaged would come out of my paycheck.”

“I see.”

“If it weren’t for Tina, I wouldn’t have been able to wear the jewelry. I’m sorry she insisted and am glad Megan refused to allow Celine to show me the panties and bras she’d brought.”

“I see.” Did I fucking ever. “Tina was there when Megan told you the terms?”

“Yes.” She shifted. In her bare feet, she was much shorter than me. “Anything else?”

“No.” Turning away from her to keep from taking her into my arms, I walked to the door and opened it. “Have a good evening.”

Once she picked up her shoes, she breezed past me. “You, too,” she threw over her shoulder, and sailed away, leaving me staring in the spot she’d just stood.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ryan

I was a lover of trivia, fascinating bits of history, and offbeat, quirky facts. Somewhere, I'd read about the worse decade for humans to be alive, though that time extended longer than ten years. I'd always counted myself lucky to be born in a world of advancements. Yet, today counted as the single worst day of my life. It exceeded the days of my parents' deaths and their double funeral. It was a hodge podge of emotions, tumult, humiliation, shock, and despair.

I wanted a do-over. I wanted a giant cosmic eraser to obliterate this particular Monday from the annals of my life. If I thought the shit flushed down the drain after leaving Noah's office, I couldn't have been more wrong.

Opening my office door, laying the dress over the back of my chair, setting the pumps on my desk, and gathering my things went deceptively smooth. Likewise, walking out and locking up. After going to the deserted garage in my bare feet, however, I discovered the depth of the day's fuckery.

Sandy wouldn't start. The tow truck arrived over an hour later. An Uber took another thirty minutes. I'd considered calling Noah, but our sex crossed a line and we both knew it. He wanted to pretend it never happen, so turning to him for help because of car problems went beyond the scope of boss/employee. I hope I hadn't made a mistake by explaining the damaged clothing.

On the ride home, I emailed Megan about the dress, leaving out Noah's reassurances. There was no way I could explain such to her. Her reply was immediate and unsympathetic. My first three paychecks were in jeopardy. As I got out of the Uber and it drove off, my keys and cellphone dropped onto the street. Sighing, I picked both up. After stuffing my cellphone back into my purse, I fastened it closed and headed into my building.

By the time I unlocked my door and walked into my apartment, I'd wanted nothing more than to collapse in exhaustion.

Instead, after setting my things against the wall just inside the door and flipping on the overhead light, I found my sister and Reid Keegan sixty-nining on the sofa I sometimes napped on. I screamed. In response, my sister lifted her head, allowing me to see Reid's mighty cock, glistening with her spit. At that moment, I hadn't known the identity of the owner of the appendage since Quinn's ass still covered his face.

I'd whirled around, too tired to summon maternal/older sister outrage.

"Reid was just about to come, Ryan," Quinn had slurred. "Can you leave so I can get him off?"

And here I was, still cavorting in the fucking sewer. I faced them again, only to see her jerk against his mouth and shudder as she screamed. Because, yeah, why not? Why not cap off my fucked-up day by seeing my little sister have an orgasm?

He wrapped an arm around her waist and plopped her next to him, not embarrassed or bothered by my presence. "Are you wearing Noah's clothes?" he asked as he sat up a moment later and squinted at me from head to toe. "Where are your shoes?"

"Where are your clothes?" I retorted, folding my arms as Quinn straightened into a sitting position.

They both glanced around, then looked at each other and erupted into laughter.

"Who knows?" Quinn chortled, which made Reid laugh harder.

"Can you find them and get dressed?" I asked, sweet as pie, even though I was on the verge of losing it. "Then do me the favor of getting out of my apartment."

"I'm not the only one getting fucked tonight," Quinn said with a wide smile.

I tried to fix my mouth to say nothing happened, but I couldn't allow the lie to pass my lips. Something had

happened. A lot. Too much. I'd fantasized about kissing Noah and sleeping with him, but I'd always categorized him somewhere between staid and selfish.

He wasn't either. His prowess was so far on the other end of the spectrum that my assumptions were almost laughable. He was generous and passionate and *dirty*. His savage pursuit of my pleasure swept through me like an out-of-control fire.

Even now, hours later, I could not pinpoint the moment his tender comfort had flared into undeniable desire. I'd needed solace. I'd wanted to forget and lose myself in his arms. His skill, or lack thereof, hadn't even entered my mind.

When he'd ripped that stupid dress, a moment of clarity had almost ruined everything. But then he'd taken me into his arms again and I'd felt what I'd only known in my dreams with a conjured ball guest—safety and understanding.

Now, though, I had to box tonight's lovemaking with Noah and tuck it away, never to unwrap it again.

So instead of confirming or denying Quinn's statement, I remained silent.

Unashamed in his nudity, Reid got to his feet and walked to my small kitchen island, where he grabbed a bottle of alcohol and swigged.

"You're drinking it all," Quinn pouted, standing, and stumbling toward him. She grabbed the bottle and swilled from it. After handing him the bottle, she made a face at me. "What are you doing here, Ryan?"

"I live here," I snarled. "What the fuck are *you* doing here sucking dick on my couch? I thought you lost my door key."

"It's called lock-picking," she said with biting sarcasm as Reid walked into my kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "You have heard of it before, haven't you?"

"You picked my lock?" I asked in disbelief, then shook my head. "No. You couldn't have. My key worked fine. If you'd broken in, you would've damaged the tumbler and—"

“You can pick a lock without breaking it if you know what you’re doing,” she told me.

Fuck, I didn’t have the wherewithal for this. “Why didn’t you go to Reid’s place?” I demanded.

Reid returned to his spot next to Quinn, holding a container of strawberries. “Can’t,” he answered, chomping into one. “Megan’s there.”

Hurt flashed across Quinn’s face, but she covered it quickly and plucked her own strawberry. “That’s what you get for giving out house keys,” she said breezily.

“She caught me in a weak moment,” Reid said without apology. “Good guess, by the way.”

“You’re such a fucking liar,” Quinn told him, sobering up by the minute.

“I can’t change your opinion, sweetheart,” Reid said.

“No. Fuck you. You can’t change the truth,” she said coldly. “You could’ve told me at any point tonight that she still had access to your apartment.”

At those words, it dawned on Reid he’d fucked up, but he was a Keegan and recovered fast. “You didn’t ask.”

“I shouldn’t have to ask. That’s why I stopped talking to you. Fuck me behind closed doors but give her your keys and your regard.”

“That isn’t true, Quinn, and you know it. You were on my arm often.”

“Go to hell.”

Annoyance flashed across his face. “You changed the fucking rules, Quinn. One day we agreed we were in it for fun and the next day you wanted to know my every fucking move. It took me a moment to catch up. Sue me. By the time I realized how much I cared about you and how much I *enjoyed* being accountable to you, you’d fucking found out about Megan.”

“Who’s still in your life.”

“Probably not after tonight,” he said. “She wanted me home to talk about what she witnessed between the two of us at the office.”

“Home?” Quinn blared. “Wait a fucking minute. She lives with you?”

“Quinn—”

I couldn’t watch the pain on Quinn’s face. The more she figured out, the more it hurt her, so I put two fingers in my mouth and whistled. The shrill noise startled them into silence.

“Impressive,” Reid said with a smile, then chomped into another strawberry like a hungry baby dinosaur.

“Ryan sometimes had to do that to get our attention. Logan and I,” Quinn clarified. “Daddy taught her that.” She pressed her lips together and glanced away.

“Quinn—”

Swiping at a tear, she shook her head. “No, Ryan. Don’t. There’s nothing you can say. If you want us to work through our emotions together, I’m here. But there’s no comfort you can offer me or I’m willing to accept until you acknowledge your own pain.”

“Baby, if that happens, I might fall apart,” I admitted. “The only thing that has kept me strong and kept me on my feet is knowing I had to set a good example for you and Logan and provide for you two in whatever way you needed.”

Quinn’s disapproving look cut through me.

“Have you spoken to Armani?”

I shook my head. “Have you?”

“Not yet. I’m visiting her first thing in the morning.” The words sounded ominous.

“Do you need me to come with you?” I had long ago conditioned myself to be Quinn’s support whenever and however she needed.

She gave me a dark look. “Do you *want* to come with me?” she challenged. “The only thing I need you to do is to be

happy. Do something for yourself. Whether it is grieving or throwing shit or running fucking naked in Times Square. If it is discovering the truth and agreeing with me that Daddy was a selfish, murderous motherfucker. Or if you hate what he did or understand his reasons. *Whatever*, Ryan, as long as you do you.”

“Quinn—”

“No, fuck *Quinn*. She’s not listening. *I’m* not listening. I’m not listening to a fucking coward.”

“Get out.” The words didn’t come out angry or loud. They were colder than I’d ever been to my sister. Whether she spoke the truth didn’t matter. I’d had enough. “If you can’t recognize that I’ve tried to do my best by you, then fuck you. I don’t ever have to talk to you again. Maybe I haven’t always made the right choices in how I handle situations or what I say to you, but my goal has always been to see that you’re happy and safe and loved.”

“Stay in your feelings, big sister. Easier than opening your eyes and admitting the truth.”

“What fucking truth?” I yelled. “I live in truth.”

“No, you live in perfection. It’s too much for you to admit you fucked Noah. You almost had an apoplectic fit thinking you’d had a one-night stand.”

“What does that have to do with anything? Fuck all,” I fumed. “It isn’t even applicable since it didn’t happen. If it had? I’d find a fucking way to live with myself. Don’t you think it would be a little hypocritical of me to celebrate sleeping with a stranger when I’ve asked you to consider what you do?”

Quinn covered her face and screamed.

It was so loud and sudden that both Reid and I jumped. Recovering quickly, he tried to take her in to his arms, but she wasn’t having it. She shoved him away.

“I’m done,” she snarled, stomping forward and gazing wildly around. She bent next to the sofa. When she stood

again, she had her panties in her hand. “For someone so smart, you’re the stupidest chick I’ve ever met, Ryan.”

Glaring at me, she put her thong on. Reid made his way to her, gathering clothing as he did so. He held out her bra, and she snatched it from him.

“Whether cobwebs grow from your pussy, or you attach an open for business sign to it, has no fucking bearing on *me*,” Quinn growled. “What the fuck is wrong with you? I’m a grown fucking woman. I’ve said this before so let me reiterate: my pitching pussy has nothing to do with you. I enjoy fucking. Again, nothing to do with you. No moral shortcomings. No failing Mama. It’s who I am.” She pulled on her jeans. “You want to know how you are failing me? By not being a fucking friend to me. By not engaging in girl talk and sharing secrets. You inevitably turn into a preachy bitch. Well, guess what, Ryan? I’m sick of it.”

She finished dressing at the same time as Reid. Once she put on her shoes and snatched her purse from the coffee table, I opened the door. When I walked into my place, closed the door, and flipped on the light, I’d been met with Quinn and Reid, and I’d froze. Since then, I hadn’t moved, which served me well.

Without looking at me, Quinn stalked out of my apartment. Reid paused. He smelled of sex and alcohol. More than anything, though, he was playing with my sister’s emotions. I didn’t want to hear anything he had to say.

“Go—”

“She has a lot on her mind, Ryan,” he interrupted. “There are things—” He hesitated. “She has just found out about one of my relationships.”

“Yeah. Megan. Your live-in girlfriend.”

“It isn’t what you think.”

“It’s exactly what I think, asshole.”

He glanced away, then met my gaze. “I can’t change your mind. This isn’t about Megan, but someone in my life Quinn

hadn't connected to me before. It has changed a lot between us. She doesn't want you to be disappointed in her."

"Earlier, she didn't give a fuck how I feel about her."

"Going on the offensive is her defense. She's using what's at her disposal to feed her fury with you before the opposite happens."

"What do you mean? Ingrid Warrington's words stirred Quinn's anger toward me."

"That woman's revelations devastated Quinn," Reid agreed. "But she's also scared of our secret and concerned about you and your reaction."

"Talking in riddles isn't helping."

He glanced into the hallway. "I'm not the person you think I am."

"Wouldn't that affect Quinn?"

"It affects all of us," he said cryptically. "I've lied to you, to my cousins, to Megan." He gave me a pained look. "Noah and I don't see eye-to-eye on a lot of matters. He sees me as an irresponsible hedonist. I am. And I paid for it by losing Quinn. I was careless with her feelings. You'll never know how much I regret that. But it was my doing. If I tell the truth, reveal the secret me, it will be at Noah's expense. Nicholas will force his brother to adhere to the rules Noah set, not caring that it might be Noah's only chance at..." His voice trailed off and he thought for a moment. "Noah's only chance at happiness."

His explanation bewildered me even more. "How do I fit into this? How does my sister?"

"I inadvertently involved her."

"What is it, Reid? Is she in danger? Are you? What can I do to help? If she's in trouble, tell me and I'll figure out a way to fix it."

He smiled at me. "You are a wonderful sister. Quinn knows how lucky she is to have you. She isn't in any danger, Ryan. I promise. But her secret might be a betrayal to you."

“What does it have to do with?”

“An event toward the end of our relationship. She’s just recently connected the dots.”

“Ryan?” Quinn walked into view and held out my driver’s license and debit card. “An Uber driver approached me while I was on the stoop waiting for Reid. At first, he thought I was you and handed me your stuff, until I told him I was your sister. Where’s Sandy?”

“She wouldn’t start,” I said tiredly. “I had to call a tow truck, then wait for an Uber.” I took my ID and card from her, hoping the fact they’d been returned before I’d missed them was a good sign.

“Where the fuck was Noah?” Quinn demanded as Reid said, “Does Noah know?”

“I don’t know where he was, Quinn. No, Reid, he doesn’t. He is my boss. Period.”

Quinn nodded. “Okay, baby. I understand. He’s a jackass, and that’s what he told you after he screwed you.”

“He has a strict no fraternization rule,” I said sharply. “Either I pretend our lovemaking...sex—” My heart sank because of the extent I had to reduce my encounter with Noah. “Pre-pretend our fucking didn’t happen or find another job. As it is, he almost fired me because of what happened at the press conference.”

“Fuck,” Reid said with a frustrated sigh.

“He’s a fucking asshole. He doesn’t fucking deserve you.”

“Quinn, no. He isn’t. It is just his misguided way of trying to protect me. I convinced him to keep me on until I make the presentation at Amage. I’m hoping if I do well, he’ll change his mind.”

Quinn walked into my apartment and reached for me, but I shoved her hands away.

“Don’t fucking touch me. You haven’t washed your fucking hands, miscreant.”

She broke into laughter, but the sound lacked her usual merriment. “I love you, Ryan,” she said after a moment. “I’m so sorry I was such an unfeeling bitch a few minutes ago. Even before I found out about your car, I knew your day was fucked up. I didn’t help matters at all.”

“It’s okay, Quinn,” I assured her. “I’m used to your bitchiness, anyway. But I owe you an apology, too. For acting so self-righteous and judgmental. I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t know where I’d be without you,” she said quietly. “Truly. Even when I’m experimenting with shit I should stay away from, I always hear your voice in my head, warning me and saying how much you love me and just believing in me.”

Tears filled my eyes, but I did my best to blink them away.

“Now, tell me. Did Noah lay good pipe? Does he have a good pipe?”

Her questions made Reid laugh, while heat rushed to my cheeks and I lowered my lashes, embarrassed. I nodded. “From what I observed, Keegan men are blessed with size.”

Reid smirked.

Not long after, he ushered my sister away. Alone, I trudged to my room, too exhausted to do anything except crawl into bed and fall asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Noah

Although I wasn't asleep, I didn't appreciate anyone ringing my bell at almost one in the morning. I knew it was a family member; they were the only ones with the access code to my private elevator. My last line of defense was the hallway between it and my entrance door. That was the reason the elevator didn't open directly into my penthouse. If I didn't want to be disturbed, I didn't allow them over the sill of my door.

A glance at my surveillance app, showed a lone visitor. When I opened my door, however, I found not one person, but two in the form of my cousin and Ryan's sister. Since I wanted to talk to them, I allowed them to enter and led them to my library, where Reid poured drinks for himself and Quinn Hagen, belatedly asking if I'd like one.

"Thoughtful of you to offer," I said with a glare.

He chuckled. After handing Quinn her drink, he poured mine and then sat next to her. We sipped in silence for a couple of minutes.

"What are you doing here in the middle of the fucking night?"

Reid shrugged.

Narrowing her eyes, Quinn swallowed more scotch, and then answered. "Why the fuck do people go to a person's house in the middle of the fucking night?"

Was this the same sobbing woman from earlier? "You tell me," I snapped. Outside of family, Ryan was the only other person so unimpressed by me to talk to me as if I were human too.

"We were in the neighborhood," she said sweetly, "and decided this was the perfect time to visit."

“I’m busy, so tell me what you need. I’ll decide if I’m in a benevolent mood, then put you out.”

“Must be an awful existence to know you’re only sought for what you can do for people,” she shot back.

“Quinn,” Reid admonished.

“If that bitch wasn’t at your place, we wouldn’t have had to come here.” Quinn glared between us, then decided I made a better target. “You’re an asshole to treat my sister the way you did. She was stuck in a fucking garage, waiting for a tow truck, because she couldn’t even call you. You’ve fucked her now you’re throwing her to the wolves. Megan Buford especially. She’s going to tear Ryan apart.” She got to her feet and put her hands on her hips. “I’m warning you—” she pointed to me— “And you.” She jabbed her finger at Reid. “I’m dragging that bitch from the top floor of your building to the bottom and down Fifth Avenue if I can prove she sent Ingrid Warrington that information. I’m betting she did. She was texting and smiling at Ingrid. I saw Ingrid pick up her phone. You know what the fuck else I saw? Megan Buford lost every drop of fucking color when Ryan defended her. A guilty fucking bitch if I ever saw one.”

I stared at Quinn, unable to utter a sound, my mind reeling. I hadn’t been able to see Megan. The closed-circuit TV had been on the podium as had the cameras feeding the live broadcast.

“Quinn, that’s a loaded charge,” Reid said in an inscrutable tone.

Hurt flickered over her face but she folded her arms and lifted her chin. “Ryan *quit*, Reid.”

“Ryan did *what*?” I demanded.

“Oh, you didn’t know about that, huh?” Quinn retorted. “Ryan didn’t tell you. If Megan had done and said and threatened and humiliated me just a tenth of how she tortured Ryan, I would’ve pushed that bitch out the fucking window.”

Reid got to his feet and took her arm, but she shoved him away.

“Don’t fucking touch me. You’re defending her.”

“I didn’t defend her,” Reid fired back. “I simply said that’s a loaded charge. If she heard it and it isn’t true, you could be charged with defamation of character.”

Clamping her jaw, she sat down again and drained her glass.

Now that Reid had silenced her, I changed tactics. Quinn was pissed. Discussing Megan would descend into war. Likewise, requests for clarification on Ryan’s car not starting, and I’d never validate my theory.

“You’re Concerned Sister,” I said flatly.

She squinted at me, but otherwise her expression didn’t change. “Of course, I am,” she answered. “I have every right to be a concerned sister.”

I searched for any clues that she was being purposely obtuse but saw none. “Not *a* concerned sister. You’re the one who has written to *Ask Ida*, confessing to lying about what happened at a ball between your sister and a stranger. Concerned Sister.” I turned a disdainful look to Reid. “And you’re the fucking asshole that lied to me about that night.”

“I didn’t lie,” Reid said calmly.

Ignoring his crock of shit, I looked at Quinn. Her expression hadn’t changed. “I don’t have time to seek the advice of a columnist over any matter. Whoever you’re referring to isn’t me.”

“It is,” I insisted, not yet ready to concede that maybe I’d gone fucking insane. Perhaps it truly was just as I’d concluded days ago. Ryan might have similarities to the girl in blue, but she wasn’t her and my fast attraction to Ryan, hell, my feelings for her, were an outlier. “You were Reid’s date at the party. There was a girl who came to my room to wait while her sister fucked D’Artagnan.”

“I was there,” she confirmed, “but Ryan wasn’t. I have no reason to lie to you,” she added with sympathy.

I studied her, wanting to see a chink, a flicker, anything that contrasted her calm words. There was nothing. She was a

stranger to me, so she had no reason to not tell me the truth.

“What reason would I have to lie to you?” she asked as if she’d read my mind. “Reid might be a cheating motherfucker who can’t keep his cock in his pants even if I paid him to do so, but what reason would he have to not tell you the truth?”

She ignored Reid’s glare.

“Stop being an immature fucking brat, Quinn,” Reid growled. “I’ve apologized to you. What more can I do?”

“Your apologies aren’t worth the breath used to say them. Megan still has a key to your place. Excuse me. She *lives* with you. Besides, you work with that treacherous bitch. I wouldn’t trust you, even if you changed your locks and threw her the fuck out.”

“Quinn—”

“As much as I’m enjoying this quarrel, what are you doing here, Reid?” My voice sounded the same, but inside my emotions were jumbled.

“Quinn and Ryan got into an argument and her brother is having a party at the apartment she shares with him. Megan is lying in wait at home...” He glanced at Quinn, swallowing at the bitter anger on her face. “At my place. Megan’s at my place, so Quinn and I came here to crash.”

“I beg your pardon?” It had been years since Reid and I were close. In all my adult life, he’d never crashed at my place and vice versa. No was on the tip of my tongue, but he looked so fucking miserable casting covert glances at Quinn. “Fine,” I grumbled.

Quinn’s expression remained stony.

“I will look into your allegations about Miss Buford, Quinn,” I said.

“She hurt Ryan,” Quinn said again. “And so did you.”

“My private life is my business,” I said with cold finality.

“Fuck you. Your private life is my fucking business when my sister is involved. Since she got the job in your lousy

company, she's been on cloud nine. After everything she endured today, in front of the world, she had to convince you to keep her on, hoping you'll change your mind. We both know you won't."

"Not for the reasons you believe," I said calmly.

"She thinks you're trying to protect her."

"Perhaps I am." Ryan's understanding of my motives surprised me. "I am going to give her a severance package."

"She doesn't want your money," Quinn said.

"She wants to have a bank account valued at five million dollars in the next ten years. I intend to deposit twenty the day I let her go."

Quinn stared at me. For a moment, I thought I'd shocked her into speechlessness.

"You're trying to buy her," she charged. "That isn't what she wants or needs."

"Everyone needs money," I said with an indulgent smile. "Your sister is no different."

"Why would you do that to her?"

"I'm not doing anything other than what's offered in the contract."

"You're a liar," she said without flinching. "Ryan wouldn't sign anything that offered her a severance package for that much money when she didn't do a fucking day's work. That isn't how she is. I am. If you're stupid enough to fling money around because you can, then I'm larcenous enough to take it. Ryan? She has a work ethic, and she takes pride in what she does. Maybe, if you were awarded a two hundred-million-dollar contract thanks to her efforts, she'd accept twenty percent. So, what the fuck did you do? Blindfold her so she'd sign her contract without reading it and then changed the terms? Tell me."

"You're acting like your sister doesn't have a brain," I said, refusing to admit her accuracy.

“Ryan is amazingly smart. Despite what we’ve been through, she still looks at the world in a certain way.” She nodded to a crystal vase with three-day-old roses and not enough water. “She’d say roses just past their bloom sit in gorgeous Baccarat, in need of water. She’d tell me to revive them with fresh water and an aspirin. She’d swear their smell was sweetest now, Mr. Keegan. She sees beauty. She makes the world beautiful because of her kindness and her ability to see what I don’t have time to search for. To me? I see half dead flowers that should be thrown the fuck out, in an overly expensive vase in need of a good washing. So, I think you pushed your weight around or fed her a fucking line that compelled her to sign your contract before she read it. She wanted her job, but at the core is how she sees *you*. How she trusts you.”

Whatever anger and outrage I had at Quinn’s words and attitude deserted me. She adored Ryan. I saw it on her face, and I heard it in her words. The anger she directed at me was because she was protecting her sister.

I also realized why Reid had come to my place with her instead of going to Nicholas. My brother wasn’t sentimental. He would’ve installed Quinn in a guest chamber, then spent the night drinking with Reid. Here, just knowing of my displeasure offered him the chance to remain in her presence. Besides, I’m sure she’d informed him she intended to read me the riot act, meaning more opportunity for him to interact with her.

“It’s been years since she’s had anyone to look after her. I’m not sure I can trust you to do it.”

“I assure you—”

“Save it,” she interrupted. “What she wants most of all is to prove her worth at KMG. You want to take that away from her.”

“I want to protect her,” I insisted. “My mother—”

“Is dead,” she inserted. “And I am so, so sorry for that. I truly am. But it isn’t Ryan’s fault. You do her a grave injustice by making her pay for your mother’s unfortunate death. And I

don't say that lightly. Because I know how that feels. If you want to do anything for Ryan, keep her on for the agreed upon six months. If you have to adhere to the rules in your company, then don't have a relationship with her until her contract is up. But she's going to be right there, under your nose, working closely with you. What better way to get to know her?" She shook her head. "Instead of chasing ghosts, some woman at some ball, appreciate who is right in front of you."

Reid glanced at Quinn, then looked at me. "As much as I wish I had the information about the girl from the ball, I don't, Noah. I don't know her identity. You think it was Ryan."

I nodded.

"What if it was?" Reid challenged. "Nicholas would see the entire Keegan empire collapse to avenge Duke. No one can remove you, but he could undermine your authority and ruin your credibility."

Facts I knew.

"Only a fucking idiot would do that," Quinn inserted.

Reid tried to make eye contact with her, but she refused to look at him. "What about Ryan?"

I narrowed my eyes at my cousin, though I understood his train of thought. Nicholas would take no prisoners.

"What the fuck about my sister?"

"He'd sabotage her career, too," Reid responded.

Quinn popped to her feet. "I need to pee. Where's the bathroom?"

"Turn left in the hallway. Third door on the right."

"Thanks, dude. I'm hungry too. Do you have anything to eat?"

"Whatever you want, I'll call my chef to prepare it."

"Chef?" She stared at me. "You're joking."

“Such a phenomenon requires a sense of humor, which Noah lacks.”

“Fuck off, Reid,” I ordered, not taking offense at his lighthearted words.

“I can find something for myself,” Quinn said after the rare moment between my cousin and me passed. “By the time your chef gets here, I will have expired from hunger.”

“Doubtful,” I said dryly. “Angelo lives on premises.”

“No fucking way,” she squeaked. “Are you serious?”

“Quite,” I assured her.

“You’re that wealthy?” she asked, her eyes wide with awe.

“I’m not sure what *that wealthy* is.”

Turning, she rushed to her purse. When she walked to where I sat, she lifted my hand and placed a stack of business cards in my palm. “I’m a makeup artist. One of the best. Pass those out to all your friends and demand they call me.”

I barked a laugh, setting her cards on an end table. “What are your rates?”

“Ryan suggested I charge fifty an hour since I have certification in master makeup artistry. I’ve worked at several salons over the years and completed the course when I was nineteen. However, I don’t think I should start my business at such a high rate. My sister disagrees.”

“So do I,” Reid growled.

Quinn ignored him. “I was thinking of setting my rate between twenty-five or thirty an hour.”

“You’re shortchanging yourself,” I told her. “Was your program any good?”

“It is rated among the top in the country. If not the world.”

“I don’t know much about the cost of a degree or certification in the industry,” I admitted. “If you’re still in debt and you’re as good as you claim, charge a higher rate.”

“Ryan helped me with tuition,” she admitted. “Twenty-four weeks, supplies, lab fees, and registration fees cost thousands. She wanted me to focus on my studies, so we agreed I wouldn’t get a job. After I graduated and found employment, I tried to repay her. She accepted a couple of payments, then told me not to worry about it. I think one of her current expenses is repaying the loan. I want to say how moochie and freeloading I am, but I’m so fucking grateful to Ryan. She told me she didn’t want me to go through the same hell as her by working and going to school. Fuck, I didn’t either.”

She was honest if nothing else.

She shifted her weight. “I’m going to piss on myself, dude, and then faint from hunger.”

“The kitchen’s at the end of the hallway,” I told her. “Eat whatever you find.”

“Thanks,” she threw over her shoulder, running out of the room.

Reid gazed toward the door, then looked at me. “I’d like to offer food for thought.”

“I’m listening.”

“Even if you terminated Ryan, Nicholas would ruin an affair with her. Your happiness is of no importance to him. Fuck, to no one. Why do you think Nate called you to serve as his witness at his ill-fated civil ceremony?”

“Money matters to Nicholas, Reid. Destroying the company to fuck me over isn’t his MO. His smear campaign would leave the fate of Keegan Enterprises out of my hands. He knows me well enough. I’d step down to save the company.”

“The end wouldn’t be far behind. Uncle Shawn named you his successor for a reason. It takes empathy and skill to serve as an effective leader, Noah. Even your fucked-up ideas are altruistic. Misguided. Skirting rules and regulations. But meant to protect. You’re the company.” His fierceness surprised me. “If you leave, it’ll limp along until it crumbles.”

I nodded. “I could never walk away. It would be a slap in the face to my mother’s legacy.”

Reid glared at me, and I stiffened. I'd allow him to join my brothers' castigation and then throw him the fuck out.

"Aunt Réjane would be so fucking proud of you." He stared at the spot Quinn had sat. "Ryan's mother was born in New Orleans."

"I know."

"If I follow Quinn's logic, and she's a brilliant woman, or believe her superstitions, Aunt Réjane isn't at peace while you're so miserable. Rosalie is spoiled. Remy wants to save the world. Nathaniel rejects brain activity and Nick is an unfeeling dick."

"Birds of a feather..." Trailing off and aware of how close Nick and Reid were, I allowed the insinuation to hang in the air.

Scowling, he flipped me off. At my shrug, he huffed before continuing. "Parents aren't supposed to have favorites, but you were your mother's. It isn't your fault. You were a child. In her quest to shield you from Uncle Shawn's moods and Nick's tantrums, you became priority number one. Her loss left a void in your life you've never filled. Your guilt has almost destroyed you. Do you believe Aunt Réjane would want that for you? What if Quinn is right? Your mother must be heartbroken that you can't move past her death."

"I'm not superstitious."

"Fine, Noah." Reid sighed. "One last thing."

"Save it. I'm done with the conversation."

"Tough. I'm not, asshole," Reid snapped. "Fuck Nicholas and anyone else who has a problem with how Aunt Réjane felt about you. That's a them problem."

"Quinn?" I asked. "A them problem?" I added at his confusion. "A 'you' problem?"

"Ryan, too?"

I nodded. "If Ryan wins the Amage contract, Nicholas won't give a fuck what I do with her. He will look at the

money.” The certainty in my tone rang hollow in my gut after the scene in my office.

“True, but the expiration of her contract won’t be far behind.”

“I’ll extend her employment. If she wins the fucking contract, it’s only fair she see the campaign through.”

“What do you mean, Noah? She’s off-limits to you now? You’re only interested in fucking her? You’ll accept her career? You’re aware she wants children? What?”

“Who made you the curator of my fucking conscience? I don’t have an answer for any of your questions, Reid. None of which are your—” *Business* died on my lips. Other than Graham Morgan, I had no sounding board. My cousin was an unlikely candidate, but I appreciated his concern. “What I was about to say is unworthy of the regard you’ve shown me. Thank you for the conversation. I have a lot to think about. Right now, I don’t know what I want from Ryan.” Her. It was as simple and as complicated as that.

“Don’t let her be the one who got away. I’ll regret fucking up what I had with Quinn for the rest of my life.”

“She’s with you tonight. There must be some hope.”

Before he responded, Quinn returned. We lapsed into a momentary silence, until a question rose in my head.

“What happened to Ryan’s car?” I asked.

“Sandy is old,” Quinn answered. “She was old when Ryan bought her seven and a half years ago.”

“She named her car?” I asked, amused.

“Yeah. She doesn’t want to get rid of Sandy because it was the last thing Mama and Daddy helped her with. She doesn’t have the money for repairs, anyway.”

“She could get a driver,” I said.

Quinn glared at me. “How?”

“That came out wrong,” I amended. “I could send a driver for her.”

“Didn’t you hear—”

“Ryan is eligible for a driver as a KMG executive,” Reid inserted smoothly.

“No shit?” Quinn said, excitement lighting her face.

Reid nodded. “Yes. Truly.”

She pulled out her cellphone. A moment later, Ryan’s sleepy voice answered.

“What’s the matter, baby?” she said groggily. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Quinn chortled. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“About?”

“Do I need to have a particular subject, Ry? Maybe I just wanted to shoot the shit.”

“And maybe I need to kick your ass. It’s after two in the morning. I have to work in the morning.” She groaned. “Fuck, thanks to Sandy I’ll need to leave even earlier. Bye, Quinn. I want to go back to sleep.”

“No, wait!” Quinn whined. “Please don’t hang up. I’m lonesome.”

I glared at Quinn, but she put her finger to her lip, her eyes alight with mischief. For some reason, I followed her direction.

“You’re a fucking chameleon. When I walked into my apartment, you were slurring. Drunk as shit.” She paused. “Or high.”

“I wasn’t high,” Quinn said.

“You were drunk,” Ryan insisted, taking her sister at her word, and moving on. “Now, you sound as sober as a church mouse.”

“Clichés are awfully basic,” Quinn said.

“Goodnight, Quinn.”

“Bullshit will sober you,” Quinn said hastily.

“There was a lot of it flung your way, baby. I’m sorry I caught you in the crosshair of my poor decision. I thought Ingrid Warrington was reasonable, but Noah was so right. She was so unfair to him. She didn’t give him a chance to defend himself.”

“Her article didn’t exactly lie. Look how he treated you during your first interview. What did you call him? A savage suit? More than once, you’ve said he was an asshole.”

I lifted my brow at Quinn, wondering at her endgame in guiding Ryan to incriminate herself by revealing her genuine feelings about me.

“He has his moments,” Ryan admitted.

To me, she sounded a moment away from dozing off, meaning she supplied answers half-asleep.

“But who doesn’t? We’re all assholes at some point. Noah is no different. Even if he was the worst motherfucker alive—which he isn’t—Ingrid Warrington sensationalized her story for maximum effect. Not for fairness or accuracy. I wanted to appeal to her reasonableness. From the moment I walked onto the podium, though, I fucked up.”

“You did a wonderful job, Ryan,” Quinn said. “Once you tore up Megan Buford’s stupid words and said what *you* felt.”

“I’ve been around vicious women before, but no one could touch her, Quinn. She criticized everything about me. I lost my mojo, and I don’t know if I’ve gotten it back. It didn’t help even the fucking line manager at lunch treated me with such disdain. Megan told him I worked with Noah, and he changed his attitude immediately. She didn’t tell him because she was on my side. She enjoyed seeing him squirm. The woman is ruthless. However...”

“However?” Quinn prompted at my nod.

“She knew what I was up against. The way she drilled me to prepare me for the press...even if she wanted to break me, not help me.”

“She did. Almost. You quit.”

“Yeah,” she said sleepily. “I’m not too sure if I shouldn’t have followed through.”

“Why? And you didn’t have to listen to Reid. Noah’s a grown-ass man. It wasn’t up to you to be the poster girl for his refreshed outlook on the workplace.”

“Reid was right. They would’ve eaten Noah alive if they announced I’d quit on my first day. No one would’ve bothered to investigate the actual reasons. That the other three women with positions commiserate to men ran me off.”

“Ah, I assume you’re including the secretary?”

“Yes. His personal assistant. Mrs. Mikes is much more subtle in her hostility toward me. Now, goodnight. My eyes keep drooping. I’m going to fall asleep on your ass at any moment.”

“Too bad. Your answers are brutally honest because you’re so fucking tired.”

“Quinn—”

“You’re much better than me,” Quinn said, ignoring Ryan. “The way you praised those three heifers.”

“I almost choked when I spoke about Megan, but every word was true. She is smart, determined, and authoritative. No matter my personal feelings, she earned her fucking place in that company. Fair is fair.”

“Fairness is overrated,” Quinn said flatly. “Don’t give a bitch her flowers after she’s worked to destroy *you*. Fuck her.”

“Would you feel that way if Megan were a Matthew and treated me the same way?”

“I’m not interested in your feminism, Ryan. If Megan was a Matthew, then he’d be a bitch-ass motherfucker. Full stop. I don’t give a fuck if there’s a pussy or a prick between your legs. A spade’s a fucking spade.”

“Nicholas Keegan is a bitch-ass motherfucker,” Ryan admitted around another yawn. “And it doesn’t matter how Tina feels about Megan, she banded with her.”

“Fuck her, too,” Quinn dismissed. “Nepotism has her where she is.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. Seriously, Noah doesn’t suffer fools. He is brilliant. He wouldn’t have anyone in his company if they didn’t know their shit.”

“You’ve gotten dick from him and he’s suddenly everything and a piece of toast.”

“It’s everything and a slice of bread,” Ryan said with exasperation.

“Toast is bread, dummy.”

“I’m falling asleep, Quinn. Goodnight.”

The sisters fell silent, but the line remained open. My mind was whirling at Ryan’s revelations. I looked at Reid, curious about what he’d said to change her mind. Her ordeal infuriated me. Heads were going to roll, despite the fucked-up timing, where I needed my focus on all things Amage. A shakeup during the company’s crucial moment, targeting the few female executives would weaken us. But they’d fucked with Ryan, and they had to pay.

“Ryan?” Quinn’s voice grabbed my attention. “Wake up!”

“I’m up,” Ryan blurted. “Fuck.” I heard a whoosh. “Fuck off, Quinn. I sat up so abruptly, I almost fell out of the fucking bed. My pillow feels extra comfy with my head on it again.”

“I think Megan is the catalyst behind what Ingrid Warrington said about Mama and Daddy.”

“In my heart, I think you’re right,” Ryan said, sadness in her voice.

“Tell Noah. I told Reid.”

“No.”

“But—”

“We could be wrong,” Ryan interrupted. “If you’re basing your conclusion on Ingrid looking at her phone or Megan losing her color after my praise, it might be coincidence.”

“Stop making excuses and defending her. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Besides sleep deprivation?”

“Where the fuck is my sister?” Quinn said, ignoring Ryan’s response.

“I’m not making excuses for either of them, honey,” Ryan said. “I’m being practical. From a personal standpoint, what took place was a travesty. If it is untrue, we can sue. From a professional perspective, Keegan Enterprises doesn’t have the luxury of losing Megan Buford.”

“You’re an employee, not a fucking shareholder. Your concern is an account for Keegan Media Group. Keegan Enterprises as a whole—”

“Is losing millions every day after Ingrid’s article. I arrived on my first day with no small amount of hubris. Hell, I accepted the job with an inflated self-importance, believing I could be the voice of the women in the company and bring in more women. The women are status quo, as much a problem as the men. Maybe that’s what I lost today. The illusion of my opinion mattering, and they would see me as important and respected.”

“Respect is earned, Ry,” Quinn said softly. “It’s one fundamental of life you’ve preached to me.”

“Basic respect as a fellow human, a fellow woman, shouldn’t be. It is supposed to be a tenant of life. Anyway, my love, we aren’t getting into a philosophical debate at almost three in the morning. Keegan Enterprises, KMG, Kee-Tel, all the many other subsidiaries, and Noah, can’t afford to lose anyone right now. Especially Megan, Tina, or Mrs. Mikes. If I’m let go in the next week, that fucking press conference will be cited, so ramifications will be minimal. Noah needs to focus on a major telecommunication deal for Kee-Tel. Any turnovers will pull his attention away. Besides those Amage brothers? I delved beyond all the documents given to me. *They* are the fucking assholes, especially Claude Amage. Jesus. Read over some of his past interviews. That motherfucker has it in for Noah, Quinn. It’s fucking personal. We all need to

work as a team, stay in our lanes, to fucking beat Ingrid, Claude, and all other motherfuckers. As much as I want to know where Ingrid got her information, I don't care right now. I was hired to win the fucking account and see his mother's parfum on the market and that's what the fuck I'm going to do. Megan's intent to take my money is the only thing I'll talk to anyone about. It'll probably be Reid. Now that I've elucidated, will you let me go?"

"You should be wide awake by now," Quinn complained.

"I'm not. You can't imagine my exhaustion. I didn't even change."

"Slept with your man's clothes on, huh?"

"He isn't my man," Ryan said sharply.

"Ummmmhmmm."

Silence fell again. One could only admire Ryan's indulgence of Quinn, as annoying a younger sibling as I'd ever seen.

"I want details, Ryan."

A little snore greeted the demand.

Quinn giggled. "*Ryan!*" she blared.

A thump came over the line. "Ouch, fuck!" Ryan grunted. "You scared the shit out of me."

"You snored in my ear."

"I fell out the fucking bed," she snapped.

"Are you okay, Ryan?" Quinn asked in all seriousness.

"Yes. Fine."

"Lovely. As I was saying, I want details." Quinn winked at me. "Then I have something juicy to tell you."

"Details about what?"

"Don't fall asleep on me. That is the height of rudeness."

"Remember our argument earlier? Let's rock with that, so I can sleep. We'll kiss and make up tomorrow."

"You're mean, Ryan."

“I’m tired. I have a long day ahead of me. Reid said no one can fire me but Noah. Megan is going to be an issue. She is going to make my life hell. I owe thirty-five hundred dollars for the bracelet and ten grand for the dress. I sent her an email while I was in the Uber. She hates me.”

Quinn glowered at Reid. “Well, talk to Mr. Sir.”

“I did. Noah said I didn’t have to pay, but how can I tell that viper?”

“By opening your fucking mouth and saying bitch, I don’t have to pay you. Simple. Anyway, I called for details on your hookup. How did he compare to your last fuck two hundred and fifty years ago?”

“Quinn, shut up.”

“He isn’t here, Ryan. He won’t hear you confessing he’s a terrible lover. It isn’t all about cock size. If they’re packing big boys and don’t know proper technique, it hurts.”

“You’re shameless,” Ryan said with laughter. “But I’m hanging up and going back to sleep.”

“I’ll call you back and blow up your phone until you answer.”

“I’m turning it off.”

“No, you won’t,” Quinn said with certainty. “You would never, in case of an emergency.”

Ryan huffed out a breath. “I’ll tell you on one condition. You answer what I ask you.”

“Your questions are boring, but whatever. I’ll answer one.”

“Fair enough. One answer from you for one detail from me.”

“Deal. Is he a good lover and do you want to fuck him again?”

“You said one question.”

“It’s one question with two parts. Keep up.”

“You’re splitting hairs.”

“And you’re stalling.”

“I have never discussed my sex life with you.”

“You barely have one, so you can’t. Answer the fucking question.”

“What do you want me to say, Quinn? He is an exceptional lover. Unselfish. Attentive. Thorough.”

I’d had no complaints from any of my partners, but hearing Ryan’s soft words, prompted by her little sister’s juvenile game, arrowed to my heart and my cock.

“And...I can’t believe I’m about to say this. He’s...”

“Yes?” Quinn drawled.

“Let me put it like this. His behavior encouraged me to be a wanton, and I loved every minute.”

“I see.” Quinn smirked at me.

I grinned, smug.

“He sounds like a very nasty boy. Like Reid.”

“I suppose so,” Ryan said, and her shyness helped me to understand Quinn’s ferocious protectiveness toward her. “Now, my turn.”

“Answer the second part, Ryan.”

“I forgot what it was.”

“Bullshit. You’re such a fucking liar.”

“Fine. Yes. Happy?”

“Nope. I want you to say the words.”

“You’re a fucking sadist.”

“Put into the universe what you most want, so the stars will grant it. Or something, Ryan. It was your saying.”

“It was Mama’s saying.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve heard it from you.”

“One day, you’ll give birth to a girl child who calls you in the middle of the night to shoot the fucking breeze between

arguing. I will do a happy dance.”

Quinn rolled her eyes. “Moving on. So. You want to be his lover. But you have a problem. You work for him. After six months, just don’t renew your contract. Pursue a romantic relationship with him. I mean, he’s a catch. Rich as hell. You’ll be set for life. You’ll want for nothing. All you’ll do is serve on committees, host parties, and push out babies.”

“Is that your goal with Reid?” Ryan demanded.

“Fuck Reid. We’re not talking about him.”

“While there is nothing wrong with a woman who wants what you described, that isn’t me, Quinn. That’s what Noah wants, though. If he lets me go and I find another job, he won’t want me. He doesn’t want me now,” she said softly.

I winced at the pain in her voice. Quinn threw me a dirty look.

“I’m not a socialite. I love kids and babies. I want to bear two or three and adopt two or three.”

Quinn choked. “Well, fuck, do you know how expensive *one* kid is, Ryan? Six little motherfuckers will have you working four fucking jobs to give them a decent upbringing.”

“Little motherfuckers?” Ryan said with disapproval. “Is that how you’ll refer to *your* kids?”

She threw Reid a dark look and stiffened, her lower lip trembling. My cousin flushed and glanced away.

“I’m tired, hunny bunny.”

“Goddamn, Ryan. Think about what you just said. You want six children—”

“I said between *four* and six, Quinn.”

“So, five,” Quinn said.

Ryan growled. “Remind me to fuck you up tomorrow, smartass.”

“As if,” Quinn retorted with a little sniff. “As I was saying, you’d leave your four, five, or six kids at a daycare, while you

pursued your career? How unfair when you have a fine-ass rich boy who doesn't want his woman to work."

She winked at me.

"Shut it, Quinn. You aren't supposed to notice *anything* about Noah. Besides, you have a fine-ass rich boy jonesing for your ass."

I lifted my brow in question, ignoring Reid's smug satisfaction.

"That's all he craves from me." The hurt in her tone wiped away Reid's pleasure. "And if you were trying to make a point by admitting you've checked him out, I'm over it. Fuck him and the bitch he rode in on."

"You're insane." Ryan howled with laughter. "What does that even mean?"

Reid reached for Quinn, but she elbowed his chin, and he grunted.

"What's that noise?" Ryan's humor evaporated.

"What's what noise?" Quinn responded, all innocence.

"Uh—"

"Listen, big sister, rethink your priorities if you want a houseful of children. You'd want to put them first, just as you did for Logan and me. Even now, you put us first. Me, especially. Which I've never understood since Logan is the baby."

"He has Dakota and our dear brother-in-law, Timothe, meaning he also has Armani. She couldn't handle raising either of you then, but you're both adults now, so she has no problem being there."

"Armani can be so judgmental, especially toward me," Quinn said, then sighed. "I see your reasoning now. Anyway, think about how you struggled to take care of us while going to school and holding down a job. You don't need to be a socialite, just a wife and a mother."

I'd never wanted kids of my own. Yet Ryan would be an exceptional mother, kind, unselfish, and caring. To keep my cock calm, I resisted thinking of making those babies with her.

"Yes, Noah. Who else, dumbass?" Quinn demanded.

I'd missed Ryan's comment.

"I'm sure I'd want to be a stay at-home mommy if I could afford it, but it must be my choice. Can you imagine what a disadvantage I'd be at in a marriage to him? If I gave up my job, I'd have to rely on him for everything. Besides, having my own fucking money is empowering. I can tell him to fuck off if he doesn't agree with what I might need or want. I might want more from him than he wants from me, but that's life, baby. I'll get over him."

Quinn and I exchanged startled glances.

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "Get over him? You almost sound in love with him." She laughed nervously.

"I don't believe in insta-love, but I'm attracted to him and infatuated with him. It doesn't matter, Quinn. I swear. He has other...never mind. He told me to forget about earlier and I will. I can't even fucking text him unless he gives me permission. He chewed me the fuck out for doing it." She sniffled, and I swore my heart broke.

"Don't cry, Ryan," Quinn said.

"I'm not." She cleared her throat. "I think I might call Ian. We had a huge argument when he found out I worked for Noah."

"That fine-ass bartender?"

"Yeah. He wants to be more than friends. And...and...I don't know. Maybe I'll go to the bar this weekend if I'm not overloaded with work."

"You could do worse. He's pretty fucking hot."

"Yeah, he is," she agreed, much to my displeasure. "He just isn't Noah."

Those words soothed my jealousy.

Quinn's deep smile revealed her dimples. "I know. Anyway, I'm tired." She yawned. "This is what I wanted to tell you—"

"Fuck no. My turn."

"Shit." Sighing dramatically, Quinn leaned her head back on the sofa and stared at the ceiling. "What the fuck do you want to know?"

"When did you realize you were in love with Reid?"

Quinn stilled, barely blinking, her focus staying on the ceiling.

Ryan's question shocked Reid in the same way her responses to her sister's nosiness surprised me.

"What makes you think I'm in love?" Quinn asked, her mischief gone. "Maybe you're imagining that because you walked in while his cock was down my throat."

"I saw your pain when you found out about Megan. You didn't know she lives with him. You didn't even ask him when he rushed up to us and took you in his arms."

"I don't know, Ryan." Quinn glared at Reid. "One day, I was fine as things were, and the next he was all I could think about. The only man I wanted to lie next to or see. Maybe it happened when we went to the beach late one night. Or the night he took me to a musical on Broadway."

"But you are in love with him." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," Quinn answered. "I am. Anyway," she said briskly. "A car will be there for you in the morning. Reid informed me, as a KGM executive, you get a driver."

"Are you serious?" Ryan asked with hope.

Quinn smiled. "Yes, Ry, I am so rest easy, big sister. I got your back." She didn't wait for Ryan to respond before she disconnected.

"Quinn," Reid started.

She got to her feet and looked at me, her eyes wide and teary. "I'm so tired. Can you show me to my quarters or tell me where to go?"

“Quinn,” Reid tried again.

“Fuck off,” she snapped.

“I’ll ring for staff,” I told her. “When you leave this room, go to your left. The staircase is in the central foyer. Take a right when you reach the top and go to the end of the hall. Last door on your left.”

She nodded. “Thank you. Don’t forget to order a car for Ryan. Good night, Noah.”

“Quinn?” Reid said, stepping in front of her as I stood and pressed the call button for Lumley. “We need to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you, so move,” she ordered.

“No. Not until you hear me out.”

“I’m counting to three, Reid Keegan. If you aren’t out of my way by then, I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

“If you told Ryan the truth about being in love with me, then ___”

“Then fuck all,” she snapped. “Do you know all you’ve explained to me today? Yesterday,” she amended. “Out of all your fucking disclosures, you neglected to tell me Megan still has a key...no, excuse me...lives with you. I have nothing to say to you ever again.”

Reid’s mouth tightened, but he nodded and stepped aside. As Quinn rushed from the room, his expression grew bleaker. “I think I will make my way upstairs to get some shut-eye.”

“We have a lot to discuss.”

“Ryan’s right, Noah. Any move within the company on our part will be disastrous. At least investigate before you incinerate everyone who fucked with her.”

He was right, just as she was. “As soon as we’re in smoother waters, we strike.”

Reid nodded, then left me to ponder what I’d learned from Quinn and Ryan’s conversation.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ryan

Stepping back, I smiled at the small plant on my desk. It capped off my personal touches, my two new chairs for visitors, an ergonomic desk chair, and a pair of landscape paintings. In the two days since Noah and I made love, er, since the press conference, my office had become my refuge. I'd tried to see him yesterday, but Mrs. Mikes told me he was unavailable. Perhaps, we'd meet today, though I wasn't holding my breath. No matter. I'd made lists for each project, so I knew what needed to be done.

Besides, I wasn't in the best frame of mind. As much as I tried to pretend otherwise, Ingrid Warrington's claims about my parents bothered me. In forty-eight hours, I'd been angry, grief-stricken, horrified, and heartsore. My father saw no other out but what she claimed? A part of me wondered if what Armani told them about me pushed him over the edge. That thought was almost worse than any of the others.

My door opened without warning, and I spun around, expecting to see Noah, but finding his very bruised brother. If he was anyone else, I would've been concerned by how rough he looked. But knowing him, he deserved the no doubt brutal beating that resulted in his injuries. Glaring at him, I folded my arms. "A closed door indicates want of privacy. Knock before your barge into my office, Nicholas."

He gave me an ugly look, slammed the door shut, and sauntered to my chair, where he sat. His insulting perusal studied me from head to heel. "Pretty legs," he said blandly. "Easy access to your pussy in that short skirt."

I gasped.

"Don't pretend you haven't fucked Noah, Ryan."

"You're a horrible fucking asshole," I hissed. "Don't judge him by what you do."

Dislike blazed from him. “What is it about Noah that breeds such loyalty?” he demanded.

“What—?”

“Even my wife has decided to protect him. She’s on a fucking campaign for that motherfucker’s happiness. What about me?”

“What *about* you?” I spat. Though I didn’t particularly care for Tina, it warmed my heart to hear she wanted the best for Noah. “I don’t know what’s going on for me to comment, so —”

“So nothing,” he snapped. “I think she’s lying to me. My wife’s covering up bullshit to protect that bastard.”

“Covering up what?” I asked, bewildered.

Clamping his jaw, he threw me an unhappy look. “Nothing, Ryan. Fuck all. It has nothing to do with you.”

“I didn’t think it—”

“Tina would have my ass if—”

“It sounds as if you’re implying you can’t be happy if Noah is,” I interrupted, uninterested in whatever power struggle was going on between him and his wife.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

His bitterness bordered on psychopathy. The wisest course was to shut the fuck up and not comment.

“How much do you require from me to expose your affair?” he demanded.

“I’m not having an affair with Noah. Even if we were, there’s no fucking amount of money I’d take to betray him. Especially from you, limp dick.”

“I’d get off your high horses, whore. Just because I can’t fire you doesn’t mean I won’t make you fucking miserable.”

“Get out of my fucking office, bastard,” I snarled. “Or I’m calling security to have them remove you.”

His ugly laughter chilled me. “I can’t get rid of you. Those assholes have no such immunity. If you want to be responsible for men losing their jobs call them.”

“Fine. Fuck you. I’m jetting until your miserable ass leaves.”

The small office allowed him to move quickly and block my pathway. “How much money?”

I lifted my chin. “I have nothing to tell.”

“Maybe, it isn’t money you need to confess.” He looked at my breasts and licked his lips. “I’ll titty-fuck you and let you suck my cock. I don’t fuck broads with asses as big as yours.”

I slapped the fuck out of the asshole, shocking him and me. Before either of us reacted, someone knocked on my door.

I stumbled back, shaken to my core. “C-come in,” I called in a wobbly voice, relieved at the interruption.

“Ryan—” Reid halted when he saw Nicholas, face twisted in fury and his cheek red.

The image of Reid and Quinn rose in my head, and I frowned, but quickly shoved the thought away, happy to see him *now*. But I couldn’t move. Not only because Nicholas Keegan stood in my way. The shock of his despicable behavior paralyzed me.

“I thought you were in the Kee-Tel meeting, Nick.”

“I was running late, so I decided to visit Ryan. I had something to discuss with her.”

“Your funeral arrangements?” Reid asked blandly. “Noah will kill you for fucking with her.”

Nicholas shrugged. “He’s a fucking bag of hot air.”

“Who will blow flames on you and burn you to pieces,” Reid said.

“What are you doing here?”

“I have an office—”

“I don’t mean in the building. In *her* office.” The asshole pointed to me. “What business do you have with her?”

“Nothing that concerns you, Nick.” Reid indicated the hallway with a nod of his head. “Leave.”

“I’m not finished with her.”

Reid pulled his phone from his coat pocket. “Noah will disagree,” he said, punching in numbers.

“Fine. I’m leaving, asshole.” The big man-baby stomped to the door, then turned and faced me. “We aren’t finished, Ryan.”

“You are,” Reid answered. “If you fuck with her again, I’ll see to it that there’s a security camera installed in this office and outside her door that feeds directly to Noah’s phone.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me,” Reid retorted.

The cousins stared at each other, but Nicholas glanced away first, leaving my office without another word. I staggered to my desk chair and sat, covering my face with my hands.

“Are you okay?”

Leaning back in my chair, I drew in a deep breath and nodded. Whoever beat Nicholas’s ass shouldn’t have stopped until he was permanently immobilized. Reid sat in one of the chairs in front of my desk, his eyes kind and concerned.

“He’s an awful fucking asshole.”

“I’m an only child, so Nick and I have always been close.”

I couldn’t read the meaning behind the words, so I shrugged. “And? It makes him no less a miserable little man.”

He smiled. “He is that.”

“Show me your friends,” I said with disapproval.

“And I’ll tell you who you are,” he finished. “I’m trying to rectify my mistakes, but I’m walking a fine line with the game I’m playing.”

“Then don’t play games. Instead of a fine line, walk in your own truth.”

“In time, once my goal is completed.”

“Ohhhh, cryptic.”

“Fair,” he countered. “After I’ve been unfair for so many years.”

“Does this concern—”

“What did Nicholas say to you?” Reid interrupted, and I took this as his way of telling me to mind my own business.

“It isn’t important.”

“I disagree. He either propositioned you, insulted you, or both.”

“You can add bribery in there,” I grumbled.

“That asshole.” Reid shifted in his seat. “He offered to pay you off to pretend you had an affair with Noah.”

His phrasing it as a statement surprised me because he hadn’t taken a moment to think about what the basis of the bribe might’ve been. “Yes,” I said, refusing to admit no pretense would be at play.

After a moment of silence, he started. “He propositioned you sexually and insulted you, in addition to the monetary offer?”

“Yep, like the giant, diseased asshole he is.” I explained to Reid what happened. “That’s why I was so happy when you showed up,” I finished.

“Goddamn him. I’m going to talk to legal.”

“Accusations of sexual harassment are true then.” Just one more fact to add to my disillusion over my new job.

“Per se, but not actually.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Nicholas had a habit of installing his mistresses in company positions. Not here in headquarters. When he tires of

them, he also has, had, them fired. He swore to my father he was going to stop.”

“I’m not his mistress. I don’t even like that asshole.”

Reid leaned forward and rested his hands on my desk, giving me an earnest look. “I’m sure you’re aware of exactly what Noah’s guilty of in that exposé. Most of it described Nick and Uncle Shawn.”

“If Noah protests and reveals that information, he’ll be accused of smearing the name of a dead man and passing off responsibility for his behavior to his brother.”

“Exactly. Even if that wasn’t the case, he’s loyal to our family. The Keegan name and heritage.”

Closing my eyes, I rubbed my temples, bleakness settling into me. My intentions to swoop in and change the company’s atmosphere seemed naïve. The sexist, brutal culture imbedded deep. After only two days, I felt isolated, up against Goliath. It didn’t help I longed to see Noah, hear his voice. Pretending our sex hadn’t happened was so different from his complete shutout.

“What are you thinking?”

“Does it matter?” I asked with a sigh, opening my eyes, and staring at Reid.

“He needs you.”

His meaning sounded personal rather than professional. Of course, I heard what I longed for—an intimate relationship with Noah. The admission annoyed me, and I scowled at Reid. “As you need Quinn?”

“I need her, Ryan,” Reid said quietly. “She needs me. She loves me.”

She’d admitted to being in love with him when she’d called my ass at two in the morning night before last. Still, Reid’s certainty surprised me. I’d had to drag the confession from her. “Did she tell you that?”

“I’m thirty years old,” he said after a moment. “I know when a woman’s in love with me.”

“Are you in love with her?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. “Quinn is an amazing woman.”

I smiled at the tenderness in his voice. “She is.”

“I’m not here to ask for your help in winning her. I’m here —”

“You wouldn’t get it from me. Megan, remember?”

He nodded. “Fair enough.”

“You’re here on Noah’s behalf,” I guessed.

“Yes. I want to show you proof of everything I mentioned to you Monday afternoon.”

“I don’t want to see whatever you have. I get it.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. In spite of his vulnerability, I don’t know if I can stay here. I want to be a trailblazer, not a fucking victim. I martyred myself as much as I’m going to at that press conference when I lied and praised Keegan Enterprises.”

“Noah can’t effect change without strong backup.”

“My contract is for six months, Reid. I don’t possess magical powers to sway Noah.”

“You must. You’re here, aren’t you?”

“He was in a bind. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have hired me.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps he needed an excuse to hire you.”

“Why...you know what? Never mind. Working around Megan and Tina is bad enough. But Nicholas gives off psychopathic vibes. Bro’s touched in the fucking head.”

“If I guarantee Nick won’t fuck with you again, will you stay?”

“You’re not here all the time, Reid.”

“Just trust me. Please. If not for me, then for Noah.”

“Why the fuck should I? Noah’s my boss, not my boyfriend. Even then, I’d have to think long and hard about overlooking Nicholas’ bullshit.”

“Nick was completely out-of-line, so I understand why you’re angry—”

“Out-of-line is a mild way of putting it. There’s a fucking term for what he did. I could bring charges against his ass.”

Reid nodded. “But you won’t.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“We both know Noah would be caught in the fallout.”

“Fuck you, Noah, and Nicholas,” I snapped. “You’re handing me bullshit. Nicholas is a fucking creep.”

“I swear he won’t bother you again. He’ll even apologize to you.”

“That’ll be the fucking day.” I thought of Noah, his tenderness to me, the feeling of him moving inside of me. The all-important Amage presentation was mere days away. He *did* need me. It wasn’t his or Reid’s fault it wasn’t the way I wanted him to. Besides walking away now meant throwing in the towel after only two fucking days. I was made of sterner stuff than that. “If Nicholas comes near me again, I walk. Understand?”

“You’re not going to regret this,” Reid said with a smile.

“Why are you here?” I asked with irritation.

“To bring you to my office and show you the information I mentioned to you in Megan’s office. I debated bringing you to the law firm but decided not to risk it. A meeting between you and I here will be much easier to explain than one at my office there.”

“I don’t know, Reid. That’s privileged items.”

“That you need to put together your presentation. The only way Noah will ever know the extent of what you will see is if you tell him.”

“I don’t need to see them. I believe everything you said.”

“Hearing is one thing, seeing for yourself another.”

He was right, so I reluctantly agreed, vowing if Nicholas Keegan fucked with me again, I was done.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ryan

A week later, Noah and I walked side-by-side into the thirty-story skyscraper housing Amage's American center of operations. Located blocks away from the Empire State Building and built in the Art Déco style, it predated its famed sister by five years, according to the company's website.

The moment we walked into the building's lobby, its vastness swallowed me. The entrance mimicked the exterior's Art Déco style but with antique furniture. Large wooden columns surrounded the reception station where a pale-skinned, strawberry blonde woman sat. 1920s-esque chandeliers hung in strategic places, near the myriad velvet seating sprinkled throughout the area. The layout, designed to showcase the vintage art on the walls, allowed visitors to stare in awe.

The Amage brothers fully embraced the style of the near-century-old exterior. Fine with me. The Roaring 20s was one of my favorite eras.

"Mr. Keegan," the receptionist greeted as we approached her, clearly awfully familiar with him.

"Ms. Jovan," Noah said, nodding.

She beamed at him, and I sighed.

Her hazel eyes shifted to me, surprise entering them. "Who is this?"

Either she didn't watch the news, or ignored online sites, both legitimate and otherwise. For days, I had been the story du jour, picked apart to the nth degree. In turns, maligned and defended, analyzed for everything from my hair to my makeup to my tuxedo dress. Some circles categorized my confrontation with Ingrid Warrington as unprofessional, while other claimed it was long overdue. Sympathizers countered accusations that Quinn's meltdown was staged. They wondered why security

didn't usher out the media sooner. One day I was the scapegoat and, the next, a heroine.

"Ryan Hagen." Ms. Jovan's voice brought me back to the present.

I'd missed Noah's introduction.

"My project manager for the Amage contract," he said. "We're here for the presentation to the brothers and to formally introduce her."

She offered a tight smile.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Jovan," I said.

"Oh," she responded, then pressed a button on the phone system and spoke into her headset to announce our arrival. "You two can go right on up now," she said a moment later. "I assume you know the floor where the boardroom is located, Mr. Keegan?"

Though the brothers owned the entire building, they leased out much of the space, only reserving three floors for themselves.

"Yes," Noah responded. "Thank you, Ms. Jovan."

"Good luck, Ms. Hagen."

"Thank you," I replied, trailing behind Noah as he walked to the elevators.

We boarded in silence.

The previous days passed as if we had no carnal knowledge of each other. Noah treated me no differently than all his employees, curt at best. Despite what he'd said, I'd hoped he would change his mind. Instead, his treating me like everyone else disappointed me. In his eyes, I was simply another one of his workers. Prior to my hiring, I believed we shared a mutual attraction. Well, obviously we had. Otherwise, that night in his office wouldn't have happened.

During the two meetings we'd had in the previous week, he'd stuck to business. They were quick discussions, designed for updates from me. Megan backed off after a curt email

explaining her error about my responsibility for any damages to my outfit. The two times I'd seen Nicholas since the scene in my office, he barely acknowledged me. In contrast, Tina texted me every morning asking if I needed anything. Mrs. Mikes went out of her way to help me, while Billy had turned into my personal chef. The moment my driver pulled in front of the building, Billy texted me and asked if I needed breakfast and found out what I wanted for lunch. It was a shocking turn of events, considering how my first day went.

Professionally, things had settled down. Ironic, considering today might very well be my last day. In my heart, I believed Noah still intended to fire me. I hadn't even received my contract yet, which made sense if he planned to let me go.

Personally, life marched on. Sandy was officially declared dead. She needed a new transmission. I couldn't bring myself to condemn her to a junkyard, yet I had to decide what to do with her. I finally spoke to Armani, and she didn't confirm or deny the truth of Ingrid's words. Quinn moped around. And despite my half-asleep declaration to call Ian, I hadn't and never would.

A ding heralded our arrival on floor seventeen, where we stepped into what amounted to another lobby. The Amage name and logo greeted me in an antique fleur-de-lis design and gorgeous cursive lettering. Amage emblems hit me from both my right and left.

I shifted my briefcase from one hand to the other, nervous and excited to make my presentation and prove my worth. Of course, the reason Keegan Enterprises was so successful was because of the different subsidiaries with qualified individuals in certain positions. But I'd never realized how many people wanted to see KMG lose the Amage contact and not produce the special perfume until my push for the release in Noah's timeframe. I was indebted to Reid and what an immense help he'd been to me. I was almost positive the fragrance would get the green light, even if the marketing contract for the pillar campaign was a lost cause.

Noah and I walked toward a brunette woman sitting behind another reception station. A gold and wood nameplate read

Joanne Blake.

“Joanne,” Noah greeted as we walked up to her.

She looked up from her computer screen, smiling at him. Noticing me wiped away her friendliness.

“My project manager and I have a meeting with the Amage brothers at one o’clock.”

Her brows snapped together. “Your project manager?”

“Nice to meet you.” My steady tone didn’t betray annoyance. I held my hand out to her.

I’d never experienced the feeling of otherness more than I had in my brief time working for Noah. While I understood the basis of their intense shock upon discovering my position, I still resented their classlessness. They didn’t have to treat me like an anomaly because of Noah’s modern choice to hire a woman.

Instead of taking my hand, she continued staring at me dumbly.

“Is there an issue, Joanne?” Noah’s tone went from emotionless to icy cold.

“Not at all, Mr. Keegan,” she swore nervously, shaking my hand to appease Noah’s displeasure. “Have a seat. Léon will come to escort you back there shortly.”

“Excellent.” He gestured for me to follow him to the seating area. “Léon is the Amage brothers’ cousin and personal assistant.”

“Got it.”

Less than five minutes later, Léon, a young blond man, led us down a hallway with beautiful wooden floors. The Art Déco emerald patterned wallpaper held various paintings. As in the first-floor lobby, the Amage brothers embraced the building’s historic design. At a wood-framed, frosted glass door, the man tapped on it.

“*Entrez!*” an authoritative voice called from the other side, prompting the blond to usher us into the room, revealing six

men at a large conference table in the middle of the room, all of whom paid no attention to me and focused on Noah.

I was in the presence of the famed Amage brothers.

As Léon closed the door, I followed Noah to the table. He found our assigned chairs and he held out my seat, waiting until I sat before taking his own. I sat my briefcase on the floor next to my chair. No matter the dismissive curtness he'd shown toward me in the past days, being close to him right now served as a great comfort.

“Noah, on time as always,” a good-looking, older man said, offering him a smile. He sat at the head of the table, and after reading his name tag, I realized this was the CEO of the company, Mr. Boyd Andrews. Knowing my presentation would be in front of the CEO of such a high-profile company made my palms grow sweaty. He looked *expensive*, with his impeccably groomed hair and flawless black suit. “Nice to see you.”

“Hello, Boyd,” Noah responded.

One brother was absent.

“*Allo!*”

“*Bonjour!*”

“*Bienvenue!*”

“*Salut!*”

I tried to place the faces to each Amage brother greeting us, but couldn't identify Denis, Guy, Sacha, Hugo, or Leo. My research had focused on Claude as the majority owner.

Assholes were always easy to spot. Claude Amage was no different. He had graying black hair and rugged good looks. Yet, he stood out from the other men in the room because of his fearsome scowl at Noah.

“Gentlemen.” Noah nodded to everyone except asshole. “When have we begun conducting our meetings in French?”

Ignoring the cold query, Claude turned his attention to me, his eyes gleaming with malice. “*Comment vous appelez-*

vous?”

Noah stiffened, his livid expression threatening to derail the presentation before it began. I tried to capture his gaze, but all eyes turned to me.

I rummaged my brain to translate Claude’s question.

“This is—”

I interrupted Noah. “*Enchanté!*” *Not.* In no way was it nice to meet this man. “*Je m’appelle* Ryan Hagen. *Comment allez-vous?*”

“Parles-tu français?” Noah asked in surprise.

“*Un peu,*” I said, demonstrating how little by using my thumb and forefinger to measure. “*C’est une langue difficile.*”

Fuck, was it ever difficult! I’d taken French honors in high school because of my New Orleans roots, but I’d lost most of my knowledge since I’d had no one to converse with. I had to use the correct pronunciations based on gender and formality. There were so many rules to follow!

“*Comment ça va?*” one brother asked.

“*Bien, merci,*” I said. “*Et toi?*”

“*Bien,*” he assured me. “*Je m’appelle* Guy Amage.” He nodded to the man next to him. “*Il s’appelle* Sacha.” With each introduction, he nodded. “*Il s’appelle* Hugo. *Il s’appelle* Leo.”

“*Enchanté!*” I responded each time, smiling politely.

“Je vous présente Ryan Hagen,” Noah said.

“*Mon français est mauvais,*” I offered, concerned we’d get to a point where I wouldn’t know what was being said. I took a deep breath and repeated what I said in English. “My French is bad. Can we speak en anglais?”

“*Ton français est bon,*” Noah complimented.

“Very good,” Boyd Andrews agreed. We hadn’t been introduced, but he was one of two board members with no family connections.

“Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Andrews,” I told him.

“Tu parles français comme une vache espagnole,” Claude spat, glaring at me.

Did he say I looked like a Spanish cow? While I tried to pick my brain and make sense of his words, Noah turned a thunderous expression to the man.

“Ferme ta gueule.”

Shut the fuck up? I wanted to ask, but I followed Noah’s order thanks to the supercharged atmosphere.

“The lady wishes to speak English, Claude,” Boyd said with disapproval. “Let’s oblige her, since she will be at a distinct disadvantage.”

“Let’s,” Noah agreed, making no attempt to hide his contempt for Claude. “This is Ryan Hagen, my new project manager for Amage.”

Claude waved a dismissive hand in my direction. “I only see a secretary with you.”

Dick.

Bristling, I bit my tongue so I wouldn’t curse his ass out and earn Noah’s displeasure. I intended to make one hell of a presentation to aid my plea to keep my job.

“Ms. Hagen is the woman I’ve chosen to be my project manager, Claude. Deal with it.”

His unnecessary gasp resounded in the room. God, I wanted this over. Each introduction elicited the same shock, revealing their workplace practices as much as Keegan Enterprises’.

I met every man’s gaze with a steady one of my own. “It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

“Keegan, is this a joke?” Claude, the dickhole, stood from his seat and gestured to me. “She is unacceptable if you want a chance at the contract. We do not need such an infamous woman,” he said, proving he knew my identity. “She would overshadow our marketing campaign.”

“Settle down,” Noah warned, his glare bone-chilling. “I am uninterested in your bullshit. You requested an introduction to my chosen project manager. Here we are. Back off and allow her to make her presentation.”

“Associating our brand with yours will be detrimental,” Claude said. “Considering the recent article.”

“You’re baiting me,” Noah said evenly. “When Boyd called with the day and time of the meeting, the article was old news.”

“We were all shocked when we discovered her identity,” Sacha said. He offered me an uncomfortable smile. “We’re very familiar with the rules of your company.”

Noah sidled a glance my way, then scowled at Sacha. “There are no rules.”

“Unspoken, not written,” Claude retorted.

“Obviously, that isn’t the case,” Noah said. “Let’s proceed.” He nodded to me.

“Is she qualified?” Claude demanded before I could say a word. “*Dans la salle de conference*. Not in the bedroom.”

Audible gasps resounded from everyone, including Noah and me. Mortification and anger rose in me, yet the frightening fury on Noah’s face silenced me.

“Careful,” he warned, in a voice I barely recognized. “I do not take kindly to any insults thrown Ms. Hagen’s way. She’s in my employ and I demand you respect her. Or else.”

“*Je suis désolé mon bon ami.*” I think he pretended to apologize and offered a phony look of sympathy. “How do you say? Your practices have come home to roost.”

Noah only clenched his jaw.

“The chaos she has created directly results from your methods,” Claude said. His English was heavily accented but understandable. “She is the center of attention everywhere because of your poor leadership and regressive thinking. Watching you crash and burn is *la pièce de résistance*.” His smile was nasty. “Réjane offered so much of herself to me on

behalf of the company. Pity you have ruined what she so freely gave.”

This wasn't an ordinary dislike between Noah and Claude. Their hatred had deep roots.

I sat as quietly as everyone else, watching the two of them as they launched into a conversation in French, their words too fast for me to decipher. Leo's intervention silenced Claude. Noah's expression remained ferocious, but he didn't speak.

“You can see why our continued partnership is in jeopardy, madame,” Hugo told me. “Noah and Claude do not mix well.”

“We have worked with monsieur for a very long time,” Sacha added. “He has gone to Sauncier, and why we have all but decided they are the best option.”

Guy's neutral expression remained. “When we met with Noah at his office, we feared his boast of a hostile takeover. In recent days, his standing has changed, as has our stance.”

The decision flushed my job down the drain. Quite appalling, yet incomparable to my alarm over the prospect of never seeing Noah again. Given his attitude toward me over the past days, he didn't care.

I'm unsure which possibility motivated me the most. And although my confidence hadn't fully returned since the fallout of the press conference, I had a job to do.

“I appreciate your position.” I glanced from brother to brother and then at Boyd Andrews. “And I understand your reservations.” Frantically, I searched my brain to speak in their language. They understood English, yet Claude would use my limited French against me. “But I can assure you, I will take my obligations to your launch seriously. I came fully prepared to present my ideas to you for your pillar launch and Mr. Keegan's parfum. I am just as ready to present to you my brief for the fragrance Mr. Keegan wants on the market to honor his mother. I might not change your mind, but we will never know if I am not given the chance.”

When I fell silent, the men looked among themselves. Except Noah. He stared straight ahead, a muscle ticking in his

jaw.

“We are not sure what good it will do,” Leo said. “Claude’s words might’ve been less than tactful, but they were true. The circus in the aftermath of your press conference wouldn’t happen at another company. Certainly, not at Sauncier.”

“Your short time at KMG has been bumpy,” Claude said. “That is a direct coincidence of his behavior,” he went on, jabbing a finger at Noah. “You defense of him.”

“You’re perceptive, monsieur,” I told Claude. “My short time with the company has been very rocky.”

Noah stiffened. I ignored him.

“And yes, *oui*, without a doubt, it is because of the small number of women in top positions within Mr. Keegan’s company. Change is rarely without controversy. But don’t malign him if you won’t allow me a chance to win the contract. You are condoning behavior he is supposedly guilty of, just as you have these many years by not protesting the predominantly male workplace.”

“You’re quite right,” Boyd Andrews said, capturing my attention.

“Of course she is,” Claude agreed with an indulgent smile. “You have always been in favor of Noah, Boyd.”

“A fact I’ve never made secret, Claude.” Boyd’s tone skirted the edges of courtesy.

He launched into French with the others. Judging by Noah’s look, he understood the conversation, while I caught a word here and a phrase there.

Boyd looked at me. “The floor is yours, Ryan.”

“Thank you,” I said, lifting my briefcase and opening it. Once I got my laptop out, I stood. Glancing around, I saw nowhere to hook up auxiliary connections. I had handouts, but I needed to make the presentation first.

Boyd rolled his chair back and moved his hand off the conference table. A moment later, a screen descended from the

ceiling. I unbuttoned my jacket and shrugged out of it, draping it over my vacated seat.

Reid had convinced me to go for another designer look, given the prestige of the Amage account. Besides, over the weekend, Quinn had called me about an online report the brothers wanted to branch into fashion. The fuchsia-colored illusion dress I'd chosen was more expensive than last week's outfit. The price tags astonished me and yet made me doubly appreciative of my job.

At the screen, I glanced around, unsure where to sit the laptop, since there was no stand.

A big, warm hand suddenly settled at the small of my back. Even before I glanced over my shoulder and met Noah's blue eyes, I knew it was him. When he was close to me, my body flared to life and my senses were fully engaged.

"A utility cart has been sent for," he told me.

"They hadn't intended to hear us out," I said wryly.

"No," he agreed, inscrutable.

"They brought you in just to be dismissed."

He nodded, his features taut.

"Noah—"

Backing away, he shook his head to silence me. He gave me a sweeping once over, his eyes darkening. But he didn't speak or allow me to, returning to his chair without further comment.

I couldn't allow our personal issues, *my* personal issues, to interfere, so while awaiting the utility cart, I walked to my chair, although I remained standing. I sat the computer on the table and pulled up the proper files. By the time I finished, maintenance had arrived. The guy set up everything, then showed me the ins and outs of the remote control.

"Thank you all for your patience." I ignored Claude's pointed look at his watch. "Because of the urgency of Mr. Keegan's special project, I will start there."

Claude smiled. "I must interrupt you, *petite une*."

Noah growled, but Boyd got up from his chair and took the seat I'd vacated to whisper to Noah.

"As much as your beauty transfixes us," Claude continued, holding my gaze, and forcing me to ignore the heated whispers between Boyd and Noah, "the special project is a guaranteed impossibility. It must be redone. Maybe we revisit for the 25th year."

I swallowed the names I longed to fling his way. "Just indulge me for five minutes." Asshole.

"Proceed, madame," Sacha said, just as Boyd and Noah focused on me.

"I created a short video to capture the essence of Mr. Keegan's goal."

Finding the right music had been agonizing. I wanted the greatest impact, so Claude Amage understood the project's importance and felt its urgency. My first song choice had been *Halo* by Beyonce. It was Bey. Enough said. Then I thought to use *Can You Feel The Love* by Elton John. It didn't work. Neither did Sam Smith's *Stay With Me*, *Dear Mama* by Tupac, or *You Raise Me Up* by Josh Groban. *Butterfly Kisses* sent me into a crying fit because of my mother. Both my parents.

Though I couldn't look at Noah, I made sure I had everyone else's attention before I ran it. I pressed play as Bette Midler's *The Rose* filled the room, the soundtrack to several videos of Réjane Keegan and her world that had been cut and merged into this one. I added text, offering facts of her life, her legacy, and words of love and beauty I thought applied to her. She had been a stunning woman with eyes as green as Noah's brother, Nicholas. Even if her honey-blond tresses were the exact opposite of her sons' dark hair, her smile mirrored Noah's. Unfortunately, as the years passed, her smile had grown even rarer than his.

Reid provided the videos, either featuring her alone or with Noah. They had been so close. I understood why her sudden death had affected his entire life.

Spliced between footage of her were clips from Chevreuse, her birthplace, a fairytale-like city dating to the Middle Ages. When the video ended, I waited a moment before I turned. I'd viewed it at least ten times, yet I felt so emotional because of Noah. I wanted to absorb his pain, the heaviness in the air heightening my feelings.

A full minute went by before I faced them, but I couldn't meet Noah's gaze, even if the heat of it lasered me. "Réjane Keegan was taken far too soon, especially from a son who loved her so dearly and whom she loved as much. This isn't about Mr. Keegan. It is about honoring a woman who enriched the world just because she was in it. The limited-edition fragrance pays homage to her legacy. She created KMG, and nurtured it, along with the Amage account."

The men remained silent, so I continued.

"Réjane Keegan was an incredible woman who carried her family's business to unprecedented heights."

I found the PowerPoint presentation and clicked to slide one, revealing the compilation of ingredients. "In my revised brief, you will see our wish to limit the amount of synthetic components, so our product can be clean. The perfume oils must be as pure as possible."

"Are you questioning the quality of our products, madame?" Claude demanded.

"*Non, monsieur,*" I said quickly. "I am making a case on why I've requested the change."

"Please, proceed, Ms. Hagen," Boyd Andrews instructed me, side-eying Claude.

"Thank you," I said, picking up where I left off. "The purer oils will also result in a thicker perfume more hydrating than most others. The parfum will have a complex fragrance. French lavender and Noisette coffee, as well as vanilla, chestnuts, and sunflowers. All things Réjane loved—the smell of vanilla, the taste of chestnuts, and the cheeriness of sunflowers."

I gazed at everyone's faces as I spoke, to gauge their feelings and make eye contact. Claude wore a scowl. The various emotions on Noah's face hinted at how the mention of his mother affected him.

"According to my calculations, each 50ml bottle will cost ten dollars to produce. This will be a high-end, limited-edition *extrait de parfum* with the highest possible fragrance concentration. Forty percent," I announced, seeing the argument forming on Claude's face. Typical concentration was between twenty and thirty percent. "Mr. Keegan is funding the project," I added quickly. "I propose a 2000% percent markup, roughly two-hundred dollars a bottle."

"We could produce a cheaper perfume, based on per bottle estimates. Sauncier's proposed perfume will cost half the amount to produce," Claude said haughtily.

Noah glared at Claude. "We aren't planning to use cheap ingredients you can find at Walmart. This perfume has sentimental value. The price per bottle factors in not only the price of the scent's oils, but the import costs as well."

"And we'll have Keegan funds at our disposal, Claude," Boyd Andrews pointed out, and I was grateful he sided with Noah. "With their funding, money won't be an issue. Going with KMG as planned is more appealing." He had a strong Brooklyn accent, one contrasting his appearance. "Factor in the close working relationship we've had with Noah's company, it's a no-brainer to produce the commemorative parfum."

"It is not possible," Claude said in a bitter voice, furious with me. "He no longer has what is needed."

Bewildered, I gazed at Noah. He was staring at me, but I couldn't read his expression.

"There is nothing more—"

"Sauncier has given a preliminary agreement to cancel the release of the smell-alike," I interrupted Claude. "Reid Keegan has their signatures. We only need your agreement to use the composition for the purpose it was created. We have received

the regulatory dossier.” I walked to my briefcase and got out my carefully arranged folders.

Once I handed them out, I took my own and opened it, going through the documents. I’m sure most of the details were familiar to everyone since Dorset had taken them with him to Sauncier and, in turn, resubmitted the files to Amage.

I’d worked my ass off to compile updated market evaluations, hoping the previous technical assessment would suffice. I’d even revised the brief. The preliminary agreement, along with the cost for Dorset and Sauncier to give up all claims, was also there, as well as my box and bottle concepts.

“If you sign off on the deal, our legal department has the trade in secret application ready as well as the applications for the logo and all other appropriate protections.”

Boyd sat the folder down. “You came armed, didn’t you, Ryan?”

He had been the fairest and gave me the opportunity to make the presentation, but he sounded as patronizing as Claude had been out-of-line and chauvinistic when he’d referred to me as little one and commented on my beauty.

“Please proceed with whatever else you wish to show us.”

My presentation for their pillar fragrance also included a video. I chose a French song played to majestic structures and dramatic romance. I used ideas from the brief I’d written for the composition to add words, closing with a voiceover. The amount of money at my disposal to create my presentations was insane. Using the funds at my discretion, along with KMG’s designers and in-house legal resources, allowed me to realize my vision.

“I will have several box and bottle prototypes for your review within the month,” I said when the video ended, and I’d passed out my folders.

Everyone but Claude reviewed what I had included.

“We will consult with Denis Amage and Channing Powers,” Boyd told me. “Then we will get back to you.”

“Of course,” I said, hiding my disappointment. “All I ask is for a fair chance.”

“Her delivery was infantile and overly emotional,” Claude spat. “A child would do better. It is obvious she is only here because she fucked you, Noah. *Putain.*”

“Fuck you!” I exclaimed before I could stop myself. “I am not a whore, but you are a fucking dickhead.”

Noah stood so quickly from his seat, his chair crashed to the ground. “How dare you? I don’t give two shits about how you feel about me or my company. You will not disrespect Ryan’s character with such a claim. Watch your goddamn mouth.”

At his calm malice, a chill slithered down my spine. He turned to me and nodded toward the door. I snatched my things, eager to leave the conference room, suddenly too small, despite the abundance of space.

The reports about me this past week hadn’t helped Claude’s perception. I could’ve excused his belief if I hadn’t put my everything into today’s presentation. It hadn’t mattered to him or anyone else. They had made their minds up. I’d gotten my position because I’d fucked Noah.

That crushed me. After Nicholas’s behavior, I should’ve expected such attitudes. I was the fool, not them.

“Ryan,” Noah said softly as we boarded the elevator, his anger gone.

His concerned stare made me swallow.

“Are you alright?”

“No,” I whispered, seeing no reason to lie to him. “I’m offended a person as important as Claude Amage believes I slept with you to get this job. I’ve sacrificed too much to be where I’m at today for someone to think my pussy got me hired instead of my qualifications.”

Memories of all the days I’d missed out with my siblings because of my dedication to school, and all my previous jobs to keep us afloat, floated through my mind.

When I entered college, Quinn had been a high school freshman, and Logan was still in the 7th grade. Following the death of our parents, they'd both been held back a grade. Despite the downgrade from the house we grew up in, they chose to live with me in the off-campus two-bedroom apartment, smaller than my current place. Timothe made his stance on us staying in our childhood home clear. Armani insisted we stay, but she had given birth to twins in my freshman year. Overnight, the space in the townhouse shrank.

She and I entered a non-legal agreement. For all intents and purposes, I'd become Quinn and Logan's guardian. I never worried Armani would challenge our informal custody arrangement. She had an ever-growing family, with three small children to care for and one obnoxious man-child she called 'husband'. She couldn't put much time in watching over our younger siblings. But, for me, juggling college, with housecleaning, cooking, and various part-time positions to keep a roof over our head and food on the table, rarely left me free time.

"Penny for your thoughts, Ms. Hagen?" Noah asked as the elevator halted, pressing the button to hold the doors opened and allowing me to precede him.

I shook my head 'no' as we walked through the lobby to the exit, trying to push the memories aside. That time had been one of the hardest of my life, and I'd wondered if all our struggles would pay off. In retrospect, it was all worth it. "My thoughts are worth more than a penny, Mr. Keegan." I sighed, dejected. "You don't have time to hear them, anyway."

"Well," he said, holding the door open for me. As we bounded down the steps, he smiled. "Why don't we discuss them over lunch?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

Noah

It's not you, it's me had always been a copout in my estimation, a crock of shit meant to forfeit real accountability. And yet, it was never more applicable or understandable because it *wasn't* Ryan. It was all me. Even if I had my reasons for my distance, it hurt her.

But all I'd learned from Quinn the night she and Reid intruded on my solitude gave me pause. Not to mention the rabid media coverage targeting Ryan. I'd trotted her out in front of the world for an end goal, the saving of my reputation, the recovery of my bottom line.

She'd succeeded, but at what cost to herself? The very reason I'd hired her—to deal with Amage—was now also in jeopardy. When Boyd Andrews called last Wednesday, he'd expressed not one hint they wouldn't give KMG a fair shot. That, too, was my fault. I should've known Claude sought any excuse to drop us.

Even worse, I was in no position to take over the House of Amage. I wasn't bankrupt by any means, yet because of that fucking article, I'd lost more money in a day's time than ever before.

I glanced at Ryan, sitting across from me at a small corner table. She was magnificent. There was no other word to describe her. She had wit, charm, business acumen, and beauty. More than anything, she was tough as steel, but I was achingly aware of her softness.

I wanted her. On my arm. In my bed.

In my boardroom.

It was the last thought I could barely wrap my head around. After insisting my entire adult life, hell, since I was twelve, I'd never marry a career woman, I yearned for Ryan. Shocking to me, but her job kept me away from her. One mishap would panic me, and I'd demand she resign.

For the entire week, I'd gone back and forth about terminating her after this meeting. It *was* worry for her health. Mostly, though, selfishness motivated the idea. If she didn't work at KMG *and* I convinced her to retire, I could pursue her.

Yet, she was so fucking brilliant, the ideal candidate on paper. In reality, she was qualified to be a project manager at Keegan Media Group. Or the fucking president and CEO.

I hadn't known what to expect from her at today's meeting. I could've sent her on her own. Had she been a man, I would have. An unfortunate sentiment she would've chewed me out over. Even with me present, Claude had disrespected and condescended. If she had been a *he*, no fucking way her looks would've been commented on. Claude wouldn't have belittled her by calling her little one. And he wouldn't have demeaned her.

When she played the video, I held my emotions in by sheer will. Ryan captured the essence of Réjane Keegan as a young woman, a wife, a mom, and, most of all, a businesswoman. Somehow, she'd also perfectly portrayed our close relationship and how much my mother loved me.

I was stunned, awed, and enraptured. At the conclusion, when Ryan paused before turning and addressing us, I was also grateful. Arrogance told me she'd done it for my benefit because she knew it had laid my heart bare and my emotions were raw. Logically, though, I understood the business decision to allow the impact of what she'd created to sink in, maximizing our chances of Amage green lighting the project.

After Ingrid Warrington's article, Boyd called and told me Claude was looking into legal action.

"He says you misled him and his brothers by overstating your net worth and intimidated them into signing the contract for Réjane's fragrance."

"*What?*" I'd exploded.

"We all know that's bullshit, Noah," Boyd had said on a sigh. "But you need to consider the ramifications of a lawsuit. The fragrance will never see the light of day because it'll be

tied up in court. Sauncier will release the smell alike. And Claude will win in the court of public opinion.”

I'd drawn in a deep breath. “I refuse to jeopardize my mother's fragrance. What do you suggest?”

“I've already gotten their agreement on an alternative. You're going to have to have your guy present the details of the fragrance. It won't be a done deal, but I will do my best to get it pushed through.”

In other words, a presentation had been as necessary for my mother's parfum as it had been for our bid to win the marketing contract for their new pillar fragrance.

Throughout Ryan's exhibition, I'd seen how impressed everyone except Claude had been with her.

And once she completed her pitch for my mother's fragrance, Ryan wasn't finished mesmerizing me. I couldn't have asked for more than what she accomplished in such a short time. I owed Reid a debt of gratitude.

After such a triumphant meeting, she should have been celebrating. Instead, she was so quiet. I'd never seen her so upset and unanimated. The next time I saw Claude Amage, I would beat the living shit out of him for dampening her mood. I wasn't a violent man; however, I didn't appreciate his accusations, especially after her brilliant presentation. Boyd had talked me down once. The next time the asshole struck, Ryan had reacted, and I'd thought it prudent to withdraw her from the situation.

Now, removed from the situation, I regretted leaving before I knocked Claude out and I hated the agony plastered on her face. Since arriving at Three Amigos, a local Tex-Mex restaurant owned by a small group of friends, she was lost in her own head. Now, with our food and drinks in front of us, Ryan's funk remained. She'd hardly touched her steak quesadilla and took occasional sips from her Mexican Coke.

“How's your food?” I asked, then took a bite of my chicken fajita, hoping my question spurred conversation between us.

She looked at her plate before picking half of the quesadilla up and taking a small bite, giving me a thumbs-up as she chewed. She washed the food down with a sip of her drink. “It’s great. How’s yours?”

“Good as always. If you’re ever craving Mexican food, this is the place to come to.”

She nodded and forced a smile. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Her skin glowed against the dress’ bright color. Mesh made up the neckline and sides and clung to her curves, driving me insane. She’d pushed her wealth of dark hair back, catching part of it in the middle and then allowing it all to flow around her. I wanted to eat her pussy, then fuck her thoroughly. Our first time together should’ve been in a bed.

“Thanks for this, by the way.”

“No problem. I was hungry, and it would’ve been rude not to extend a lunch invitation to you.”

Disappointment flashed in her gray eyes.

Fuck. I wanted to kick myself for making it sound I’d only invited her out of courtesy.

She nodded again. We ate more food, staring at each other as we chewed. Her gorgeous face captivated me, and her bright eyes intrigued me.

I should tell her if I’d keep her as my project manager, except it was possible her position was now useless.

“Ms. Hagen.” My sanity required formality, so I’d make a sound business decision. Brains over cock. *Heart?* Whichever. Every part of me knew she loved her work. How could I take away her passion for my own selfishness?

“Mr. Keegan?” Her brow creasing, she shifted in her seat. “Yes, sir?”

“Our chances of working with Amage are slim-to-none.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I know.”

She raised her liquid gaze to me. Goddamn, if I couldn’t have stared at her forever.

“I will set a goal to honor the 25th year of my mother’s death.”

“Excellent idea. Breaking away from Amage will be good for Keegan Media Group in the long run. KMG has other accounts, but Amage is its biggest. I’ve investigated their background. They won’t be able to operate much longer. Claude isn’t right for the job he has. He’s a great fucking asshole, but a horrible businessman.” She drew in a deep breath. “The events of the day let you off the hook, Mr. Keegan. They decided my fate. Every argument I intended to make is moot since I am no longer needed.”

The escape she provided should’ve made me happy, but her disappointment bothered me.

“You’re wrong, Ms. Hagen. I need you very much.”

At my words, her gaze flew to mine, and she licked her lips.

My words required clarifying. My tone was not businesslike but filled with desire.

“You need me?” she asked, so quietly I almost missed the words.

It isn’t you. It’s me.

Yes, because I was a fucking jackass. My flip-flopping would seem I toyed with her emotions, when, in fact, protecting her was my goal. My workplace stance had been so fucking rigid and Ryan would suffer most if I played both ends to the middle.

We could only be secret lovers if she kept her job. We could only have a relationship if she gave up her job. The twain would never meet in such a situation.

“You’re an asset to Keegan Media Group, Ms. Hagen.” It was the truth, even if it was a fucking copout.

She glanced away, and I fisted my hands so I wouldn’t reach for her.

“I would like you to stay for the planned six months. You’ll oversee the preliminary work for the 25th year honor. We will rewrite your contract to reflect the change.”

“I haven’t seen my current contract,” she said briskly.

“I know.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered what I said to you or even if everything had gone smoothly today. You intended to fire me.”

“I did,” I admitted. “Before I saw you in action, sweetheart. Your resumé captured my attention, though you were still inexperienced by any standard. Trent Smith’s recommendation swayed me, but it was what most bosses did for an outstanding employee. After today, you have my admiration and everlasting respect. I’m sorry you won’t get the chance to handle Amage’s launch campaign for their new pillar fragrance. Your future is bright, Ms. Hagen.”

“Thank you, Mr. Keegan. You don’t know what your words mean to me.”

We concentrated on our food. Luckily, our fajitas were served piping hot.

A few minutes passed in companionable silence. After swallowing a bite, Ryan looked at me. “Can I ask you something?”

Not done eating, I nodded.

Her eyes lingered on my face. “Who was the woman you were on a date with at the restaurant? Rosalie Howard?” she asked, not hiding her jealousy as she said my sister’s name. She lowered her lashes. “If I remember correctly,” she mumbled.

I stared at her and choked at her question, which quickly turned into body-racking coughs. Fuck if I hadn’t lost my mind. Her jealousy thrilled me.

“Are you okay?” she asked in concern, eyeing me as if she’d jump up at any moment to save me.

I swigged my Dr. Pepper to clear my throat. Back to normal, I took a deep breath and stared at Ryan’s mouth. “I’m fine.” The memory of her luscious lips wrapped around my cock hardened me. Meeting her gaze, I saw genuine concern. Allowing me to make love to her without knowing Rosalie’s

identity underscored how vulnerable she'd been. "Rosalie is my sister," I said gruffly. "Howard is her married name."

Shock entered her eyes. "Oh." She bit her lip, and I held back a groan. My cock throbbed. "You two look nothing alike," she said after a moment.

"Rosalie is the spitting image of our mother," I said wistfully. Every time I saw my younger sister, Mother came to mind. At twenty-seven years old, Rosalie looked just like our mother at that age. Though Nicholas also had our mother's green eyes, Rosalie was the only one to inherit her blonde hair, which increased their uncanny resemblance.

My heart ached as I thought about my younger sister. Rosalie lacked our mother's warmer qualities. When I received Rosalie's call informing me she'd driven from her home in The Hamptons to have dinner with me, I knew she'd been after a favor. Money. Still, I accepted her dinner invitation to one of her favorite restaurants, knowing I'd foot the bill but hoping she just wanted to see me. We'd enjoyed our meal and had even reminisced about our childhood. For a time, our easy banter had deceived me. Then, on the way to her hotel, my sister informed me she and Wilson, her husband, needed financial help. Though I suspected the reason for her visit, her requesting a check disappointed me.

"I thought the other plans you mentioned referred to... inappropriate activities."

I grinned at her primness, but she offered me a stern look and turned her attention to her phone. A few minutes went by before she spoke again.

"Your little sister seemed very possessive of you."

"She is." She was the middle child, and one of two girls in a family full of men. As bad as she was with her brothers, she'd been even worse with our father. My sister...the thought trailed off as Ryan's words sank in. "How'd you know she's younger than me?"

Googling the Keegan name yielded a plethora of information, especially about me. We'd all worked hard to

keep Rosalie and Remy out of the public eye, so one would have to dig a little deeper to find anything about her.

I wanted Ryan to admit her curiosity. It would mean she was interested enough in me to research me.

“You’re Noah Keegan,” she said casually. “I’ve just spent the past week curating your mother’s life story.”

“The Keegan sibling birth order isn’t common knowledge. In the entirety of your video, I only saw photographs of me with my mother.”

“Honoring her memory was your idea,” she responded. “Besides, I worked with what Reid provided.”

“You didn’t know anything about Rosalie,” I challenged. “How do you know she’s my ‘little’ sister if you didn’t know her identity?”

“Fine,” Ryan conceded with a sigh and nodded to her phone. “I just Googled you.”

Her sheepish tone made me grin, and her gaze briefly flickered to my lips. “Stalker,” I joked.

It fucking thrilled me she cared to know about me. Besides, seriously accusing her of stalkerish behavior, considering my extensive background check on her because of my attraction, was hypocritical.

Her eyes widened, her skin flushing.

“No, I’m not!” An adorable giggle escaped her. “I was just curious about you, and Google is right here!” She tapped her phone.

“Well, then.” I rested my elbows on the small metal table and leaned forward. “What do you want to know?”

“Google doesn’t tell me the basics. For instance, what’s your favorite color?”

I’d never considered the unimportant detail. “Teal,” I answered after a moment’s reflection.

“Teal’s a pretty color. I would’ve guessed gray since it’s your office color. Why—”

“Not so fast, Ms. Hagen.” Gray reflected my usual mood. How sobering. “It’s my turn now.”

Her eyebrows rose a notch before she playfully grinned at me. “Oh? So, we’re playing twenty questions, then?”

“I suppose we are. So, what’s *your* favorite color?”

She laughed, and I chuckled at the infectious sound. Her joyful expression warmed my stony heart, and it relieved me to see her lifting herself from the funk Claude put her in. “You can’t just steal my question, Mr. Keegan.”

“I can and I did. Now answer me.”

“Fine. I like red. It looks great on me.”

Remembering her little red suit, I nodded in agreement, and my cock thickened, eager to express his agreement with her statement, too. “Indeed, it does,” I said huskily.

Lust darkened her gray eyes. “Why, thank you. My turn, now.” Lowering her lashes, she cleared her throat. “What’s your favorite animal?”

Her boring questions disappointed me, but I didn’t want to relinquish my time with her. “Ask another one. That one is too simple.”

“Hey, a person’s favorite animal speaks volumes about their character,” she chided, a soft smile playing on her lips.

God, she was gorgeous.

“Such as?”

“Dogs and cats. Both are great pets, but in need of different care. Cats are more independent and colder toward their owners, while dogs are more affectionate and loyal.”

“What if I like them both equally?”

“Then you just like cute, fluffy animals and my words are meaningless.”

Her dramatic sigh coaxed another chuckle from me.

“So, what’s your favorite animal, Noah?”

The casual use of my first name might breed insubordination, but I loved the way ‘Noah’ sounded on her lips. The two times she’d seen me over the past week, I don’t think she’d addressed me. “I’d have to say turtles, Ryan. Those creatures got me interested in scuba diving.”

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Scuba diving?”

“Yeah. When I was younger, I found turtles adorable. I carried out a life’s goal to swim with them on my twenty-fifth birthday.”

“Wow! Great!” She finished her quesadilla. “Your turn.”

“Tell me about an unconventional life goal.”

“Unconventional?”

“Unique to you, like swimming with turtles.”

“I have several, but a collection of luxury pens doesn’t interest many. It’s silly, but I’d love to own a bunch of fancy pens.”

“Noted.” I smiled, adding researching top-tier pens to gift her to my mental to-do list. Cheap pens from bulk packs worked for me and cost far less. “Your turn.”

“Tell me about a memorable stranger.”

“A mysterious woman from a party. Our encounter was brief, but I connected to her.”

The girl at the ball saw *me* and treated me like a man, instead of a steppingstone or a personal bank.

“Are you still in contact with her?”

Since my every effort to prove Ryan was that angel had failed, I shook my head. “No,” I sighed. “We talked for a little while, and I never saw her again,” I announced, my disappointment clear to my own ears.

Ryan’s face fell, and I cringed. I couldn’t explain my regret came from accepting *she* wasn’t that girl. But Quinn had been right. I was chasing ghosts while a flesh-and-blood woman unimpressed with my status or my wealth was within my reach.

“Your turn,” she said with forced cheer.

After swallowing the last of my food, I wiped my hands off with a napkin. I glanced at the time and scowled but texted my driver we’d be ready in five minutes. I rested my elbows on the table and smiled at Ryan. “What made you interested in advertising?”

“My mother’s father worked in advertising, and the stories she remembered my grandfather describing sounded straight from *Mad Men*. And the actual show, especially Peggy Olson, continued my interest in the profession and its history, specifically women in advertising.”

“So, your grandfather and Peggy Olson are the reasons you’re in advertising?”

“Yep.”

“Fascinating. Although I’m dying to know more about you, we must get back to the office.” I got to my feet, unable to recall being so annoyed at returning to work.

For years, work was the crutch keeping me sane. I enjoyed what I did for a living, so I didn’t mind the long hours. But right now, I wanted us to enjoy the afternoon and forget every single task on today’s calendar. Mrs. Mikes and Megan were more than capable of handling whatever arose.

Ryan grabbed her bag and stood. “I’m ready.”

My thought was too impulsive to implement. I glanced at the table to make sure we had everything and noticed the dishes stacked on top of each other, easing the waiter’s collection of the remnants of our meal. The corner of my lip turned up at her kind gesture.

“We should do this again,” Ryan said as we walked out of the small building.

“Yes.” I agreed, grinning again, pleased at her casual suggestion. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d smiled as much. “We should.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ryan

Breathless, I nearly tripped over my feet as I dashed into the Keegan building, horrified at the time. 9:30. Thirty minutes later than my report time. Until today, I'd arrived earlier than necessary almost every morning. Day in and day out, I hurried through dressing to assure my prompt arrival. New York traffic was unpredictable.

Today was a prime example. As I did every day, I got up at seven to dress for the workday. An hour later, I was ready to go. Yet, an hour and a half after I left my home, I was just arriving. Besides traffic being an absolute ass today, Sandy was giving me trouble again.

Last Tuesday, I'd gotten an unexpected bonus deposited into my bank account. Instead of using it as a down payment for a new car, I'd paid for Sandy's repairs and had picked her up over the weekend. Yet, she'd once again been difficult. More than once, I'd thought I'd need another tow truck.

Inside the building, I chuckled at spotting the little pumpkins and skeletons on Jose's desk. I waved at him, smiling as I passed him, and he mirrored my gesture. Hurrying to the bank of elevators, I hit the 'up' arrow, willing the doors open *now*. Tardiness was one of Noah's major pet peeves, so he was going to hand me my ass.

Maybe he'd give some slack thanks to the news we'd gotten not long after returning to the office after our lunch. Against all odds, Boyd Andrews announced their agreement to cancel the smell-alike with Sauncier and proceed with KMG's scent. We signed the paperwork last Wednesday. All systems were going at Mach speed because of the tight timeline.

The icing on the cake was Friday's call from Boyd. KMG was still in the running to handle the pillar launch. Our odds of being awarded the campaign were slim, he'd warned, but it was still a possibility.

The elevator doors opened, and I almost squealed in relief. Stepping in, I hit the button for floor twelve, listing everything on my agenda for the day. Foremost, stopping by Noah's office and explaining my tardiness. Only then could I discuss his need to come up with a name for his mother's parfum.

I was averaging fourteen- and fifteen-hour days, but without a name, it would screech to a halt.

Second, I had to give Mrs. Mikes my notes from this weekend, so she'd type my proposal. Noah expected the document by this evening. Third, Claude Amage demanded another presentation. I needed to jump on that and secure Noah's approval since it concerned budgeting.

"Floor twelve," the familiar robotic monotone announced. Stepping off, I bee-lined for Mrs. Mikes' desk, just as she was disconnecting from a phone call.

I prayed my appearance didn't reveal my rushed morning. "Good morning, Mrs. Mikes."

"Good morning, Ms. Hagen. Mr. Keegan wants to see you in his office."

So eager to chew my ass out. "Right." I dug into my briefcase and handed her a folder just as my cell phone alerted me to an incoming message. "I need a proposal typed by this afternoon."

"I'll complete it long before then," she promised, turning to her desktop.

A quick glance at my cell phone revealed Billy's message, asking for my preference for lunch. My stomach was in knots, and the thought of food nauseated me. I sent him a quick *surprise me*, then dropped my phone back into my purse.

Sighing, I trekked to Noah's office, not looking forward to his verbal lashing. I wanted the confrontation over. No, I wanted seeing him behind me. This morning, I would've appreciated his arms around me. His lips on mine. His cock inside me.

Jesus.

I paused and fanned myself. “You got this, girl.” *Are you sure about that?* Fuck, I was positive. My body didn’t crave his. Our morning meetings weren’t the highlight of my day. He had ordinary blue eyes and an itty-bitty dick not even a gnat would appreciate.

That was taking it a little too far.

Growling in frustration, I stalked forward. Pretending our sex hadn’t happened was harder some days.

Obviously.

Fuck off. I didn’t have an Inner Goddess. I had an Annoying Bitch.

At his door, I knocked. Annoyed, I opened his office door without his leave. My heart dropped to my toes. Of all the things I expected to see, it wasn’t Noah standing near his desk, locked in a hug with an olive-toned woman. The tips of her dark hair were dyed blue.

A gasp escaped me, and I regretted opening his door before his go-ahead.

“Oh!” I exclaimed quietly, frozen in my spot as I fought to control my irrational jealousy.

We weren’t anything more than boss and employee, so I had no business feeling jealous of the mystery woman. Taking in a breath, I tried to compose myself as they pulled apart, not wanting either of them to see how their embrace bugged me.

“Ryan,” he said, distancing himself from the woman. “You’re here.”

“Traffic was a bitch today,” I said icily, focused on the gorgeous woman he’d been hugging.

Noah followed the direction of my gaze. “Ryan, this is Soraya Morgan.”

“So, you’re Ryan Hagen,” she said by way of introduction, a smile curving her red lips. She knew me? “It’s nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Soraya,” Noah hissed, glaring at her.

She grinned, and mischief gleamed in her eyes.

“Uh, nice to meet you, too,” I muttered awkwardly, inching into the room, leaving the door ajar.

The tips of Noah’s ears reddened, and his handsome face twisted in annoyance.

Unperturbed, she stared at him and laughed before she shook her head. “I better get going, Noah. I’ll see you later.”

She strolled out of his office and closed his door, leaving the two of us alone.

“I’ll remember to knock next time before entering your office,” I said briskly.

“Your prerogative, Ms. Hagen,” he said in dismissal. He looked at his watch before glaring at me. “You’re late.”

“Who was she?” I demanded, as if I had a right to know. He’d made his feelings clear, so who he fucked was no concern of mine.

According to him.

“I told you, she’s Soraya Morgan.”

“How detailed,” I sneered, returning his glare measure-for-measure.

“Careful, Ms. Hagen,” he warned, his voice dangerously low. “Why does her identity matter so much to you?”

His asking spoke volumes.

I shrugged, playing it cool. “I’m just wondering.”

“Her identity doesn’t matter,” he snapped. “Back to the topic at hand. You’re late.”

What was wrong with me? He was right. Whether they were an item wasn’t my business. I wasn’t owed any explanation about her relationship with Noah. He and I were nothing.

“I’m sorry for my tardiness. As I said earlier, traffic was a bitch.”

“I’ll let it slide this time, but I don’t tolerate tardiness. Don’t let this become a habit.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Mr. Keegan, but I can’t control traffic.”

“Leave your house earlier. Get the subway.”

His words pissed me off. “I leave at the same time every day, and in the three weeks I’ve been here, I’ve been early almost every single day. Traffic was heavier than normal, which is why I was tardy. I’ll do my best not to let it happen again, but the time I leave isn’t the issue.”

I didn’t address his subway comment. It wasn’t his business I drove everywhere out of sentimentality. True, it made my life harder, and I’d have to change my transportation habits soon, but Sandy was one of the last remnants of my parents’ help. It didn’t matter they’d intended to take the money from me. They’d loved me enough to give me money to put toward her.

“You also have a driver at your disposal. You have several options to ensure you arrive on time.”

He was right, so I had no response. “What did Soraya mean when she said she’s heard a lot about me?”

Discomfort flashed across his face before his emotionless mask returned. “She’s married to Graham Morgan, a close friend of mine. I’ve informed him of your employment and of your performance, and he must’ve relayed that information to his wife.”

Relief settled into me. “You two aren’t together?”

Off the market. Soraya was off the market. Yeah-yeah-yeah.

Whoop, whoop.

Why the fuck was I so happy Mrs. Morgan was married? Only a low motherfucker fucked his friend’s wife. Whether Noah had, changed nothing between us.

He shook his head. “No, we’re not. Again, Ms. Hagen, why do you care?”

Because I can’t forget my time in your arms, you fucking idiot.

“I want to know more about you. Our twenty questions at Three Amigos piqued my curiosity,” I admitted with exasperation. TMI. I changed the subject. “My performance is so good you’ve been bragging about me.”

His eyes darkened, and he stared at my mouth before he cleared his throat. “Indeed. Your performance is excellent, Ms. Hagen.”

Informing me I’d keep my job and detailing the reasons had left me floating on a cloud for the rest of the evening. His compliments and the sincerity on his face meant a lot.

Apparently, his praises would always affect me, because now my heart soared at his words.

His gaze swept over my body, and heat rushed through me. When he looked at my face again, the desire in his gorgeous blue eyes was unmistakable.

“I’ve held you up long enough,” he murmured in a deep, husky voice that made me want to rip his clothes off and fuck his brains out.

“Have that proposal to me by the end of the day.”

“Mrs. Mikes is typing it up for me as we speak, Mr. Keegan.” I applauded my steady voice, shamelessly admiring him.

Lord, but he was a beautiful man.

“Excellent.” The corners of his mouth ever so slightly lifted in a subtle smirk. “I’ll have Mrs. Mikes fetch you when it’s submitted so we can go over it.”

“Excellent,” I echoed, breathless.

He dropped his gaze to my cream V-neck sweater and the unbuttoned blazer matching my pants and showcasing my breasts. My nipples tightened at the stark hunger on his face.

Swallowing, I took in another breath to control my growing lust. I stood still, tilting my head up to meet his gaze as he walked toward me. He stopped, inches away, close enough for me to smell his minty breath.

Noah swallowed, raised his hand, and caressed my cheek. Goosebumps swept over my body, and I trembled.

“May I kiss you, Ms. Hagen?” he rumbled. “Ryan.”

For days, I’d dreamed of hearing his desire roughened voice and feeling his mouth on me again.

Unable to speak, I nodded. Even before he touched me, my pussy moistened. When he leaned down, my eyes fluttered closed out of instinct. He brushed his lips against mine, and I eagerly responded. Our kiss quickly deepened, flaring out of control. He grabbed me by the waist and held me tightly against him. Humming in the back of my throat, I wrapped my arms around his neck. His hard, thick cock pressed into my belly.

“Noah,” I whispered, wanting him more than my next breath.

“I’m here, baby,” he told me, and my heart melted. I was lost. Completely and irrevocably.

Our kisses turned frantic.

“I want you inside of me,” I confessed. “Now.”

Satisfied laughter rumbled from him. He guided me to his desk and pressed me against it, trapping me between his rock-hard body and the wooden surface. My hands traveled up to his hair. He nipped my lip, and a moan escaped me. Breathing heavily, he pulled away from me to untuck my sweater and undo the button of my pants. Watching his big hand trail across my belly once he lifted my sweater filled me with anticipation.

A knock on the door interrupted us.

“Fuck,” I gasped and shoved him away. Stumbling to my feet, I put some distance between us as I repaired my clothing. My lips were moist and swollen. My lipstick stained Noah’s mouth, so I’m sure it was hopelessly smeared on mine.

Unperturbed by our encounter, Noah stared at me as I strove for calm. Besides his slightly messy hair and my lipstick on his mouth, he looked as collected as always.

The knock came again.

“Mr. Keegan?” Megan called.

Fucking shit! She was the last person I wanted to face. For the most part, we stayed in our own lanes, but she still had it in for me. And I didn’t trust her. I also still suspected she’d orchestrated the Ingrid Warrington confrontation.

“Yes, Miss Buford?” Noah stalked to his desk and settled into the chair, then grabbed a file and opened it. “What can I do for you?” He picked up a pen and busied himself with paperwork.

“May I come in?”

He opened his mouth to answer.

“My lipstick is all over you,” I blurted, panic not passion responsible for my racing heart.

Scowling, he opened a desk drawer and pulled out a packet of tissue.

“Mr. Keegan, may I come in?” Megan demanded.

Wiping one over his mouth several times barely helped, but Megan’s refusal to leave left him limited options.

He glanced at the folder again. “Of course.”

The door opened and Megan strutted in, laser-focused on Noah.

Her black pencil skirt showcased her long legs, the tailored coat outlining her trim waist. “Mr. Keegan,” she purred. “Have you seen—oh!”

I moved away from the sofa to alert her to my presence.

Startled, she gasped, and her hand flew to her chest. “There you are, Ryan. I’ve been searching for you.”

“My morning meeting with Ms. Hagen took longer than usual,” Noah said coolly. “I apologize for holding her up.”

We’d been seconds away from fucking on his desk. I would’ve *really* been held up.

“Oh, my goodness. Is everything okay, hun? I came looking for you twenty minutes ago, and Rosa said you hadn’t arrived yet.” She smiled, and I wished her phony expression froze on her fucking face forever. She stared at my lips, then looked at Noah again. Displeasure gleamed in her eyes. Still, she kept smiling. “Are you terribly undone by his reprimand, Ryan? I should’ve warned you—”

“Miss Buford,” Noah barked. “Ryan’s tardiness is of no concern to you, Rosa, or anyone else except me.”

“Of course, Mr. Keegan,” she responded, her cool dignity firmly in place. “I apologize, sir. I was out of line.”

“I’m not interested in your apologies, madame. You do owe Ms. Hagen one.”

“Of course.” She offered me a brittle smile. “Sincerest apologies, Ryan.”

I nodded, feeling awkward and exposed. “Traffic was out of control today,” I said to fill in the silence, then wished I hadn’t when my voice cracked. Clearing my throat, I walked toward her. “Let’s go to my office and we can discuss whatever you wanted to tell me.”

She glanced between Noah and me one last time. “Of course,” she said through tight lips.

We walked to my office in complete silence, affording me a moment to compose myself and clear my head of how many rules were broken in Noah’s office. It didn’t matter if he’d initiated the encounter. The result would be the same as before.

Instead of learning from my mistake, I’d kissed my fucking boss again.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Noah

“You look like shit,” Graham said as I slid into the booth at Luca’s, a mom-and-pop, family-owned Italian restaurant he’d chosen for this month’s meeting.

“Thanks, man. I feel like shit,” I grumbled. Picking up my menu, I flipped through the meal options.

Yesterday, the moment I got off the clock, I went home and popped open a bottle of whisky. Despite my best efforts to keep the relationship between Ryan and me professional, I’d crossed a boundary with her again. But she’d been upset and jealous over finding Soraya in my office, and just too fucking lickable for words.

Throwing down my menu in disgust, I blew out a frustrated breath.

“Care to tell me what’s going on?” Graham sipped his drink before he jutted his chin at the glass of brown carbonated liquid in front of me. “I ordered you a Dr. Pepper. I know you’re a fan of that poison.”

“Dr. Pepper is great; you just have poor taste,” I quipped, then took a big gulp.

“Dr. Pepper used to be medicine, and it makes sense. It still tastes like fucking medicine,” Graham said flatly.

“I’d love to know what medications you’re prescribed that taste like soda, Graham.”

He grinned at me. “Touché. Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

“A hangover,” I muttered.

A young, short waitress bounced over, her auburn hair piled on top of her head. “Are you two gentlemen ready to order now?”

Graham handed her his menu. “I’ll have the Chicken Cacciatore with garlic bread, Anna.”

“You got it, Mr. Morgan.” She turned her attention to me. “And for you, sir?”

“I’ll have the *Melanzane di Parmigiana*, and garlic bread as well, thank you,” I said, mimicking my friend and passing my menu to Anna.

“Alrighty,” she gushed. “Coming right up!” She bounded away, leaving us alone again.

He and the waitress were quite comfortable with one another.

“You come here often?”

He nodded. “I bring Soraya and Lorenzo here sometimes.”

“How are your son and daughter?” I asked. In the past, my interest was more perfunctory. Mere weeks ago, I’d been a pompous, unfeeling, arrogant asshole. But that was before Ryan.

“Again, Noah, what the hell is wrong with you?” Graham demanded, ignoring my question. “You look like you’ve lost your best friend.”

I raised my forearms on the table and rested my head in my hands, shame filling me. After trying to force Tina out because she was Nicholas’s wife and my sister-in-law, yesterday I’d violated my decree for the second time. “I fucked up,” I admitted bleakly.

“Give me more details so I can better concur or disagree.”

I hadn’t been stingy with my praise of Ryan to either Soraya or Graham, especially following the shitstorm after Ryan’s interview. They’d offered more than their fair share of admiration for her, and neither Morgan suffered fools easily. I thought Soraya and Ryan could be great friends.

“It’s a long story.”

“That’s why we have these lunches, dumbass. To stay up to date about each other’s lives.”

I didn’t know where to begin.

“Soraya thought your deer-in-the-headlight look when Ryan walked in on you two hilarious.” Graham chuckled. “You couldn’t explain you hugged Soraya because she gave you a head’s up about a letter she intended to publish from the Concerned Sister.”

I gave him a dark look.

“Stop dodging my damn question, Noah,” Graham ordered, unperturbed. “If you’re not up for a long story, simplify it.”

There was no simplifying my clusterfuck. My hangover raged on, and my head pounded, but I needed some fucking advice, so I eased into the subject.

“It’s Ryan.”

He considered me for a moment, before realization dawned in his eyes, and they widened. “You fucked her?” he exclaimed louder than I would’ve liked.

“Quiet the fuck down.”

“What about her?”

“After Soraya left, Ryan and I didn’t have sex, but I did fucking kiss her.”

We had sex, just not yesterday. I couldn’t bring myself to admit how I couldn’t control myself around her. It was the most fucked-up kind of karma.

“You kissed her. What’s the issue? Your technique? Your timing? Did she not like it?”

“She loved it,” I snapped, “but you’re missing the point.”

“It seems so. I can’t say hello to you lately without hearing about her, so what’s the issue?”

“The issue is she fucking works for me!” I exclaimed, dropping my hands to my side to glare at Graham.

“Look, man, I’ve never been in your situation, so I can’t offer you too much advice. But the two of you share an attraction. As consenting adults, what’s the problem?”

As my story concluded, Anna returned, carrying a tray of food.

“Here you guys are.” She set the dishes down and smiled. “Enjoy!”

Alone again, we dug into our meal, silence falling over us.

“What else is going on in your life?” Graham questioned, halfway through our eating. He shoved a forkful of chicken into his mouth.

“Work.” Besides Graham, I counted only one or two other people as friends, since almost everyone only wanted to use me.

“How exciting. How’s your family?”

My siblings were the poster children of people who wanted to use me. “Nicholas and Tina are fine. Rosalie’s husband is a dumbass, unable to handle money. Remy is touring Europe, then she’s going to East Asia. Nathaniel’s life is a shitshow.”

“Didn’t he crash your car some weeks back?”

“Yep. Now the girl he borrowed it for is pregnant.”

Nathaniel’s irresponsibility still astonished me. My perception of him changed slightly after his surprising defense of me.

Graham’s eyes widened. “Jesus!” He sounded as horrified as me. “Nathaniel’s going to be a father?”

“I can’t believe it either.”

After learning of his fling with Megan, I couldn’t picture my irresponsible playboy brother as a family man. May the Lord have mercy on that child. He swore he loved Alessia and wouldn’t cheat because he was determined to marry her.

“What’s he going to do now?”

At the question, I remembered Nathaniel’s request for a job at Graham’s company.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about Nate. He wants a job at your company.”

“Why my company, specifically?”

“Because he’s good with numbers, and for whatever reason, he doesn’t want to work at Keegan Enterprises.” I knew why Nathaniel didn’t work for me; I just opted not to inform Graham of the reason.

“I can’t picture your brother working at my company. Or working, period.”

Agreed.

“I understand, Graham. I’m asking you, as a friend, to take a chance on him.”

Nathaniel needed to get his shit together. Since he didn’t want to work for me, Graham was the next best alternative. Fuck, maybe even better. My brother would take my criticisms as unfair and unnecessarily harsh. He would see the same critiques from Graham as helpful.

“Noah, he’s your brother and you want what’s best for him, but given his track record, I’m not sure if I’m willing to take a risk on him.”

“Would you just think about it so the little shit can get off my back?” It was a lie. After his first request, Nathaniel hadn’t mentioned working for Graham again.

“Certainly,” Graham agreed, then returned to his meal.



I write to you with the unerring knowledge a few details will confirm my identity to one of your readers. But my sister is unhappy, and I am hoping you will somehow fix the mess I’ve created, even if I don’t believe she should know immediately. I know her. She would be so horrified and perhaps even ashamed. She would feel as if she’s failed me because she only wants the best for me. However, I’m afraid to face her sense of betrayal and her disappointment. She trusted my insistence nothing happened at the ball so much, she hasn’t brought it up again, even now after you and her...

I didn’t put two and two together until someone explained it to me when I visited my sister on her first day at work.

Later, when asked point blank by you as we sat in your library if I was Concerned Sister, I denied it. We believed if the truth came to light, the forces that be would band together and come between you. He wants the best for you as much as I want the world for her.

However, I think it is time for you to know the truth so my sister can find the happiness she deserves. If you care about her as much as I think you do, then you will be her rock as she is mine. Just give her time. If there's anything these past days have underscored is how precarious and unkind life can be. I hope you can understand and forgive him and me for our subterfuge.

To leave no doubt to my identity and to whom I am addressing this to, I will say this about my sister. She sees beauty. She makes the world beautiful because of her kindness and her ability to see what I don't have time to search for.

- A Regretful Sister

Even if you'd placed the onus on his shoulders, it doesn't absolve the lies you have told her. We can only hope this has a happy ending for all concerned.

I stared at the *Ask Ida* column. Reread it once. Twice. Four times.

Concerned Sister was Quinn.

Ryan was my angel in blue.

I hadn't imagined our connection at that first interview. It had been real, in place because she'd happened upon me in a guestroom at a ball I'd never wanted to attend.

I thought back to confronting Reid in the presence of Nicholas. The night Quinn told me how Ryan made the world a beautiful place, Reid pointed out she wouldn't stand a chance if Nicholas discovered our lovemaking.

Reid's interference should've infuriated me, and yet I couldn't summon any anger. He'd been protecting me, and the tenuous bond Ryan and I shared.

Perhaps I was running as scared as Quinn, but why rock the boat and admit to Ryan we'd met at the ball? Of course, she needed to know, and she would.

Just not immediately.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ryan

Thank God it was Saturday and my day away from the office. After the steamy kiss I'd shared with Noah yesterday, I wouldn't have been able to look him in the eyes today without revealing how much I wanted him inside me again.

Another bonus to the weekend was not having to deal with Megan. She had been so fucking suspicious and pissed about the apology Noah forced her to give me. She'd sought me out to ask if I knew Ingrid Warrington's husband had lost his position at Sauncier.

Nope, sure hadn't.

My answer hadn't deterred Megan. She'd told me doors opened to Ingrid because of her exposé on Noah were suddenly and firmly shut. Their application for a co-op, ready to be approved, had been denied.

I didn't know about the reasons for the Warringtons' unexpected reversal of fortune. Although I wondered why Megan thought I'd want updates about that woman, my bigger question was how had she discovered these details?

After studying me like a specimen under a microscope, she'd left. Noah had canceled our meeting, so when five o'clock rolled around, I was more than happy to leave.

This morning I'd gotten up, had coffee and toast, then spent hours working. I'd been on the verge of texting Noah most of the day. Knowing the later it got, the weaker my resolve would become, I decided to visit the bar where Ian worked to talk to him. Because I intended to have several drinks and I couldn't trust Sandy, I took the subway, then walked the six blocks from the station.

"Hey, gorgeous," Ian greeted as I sat at the bar and smiled at him.

“Hey, Ian.” I was glad the place was practically deserted tonight. “One screwdriver, please.”

“Coming right up, ma’am,” he drawled, pouring orange juice and vodka into a shaker. “What’ve you been up to?”

Fucking my boss. Kissing my boss. Simple shit.

“Stuff,” I answered, noncommittal.

He grinned. “Stuff?” he echoed. “Sounds like fun.”

“Hmmm,” I replied, my thoughts on Noah and how he might be spending his Saturday night.

Ian slid the drink to me and leaned on the bar. “It’s great seeing you, Ryan. I’ve missed texting and talking to you.”

“Work has been intense.”

His mouth thinning, he straightened. “Considering what you went through at the press conference, I’ll bet it has been.”

I tasted my drink. “It was awful. I can do without such fame.”

“Infamy,” he corrected curtly.

Uninterested in further conversation, I sipped more vodka and orange juice.

Ian got the hint and went quiet, allowing me to brood in silence. For whatever reason, I’d believed I could dispel Noah from my head tonight, when I hadn’t successfully done so since our first meeting. Worse, my attraction had turned into infatuation. The more I learned about him and the more time I spent with him, the more I yearned for him.

Having a career hadn’t come up between us as another reason a romantic relationship was impossible. He admired me because of my work and wanted me to be a part of his company for the time being. However, his years of conditioning himself to believe women shouldn’t be in the workplace wouldn’t change overnight. Especially given the misguided reason behind his logic.

Ian set another screwdriver in front of me and removed my empty glass. “Penny for your thoughts?”

I smiled, remembering similar words from Noah. “My thoughts are worth more than that. Besides, you don’t want to hear them.” I sampled the drink, loving the taste of the orange juice, with just the right amount to conceal the vodka. “Delish.”

He flashed me a cocky grin and began cleaning glasses. “Try me.”

Ian was attracted to me, and men didn’t respond well when a woman friend-zoned them, then gave attention to another man. He wouldn’t harm me, but our relationship would be irrevocably damaged.

Despite visiting to confide in him, I was having second thoughts. Why had I thought talking to him was a good idea?

“Trust me, Ian. You’d prefer if I kept these thoughts to myself.”

“Ryan, sweetheart.” Abandoning his task and drying his hands on a dish towel, he reached across the bar and took one of my hands into his. “You trust me, Ryan. We’re friends. You’re not yourself, and you need a sympathetic ear.” He brought my hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. “Your well-being is the most important thing to me, so try me.”

The care in his words touched me and made me feel as if I could open to him and unburden myself as I had at the auto shop when he’d been all but a stranger. Though he was my friend now, I wouldn’t tell him about making love to Noah. Maybe, though, once I got yesterday off my chest, I could tell him how worried I was about Quinn. She wasn’t her usual carefree self. I could say so much, and he’d listen as he always had. It didn’t matter how much I wanted it to be Noah, who I confided in. “I kissed my boss,” I announced, taking a gulp of my drink.

Ian’s eyes widen. “Come again?”

“I kissed my boss,” I repeated, fully aware he’d heard me the first time.

He drew in a breath, pinning me with a hard glare. “The asshole with the blue eyes? Noah Keegan? Him?” he growled,

anger darkening his brown eyes.

I nodded. “Him,” I confirmed, swigging my drink, welcoming the numbness alcohol provided.

“As I recall, you weren’t looking for anything romantic.”

“I’m not!” I exclaimed, opting to withhold a simple truth. I wasn’t looking for a relationship with anyone except Noah. At that deplorable admission, I finished my drink and held out the empty glass. He snatched it out of my hand and slammed it down with such force, it shocked me it didn’t break. “It was just a heat of the moment thing.”

“That’s why the guy was such a dick during my date with you,” he snarled, leaning across the bar to thrust his face close to me. All traces of the sweet guy I’d met and the understanding one he’d promised to be five minutes ago were gone. “You two are fucking.”

His nose almost touching mine made me uncomfortable, so I scooted to the edge of the barstool. “Ian,” I murmured, trying to control my temper, and pushing aside my sudden hurt. “We only kissed.”

Lies. Such fucking lies.

“That’s hard to believe, Ryan, so I’m calling bullshit. You’re a fucking liar. Keegan’s been a passive-aggressive dick to me since we’ve met. Now, it makes sense why.”

“I warned you that you wouldn’t want to hear my thoughts, but you insisted.”

“I didn’t think you’d say that!”

“You didn’t know what I’d say. For all you knew, I could’ve been ready to confess to a murder spree. And by the way, I don’t appreciate you calling me a liar.”

Well, shit. The fucking nerve of me.

“I don’t appreciate being lied to,” he retorted.

“How the fuck did I lie to you?”

Hint—by omission. By claiming you and Noah only kissed.

Guilt and confusion clawed me, worsened by alcohol, missing Noah, and realizing my friendship with Ian was over. “I told you I wasn’t looking for a relationship, and I’m not.” *Lies, lies, and more lies.* “Kissing someone doesn’t change that, nor gives you the right to insult me because you’re jealous it wasn’t you.”

“Jealous?” Ian snapped. “Jealous of that classist fuckbag kissing you? *Not.* That you think that bullshit shows just how fucking full of yourself you are, Ryan.”

Who the fuck lied now? From the moment we met, Ian made his attraction to me clear.

Folding my arms, I glared at him. “You must think I’m an idiot, Ian. The first time we met you tried to spit weak ass game at me. And if you aren’t jealous, what’s it to you if I kissed Noah?”

Ian’s eyes flashed with hot fury. “Fine, I *am* jealous, but don’t act like there’s no reason to be. From jump, you’ve led me on and played hard to get. Liar! You’re fucking that rich boy egomaniac you work for.”

“Ian, gag on a fucking dick!” I snarled, opening my wallet, and throwing two twenties onto the bar. “I didn’t come here to be subjected to your fucking temper tantrums because you feel as if I’ve spurned you. I didn’t lead you on or play hard to get. I’ve been honest with you, so fuck you and your false accusations. And a word of advice: don’t ask questions you don’t want answers to.”

I stormed out of the bar, fighting off tears. Ian’s words hurt me to my very core, especially after he’d promised to listen as my friend. His malice heightened my sense of betrayal. Combined with all my overwhelming emotions over Noah and I felt like utter shit.



Noah

“Ryan.”

Reid handed a photo to me, then tasted whatever tropical concoction he'd been served. We were at a tattoo shop party on Eighth Avenue. The owners were good friends of Graham and Soraya. They'd invited me when I called to once again thank Soraya for giving me the heads up about the letter Quinn sent to *Ask Ida*. At first, I'd declined their invitation, then reconsidered once I realized it would be perfect to introduce Quinn to Soraya. To arrange the meeting, I called Reid. After expressing my anger at his lies, I'd listened to his explanation and promised to email copies of Concerned Sister's letters. Somehow, he'd talked me into going to a late dinner at Nicholas and Tina's house. He didn't know about the scene in my office and I had no interest in revisiting that confrontation. Besides, I was restless and I wanted Ryan. An evening in my brother's company would keep me occupied. I'd ignored the asshole for years and still worked with him.

Reid and I decided to meet at Tig's Tattoo and Piercings, then head to dinner from there. He'd also agreed to convince Quinn to accompany him.

She hadn't arrived yet, though my cousin had been here for thirty minutes already, long enough to be on his second drink. We were inside, away from the guests, but sounds of laughter and chatter floated to us, serenaded by music unknown to me.

I finally glanced at the picture and my breath caught. *Ryan*. My angel in blue, arm in arm with Quinn. Their masks were on, and Ryan's hair was just as I'd remembered, dark and bone-straight. Memories of her coconut scent wafted to me, and I closed my eyes.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me, Reid?" I demanded, looking at her again and tracing my finger over the image. The sapphire blue made her golden skin radiant. So many dirty thoughts ran through my head, it surprised me my cock didn't burst my zipper. "I asked you point blank."

"You asked me in front of Nick," Reid reminded me. "What did you expect me to say?"

"The fucking truth. You know how to contact me."

“I’m not sorry for what I did. If I had said anything after our meeting at the club, you might not have given her a chance. The truth from me would’ve triggered either Nick’s need for revenge or your desire to be politically correct.”

“Spoken like a true fucking asshole,” Quinn said, gliding to us from the opposite direction of where we’d entered.

“Quinn!” Reid’s eyes lit up. “You’re here.”

“Not for you,” she retorted, snatching his drink, and draining it, then shoving it against his chest.

He caught it by reflex.

The opening door brought in a blast of cold air as well as Graham and Soraya. Like Ryan, Soraya had dark hair. Unlike Ryan, Graham’s wife dyed the tips of her hair according to her mood. Blue, tonight.

“Thanks for pointing me in the direction of the bathroom,” Quinn said to Graham.

He nodded and wrapped an arm around his wife’s waist, bringing her closer to him. “Babe, this is Concerned Sister. Quinn Hagen.”

Soraya grinned and held out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Quinn,” she said as they shook hands.

“Same,” Quinn said, smiling and reclaiming her hand. “Thank you for your help. I figured it was time to confess or start sending in checks to cover your therapy fees.”

Soraya chuckled. “What time is Ryan coming?” she asked, her lips turning down when we didn’t answer. “Are you two fucking serious?” she demanded, glancing between Quinn and me.

“Don’t forget him,” Quinn said, pointing to Reid.

“Nope, you’re not putting me in the middle,” Soraya announced, ignoring Quinn’s words. “Ryan deserves to know the truth.”

“How do I tell her the truth?” Quinn asked. “My sister will hate me.”

“I’ve met your sister,” Soraya snapped. “She seems like a reasonable woman. She’ll be angry, but she’ll get over it.” She glared at me. “Noah—”

I held up my hands. “She’s not ready to hear the truth, Soraya. I have to find the right time.”

“The longer you wait, the harder it will become,” Graham said.

“You don’t understand,” Quinn said bleakly. “My sister...” Her voice trailed off and she pursed her mouth. “The morning my parents were killed, they read her for filth.”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“Criticized,” Quinn, Soraya, Reid, and Graham chorused.

“Harshly,” Quinn added. “To the nth fucking degree. Brush up on your slang, dude. Go to urbandictionary.com. Do you have your cell phone?”

I nodded.

“Assignment starts now. Look up Alabama hot pocket.”

“God, Quinn,” Reid said, exploding with laughter at Soraya roaring, “you’re bad!”

“What the fuck is that?” Graham asked and I sagged in relief I wasn’t the only clueless one.

While Soraya whispered in Graham’s ear, I opened my phone browser and typed in the address Quinn gave me, ignoring Graham’s widening eyes.

As I started on the word ‘hot’, Graham snatched my phone. “Look it up later,” he told me. “Just trust me, man. You don’t want to know.”

“Now I’m doubly curious,” I grumbled, reclaiming my phone to resume the search. When the definition came on the screen, I stared. Reread the words. Twice. Again. Nothing changed. The meaning stayed the same. I was both aghast and sick to my fucking stomach. “People actually do this?”

“I hope not,” Soraya said, wrinkling her nose.

Quinn's humor faded. "That's grounds for murder."

She and I looked at Reid.

"I'm insulted!" he said in outrage.

"Enough," Soraya inserted. "We need to get back to the matter at hand. The way you two—three," she amended at Quinn's raised eyebrows, "are skulking like preschoolers behind Ryan's back and have the fucking audacity to bring me into your bullshit."

"As I was saying, Ryan has issues," Quinn said. "Fuckhead wasn't happy being miserable on his own. Nor was he content with my mother's wretchedness. He had to fuck up my sister, too."

"Quinn, your father—"

She stiffened. "Fuck him, Reid." Her voice trembled and her hazel eyes glistened. "I'm worried about Ryan." Drawing in a deep breath, she swallowed then focused on Soraya. "I'm going to tell her. I just want her to give Noah a fair chance. I think she has fallen for him. Once she accepts desiring someone doesn't make her a whore, any embarrassment on her part, when she discovers the truth about the ball, will be inconsequential."

"Your father was ill, Quinn," Reid said softly, his look tender and unguarded.

Anger and pain settled into her features, and she swallowed. "Undoubtedly. I could've forgiven him for what he did to himself. Even what he did to our mother. He had been so unhappy for so long." She blinked rapidly, then stiffened. "Fuck him. He didn't have to take her away from us. But he knew what the fuck he planned to do. That's why he wouldn't let me go with them. He *knew* and he allowed Ryan's last interaction with them to be verbal fucking abuse and humiliation. Fuck him. He was a motherfucker then and he's a motherfucker now for what he did to my sister."

"He was," I said, because, fuck, *he was*. "But hating him will destroy you, sweetheart."

“No, it won’t,” Quinn said. “I refuse to give him the satisfaction of claiming one more woman in my family. Literally or figuratively. We’re going to win this battle for Ryan’s sexual liberation, then fuck him for all eternity.”

“You can’t win a battle that she has to fight,” Soraya told her. “And she can’t fight it if the truth is hidden from her. I know you want to protect her, and I admire how much you have her back. She deserves to know the truth though. She’ll see that no one thinks less of her. Desire and passion aren’t shameful. Deep down, I’m sure Ryan knows that.”

“Knowing and accepting are two different things,” Quinn responded.

The door opened again, this time bringing in Tig, the tattoo shop owner and Soraya’s friend since childhood, and his wife, Del. I’d met them when I first arrived, and Graham introduced us. Out of the seven of us, I was the only one in a suit. It didn’t matter. They accepted me as is, but I regretted Ryan’s absence. She would’ve enjoyed herself immensely. Having her at my side would’ve made my night out with friends special, even if we hadn’t ended up in bed.

“Yeah, nipples and tongue,” Quinn said.

What?

“Can I watch?” Reid asked.

“What are you two talking about?” I demanded.

“Quinn is getting piercings,” Del answered.

“Not tonight,” Quinn said. “I’ll book with you before I leave, Del.”

“You got it,” Del answered.

Tig lit a cigarette and puffed a couple of times. “Leroy created another drink. Soraya, Quinn, you have to taste this shit.”

“I’m not budging until we resolve this matter,” Soraya said.

“What can I say?” I asked. “I don’t know what the right time will be.”

“That’s not good enough,” she said.

“January 2nd,” Quinn announced. “Noah, Reid, and I will confess everything to Ryan. It’s almost the holiday season. Let her enjoy it. Besides, she needs to focus on her work. Also, it’ll give her and Noah extra time to get to know each other.”

“I hope I don’t regret my agreement,” Soraya said, “but, okay, Quinn. January 2nd I expect you to ‘fess up.”

Another unknown song filtered into the building, and the women laughed.

“Let me in on the joke,” I said.

“That’s Bob Marley,” Soraya answered.

“*No Woman, No Cry*,” Quinn added.

Del winked at me. “You figure it out,” she said, then ushered Quinn and Soraya away.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ryan

After a weekend of sulking and self-loathing, Monday's arrival filled me with a strange sense of dread at seeing Noah again. I knew how he'd expect me to act, and I knew he'd have the barrier firmly in place. Shame morphed into apprehension and bled into anger.

When I'd informed Quinn of the kiss during our two-hour conversation on Saturday, she thought I was overreacting and recommended that I not stress. Fucking easy for her to say, I decided grouchy as I stepped off the elevator and onto the twelfth floor.

"Ms. Hagen," Mrs. Mikes greeted. "Mr. Keegan wants to see you in his office at once. He doesn't wish to wait until you bring your things to your office."

Shit.

"Why?" I asked, my voice so shaky she eyed me with suspicion. I glanced at my watch. "I'm on time."

She presented her back to me and turned to her computer before answering. "I'm not sure. He didn't say."

Fucking shit.

"Okay," I muttered. My stomach knotted as I hurried to his office. The moment I knocked on his door, he bade me enter.

"Ms. Hagen, Megan is on leave and I'm unsure when she'll return," he said, not bothering with a proper greeting.

Simple. Brief. To the point. Just like most of our recent exchanges where zero pleasantries existed. Usually, the abruptness rolled off me. Today, it just made me feel worse.

Besides, he didn't explain why I needed to know this information. True, I consulted Megan here and there, but we stayed away from each other as much as possible. But Noah

was searching my face, his gaze touching everywhere, as if he'd never seen me before.

I wanted to escape to my office, where I'd used the money he'd given me on my first day to put my own touches. Though it was small, it had become my safe space. "Is that all?"

"For now, yes. Plan on returning to my office at noon. Over lunch, we can strategize your upcoming presentation with the Amage brothers."

Between Noah's kiss and Ian's assholery, I'd pushed aside having to face that asswipe Claude again.

His gaze held mine. "Gather whatever documents you have so we can review them today. I'll see you at noon."

The intensity of his blue eyes captivated me. Somehow, I managed a single nod. "Yes, sir."

"Excellent."



Noah

"This is outstanding work, Ms. Hagen," I said, flipping through the folder detailing her plan. Instead of having a private lunch in my office, I'd opted for another visit to Three Amigos to better focus on business.

Still, it was all I could do to keep my hands to myself. All I wanted to do was take her face between my hands and take in every detail. I wanted to kiss her gently, then fuck her hard.

She was so much more than just my girl in blue. She was Ryan.

She was mine.

"Not that I doubted you," I said, setting the folder aside and smiling at her.

"Thank you, Mr. Keegan," she responded, her rigid posture and the formalness of her tone irking me.

Her reserved demeanor shouldn't have vexed me. Earlier, I'd been the same. I could attribute my attitude to lingering

fury over Megan Buford.

Reid hadn't wanted to leave Tig and Del's party because Quinn declined his invitation to accompany us to dinner. In the end, we had gone to my brother's house. He'd been cordial, attributable to Tina's presence.

Once Reid let slip he'd been staying at a hotel to avoid Megan and I demanded to know if he'd discovered any role she'd played in Ryan's humiliation, Tina told me to leave everything to her. She'd delivered. I had spent most of yesterday, enacting the same plans I'd employed to ruin the Warringtons.

Ryan shifted in her seat, and I gazed at her, remembering the softness of her lips and her body against mine.

Shit. Now wasn't the time for this. I thought of all things pure and holy to cure my unexpected lust in such a public setting. I damned my dick for rising. Never had I been mad at my cock for functioning as it should, but there was a first time for everything.

Suddenly parched, I grabbed my Dr. Pepper and gulped half the contents of the glass.

Eyeing me, she took a dainty sip of her Mexican Coke. Her smoldering look, her mouth around the lip of the bottle, did nothing to ease my erection.

We needed to go on a proper date, return to my comfortable bed, and fuck each other's brains out.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I opened my calendar to find the first available day. Right now, I didn't care that she still worked for me. It didn't matter she wanted a career.

I needed to have her with the full knowledge of her identity. Everything could be worked out later.

I focused on my calendar.

Holy shit, tomorrow was Amage's ball! Every year, they threw a huge gala. That was the perfect excuse to take Ryan out. "There's a critical party for Amage I must attend tomorrow night. You are going with me."

Irritation entered her gaze. “I have to accompany you?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at me.

“This is a business affair for one of our most important accounts, where you will serve as project manager if they award us a new contract. Therefore, it’s imperative you attend.”

Each year, I used the event to solidify connections and size up my competition.

“How kind of you to order me to a business event the day before it’s taking place, Mr. Keegan.”

“It slipped my mind.”

“You don’t know what I’ve got planned for tomorrow evening,” she snapped. “Besides, you didn’t ask me. You ordered me.”

Bartender Ian came to mind. I didn’t like the thought she might see him. “Do you have a date?”

“No, but—”

“But nothing. It starts at nine. My driver will pick you up at eight. Be ready.”

“What would you have done if I had other plans?”

“You don’t.”

She gave me the stink eye. “What’s the dress code?”

“Formal.”

“I don’t have a gown.”

I begged to differ. She had an unforgettable blue gown. “I’m giving you the day off tomorrow,” I announced, wondering what had become of the dress. “I’ll have Tina alert Celine you need a gown for tomorrow night.”

Amusement lit her face, and she shook her head. “You’re creating a monster, Mr. Keegan. I love clothes and you’re feeding my habit. Stop! It is unsustainable on my salary.”

“Celine is at your disposal. Whatever you desire is at your beck and call.”

She giggled. “What’s in that Dr. Pepper? You’ve gone insane.”

“Perhaps.”

“You never answered my question.”

The hypothetical one where she would’ve been unavailable. “I would’ve gone without you, but I prefer if you accompanied me.”

“I see,” she said smugly. “I don’t need to come; *you* just want me with you.”

God fucking dammit, but she looked so sexy right now.

“You are correct, Ms. Hagen. The truth is out!” I feigned horror.

“You’re funny,” she said, laughing.

And she was gorgeous. The light moment passed, yet an easiness settled between us, a special camaraderie that made her so unforgettable. I gave her a gentle smile. “Will you do me the great honor of accompanying me, Ryan?”

“Yes, Noah,” she whispered. “I will.”

Chapter Thirty

Noah

The moment we walked into the extravagant ballroom where the Amage brothers held their annual gala, Ryan and I commanded attention. Glancing around the room, I decided we were the most striking couple at the yearly ball designed for only the most connected new talent to attend and impress the exclusive list of advertising big wigs.

Our eye-catching combination rested on my twenty-six-year-old escort, a ravenous vision in a beaded chain thigh-slit cape gown in a shade of blue almost identical to the ball gown I'd met her in. That wasn't a coincidence. When I'd arranged for Celine to dress Ryan, I'd suggested she find outfits in shades of blue, especially sapphire. Her jet-black hair was brought up in a swirl, with loose ringlets escaping on the back of her neck and on the sides.

Between conversation with some of the other guests, glasses of champagne, and tastes of hor d'oeuvres, I could barely keep my eyes off Ryan. Even as she whirled around the dance floor for the umpteenth time, with another admiring man no less, I couldn't look away. She was simply stunning. At her quick smile, satisfaction rushed through me. She was with me.

Intense possessiveness swept over me as I saw another man intimately caressing her waist, an action which she didn't protest, tainting my pride in her beauty with jealousy.

I started toward them.

Thankfully, before I created a scene, the band's instrumental rendition of Billy Holiday's *God Bless the Child* ended. The musicians went on break and Ryan glided to me.

"Welcome back, Ms. Hagen." I smiled at her, holding in a groan at the small part in her full lips that were painted crimson. "Are you having a good time?"

"The best," she murmured, her eyes shining and her lovely skin glistening.

A familiar gray-haired man approached us, stopping behind Ryan, almost indecently close.

Channing Powers smirked at me.

Glaring at him, I pulled her to my side as his gaze roamed over her. Wrapping my arm around her, I threw him a look of warning. Though she stiffened, she didn't protest the action.

"Hello, Noah!" Channing greeted, walking around her, and stopping in front of me. Holding me by the shoulder with his left hand, he extended his right hand for the expected shake.

"Channing," I said in a monotone, accepting his proffered hand out of sheer courtesy.

Staring at her mouth, he licked his lips. "A little bird told me this is the infamous Ms. Hagen."

She transferred her glare from me to him.

"I'm sorry I was out of town and missed her presentation at Amage. I will be there next week. Of that you can be certain."

"Y-you're with Amage?" Ryan asked, her annoyance slipping away.

"Oh, indeed," the asshole told her.

I couldn't stand Channing Powers, the entitled dick. Not only had he been an active participant in my mother's unfortunate threesome, but he'd also been married to multiple women and had come from a family almost as wealthy as mine. His work ethic was shit, and he spent an enormous chunk of his time fucking, drinking, smoking, and gambling. Only his connections had allowed him to get so far in life.

"Pardon my audacity, Noah, but I can't help wondering if you have cornered the market on beautiful women. This one is by far the most stunning of all your flings. And God knows you've had many." Channing guffawed as if he told a genius joke.

"You make me sound as though I'm a career philanderer," I bit out with undisguised irritation.

A man who cheated on all five of his wives should've been the last person to take a fucking dig. Sensing the tension, Ryan glanced between us, and her eyebrows furrowed.

“Not at all, Noah. Not at all. It was an observation meant to compliment your date. I couldn't help but notice her. As I am sure every other man here has.” He ogled her with undisguised lust. “She's drop-dead gorgeous. Where did you find her? Is she a local or from some faraway land?” His eyes lingered on the swells of her breasts.

Ryan squirmed uncomfortably but remained silent. Another wave of possessiveness swept over me, and I tightened my grip on her waist.

When I cleared my throat, his gaze snapped to my face, his lascivious grin disappearing at my scowl.

“Your manners are atrocious, Channing, and your intrusion is even worse. Ms. Hagen's attributes are not up for discussion. You've said enough. Leave.”

If I punched him, the news would spread before I left this building.

Luckily, the bastard knew not to go further. He understood he'd said enough. “No harm intended, Noah. I apologize to both you and the lady. Please excuse me.”

Channing slithered off like a wounded lizard. I glared at his back as he skulked to Claude Amage, who flashed me a mocking grin.

I fought off the urge to flip him off. Instead, I looked at Ryan. The moment I gazed into her beautiful, inquisitive eyes, I calmed down. “I'm sorry, Ryan. He's an insensitive ass.”

“He creeped me the fuck out. Unfortunately, this is a significant business event.”

“Yes. Competition size up each other. Executives search for new talent for their bullpens.”

Ryan gave me a playful smirk. “Why are you here, Mr. Keegan? Are you looking for new talent?” she purred.

“One reason I attend is to scope out my competitors for the yearly bonanza Amage awards. This year my biggest rival is Sauncier. Besides, I don’t have to find new talent. I’m standing next to a very brilliant young woman, proven to be a formidable contender in our bid for this contract.”

“You’re going to give me an impossibly inflated ego.”

I attempted a sincere smile, but I was still angry at Channing. His interaction with Ryan reminded me of my deep hatred for that fucker.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly.

“Channing and I have a history,” I admitted darkly.

“Not a very good one, I take it.”

“No.” I clenched my jaw, so I wouldn’t betray my mother and tell her secret. “If he comes near you again, I won’t be able to ignore his bullshit. I’ll have to beat the shit out of him.” I was more than ready to make good on my words. Channing Powers and Claude Amage had a lot to atone for, especially regarding my mother.

I couldn’t take it if either of them targeted Ryan again. Knowing how he operated, I understood Channing’s only intention tonight had been to objectify Ryan and fuck with me.

The orchestra returned to the stage. Soon, they were playing *What a Wonderful World* by Louis Armstrong.

She took my hand in hers. “Dance with me,” she said. “Worry about him another day. That asshole isn’t worth your time. Don’t give him the power to ruin your night.”

It was our night, and she was right, so I guided her to the dance floor and drew her into my arms, moving to the slow heartfelt composition.

Ryan and I were so close I heard her breath catch as I moved against her. Her body shuddered against mine.

“Ryan.”

Slowly, she raised her head, and we gazed deeply into each other’s eyes. I grinned, unable to do anything else.

“What are you smiling at?”

“You. You’re gorgeous.”

“I know,” she replied without shame.

My dick ached, and I longed to lose myself in her again.

“Of course, I could say the same about you, Noah.”

“Careful, Ms. Hagen,” I said playfully, her words igniting my blood.

The powerful urge to kiss her in the middle of the dance floor almost overrode my common sense.

The music drifted away, but I held her against me a moment longer than necessary before I released her. I’d fucked with those snakes enough for tonight.

“Let’s collect your coat and get out of here, Ryan,” I said, wanting nothing more than to be alone with her.



Alf walked to my usual table as I assisted Ryan out of the blue chinchilla coat I’d had Celine give to her. The waiter smiled, looking even jollier with his cheerful expression. “Mr. Keegan, it’s great to see you again.”

“Thank you, Alf,” I said, once Ryan sat and I walked around to my chair. “I’m always happy to see you, too.”

At hearing his name, a grin spread across Ryan’s mouth, and she bit her lip, her eyes twinkling. I’d bet the building she was fighting off the urge to laugh. I winked at her.

“Would you and the lady like a drink, Mr. Keegan?”

“Please bring a bottle of Krug.”

Ryan’s eyes widened, and I grinned. Between the time we left the ballroom and arrived here, the effects of her imbibing hit her.

“Coming right up, sir.”

“Krug,” Ryan said with a nod after Alf left. “I’m impressed.”

“Are you?” I murmured.

“Oh, yeah. Expensive champagne. Beautiful clothes to borrow.” She twisted and rubbed her hand over the coat’s sleeve. “I’m in love with this. Since Celine told me you wanted me to wear it tonight, I’ve debated on asking you for a payment plan, so I can keep it. She brought several coats. Two sables of different lengths. Do you know the asking price could buy a car or two? Or used as a down payment on a house?”

“Did you prefer another coat over this one?”

“I love this one,” she answered without hesitation. “Of course, I have no clue about the cost. Or the dress. Or the shoes. Celine refused to tell me.”

Tomorrow, I’d tell Ryan everything she wore now belonged to her. I don’t think she’d readily agree, so I didn’t want to ruin our evening with an argument.

“I might not know the cost of what I’m wearing, but I know Krug is very expensive.”

“And? It isn’t as if it’s our first drink this evening. It will be much better than the fucking Bollinger we drank at the gala.”

“You’re showing your elitism. Bollinger is an excellent champagne,” Ryan said severely. “I believe it was listed as an excellent choice for high-end affairs.”

“Where?” I challenged.

“Where-square,” she laughed, as happy a drunk now as the night I met her. “On one of the bazillion blogs on the ‘net.’”

“Fine,” I conceded. “It’s a decent champagne, but it doesn’t compare to the smoothness of Krug.”

“Maybe not, but the price tags are vastly different.”

“Money well spent, Ryan. The taste will blow you away. I guarantee.”

“I’ve had Krug before. My older sister bought me a bottle when I graduated from college. Armani proclaimed it her favorite champagne, and I’d love it. She was very right. It was

the only time I've ever had it, but I've never forgotten the taste. Easily, one of the best champagnes I've ever had."

"Your sister has good taste."

"Yeah," she said, and I wondered at her wistful tone. "She does."

Her bucket list came to mind. "Your goal is to try as many expensive champagnes as possible," I said, caught up in her animation.

"It is," she agreed. "I've tried a handful of them from my champagne bucket list. I haven't gotten the chance to taste most of them."

"You will," I reassured her.

"It's a silly list," she said lightly, an adorable giggle escaping her. "I'll never get the chance to taste most of them, but a girl can dream."

"Never say never," I recommended. "What champagnes are on your list, sweetheart?" I couldn't remember.

Excitement and the effects of the alcohol brightened her eyes. She leaned forward, and I mimicked her, creating intimacy even in the crowded restaurant.

"*Goût de Diamants* is the top, over a million dollars, and forever out of my monetary limits."

"The one you refer to is a collector's item, lush," I teased. "If you want to drink it, you can find it at a much more affordable price."

"Where's the fun or the decadence in that?" She laughed merrily. "It's wildly expensive and a *limited* Limited Edition. I understand if I ever lucked out and bought it, it should be to keep in a display case and allow its value to increase with time."

"That isn't what you'd do, though."

"Nope. YOLO."

I lifted a brow at her, and she covered her face.

“Oh God,” she groaned from behind her slim fingers. “Lame. You don’t have to tell me.”

“Okay, I won’t. I wasn’t going to say it, anyway.”

She slid her hands down just far enough to show her eyes. “You weren’t?”

“I was going to say that expression is so yesterday.”

“Pooh on you,” she chirped, waving her hand in dismissal.

“I’m wounded.”

“I’m sure,” she retorted, and we laughed at our silliness.

“*Goût de Diamants* might be an impossibility.”

“As you said it’s a collector’s item. The true expense is from the bottle, not the champagne. It has a nineteen-carat diamond and a white gold logo.”

The depth of her research impressed me. “What other champagnes would you like to try?”

“Ace of Spades. Some vintages top out at a very affordable two hundred grand,” she joked. “Rotgut compared to *Goût de Diamants*.”

“You tasted Ace of Spades,” I reminded her, caught up in the moment. “I doubt Nicholas paid as much per bottle. Maybe six or seven hundred. I’d also like to add your pronunciation of *Goût de Diamants* is much improved since the masquerade ball.”

She blinked at me and straightened. To me, she moved in slow motion. Or, maybe, it was the speed of my brain as it caught up to my words.

A squeak escaped her before absolute horror wiped her happiness away.

I leaned across the table to grab her hand, but she recoiled from me. “Ryan—”

“Quinn lied to me,” she whispered, and her voice shook. “You... We... Did we...”

Before she got her words out, Alf returned, wheeling a cart with two champagne glasses, and a bucket of ice holding the bottle of Krug. “Here you are, sir.”

When he presented the bottle to me, it was hard to drag my gaze from Ryan’s ashen face to look at the label. Likewise, the cork. Pouring enough for me to taste took forever. Once he handed me the glass, I sipped from it, not caring enough to assess the flavor. I simply nodded.

“Are you two ready to order?” he asked once he filled our glasses and returned the bottle to the bucket.

“Give us another minute, Alf.”

“As you wish, sir,” he said, wheeling the cart away.

Ryan looked at me and drew in a deep breath. “Did we have sex that night?”

This wasn’t the way she was supposed to find out, and I damned myself for not taking more care.

“Did we?” she demanded.

Snatching up my glass of champagne and taking a sip, I gave a curt nod.

“Oh my God.” Her eyes were huge and teary. “How long have you known?”

“A couple of days,” I admitted.

She sniffled, but her face hardened, and her mouth tightened. “You didn’t think I needed to know? Neither did my sister,” she spat, hurt and angry. Another realization dawned on her. “And Reid. He knew, too.”

Quinn was wrong for hiding the information, as much as Reid and me. Fear motivated her. Reid thought he was helping, while I had no excuse. I *could* say I was worried about Ryan’s reaction. Obviously, I’d had reason to. My behavior was still fucked up.

I felt compelled to protect Quinn, for both their sakes. They were as close as sisters could be. Believing Quinn had

betrayed her was crushing Ryan. I had to stop this disaster in the making. “Quinn doesn’t know.”

“That’s fucking rich, Noah. Of course she knows! She was the one who fetched me after she fucked Reid.”

“I was gone by the time she found you. I left right after you fell asleep. Reid did not know the room was occupied.” He did, although he thought it was Nate. “Do you understand me, Ryan?” I searched her face, checking if my words somehow penetrated her disbelief, anger, and panic. “As far as they knew, you’d been alone and asleep.”

“You knew the truth,” she snarled.

For a moment, I floundered. What could I say? All along, I’d suspected her identity.

“You’ve known for two entire days.”

Relief that her timeline was wrong hit me so hard, I almost sagged.

Outrage dropped into her face, and her eyes narrowed. “Blue! That’s why you told Celine to bring gowns in shades of blue. We thought it a dress code.” She laughed bitterly. “How fucking stupid am I?”

“You’re not stupid. You’re—”

Her glower shut me up.

“I want to go home.”

“Ryan.”

She pushed her chair back, but my words halted her and I rushed to explain.

“I had dinner with Reid at Nicholas and Tina’s this past Saturday. I don’t make a habit of visiting my brother, so this was the first opportunity I had to see the photo album from the masquerade. You, Quinn, and Reid were in one photo. It was Reid who showed me the picture. When I saw that blue gown and your dark hair bone-straight, I knew it was you.”

She grabbed her glass of champagne and gulped half the contents. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“You have no reason to be, Ryan.”

A little hysterical laugh escaped her. “I was so fucking wasted. I don’t remember half of what I said.”

“I remember our conversation. Trust me, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“If you can recall what we talked about, how could you not know my identity when I came for the first interview?”

“Because we didn’t remove our masks. The room was dimly lit. And I had a helluva lot to drink myself. You seemed familiar to me. Your voice. The coconut scent. My instant draw to you. I didn’t know if I was imagining my recognition, creating an image in my head to fill in the blanks left by the circumstances of that night.”

She thought for a moment, not meeting my gaze, not indicating if she believed me.

“I want to go home,” she repeated.

I nodded. “Let me take care of the tab and call my driver.”

“Okay.” She didn’t look at me or speak to me anymore for the rest of the night.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ryan

How should one feel after unknowingly fucking one's boss? Since Tuesday night, the question plagued me.

My problem reminded me of a plot from a romance novel, except mine wasn't guaranteed a happy ending. Work had been an absolute nightmare since I found out the truth about the masquerade ball. Being around Noah was just too awkward. Besides, it annoyed me he hadn't told me about the night as soon as he found out.

As it was, I doubted he'd intended to tell me when he did. It had been a slipup. It didn't matter. We'd hooked up, everyone knew but me, and no one thought I should know.

For the past few days, I'd avoided both him and Reid as much as possible. Thankfully, Megan remained on sick leave, so I didn't have to deal with her.

Closing my eyes, I laid my hands against my yoga mat. "Ohhhmmmm," I chanted, maneuvering from the wide leg forward bend position to revolved wide leg bend, trying to banish thoughts of Noah from my head. "Ohhhmmmm."

After coffee this morning, I'd returned to my room to complete my once regular morning yoga routine. It had always given me a calming start to my day. Once I lost my job at T.S. Marketing, my focus had become survival.

Maybe because I hadn't done yoga in a while or because Noah's revelation overwhelmed me, today's attempt to lower my stress wasn't working. Vague memories of that night and thoughts of Noah and our more recent lovemaking made it exceedingly difficult to relax.

Conflicting feelings muddled my brain. I'd been hammered at the masquerade ball, and we weren't yet boss and employee. Nor did we know each other's identities. *And* we'd had sex again in his office. Somehow, though, our drunken hookup was so much worse. It painted me in such a poor light. Even if

there was the minutest chance of a future between Noah and me, my irresponsible behavior might give him pause.

Huffing out a breath, I switched the arm supporting my weight, calling myself a thousand fools. I wasn't the type of woman Noah looked for, my inappropriate behavior aside. We were just from different worlds.

I stayed in the revolved leg bend for another minute, then stood, rolled up my mat and placed it in the corner next to my desk. My brain refused to give me respite, so I pulled out my white desk chair with the fluffy gray pillow and sat.

Before I grabbed one notebook dedicated to calligraphy and my favorite calligraphy pen, banging on my door interrupted me.

I scowled, knowing it was Quinn. For days, I hadn't answered her calls or her texts. Yesterday, she'd informed me she would come over if I insisted on ghosting her.

If I could have, I would've ignored her ass today. Instead, I huffed out a breath, jumped to my feet, and stomped to the door. When I threw it open, she rushed past me, not even allowing me the pleasure of slamming the door in her face.

Leaning against the open door and still holding the knob, I threw over my shoulder, "Get out."

"No. Not until we talk about this. Besides, we need to resolve this before tonight's dinner."

Our monthly family get-together at Armani's. "We can talk then."

"I don't want them in our business, Ryan. Do you?"

Fuck no. I didn't want to hear what Quinn said right now, though. I'd spent most of the morning trying to calm down. I found another excuse. "We've discussed it, so there's nothing more to say. You lied to me. I asked you point-blank if I'd slept with Noah—"

"No, you asked if you'd fucked a random stranger."

"Who was Noah!" I flared. Unless I snatched her by the hair and dragged her ass out, she wasn't leaving and having the

door open only aired my dirty laundry to the neighbors. I slammed the door shut and turned to Quinn. "I'm never trusting you again."

"When you called me Tuesday night with your accusations, I explained to you I-I-I f-found you alone."

Glaring at her, I placed my fisted hands on my hips. "You're a liar. D'you know how I know? Because you're stuttering, long a hallmark of your dishonesty."

"Have you considered I'm fucking stuttering because I'm scared you're going to shut me out of your life? Maybe I'm looking for the right words to convince you of my truthfulness." A little sob escaped her, and she swiped at the tears sliding down her cheeks.

No matter what, I hated to see my little sister cry, simply because she did it so rarely.

She sniffled. "You haven't spoken to me in days. Do you think I'd risk losing you by lying?"

Did I? Quinn didn't dissemble. She told it as it was and fuck anyone who didn't like it. Walking to her, I pulled her into my arms and hugged her, then dragged her to the crowded sofa. After pushing files and recent purchases aside, we both sat.

"I think you know how I feel about that night," I intoned. "And I think you know, not only did the alcohol affect me, but whatever drug Reid spiked the champagne with. You'd feel guilty for leaving me alone in such a state."

Blinking back more tears, Quinn sniffled again.

"You know I'm unhappy you allowed Reid to fucking drug me," I said tightly. "That was beyond irresponsible and will make it hard for me to trust you."

"No, Ryan, you've got it wrong," she said, her voice breaking. "I didn't know until after we came to get you what he'd done. I never would've agreed to it had I known, and I wouldn't have left you alone."

She sounded so convincing and looked so distraught. My heart ache and my head hurt.

“You’re blowing this so out of proportion.” Her small, watery voice made me feel like the biggest bitch alive. “Even if it played out the way you imagined, you would still exaggerate a minor issue. One night out of many in your life, you would’ve let your guard down and allowed the moment to guide you. A place in time where there was no me, no obligations, no second-guessing and wondering if what *you’re* doing is setting a terrible example for me. It would be you and stealing a small bit of happiness—”

“How the hell is that happiness if I can’t decipher fact from fiction? According to you, everything had been just a dream.”

She met my gaze. The pain darkening her hazel eyes hurt me. “I thought it was.”

“I smelled of soap, Quinn. Soap! I was too shocked by my discovery to ask Noah if we showered together. That would be the only explanation, other than you helping me to clean up.”

“I don’t know why—”

“My panties were gone—”

“You’ve told me—”

“My pussy was sore!” I snapped.

Quinn leaned over and threw her arms around me, sobbing almost as hard as the day Mama died. “Please, Ryan. Please. I’m begging you to believe me. I would never do anything to lose you. Long ago, you warned me to never lie to you. And I know how much you judge my promiscuity and wouldn’t want to be that way—”

Pushing away from her, I took her face between my hands. “Quinn, baby, listen to me. I’m no judge, jury, and executioner. Neither am I particularly religious. If I were, I’d remind you I don’t have to stand and answer for whatever your sins may be. Only you can. Neither am I the Second Coming, here to give my life for your transgressions. Do I wish you’d find one good man to have a relationship? Yes! I only want the best for you.”

Quinn straightened and turned away from me. “Who’s lying now? You *do* judge me. It’s traumatizing to you to think you

acted in a way you believe inappropriate.”

“That isn’t true!” I said hotly.

“If it isn’t, then what’s the reason? I’ve been trying to figure out why you repeatedly questioned me when I gave you the same answer each time. My explanation never once veered and, yet you refused to believe me. Your low opinion of me might be buried in your subconscious, but it’s there, Ryan.”

“I’m proud of you, Quinn. More than you’ll ever know. Sometimes, I wish I could be as free and fun loving as you. Yet, all I can think of is what Mama would do. How she would act. React. Comport herself. What she would expect me to teach you and what example she’d want me to set.”

“Newsflash: you aren’t Mama.”

At Quinn’s harsh words, I flinched.

“I don’t mean you aren’t *my* mother, even if that’s a fact. I mean, you and she are two different women. You stepped in when we lost her, but you can’t measure yourself by her. She married straight out of high school and stayed in a marriage I no longer believe was happy. What example did *she* set, Ryan?”

“Mama still expected us to act a certain way. Daddy, too.”

“Yeah, well, Armani was her clone. She could’ve left us in peace.”

Lowering my gaze, I stared at my hands resting in my lap. “These are philosophical circumstances way too heavy for me at the moment.”

“Reid called me last night,” Quinn said, breaking an uncomfortable silence, rare between us.

She and I always found topics to discuss or debate. Such heaviness never clouded the air during the rare times we didn’t.

“He said you barely spoke to him or Noah at a meeting between the three of you on Thursday.”

“We had to discuss legalities for the upcoming meeting at Amage. I focused my mind on work.”

“You’ve slept with Noah since the masquerade ball.”

“Yes.”

“What’s the big deal?” Her tone was as bewildered as her look.

“I can’t explain it.” Unable to meet her eyes, I averted my gaze. I cleared my throat. “No matter how you feel, I know Mama and Daddy would expect so much more from me.”

Nodding, Quinn turned away and folded her arms. “I love you so much, Ryan. You’re my best friend. You stepped up for Logan and me when you didn’t have to. You could’ve gone on with your life, like Armani and Dakota.”

“Quinn, I did nothing more than any sister would do. Families stick together, want the best for one another, and help each other out in whatever way needed. It’s an unwritten obligation.”

“Really?” Quinn stood, hurt and anger in her eyes. “Maybe Daddy didn’t get that memo? The same one Armani missed.”

I got to my feet and hesitated to reach for my sister for the first time in memory. “He wasn’t a saint, but Daddy’s gone, so let him rest in peace. I’m sure if he hadn’t been killed—”

“He wasn’t,” she snarled. “He killed Mama. He fucked himself up and took her from us.”

“Quinn—”

“No, fuck off, Ryan. You can’t ever say ‘thank you’, when I tell you how much what you did for us means to me. Nor do you ever make it personal. It’s never I did what I did because I love you and couldn’t imagine my life without you. Everything...every blessed fucking thing with you is about duty and responsibility. What happens if I move away or marry? *Die*? What then? What’ll you do with your stinking, miserable obligation?”

It was rare I lost my temper with any of my siblings. They pissed me off on the regular, but the fury coursing through me

at Quinn's words was a singular event I don't remember ever experiencing.

She was distraught and emotional, yet I was, too, and slapped her so hard across her face her head snapped back, the loud sound reverberating in the room. We stared at each other, each as shocked as the other at how far out of hand the situation descended.

She started past me.

"Quinn," I said in a shaky voice. I couldn't allow her to leave with so much anger between us. Tragedies happened so quickly. Sometimes before arguments were rectified. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have raised my hand to you."

My cheek stung in phantom memory, as if my hit had been today, too.

Offhandedly, I rubbed the place, inconsequential by the end of that horrible day.

"I didn't mean my words to offend you. And, maybe, I can never make you understand why my behavior with a stranger is so horrifying to me. Hell, maybe I don't understand it myself." Except I did. Frowning, I dropped my hand to my side. "You're adamant in believing the worst of Daddy when Armani denies it. The past several weeks have been extraordinarily stressful. Perhaps, your speculation seems like a confession. In your own way, you're revealing you knew the truth, but chose to lie."

My fingers skimmed through my hair. Since I received no response, I glanced in the door's direction to make sure I wasn't alone.

She remained, angry and hostile.

"It's crazy," I said with a sigh. "My virtue has always been so important to me. *Mine*," I stressed. "It takes three or four weeks of dating before I even kiss a man. Graduating to sex takes another three or four months. I'm twenty-six-years-old and have only had three serious relationships." Four if I counted the ill-fated one discovered on the day of my parents' car crash. "Can't you understand the disappointment in myself

that I didn't even get Noah's name before I fucked him? Do you have any idea how shameful that is to me?"

"No," she said without flinching, yet comprehension seemed to dawn on her. Her look gentled. "You aren't shameful. You're a beautiful woman with desires and you do yourself a disservice by not seizing every moment."

"*Carpe diem*," I said with a small, sad smile. To lighten the moment, I changed the subject. "Did you tell me you found your key?"

"I did, but in my rush to get over here, I left it on my dresser. It ruined my grand entrance."

"The one where you barge into my house unannounced, no matter the time?"

"Exactly."

"Girl, one day you're going to open my door and walk in on action you'd prefer not to see."

She nodded, a perfunctory gesture, already abandoning our levity. "As much as you want to see me happy, I want no less for you, Ryan."

"I know."

"We both are aware of how short life is. Instead of freaking out over what was, think about what can be. Whether it's a month, a year, or a hundred years, if you want Noah Keegan, take however long you have with him and be happy. Do you. No one will judge you and the two people who would have, are dead because of their own demons. They would've been better off apart. Instead, they stayed together."

"Mama was getting better," I reminded Quinn. "Then she found out Daddy hadn't made it and she lost her will to survive."

"Then shame on her," Quinn said flatly. "We were there. She had us. Her children who didn't ask to be born. He was dead? So sorry. Fight to survive to be a mother."

Ways to address her bitterness ran through my head, but nothing seemed right, so I just stated the obvious. "When you

thought they both died from the accident, you were so much kinder in your words and thoughts toward them.”

“It wasn’t an accident, Ryan. He took her out that day, aware of his intentions. How should I feel?”

“That he was troubled and not in his right mind. That he never would’ve left us so broken if he hadn’t felt his way was the only way.”

“Uh, no, you’re fucking right it wasn’t the only way. He was unhappy and wanted to check out? Peace out, bro. Fuck yourself up and leave an innocent woman alive.”

“Quinn—”

“Don’t. I know my words are harsh and my thoughts are cold, but what were his? He knew Armani. He’d lived with that heifer until she married Timothe. He left us at the mercy of those two. What about me? Begging to go with them as usual. Did he not wonder how his actions would affect me? How I will live the rest of my life wondering if there was anything I could’ve said or done to change his mind and save them.”

“Baby—”

“And what of you? Goddamn, but I’ve been so fucking stupid. When you spoke of the disappointment in yourself and your shame, the pieces clicked into place. They found out you’d gone to a Title X clinic and gotten on the pill.”

“Title X has nothing to do with my feelings—”

“Without it, you wouldn’t have had sex when you did, and Mama and Daddy wouldn’t have found out and crucified you and called you every horrendous name they could think to hurl at you. *He* wouldn’t have called you a worthless slut and *she* wouldn’t have slapped the shit out of you.”

I gasped. “You were in your room.”

“No, I was in the bathroom but heard your crying, so I took a detour.” She released a frustrated breath. “It doesn’t matter what I say to you. Shit like that isn’t easy to overcome, especially when they left angry at you and never came home.”

“I made peace a long time ago,” I said briskly, tossing my hair over my shoulder. “They were angry with me because I’d disappointed them. It didn’t mean they didn’t love me. Of course, I wish our parting had been kinder. It didn’t happen. That’s life.”

Quinn bowed her head for a moment. When she looked at me again, fresh tears shone in her eyes. She rubbed the cheek I’d struck and attempted a smile. “I’d forgotten what an expert you are at slapping the shit out of people.”

“I’ve never hit your face!”

Her smile was more genuine. “You haven’t, but you spanked me and Logan a time or two. I can’t understand why you didn’t slap a bitch before, during, or after that press conference.”

“I was just so disappointed at the disillusion of my first day. First, Mrs. Mikes, then some executives. Then Billy. Then Megan. It just went on and on and on.”

“You made it through,” she said quietly. “Stop trying to live up to the standards of people who didn’t care enough to be around for us. You’ll be happier. To me, you’re perfect just as you are. I’ll see you at Armani’s.”

She blew me a kiss, turned on her heel, and hurried out the door, closing it softly behind her.

It took me a few minutes of staring at the place she’d stood before I returned to the desk in my bedroom.

My showdown with Quinn lifted a weight off my shoulders. In retrospect, I shouldn’t have ignored her. We’d needed this conversation. My past hurts and traumas were inconsequential, dealt with long ago. Had they shaped my perspective on sex? Of course. My prudishness undoubtedly fired Quinn’s rebellion and turned her into my complete opposite. Yet, that long-ago humiliation of being called a whore and a slut and a few other names would return to that place inside me where I buried most of my pain. It was inconsequential anyway. Armani had been praised for ratting me out, and I’d been condemned for acting on puppy love.

So what?

Scooping up my calligraphy pen and opening my notebook, I flipped to an empty page and began writing.

Another hobby I'd neglected was calligraphy. Writing pretty words worked wonders for my mental state. Sometimes, it helped more than yoga.

It being Saturday gave me two days away from Noah to reflect on the situation. And, hell, maybe tonight, I'd seek everyone else's opinion on what I should do. It had been ages since I'd gone to Armani or Dakota for anything. Logan was now an adult too, living on his own. Perhaps I should give them a chance, open up and receive much-needed advice on how to deal with my emotions right now.

Different scenarios ran through my head as I imagined their reactions to what I needed to say.

Okay. Scratch talking to them.

Other than Quinn, my family wouldn't offer support for my predicament. They'd reprimand me. Never mind, at thirty-one, Dakota was unmarried with a baby mama, and Logan was a certified man whore. They didn't take issue with them. In the minds of my brothers and older sister, Quinn and I should've followed Armani's example, settled down and started a family by now, instead of involving ourselves in myriad illicit affairs. Well, Quinn. Outside of losing my virginity, I conducted my life, especially romance, with my head. My family wouldn't give me credit for that, though.

More than once, I cussed their asses out for berating Quinn.

Perhaps their hypocrisy and chauvinism allowed me to forgive Noah when the exposé had first come out. From an early age, I'd been groomed to ignore outdated mindsets.

My notebook page ran out of space. I'd been blindly scrawling words. Before turning to the next empty page, I glanced down, and my mouth dropped open.

Holy shit.

In every available space, I'd penned Noah's name like a crazy, obsessed stalker woman. Disgusted, I shut the notebook with more force than necessary.

God, what was wrong with me? This shouldn't be a tricky situation. Perhaps I tormented myself over nothing. We shared a mutual attraction, and we were consenting adults.

Except *Noah*, my boss, had rules in place against office romances. I didn't agree with many of his opinions, no matter their basis. On the other hand, he didn't intend to keep me in his employ. I should've been searching for other jobs, instead of waiting until the last minute. Yet maybe Quinn was right. Maybe I should seize however long Noah was my lover and worry about all else later. Acting on my feelings without considering the fallout was a foreign notion.

If it concerned Noah, my attraction guided me, consequences be damned.

Sighing, I stood from the desk, suddenly needing a cold shower.



Good Lord, I was beat.

After my morning yoga, my emotional confrontation with Quinn, writing Noah's name in calligraphy an ungodly amount of time, and my cold shower, I brooded over my situation a little more. I stayed in my feelings for fifteen or twenty minutes, then decided more strenuous physical activity would be the perfect way to unwind.

Now, hours later, after spending the entire afternoon cleaning up my very messy apartment, taking a longer, warmer shower and picking out an outfit for dinner with my family, I was exhausted. But it was the good kind and gave me a sense of accomplishment.

My mother used to say housework was one of the best workouts a person could do, with the added benefit of being free. Boy was she right. Today reminded me why I needed to make cleaning my apartment regularly more of a priority.

Beyond keeping the dishes in check, my bathroom clean, and changing my bedsheets once a week, I allowed mess to pile up. That bad habit had me so fucking tired.

Thankfully, I had time to recharge before I headed to Armani's house, so I intended to use that time wisely.

My feet were grateful my precious respite allowed me to sit on my ass and do nothing.

The chiming of my doorbell filled me with annoyance, and I groaned at the inconvenience of entertaining anyone. Since I wasn't expecting any visitors today, I debated on ignoring the bell. My brothers would head straight to Armani's place. Besides, we had three hours until dinner. Quinn had already come and gone, so who could this be?

The bell rang again, and I scowled. At the urgent knocking, I realized I couldn't escape answering. Sighing, I hurried to the door, not checking the peephole before flinging the door open.

I gasped and clutched the knob tighter to remain standing upon seeing Noah. My ratty gray sweatpants, no bra, and thin white top stood in stark contrast to his immaculate clothes.

His gaze flickered to my breasts.

"Noah," I managed, my voice in my throat.

"Ryan," he responded in kind. He peered over my shoulder into my freshly cleaned apartment. "May I come in?"

Quinn's words drummed through my head. Except I'd worked myself to a state where I couldn't fully process all she'd said.

"Why are you here, Noah?"

"To see you. To talk."

My worst nightmare. Quinn had undermined the self-righteous indignation I felt toward myself. That didn't mean I was ready to talk to Noah.

"That's what phones are for. You could've called me."

"Would you have answered?" he challenged.

“Go home, dial my number, and find out.”

“I don’t like how awkward things have been between us, and you made it clear you didn’t want me to approach you in the office.”

“Just following your dictates, Mr. Keegan.”

“I deserve that, Ryan.”

His voice was deep and held a bit of wariness. Without a doubt, it was also the voice living in my head for months.

“You do,” I agreed. “You ordered me to forget our lovemaking in your office, so what’s changed?”

“You know what’s changed.”

“We both fucked a random stranger and because life is such a comedian, it was each other. My boss. Your employee.”

He averted his gaze for a moment, then shoved his hands into his pockets. “We need to talk,” he repeated, his low timbre making my body betray me. My nipples hardened, pressing against the thin material of my shirt.

I was afraid. I was afraid I’d reveal too much. It was hard enough pretending he didn’t fascinate me, that from the moment we met, I hadn’t stopped thinking about him. As much as I tried.

“There’s nothing to say, Noah.”

He laid a hand against the door before it shut.

“Work isn’t a suitable setting to discuss our sex life, but we either talk here or we talk there. Your choice, Ms. Hagen.”

“Do you think popping up at my apartment unannounced is appropriate?”

“Maybe not unannounced, but it is better than the office.”

“You’d get me fired to have your way?”

“I’m the boss, sweetheart. I’m the only person who can fire you,” he said, sounding genuinely amused.

“Everyone else can just make me fucking miserable.”

He frowned. “Who else do I need to fire?”

I laughed at his joke. His serious expression killed my humor. I blinked in disbelief and thought of Megan Buford. “You fired her?”

“And had her visa revoked,” he said without apology.

“Why?”

“She gave Ingrid Warrington the information about your father.”

“Why would she have me investigated in the first place?”

“She didn’t. I did,” he said without apology, needing no clarification about the identity of *her*.

Anger rose in me. “Fucking asshole. That’s an invasion of privacy.”

“No. It’s how I operate, especially now considering the fiasco of my mother’s perfume and fighting for the Amage account.”

“That’s a misuse of my personal information. Social security number. Birthdate. Everything.”

“With or without that data, I can have you or anyone investigated, Ryan. It makes it harder with only a name. Each additional piece helps. Name and address, for instance.”

“Lovely,” I sneered. “You investigate people at-will to satisfy your overwhelming curiosity.”

“About you, yes. But knowledge is handy when someone is on my hit list.”

“No matter how I feel, you won’t care, so it doesn’t matter in the grand scheme. It’s bad enough you know so much about me, but you’ve also made it available to everyone else.”

“She got to it because of Reid. He oversees my investigations into potential employees.”

“Reid is just a wellspring of personal information,” I said sarcastically.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” I huffed, quickly changing the subject. “I don’t understand you. I will not be at your company very long, yet you fired Megan because of me?” The idea baffled me, and I needed confirmation.

“That’s right,” he confirmed. “She used information, unauthorized to her, to humiliate you.”

“You fired her because she pried into my history without permission,” I decided, the explanation quite ironic.

“I fired her because she fucked with you.”

His words burned away most of my resistance. I almost melted into his arms and begged him to fuck me, not caring about anything beyond the here and now. Old habits die hard, though. “You still could’ve called. I could’ve been entertaining someone.”

“You weren’t.”

“But I could’ve been,” I insisted.

“Since Tuesday night, you’ve done nothing but go to the office and come home. You haven’t left this building once today.”

“Are you having me followed?” I managed, at a loss for words.

“Having you followed implies you go places to *be* followed.”

I growled, his implication I was too boring to stalk oddly insulting.

Say what, dumb bitch?

“I’ve been worried about you.” His words interrupted my self-directed outrage. “I don’t like how you’ve shut me out.”

“It’s no different from what you do.”

“It is,” he countered. “*I* can do it. *You* can’t.”

“You’re such a dickhead! What kind of shit is that? Who the fuck do you think you are?”

“I don’t enjoy experiencing what you’ve put me through these past days, Ryan.”

“Oh, well, asshole, welcome to my fucking world. Cut down for sending you a fucking text. I didn’t like that, but you didn’t give a good fuck.”

“Ryan—”

“Leave. I’m not interested in hearing what you have to say. You had me investigated, had me watched—”

“I didn’t have you watched. *I* watched you.”

In my memory, I don’t recall any other man except Noah having the ability to sweep all thoughts away and steal my ability to speak. I stared at him. His blue eyes smoldered with intensity and tension tightened his beautiful lips.

“You watched me?” I echoed.

He nodded. “Each evening, my driver drops me off and I languish in the shadows of the church. Today, I’ve been there since early. I saw Quinn come and go, but she didn’t see me.”

Anger and a feeling I refused to recognize hit me in equal measure. His bullshit wasn’t romantic, I reminded myself. It was fucking insane and unacceptable.

“I only did it because I’ve been worried about you,” he said softly, the sound of his voice hypnotizing, the blueness of his eyes threatening to sweep my good sense away. “I needed to see you.”

“Your behavior isn’t cute,” I flared. “I don’t appreciate being the target of your prowling.”

“I’ve never done such a thing—”

My glare shut him up.

“I’m sorry. I promise I won’t do it again,” he said after a moment. “I’ve missed you.”

Damn him. “The only difference between us is me freezing you out instead of the other way around.”

He didn't respond immediately. When he did, his words jolted me again. "Would you like to hear Ingrid Warrington's fate?"

My mouth moved, but no words came out. I stared, dumbfounded.

"Yes? No? Maybe?"

"Later?" I mumbled, too shocked to say anything else.

"Excellent." His gaze returned to my breasts before he looked at my face again. "May I come in?" he repeated. "Please."

Still reeling, I stepped aside to allow him entry into my home without further comment, closing and locking the doors behind him.

Without invitation, he strolled to my uncluttered couch and sat. "It smells good in here."

"Thank you." I opted to remain standing. "I sprinkled a blend of bergamot, lemon, and jasmine oil in different places."

"No coconut?" he murmured. "Or is that scent only for your hair and body?"

Refusing to allow him to lure me in, I folded my arms. "Talk, please. You need to leave so I can dress."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Where the hell are you going?"

"When you offer me your full schedule, I'll be happy to give you mine."

Although he didn't look happy, he dropped the subject. He considered me for a moment. "Since Tuesday night, I've been thinking a lot about you."

My feelings for him were as foolish as hoping he cared for me, but my heart leaped at his words. He'd said as much in the hallway and Noah didn't repeat himself or lay his heart bare. The traumatic experiences he'd suffered, I'd learned from Reid. Yet, here he was, staring at me with an openness I'd never seen on his face.

“About our relationship,” he said into the silence, “and what it should be.”

“Employee and employer,” I interjected, barely believing I’d found the strength to push out those words. “That’s what it should be.”

“You’re right,” he agreed, his expression closing.

It had been the right thing to say, the prudent thing, even if I yearned for so much more than a professional relationship. He was attracted to me, so he’d ruin whoever made me unhappy. What would happen when the novelty wore off? In each of my other relationships, I’d stayed in control.

Noah would consume me. Already, I was in danger of falling in love with him. Fighting to resist him, battling my heart not to overrule my common sense, I was a word away from throwing caution to the wind and ignoring our complicated situation.

“I want more from you, Ryan. I know you were shocked and embarrassed, but I don’t think you want only a professional relationship with me. The night we met? I was alone, stewing in grief. You were like a ray of sunshine lighting my life. I don’t know if I had such a profound effect on you?”

He was showing vulnerability to me, opening up, affording me a rare gift. “I don’t remember much,” I admitted, ashamed. “I’d drank so much champagne. Having my drink spiked didn’t help.”

“What are you talking about?” he demanded.

The man was a fucking chameleon. One minute he was gentle and sexy, and the next he looked ready to fuck something up. “I took a downer,” I said, deciding not to throw Reid under the bus.

“The fuck you did. Reid gave it to you, didn’t he?”

“*Gave to me* is kind of harsh.”

Noah glared at me, then narrowed his eyes. “Was he in any way involved?”

I studied my nails. “What do you mean by involved?”

“Ryan!”

“Jesus, stop! It doesn’t matter what Reid did or didn’t do. It’s in the past. Our conversation has veered off track. The fact is, I had vague memories. Quinn insisted it was a dream, so that’s what I chalked it up to. When I went to your office the first time and you sauntered in, it felt...I felt...”

“A connection,” Noah finished, still annoyed over Reid, but the look in his eyes had gentled once more. “You felt a connection to me. And I to you.”

“Yes,” I said softly. “So now what? I-I’m not a whore. I don’t...I’ve never slept with a stranger in my life.”

“I’ve never thought of you as a whore, sweetheart,” he said gruffly. “Why would you even think that about yourself?”

“It was just a thought,” I mumbled, refusing to open that old wound anymore. It was bad enough it had pushed to the surface earlier.

“And what now?” Noah continued. “I’ve had nearly a week to think about our status as employer and employee, as friends, and as lovers. I don’t give a shit about what our relationship should be. It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters, other than one truth. I just want you.”

His words, coupled with the stare he aimed my way, turned my legs to jelly and aroused me beyond fucking measure. My belly tightened and my core pulsed. I wanted to say something. Anything. Whether it was profound or lighthearted didn’t matter.

Squeezing the bridge of his nose, Noah sighed. “I don’t want to pressure you into anything, Ryan. Tell me you don’t fucking care about exploring whatever is between us, and I’ll leave right now and never bring this up again.”

How did he expect me to answer with so many variables involved? At my silence, he stood up and advanced toward me. I stayed in place, craning my neck back as he got closer so I could continue to look him in his eyes.

“Tell me you don’t want to see where this goes, Ryan,” he murmured, barely an inch separating us. He bent his head and

trailed barely-there kisses down my neck, his warm, minty breath tickling my sensitive skin.

His arms slipped around my waist, and he pulled his lips away, so our gazes met.

“I won’t stop working unless I choose to do so,” I whispered, our faces inches apart.

“Fine, Ryan.”

For now. He didn’t say those words, but they still rang loud and clear in my head.

“Let your brain rest,” he told me. “Stop analyzing every word I say or every move you make.”

The spicy scent of his cologne and the lust in his eyes punctured my resistance and wet my pussy. We wanted each other, and I was finally at peace with what had happened at the masquerade ball.

Lifting on my tiptoes, I ran my tongue along his bottom lip. His tortured groan emboldened me. He returned my pecks slowly at first, allowing me the lead for a brief time. One of his arms wrapped around my waist, where he settled his hand at the small of my back, pressing me closer to him. His other hand wrapped around my unbound hair. He lightly nipped my lip. I gasped at the pleasurable pain, and he used the opportunity to slip his tongue into my mouth. Our tongues dueled, the sensual open-mouth kiss leaving my clit aching. He guided me to my couch, our lips still attached. They were no longer sweet and patient and instead had turned into hot carnality.

As soon as he backed against the couch, he tugged at the bottom of my raggedy t-shirt. I pulled away from him and removed it myself, tossing the holey fabric to the ground and revealing my uncovered tits.

He stared at my breasts and licked his lips. “Christ,” he groaned. “Look at the rack on you.”

Grinning, I stole another kiss from him and laid my hands on his chest to bare it to my hungry eyes.

“You’re taking too fucking long, Ryan.” He intercepted my careful removal of his sage colored dress shirt. Heedless of the buttons, he tore it open and threw it on mine.

He spoke of my tits, but damn if he didn’t have the body of an athlete. Wide shoulders, muscled chest and arms, and rock-hard abs bared to me. I took in every fine detail of him. Suited and professional, he hid the sculpted perfection underneath his clothes. I trailed my fingers over his washboard abs.

“Look at me, Ryan,” he ordered in a ragged whisper.

I ignored him, unable to drag my focus away from his body. The warmth of his tanned skin singed me, and liquid heat moistened my pussy. I traced invisible patterns on him, longing to kiss every place I touched. He sighed in contentment, allowing my exploration for a few moments before his big hand grabbed my wrist and stopped me.

“My eyes are up here, ma’am,” he joked, his voice low and deep and sexy.

He flashed me a devilish grin.

“Shut up,” I murmured, shoving my sweatpants down and revealing my pink cherry-print thong.

Still holding my wrist, he sat on my sofa, gently guiding me onto his lap. I straddled him as he freed his cock before he shoved the seat of my panties to the side and thrust into me. We both gasped at the wonderful sensation of his dick entering my wet pussy.

He filled me to capacity, and I groaned in ecstasy, clenching my muscles around his cock.

“Fuck, baby,” he growled, reclaiming my lips, and absorbing my moans of pleasure. My hair blanketed us, its coconut smell mingling with the scent of his cologne.

He gripped my hips, driving into me, while I rode his length and bounced to his rhythm. My tits jiggled, my nipples brushing against his chest. Noah released one of my hips and brought his hand to my chest. He thumbed my nipples, but it wasn’t enough for either of us. Tearing his mouth from mine,

he cupped my tit, bent his head, and swiped his tongue over my nipple.

“Delicious,” he murmured, not waiting for a response, and instead sucking my nipple into his mouth.

“Holy shit!”

I rode him faster as his thrusts grew harder and more frantic. My movements quickened, and my moans turned to cries. Goosebumps rose on my skin, and I threw my head back. He fingered my swollen clit and drew my other nipple into his mouth. I shivered and jerked, all thought and reason flying away. Ecstasy swept over my body, and I stiffened.

“Noah,” I whimpered, holding his head against my breast.

Mid-orgasm, he pushed into me again and caressed my clit. I screamed, my pussy creaming in a hot rush.

Noah grunted, his cum shooting into me.

Collapsing against him, I let out a contented sigh, not wanting to move. Eventually, he lifted me off his cock, repositioning me on his lap, with his arms wrapped around me and my head resting in the crook of his neck.

Even after our lovemaking, I smelled his delicious spicy scent.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Ryan

Somehow, I roused my sated limbs enough to go to my bathroom and clean myself up. Wanting to return to Noah's arms as soon as possible, I didn't tarry, sinking back into his embrace within five minutes. We remained entangled on my couch for the next thirty minutes, basking in the afterglow of our lovemaking. Neither of us were inclined to move away from each other.

Until I remembered my family's dinner. If I didn't dress and leave soon, I would be late.

I tore out of his arms and hopped to my feet. "Shit!"

Alarmed, he straightened. Dark hair tousled and passion lingering in his eyes made me weak in the knees. "What's wrong?"

"My older sister is hosting a family dinner."

His shoulders relaxed at my explanation, and he stood, heading toward our pile of discarded clothing.

I didn't want to leave Noah. Tonight was a turning point, threading a fragile bond between us. I feared one wrong word, one wrong move, would rip it apart.

My family had a penchant for drama, but it had been a while since I'd seen everyone except Quinn, so I was looking forward to the dinner. Unless they'd undergone personality transplants, the evening ahead meant arguments and insults. As Noah laid my clothes on the sofa, I debated spending the evening with him.

However, if I skipped the meal and something happened to any of my family, I'd never forgive myself. Armani preferred our distance if she didn't need me to babysit or was having the rest of our brothers and sister over. Dakota and our brother-in-law were besties, automatically putting us at odds. The sporadic get-togethers appealed to them—they didn't care one

way or the other. Meanwhile, I jumped at Armani's invitations *because* of how infrequent we spent time together.

Noah sliding one arm into a shirtsleeve, then the other captured me. Muscles roped his arms, flexing with each movement. Realizing I watched him, he paused, allowing his shirt to hang open and displaying rock hard abs.

He smirked at me. "Yes, Ms. Hagen?"

"I want to lick you from head to toe," I blurted. My words registered and horror washed through me. "I-I-I—"

Instead of taking offense, he drew me into his arms and took my face between his hands. "That's my line, but you're welcomed to suck me."

Nervous laughter escaped me. Looking to move past what I said, I licked my lips. Noah took it as an invitation to kiss me. His tongue's exploration of my mouth removed any lingering shame. I lost myself in him. His hard cock pressed into my belly, and I groaned, the sound swallowed by our kiss.

He lifted his head. "Fuck, Ryan. Go, baby, before I hold you prisoner and fuck you the rest of the night."

Desire roughened his voice. My nipples were hard and achy, and my pussy throbbed with need. I wanted to call Armani and give my regrets, but I couldn't bring myself to brush off my family over my wantonness.

Staying with Noah wasn't just about sex. It was because of him and how much I enjoyed his company. We didn't *have* to part ways. Armani had never forbidden me from bringing a date. I'd chosen not to. My feelings for Noah were different, intense, unmatched by any I'd ever experienced. Eventually, he'd have to meet them if we became a couple. Why not tonight? If their...*them*...ran him away, I'd recover.

"Do you wanna come with?"

"What?"

I cleared my throat, encouraged by his roguish smile. The rat! He'd heard me fine. "I said, do you want to come with me? To meet my family?"

He released a long-suffering sigh. “I’m not sure, Ryan. That’s moving too quickly, don’t you think?”

Disappointment sagged my shoulders. “Yeah, I guess.”

A second of silence passed before he laughed and shook his head. “I’m joking. I’d love to meet your family.” He brushed his lips over mine. “How easily you fell for my ploy is shocking. You’re losing your touch, Ms. Hagen.”

I gasped and slapped his chest. “Dick!” I feigned outrage.

He chuckled, and I giggled.

“I couldn’t resist fucking with you.” He grabbed me by the waist and kissed me.

Tapping my tongue against his lips, he opened his mouth, and our kiss deepened. His cock stirred to life. Dinner with the fam slid lower on my to-do list.

He pulled away and pressed his forehead to mine. “If we fuck again, we might not make it in time, baby.”

I couldn’t get enough of his mouth on me. “We can have a quickie.”

“Ryan,” he murmured against my lips. “Your offer is so fucking tempting, but your family is important to you.”

“They are,” I admitted grudgingly, backing out of his arms.

He grinned at me. “There’s always later.”

“True.” Disappointment thickened my voice. “I’ll shower, do my hair, and all that jazz.”

“Don’t sound so defeated,” he said, snickering. “I have the perfect solution.”

“Which is?”

“Showering with you.”

Desire pooled between my legs. “That can be arranged.”



I knocked on the black wooden front door to the brownstone I grew up in. Behind me, Noah shifted anxiously, far from the

confident man I'd grown familiar with.

"Calm down," I chided, as the door swung open.

My big sister smiled at me. Armani looked like an older version of Quinn. They had almost identical facial features, with our father's hazel eyes. Before Quinn began so heavily processing her hair, she'd had the same natural coils as Armani.

Armani yanked me into an embrace. "Ryan!"

Laughing at her enthusiasm, I returned her bear hug.

It had been weeks since I'd seen her. Our conversation after the press conference hadn't been the happiest. It was only now, in her presence, I realized the depth of how much I'd missed her.

After a moment, we separated, and she glanced over my shoulder.

Curiosity lit her features, and she smirked at me before studying Noah. Suddenly, her eyes widened, and recognition dawned in them. "You're Noah Keegan."

At her disbelief, I glanced at him. His disarming smile heralded the return of his self-assurance. "I am. It's nice to meet you."

Armani's gaze seesawed between us. "Ry, why is your boss here?"

We hadn't discussed how he wanted me to introduce him, so I searched for an acceptable response, but only incoherent mumbling escaped me.

"I'm Ryan's date for the evening," Noah said without hesitation.

Armani's eyes grew to the size of saucers at the information. "Oh. Er...it's nice to meet you. I'm Armani, Ryan's older sister." She extended her hand.

He took it and gave her hand a firm shake. "I've heard so much about you."

"All good things, I hope," she chirped, eyeing me playfully.

Noah chuckled.

“I would never bad-mouth you,” I exclaimed, just as Noah said, “She’s said nothing but positive things about you.”

Armani continued to stare between us, blocking our path into her house.

“Are you letting us in?” I demanded, tired of standing on the doorstep. “Orrrr?”

She stepped aside. “You know I am, Ryan. Show our guest to the dining room, and I’ll be with y’all in a moment.”

As Noah and I entered the house, Armani turned away and started toward the hallway. Boisterous voices floated to me, and I knew all my siblings had arrived.

“Hey, Armani!” I called.

Turning, she placed her hands on her hips and lifted a brow as I locked the door.

“Is it okay if I check in with my nieces and nephews?”

“It is not,” Armani said. “You will see them when they come out for dinner.”

“Come on, sis,” I said, offering her a winsome smile. “I’ve watched them more than any of our other siblings. I have it on good authority I’m their favorite aunt.”

“You still can’t disturb them. You’re the aunt. I’m the mother.”

Was she ever a mother! And not of the family kind.

Fuck, I bit my lip so I wouldn’t throw those words at her.

At my silence, she turned around and continued down the hallway.

Noah looked at me and frowned.

“Don’t fucking ask,” I grumbled.

He nodded. “You and Quinn are so close. I thought it would be the same with your older sister, too.”

“Armani is, uh, *interesting*.” To say the least. I didn’t know how to describe her.

Smiling, he pulled me into his arms for a quick kiss. Suddenly uncertain about Noah’s presence, I broke away first and glanced around the living room.

Since my parents’ deaths, I’d been in the house, this very room, so many times. Tonight, though, felt different. Countless memories slammed into me.

Until I was eight, the place belonged to my paternal grandparents, but that year my grandfather had a massive heartache. My grandmother had died so long ago, I barely recalled her. I remember being afraid to live here, convinced it was haunted.

My father would lift me into his arms and swear I hadn’t anything to fear. “I’ll let nothing harm you,” he’d say.

Mama would sing lullabies to me. Corny to some but comforting to me.

In this room, I’d also sometimes find Daddy deep in thought. So much sadness lived inside him, it seeped through his skin and hung in the air.

My parents had drilled my first date in here. Well, Daddy had. Mama would either nod in agreement or add a comment here and there. They’d announced how they were going to help me with my first car.

Armani had opened her big fucking mouth in here.

And I’d been sitting in Daddy’s chair when we’d gotten the call about the accident. That chair was long gone, but besides a few updated furniture pieces, the house remained identical to the way it was when my parents had still been alive. Even the wood floors and cream wallpaper hadn’t changed since I’d moved out, taking Quinn and Logan with me.

Noah caressed my cheek. “Are you okay?” he asked.

I swallowed. “Yes.” I tried to smile, but failed, so I nodded in the direction of the noise. “This way.”

In silence, I led him toward the small formal dining room.

Quinn's indistinguishable words brought on loud laughter. I smiled and quickened my pace at the sounds of happiness.

"Ry!" Quinn squealed when she caught sight of me, hopping from her seat and rushing to me. She gave the briefest hesitation before hugging me. "I was thinking you wouldn't come."

"It's only 6:10, and food isn't even ready," I said as I hugged her back.

Pulling away, she beamed at me before her gaze wandered to Noah. "Oh. Uh. H-hi."

Although Noah had recognized her earlier, I hadn't ever formally introduced Quinn to him. "This is Noah Keegan, baby," I told her, starry-eyed and smiling widely.

She gave me a hesitant nod, then glanced at Noah. "A pleasure to m-meet you."

"Likewise," Noah said politely.

"Okay, what am I missing?" I asked, because clearly, I overlooked crucial information.

"What are you talking about?" Quinn demanded.

"You two are acting a little weird."

"And you're acting right in character," Quinn retorted. "Suspicious of everything."

"Let's call a truce tonight," I told her before our argument grew out of hand.

"I'm sorry, Ryan," Quinn said. "I'm just on edge. A jackass will always be a motherfucker."

"What?" I asked, giggling despite myself. "Leave it to you to come up with these one-liners. However, I assume you mean Timothee."

"You assume correctly," she hissed. "So, a word of advice. If, by some miracle, Timothee, Dakota or Logan remain unaware of our esteemed guest's identity, keep it that way so the tidbit doesn't leak out. Now isn't the time to inform any of them of your professional affiliation to Noah."

“What the fuck is going on?” I demanded. It was Dakota who’d alerted me to the job opening at Keegan Enterprises, so chances were high he’d recognize Noah.

Instead of answering, she looped her arm through Noah’s and turned him toward the three men whose full attention was on us.

“Ryan’s brought a date,” Quinn announced. “This is Noah.”

As I stepped to Noah’s other side, Timothe narrowed his eyes. Disapproval darkened his expression.

“As in, Noah Keegan?” Dakota demanded, intercepting any comment Timothe might have made. “Ryan’s boss?”

“Fuck,” Quinn groaned.

“Correct on both accounts,” Noah responded.

His cordial tone won props from me.

“It’s nice to meet everyone,” he continued, as if I regularly brought my boss to a family dinner. “She speaks highly of all of you.”

“That’ll be the fucking day,” Quinn glared at Timothe. “In what universe does she speak highly of *all* of them?”

“Shut it, Quinn,” I snapped.

She released Noah and walked to my side.

“Are you two...dating?” Logan’s tone held curiosity, not disapproval.

“He’s her fucking date for the evening,” Quinn said. “When she leaves, she’ll get dick from him, then send him home. Simple, so shut the fuck up.”

“Oh God,” I groaned, pinching my sister’s arm. “Did you have to say that?”

“It was only a matter of time before you rubbed off on her, Quinn,” Timothe said.

“This is getting out of hand, people,” I interjected. “I don’t know what the hell I walked into, but we have a guest. Show some manners.”

They fell silent, the three looking between me, Noah, and Quinn.

“Okkkkaaayyyyy.” Dakota flashed a phony smile. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Same here,” Logan echoed.

Noah gave a polite smile. “Thank you.”

Quinn returned to the table and sat beside Dakota, directly across from Logan.

An uncomfortable silence fell.

I eyed the set table and saw we were a seat short. I hadn’t informed Armani I’d bring a guest.

My nieces and nephews ate at the dinette set in the kitchen, so the adults could enjoy unfiltered conversation. It was the same reason they remained in their rooms until time to eat. It still rankled that Armani refused me a quick hello.

I pushed aside my displeasure. “We need an extra seat.”

“Armani thought only you’d be coming.” Timothe eyed me from his end of the table. “You neglected to inform us you’d bring your boss.”

“It was a last-minute invitation,” Noah said coolly. He put his arm around my waist and pulled me close to him.

My brothers raised their eyebrows. Timothe’s glower deepened.

“That’s our problem how?” he demanded. “Last minute or not, she should’ve asked us if we wanted an outsider at our table.”

Noah went rigid, but Quinn beat him to it even if he’d had a response.

“We should’ve been so fucking lucky with your ass,” she said sweetly. “Had Armani *asked* us, I would’ve banned your fucking ass from ever crossing the sill of that fucking door.”

“You didn’t have shit to say, Quinn,” Timothe replied curtly. “You were a child.”

“With the sense to know what a fucking dickhead you were from the moment I met you,” she snapped.

He threw me a small smile and gave her a bland look. “Your feelings still hurt that everyone but you and Ryan knew the truth about the car accident?”

Oh, but I couldn’t stand this fucking dickhead. Judging from his look, he wanted to hurt me. He’d succeeded by blithely confirmed Ingrid Warrington’s announcement. I believed Timothe. He was a fucking sadist, not a liar. *Armani* had lied when she denied the truth. However, I wouldn’t give him or her the fucking satisfaction of a reaction. As a matter of fact, I wouldn’t dignify his bullshit with a response.

I pasted on a smile. “If I knew I was bringing Noah in advance, babe, I would’ve told y’all. Do you understand the definition of *last minute* or should I explain it to you?”

“My presence has created an issue,” Noah said, his voice ice-cold. Although grateful, it shocked me he’d remained silent so long. “I don’t wish to cause any distress to Ryan, nor will I stay where I’m clearly not wanted.” He tipped my chin up and brushed his lips across my own. “Let me know when you’re done. I’ll send my driver.”

“I want you here,” I said. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t have invited you.”

“*You* want me here, Ryan,” he responded. “No one else—”

“Fuck him,” Quinn interrupted, nodding to Timothe. “I want you here too. It has been years since Ryan brought a man to dinner.”

“We wondered if you had what it took to get a man,” Timothe said. “I doubt you’ll keep a man like him, or *him*.”

“A man like him?” Quinn chortled, stealing my opportunity. “Your bitch-ass wish you were a quarter of the man he is.”

“Show some respect to me if you want to remain at my table,” Timothe responded. “I can always invite you to leave.”

“And I can always call 911 for an ambulance to rush you to the hospital after I fuck you up.”

Reaching his bullshit quota, Noah looked at me. “Walk me to the door, Ryan.”

“If you leave, so do I,” I told him.

“That’s not a threat, Ryan,” Quinn said dryly. “That sounds like a blessed escape.” She got to her feet and offered our brothers and Timothe a two figured salute. “Fuck y’all. I’m out too.”

“Armani wants us to have dinner.” Dakota found the balls to open his fucking mouth. “It will crush her if her plans are ruined.”

“She’ll survive,” Quinn said, walking to where Noah and I stood.

Logan hopped from his seat. “You can have my chair, Noah. I’ll go ask Armani about an extra chair if you stay.” He looked at me, always the fucking peacemaker.

I wasn’t feeling peaceful. Nor did I care any longer how they felt about my relationship with Noah. “Stop fucking with Noah, Timothe. He’s important to me.” Those words escaped me before my brain caught up with my mouth. Couldn’t recall them now. I folded my arms and glared between Timothe and Dakota. “You fuck with him, you fuck with me.”

My asshole of a brother-in-law leaned forward. “I’m shaking.”

Noah’s comments would add fuel to the fire, so I glanced up at him. He must’ve sensed me looking at him and focused on me. I gave a slight shake of my head. A muscle ticked in his jaw. He was pissed, but he nodded, and I breathed easier.

“You would defend your date,” Timothe went on, “since you enjoy so few of them.”

“Dude,” Logan said with disapproval. “You’re getting your full asshole on with Ryan. We get it, okay? You don’t like her. You’ve always taken special issue with her. But back off. Damn.”

“You know, Tiny Tim, if it wasn’t for Ryan, the responsibility of looking after me and Logan would’ve fallen

to Armani?" Quinn said.

"Or you would've ended up in foster care," Timothe said.

"No," Logan said, shaking his head. "Armani wouldn't have let that happen. Family is important to her."

"*Her* family," Timothe pointed out. "Her husband and her children. She has no responsibility to any of you, when your mama's relatives washed their hands of her and her children years ago."

"Yeah, they found out Armani brought a mongrel into the family," Quinn said, never one to allow anybody to best her.

He perused her from head to toe, then smirked at her. "I'm the mongrel? You sure about that?"

I grabbed Noah's hand, and he turned a dark look to me. He hadn't made a move, but rage wafted from him.

"Please," I whispered. His anger would only add fuel to the fire.

"We have set aside manners," he said, looking at Timothe. "I'm at a disadvantage. I got none of your names."

Our earlier conversation came to mind. If he unleashed his wrath on Timothe, my sister and her kids would be in the crossfire. "That's my brother, Logan," I said quickly, pointing to my youngest brother. I nodded to my older one. "Dakota."

"And fuckface is Timothe," Quinn said. "Armani's husband."

Logan walked to Noah and held his hand out. "It's nice to meet you."

"Same here," Noah responded, accepting Logan's hand, and shaking.

"Sit," Logan urged. "Behave, Quinn," he ordered, then looked at me to back him up. "Tell her, Ryan."

"She's behaving as the situation warrants, Logan," I told him.

“I’m going to get an extra chair,” he said, shaking his head and loping out.

Quinn grabbed my arm and dragged me to the table. “Join us, Noah,” she called over her shoulder as she gently pushed me into the chair Logan had vacated.

I looked at Noah. “Please?”

Visibly gritting his teeth, he came and sat next to me.

From across the table, Quinn beamed at him. “Whatever he says—” she nodded at Timothe— “should go in one ear and fly out the other. You’ll be happier.”

“You are sitting at the man’s table,” Dakota chided. “You need to show a little more couth.”

“I’m impressed that you pulled your tongue out of his ass long enough to impart that gem.”

Dakota opened his mouth, but she waved him away and looked at Noah.

“See how much you and Ry have in common? We have as many assholes in our family as you do in yours.”

“I’ve observed,” Noah quipped.

“Shut it, Quinn,” Dakota ordered, and looked at me. “Tell her, Ryan.”

“How the fuck is it Ryan’s job to keep my grown ass in line and also serve as family peacemaker?” Quinn demanded.

Dakota frowned at her. “I don’t know. It just is. That’s her job.”

“Says you,” Quinn said. “Not considering three grown motherfuckers left it up to *Ryan* to care for Logan and me.”

And that was it right there. The reason Timothe’s passing dislike had turned into out-of-control resentment. My age. I’d been too young to move out, but the only one willing to take responsibility for Logan and Quinn. As the eldest underaged sibling living with Armani and Timothe, he placed every gripe he had with all three of us on my shoulders. I doubted even

Armani would've allowed him to lash out at a grieving eleven and thirteen-year-old.

"Coming through!" Armani called, barreling to the table, and setting the casserole dish in the middle of it. After taking off the glass top, she removed her oven mitts and tossed them on the server behind her husband. Before seating herself at the other end of the table, she kissed Timothe as a delicious aroma filled the air.

Moments later, Logan returned with a folding chair and positioned it between Quinn and Armani.

"What did you cook?" Quinn asked, craning her neck to glimpse the meal. "It smells fucking amazing."

"Your sister is incredibly gauche, Armani. She's been using filthy language ever since she arrived," Timothe complained. "This is the reason I told you to have the kids eat in their room."

"If I gave a fuck about your feelings, your low opinion might crush me," Quinn spat.

"Quinn's over twenty-one," I said, admiring Armani for her wherewithal. I would've left long ago. "And the kids aren't in here."

"The kids aren't ever in here," Quinn said. "They eat in the kitchen, anyway."

"And even that was too close for their tender ears," Timothe told her. "You're as loud as you are vulgar and tacky."

Glaring at Armani, I waited for her to defend Quinn. Of course, she didn't. In her, I saw my mother. No matter what Daddy did, Mama always backed him up.

"The kids aren't present," Noah growled, and my entire body tensed, even though I knew it went against the grain for him to remain silent as long as he did. "The only one who's being gauche, vulgar, or tacky, is you."

"Who the hell are you to chastise me in my own damn house?" Timothe demanded.

"Your sister-in-law's invited guest," Noah retorted.

“*Her* guest, not mine. In case you haven’t noticed, no one else has a plus one.”

“It isn’t because of you, Timothe,” Dakota said, sighing and side-eyeing Quinn.

“It’s because of me,” she announced without remorse. “Both those bitches work on my fucking nerves. It was them or me.”

“Thalia is the mother of my son,” Dakota told her. “Your nephew.”

“My nephew, hmm? I only see Elijah when you have time to bring him for a visit. Which is almost never.”

“You aren’t that nice to Thalia, Quinn,” Dakota said.

“She isn’t that nice to me,” Quinn replied. “She’s not that nice to you, Dakota. That’s why she’s your on-again/off-again woman. That’s another reason I don’t appreciate her sticking her nose in my business.”

This was news that piqued my curiosity. “What do you mean, baby?” I asked.

“She means Thalia is a decent woman who was trying to do the job you’ve failed so horribly at,” Timothe said. “Help Quinn find some morals.”

“Fuck off, asshole,” I snapped. “Quinn is fine just the way she is, so shut the fuck up. Worry about your own fucking soul and leave my sister the fuck alone.”

“And you wonder why I don’t want my children around you,” Timothe sneered. “It’s the same reason Thalia doesn’t want you near her son.”

I flipped him off.

“It’s okay, babe,” Armani said to Timothe, before flashing Quinn a quick smile. “Ryan’s right. The kids aren’t in here, so it isn’t an issue.”

“In other words, fuck you,” I told him, wishing I could incinerate him for talking about Quinn. “Dakota, grow some fucking balls and defend your sister. Thalia has no right to tell Quinn how to live. Tell her I said to back the fuck off or else.”

“Mama Bear,” Timothe said without humor. “Pity it’s toward other women’s children and not your own.” He smiled at Logan. “You could’ve brought Sami.”

“She and Quinn had an argument,” Logan said. “Besides, she’s out of town with her family.”

Silence fell, giving us a respite from the petty bickering. I couldn’t believe I’d missed this bullshit. No, I couldn’t believe I’d missed Armani. Babysitting my nieces and nephews was one thing but socializing always brought out Timothe’s assholery and Armani’s overlooking whatever he said and did.

“I owe you an apology, baby,” Timothe said suddenly.

Discomfort washed over her features, and she pasted a smile on her lips. “Of course you don’t, my love. I can’t recall anything you’ve done that would call for an apology.”

“I insisted you invite your sisters over,” he said grimly. “When you were so furious with them. Ryan especially for goading an investigative reporter into sharing family secrets on live television. Don’t you remember, sweetheart? You said she got the comeuppance she deserved for always being so confrontational?”

“I-I-I...” Armani’s voice trailed off, and her guilty expression told me everything I needed to fucking know. “No, darling,” she said weakly, her eyes watering at my dark look. “I think you’re confused. I was mortified, but I didn’t wish her any ill-will.” She threw him a pleading look.

“My mistake, Armani,” Timothe said, his point made. “You must’ve meant someone else after Quinn called on her way to Ryan’s swanky office.” He grinned, not caring that his wife, my fucking traitor of a sister, had gone ashen. “I’m sure that reporter has been promoted several times over for her steely confrontation with your sister.” He shook his head at me. “That’s the breaks, kid. I’m sure you’ve learned your lesson and will steer clear of the indomitable Ms. Warrington.”

“Ms. Warrington,” Noah snarled, “may find someone willing to hire her in a newsroom in Antarctica. I promise you no one else will hire her. The same goes for her husband. And

do you know why? Because she fucked with Ryan, something I don't take kindly to. A phone call or two avenges her. Are you interested in finding out how thoroughly I take issue?"

"Wait a damn minute..."

"No!" Armani interrupted Timothe. She combed her fingers through her hair. "You're blowing this out of proportion. Timothe and Ryan argue like true brother and sister." She threw me a shaky smile. "Right, Ryan?"

Tightening my lips, I leaned back and folded my arms.

Timothe glowered at Noah and opened his mouth again.

"We invited everyone over because we wanted to share our joyous news," Armani said hurriedly. "We're pregnant!" She pursed her mouth. "So, tell Noah how you and my husband are such jokesters, Ryan."

"Got to give you props, Armani," Quinn said. "You can go from a backstabbing bitch to an emotionally blackmailing one without batting your fucking eyelashes." She clapped. "Kudos, big sister."

"Are...are you really having another baby?" Logan asked.

Armani nodded, then threw me an under eyed look. "If I said anything close to what my sweet husband said, it was only because of how badly I'd been suffering morning sickness. We don't always see eye-to-eye, Ryan, but I would never say anything so cruel."

"Do you see me having a hissy fit?" I asked. "Nothing you say about me or do to me is a surprise. If Timothe's happy, you're good."

Quinn's stomach growled. "Fuck," she grouched. "I've been waiting all fucking day to eat Armani's food, but that bitch is Judas, and I can't break bread with her."

Instead of storming out of the house, vowing never to return, madness gripped me, and I roared with laughter at Quinn's indignation. We were all—um almost all—laughing. Only a slight smile curved Timothe's mouth, a wonder in itself.

“Let’s eat, Quinn,” I said once we’d gotten a semblance of control. “Let’s forget the bullshit for now.”

She nodded. “You’re insane, woman,” she said, giggling. “Only you would laugh when I was dead-ass serious.”

“It was funny.”

“No, you made it funny,” she said, then looked at Armani. “What did you cook?”

“Shepherd’s pie. I used grandma’s recipe. Y’all used to love it and I had a craving for it.”

“I still love your shepherd’s pie, Mani,” Dakota said, as Quinn served herself. When she finished, he held his hand out for the spoon.

My stomach growled with anticipation when the spoon was handed to me. According to my parents, Daddy’s mother couldn’t cook much, but one thing she had mastered was Shepard’s pie.

“The food’s delicious, honey,” Timothe said.

For once, I agreed with him.

“I second that, sis,” Quinn agreed.

“I third it,” I called, before my brothers added a comment.

“What they said,” Dakota said around a mouthful of food, gesturing toward Quinn, Timothe, and me.

“What he said,” Logan followed up.

Armani chuckled, beaming with pleasure. “What do you think, Mr. Keegan?”

Noah hacked off another big forkful and brought it to his mouth. As he chewed, a thoughtful expression crossed his face. Once he swallowed, he looked at Armani and said, “This is the best damn Shepard’s pie I’ve ever tasted, ma’am.”

Armani’s grin broadened. “Thank you all very much.”

After that, we ate in comfortable silence for several minutes, with only the sounds of chewing and silverware scraping against plates echoing in the dining room.

“How’s the job, lil’ sis?” Armani asked me, daintily dabbing at the corners of her mouth before continuing her meal.

“Really, Armani?” Quinn said sharply. “You’re asking about her job after all the revelations?”

“It’s great,” I said, preferring to play peacemaker than to have the bullshit flare up again. “I’m so happy I got it.”

“I’ve heard rumors about you, Noah,” Dakota said.

At his words, my muscles tensed again.

“Rumors are rarely factual,” Noah said stiffly.

“There are claims you’re a sexist who refuses to work with women.”

“I told you,” Quinn said dramatically. “I told you, Dakota, hanging out with a dickhead like Timothe would turn you into one too.”

“Hilarious, sister,” Dakota said.

“I wasn’t joking. B, how can Noah be a sexist if he hired Ryan?”

“A is the first letter in the alphabet, dear,” Timothe said. “Not ‘b’.”

Armani released a delicate cough.

“No offense,” Timothe added.

“Fuck you, because I’m greatly offended. Looking at your humpy face insults me deeply,” she said. “Anyway, Kota, that was a dick thing to say to Noah.”

“I’m sorry, man,” Dakota said to Noah. “I was just curious.”

“As your sister said, I wouldn’t hire women if I refused to work with them,” Noah gritted.

“She could’ve been damage control, though,” Timothe added.

Snatching my glass, I glared at him. Neither the water nor the wine glasses were filled. Sighing, I set the empty thing back on the table.

Timothe's words annoyed me. He had no right to such an opinion. To me, he was my dead ass enemy, so I overlooked how similar I'd felt about Noah.

"Just saying," he pressed. Either he didn't believe Noah's threat to ruin him, or he didn't care, because he just wouldn't shut the fuck up. "A reputed sexist hires you after an exposé about his work practices comes out is mighty convenient. Or maybe your 'dating' has something to do with it."

My mouth fell open. Noah growled. Everyone else gasped, even Armani. Timothe threw insults and shade my way all the time, but implying I'd fucked Noah for my position, stooped to a new fucking low.

I glanced at Noah, intending to say something to him, but I'd never seen a scarier look on his face. Ever.

"Timmy," Armani chided, her gaze roaming from Noah to *Timmy*. She swallowed. "Ryan is a very capable young woman. I'm sure her résumé alone swayed him."

I slid my hand under the table and laid my palm on Noah's thigh, hoping he calmed down.

"This is only Ryan's second job in the field, but's she amazing at her work, so you're correct, Armani." Shards of ice dripped from Noah's words. He directed his attention to Timothe. "I don't appreciate your implication. It's an insult to me and to her. My priority is my company, and I don't hire unqualified individuals. Your sister-in-law is a rising star with impressive ideas. As for the rumors, they are unfounded."

Complete bullshit, but I grinned at his praise.

My reaction eased the malice on his face, and he gave me a small smile.

"Straight from the man himself, Timmy," Quinn chirped around a mouthful of food, ignoring Timothe's glare. "My sister is amazing at her job."

Armani had her eyes glued to her half-eaten plate of food, a distressed look on her face.

“My house, Quinn,” Timothe said. “My castle, and I don’t appreciate being called names in it,”

Logan threw our brother-in-law a look as nasty as Noah’s. “It’s Armani’s house.”

Dakota shoveled the last bit of food into his mouth, then pushed the plate away. “And I have to draw the line at you implying Ryan slept with anyone for her job.”

I flashed a victorious smirk at Timothe. For all my siblings to defend me, he’d really fucked up.

“Everyone, please!” Armani exclaimed, her back stiff as a board, while Timothe looked ready to explode. “Let’s just drop the subject, shall we?” She nodded to the shepherd’s pie. “There’s still plenty left, if anyone would like seconds?”

“I do,” Quinn said, standing, “but I need something to drink. I can’t believe you’d let us die of thirst.”

“We have another baby coming,” Timothe said crossly as Quinn stomped out of the room. “We can’t afford to buy soda or alcohol.”

Armani shifted in her seat, glancing away.

I *was* still hungry. Even though I had a bit of food left on my plate, I stood and added more. Armani knew announcing her pregnancy would soften me toward her. “Would you like more?” I asked Noah.

He nodded. Just as I sat after giving him another serving, Quinn walked back into the room. She carried a pitcher of ice water.

Timothe pinned Quinn with a harsh look as she went around the table pouring water into our glasses. She paused behind his chair and smiled. For a horrible moment, she seemed intent on dumping the contents of the pitcher over his big, fat head. She sidled next to him, and I sagged in relief, glad she’d fill his glass, too.

But no. Quinn lifted the pitcher over Timothe and tipped it. Water rolled off his head, raining down his face, onto the table, and into his lap. A slight shift on her part and she finished her

waterfall onto his chest. It happened so fucking fast, we all froze, even that asshole who'd gotten just what he deserved.

"How dare you!" Armani shot from her seat and rushed to her husband as she screeched, ending with, "Quinn!" just as Timothe shot to his feet and yelled, "Bitch!"

For a horrible moment, I thought he'd strike her, so I hurried to her and pulled her away, aware Noah followed me. As I removed Quinn from any danger, he inserted himself between us, and Timothe and Armani.

Dakota stared at Quinn, mouth agape and eyes wide, while my sister and her husband screamed at Quinn. We were close enough to Logan for him to take her hand and guide her back to her seat. She was calm and collected, picking up the glass she poured for herself.

While Armani went to the server and opened one drawer for a cloth napkin, Quinn childishly took a swig from her water and smacked her lips together. Timothe snatched the napkin from Armani and scrubbed it over his damp face. Water soaked his shirt and the blossoming wet spot on his trousers made it seem he'd pissed himself. I hoped he excused himself to change, but no, the cretin sat again.

It was past fucking time to leave, however Quinn didn't seem inclined, and I refused to leave her behind, so I sat. Noah glared at me but returned to his seat, too.

Armani and Quinn engaged in a stare down, an unwinnable competition against Quinn. One of her favorite pastimes as a child had been engaging Logan and me in staring contests.

After looking away first and sitting down again, Armani opened her mouth to speak, but Quinn held her hand up, gulping down the rest of her water. Releasing a satisfied sigh, she said, "Save whatever it is you're about to say, Armani." Her glower didn't falter. "I won't be scolded by a backstabber with no family loyalty."

"How dare you?" Timothe stood again and stormed to her. "You're a little good-for-nothing cow." He reached for her, but Logan knocked his hand away.

As Noah and I stood again, Quinn jumped from her seat. She shoved Timothe away from her. Even if he'd thought of retaliating, Noah inserting himself between them and Logan jerking her away, prevented it.

"Fuck you and fuck this raggedy house," Quinn snarled. "I don't ever want to step foot in it again. When you're old and decrepit, I hope your children lock you motherfuckers in a nursing home and throw away the fucking key."

With that, she stalked out. A moment later, the front door slammed.

"We're leaving, too," I muttered, taking my phone out of my clutch to text Quinn.

Noah placed a hand on my shoulder, the weight of it calming. "I'll call my driver. Does Quinn have a ride home?"

"She came with Dakota," Logan said. "It doesn't matter, though, because I'm leaving too." He yanked his phone out of his pocket. "I'll text Quinn and tell her to wait for me. We can ride the subway together."

"Nonsense," Noah said. "Text your sister and tell her we'll meet her outside. I'll drop both of you off."

Logan looked at me, and I nodded, grateful to Noah for his consideration.

"Both of you are leaving?" Armani asked, frowning.

"We should've left a while ago," Logan said with a sigh.

His words and texting my sister split my attention. Logan didn't like confrontation.

"The moment Quinn walked in, you and Timothe showed her those death certificates and confirmed the truth," he continued. "That set the tone for the entire evening." He looked at Timothe. "You were wrong all around but especially how you told Ryan." Glared at Dakota. "And you're a fucking ball-less wonder. Somehow, you fathered a kid with your nuts missing."

A semblance of shame crossed Dakota's face. "We'll talk later."

“Nothing you say will make any of it right,” Logan responded. “After so long, I was looking forward to our get-together. I’m the dumb ass because I ignored all the drama that ensues when Quinn and Ryan are invited.”

He looked sad and disillusioned. I hurried to him and hugged him. “It’s okay, baby,” I whispered, wishing I could take his pain away.

He kissed my cheek and stepped out of my embrace. “It isn’t, Ry. We had every right to know what really happened. You and Quinn had every right to have the news broken to you gently. Armani asked me to arrive earlier, and she told me the truth. Her and Timothe answered all my questions and comforted me. They treated me with compassion and respect.”

I nodded as a phone alert dinged. “Quinn’s waiting,” I announced after reading the message.

“My driver is a couple of minutes away,” Noah added.

“I’ll go to Quinn now.” Logan paused in the doorway. “It doesn’t matter what you say, Timothe. Nor does it matter that Armani and Dakota allow you to run roughshod over our sisters. Five adults didn’t give a fuck about three kids to care for us. You allowed Ryan, at eighteen, to move out and struggle to take care of a fifteen-year-old and a thirteen-year-old. Not that it differed from what she’d been doing the previous two years, except we could live here. *Maybe* I can excuse you.” He pointed to Timothe. “We don’t share blood. But Armani and Dakota? Mom and Dad? You, *they*, failed us. Quinn and I turned out fine, so Ryan did a damn decent job.” He met Timothe’s gaze. “Fuck you very much, dude.” He left.

“I’m so sorry for this behavior,” Armani said.

For a moment, I thought she spoke to me or even Noah, but she focused her attention on Timothe.

“You know, Ryan and Quinn have always been theatrical, and it’s rubbed off on Logan, Timmy, my love. I will talk to them when their emotions settle, so they can apologize. Especially Quinn.”

“That’ll be a cold fucking day in hell,” I snapped.

Armani sniffed and pressed her hand against her belly. “You’re insulting my husband and stressing me out in my condition.”

“Yeah, I’m done.” Dakota scratched his jaw. “Thalia is waiting for me to pick up Eli, sis. I’ll catch up to you later.”

“But—”

Dakota’s kiss on her cheek interrupted her words. Despite everything, the asshole still shook Timothe’s hand.

As my brother, Noah, and I filed out of the dining room, the silence was deafening in the oppressive air.

Parting like this broke my heart, but it was even more gut wrenching to know how she truly felt.

Noah wrapped an arm around my waist, and I leaned into his comforting warmth.

This dinner had been a certified disaster, exposing Armani’s low opinion of us.

Yet, I was proud of Logan and Quinn. She’d delivered Timothe’s just desserts, beating the prick at his own viciousness, a small payback long overdue.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ryan

Bright and early Monday morning, I stepped from the elevator and onto the twelfth floor of Keegan Enterprises, unsure of how to act, or even how Noah *expected* me to act.

From the time we walked out of my sister's house up until last night, he had been the man of my dreams. After talking us into going for dessert, he'd sat up front with the driver because of the Town Car's limited space. At the café, he'd stepped into the role of concerned older brother for Logan, expressing admiration for how he'd defended me, possibly at the expense of his own relationship with Armani, Timothe, and Dakota. He'd given my brother his personal phone numbers and told him don't ever hesitate to call for anything. Noah engaging Logan in conversation had allowed me to focus on Quinn. She swore she'd never forgive Armani and had to rethink Dakota in her life, too.

For once, I hadn't tried to defend any of them, including our parents. None of them deserved it because they *had* failed us. Once Logan and Noah rejoined our conversation, Noah congratulated my sister on dumping the water on Timothe. She'd preened at his words, buddy-buddy, seeming better acquainted than the onetime run-in at the press conference.

Yes, it was a lie that she'd slept with Noah and Reid to guarantee my employment, but their familiarity struck me as odd. Then I decided I was paranoid, as I took in Noah's interaction with Logan.

The Shibuya honey toast and bubble tea Noah ordered had been delicious. It disappointed me when Quinn asked to crash at my apartment, which prompted Logan requesting the same. I couldn't turn down the cockblockers. Quinn would sleep with me instead of on the couch, preventing an invitation for Noah to spend the night.

Once we arrived at my apartment, Noah saw us to my door, sweetly surprising me with an invitation for us to spend the

next day scuba diving with him.

“Nope,” Quinn had said. “I’m not a fan of invading the privacy of a shark. It might take umbrage and bite my ass off.”

“I say hell yeah!” Logan boasted, enthused. Which wasn’t surprising, considering he was studying to become a marine biologist.

Three pairs of eyes had turned to me.

“What Quinn said.”

“It’s a tie.” Logan looked at Noah. “How do we break it?”

“A coin toss,” I said.

Quinn shook her head. “Don’t you need training and certification to dive? The three of us don’t have that, so no need to toss a fucking coin because we’re not doing it.”

Noah smiled at her. “A DM will come with us to a location safe for beginners.”

“What the fuck is that?” Quinn demanded. “A DM.”

“Dive master,” Noah supplied, and looked at me.

“I don’t know,” I’d hedged. Logan might not get such an opportunity again soon.

“Ryan’s way of saying we should do it for Logan,” Quinn had said, rolling her eyes. “Fuck him. No.”

“How about a compromise?” Noah inserted.

“You send us wardrobe shopping while you two fuck around with sharks?”

I’d poked Quinn’s shoulder. “Shut it. Have some pride. We can buy our own clothes.”

“*You* can,” Quinn retorted. “And it still isn’t the type of clothes he can afford.”

“Not all dive points have sharks, Quinn,” Noah chastised with fondness, sounding genuinely amused at her gold-digging attempt.

“Fine,” she’d relented. “Have fun. I’m staying here.”

“No. Come. If Logan and I go and you’re alone, you’ll only think about shit best left alone.”

“Fuck, Ryan, unless my brain is carved out of my fucking head, I’m going to think. That’s the way intellect works. The difference is what is on your mind.”

“How about this?” Noah inserted. “You two stay on the yacht.”

“Yacht?” Quinn and I chorused.

Noah nodded. “Inherited from my father and not sold because Nicholas uses it regularly.”

My sister and I exchanged glances while Noah continued.

“The dive master, Logan, and I will dive. However—” He’d given a meaningful look to Quinn. “Reid will have to come.”

“I can ignore his ass. I’ve never been on a private yacht before and I’m not missing this opportunity because of him.”

“You’ve never been on any yacht before,” Logan retorted.

Folding her arms, she’d sniffed. “I’d prefer shopping.”

Instead of responding, I’d sent them inside my apartment so I could give Noah a proper goodbye. The kiss had been everything. I’d hated to leave his arms.

As in so many other instances, I’d underestimated what Noah meant by yacht. My vague definition was recreational boats with sleeping and observation areas. It wasn’t something bigger than my apartment with a crew of six, a captain, and too many luxuries and amenities to count.

For once, even Quinn had been speechless. When Noah, Logan, and the dive master, whom Noah referred to as Lemon, went for their dive, Reid had remained on deck, and the two spa attendants Noah hired had pampered Quinn and me.

By the time the dive ended, Quinn and I had had snacks and champagne.

“I need a word with you, Ryan?” Noah had said. Once I’d followed him to the master cabin, he’d dragged me to the shower, then fucked my brains out on the bed.

Dinner was relaxed and fun, an experience I wouldn't forget, especially as the sun set. When we docked, Noah directed Reid to take Quinn and Logan home. He'd come to my house and left early this morning, since he hadn't brought clothes.

Now, Monday brought me back to reality. Preparations for Wednesday's meeting with the Amage brothers would be in high gear. I had a plethora of last-minute details to attend, the most important being a name for the cologne to honor Noah's mother. Things were at a crucial stage. If I didn't supply a name in the next two or three days, my deadline was fucked.

Yet, instead of any of the above being my chief priority, I was nervous.

"Ryan! You startled me," Mrs. Mikes said, coming from the direction of my office. "I was lost in thought."

"So was I," I admitted wryly.

"It's Monday," she said. "How was your weekend?"

Heat crept into my cheeks, and I averted my gaze. "Lovely," I said, and bit my lip.

She grinned. "It's like that, is it? Met someone special and spent it with him? Nothing like a new romance."

"I...I...maybe. It's complicated."

"You'll figure it out."

Since Megan's leave of absence, uh *firing*, Mrs. Mikes was much nicer. But I didn't want her invading my personal life. It was too uncertain. I started down the hall, toward Noah's office. "I better get in there."

"Mr. Keegan hasn't arrived yet," she said breezily. "An emergency came up, but Reid wants to talk to you. I'll tell him you've arrived so he can meet you in your office."

Whatever held Noah up wasn't my business. In my office, I opened my presentation file on my computer and stared at the screen, unable to concentrate, thinking of Noah.

Reid knocked once and opened my door.

“Yes, Reid, of course you can enter,” I said sarcastically. “Thank you for waiting for my direction.”

“Didn’t know if you’d give it to me,” he said without apology as he sat in a chair in front of my desk. “We need to talk, and we didn’t have time to do so yesterday.”

The words on the screen might as well have been hieroglyphics. I couldn’t process a copy I’d been so proud of three or four days ago. I turned away from the computer and looked at Reid. “What can you say to me?” I groused. “What’s done is done. You, Quinn, and Noah knew the truth of that ball and didn’t tell me.”

“None of us figured it out immediately. Forget Noah or me for a moment. Quinn loves you. She wouldn’t lie to you over something so important.”

Reid’s words just reinforced what Noah and Quinn said. I rubbed my temples. “It’s all just a big misunderstanding. I understand that. I was angry at first, but I’m over it. If I was holding a grudge, I wouldn’t have talked to you at all on the yacht.”

Yacht. Damn. I still could barely wrap my head around that.

“I convinced Quinn to have a drink with me last night once we got to the apartment.”

“Because Megan’s no longer at your place, though not at your suggestion,” I said darkly.

“She wouldn’t leave at first,” he said defensively. “But I didn’t come in here to talk about Miss Buford. Quinn told me about the argument you two had this past Saturday.”

“We made up.”

Reid nodded.

“So?”

“Listening as Quinn related what happened made you sound so fucking judgmental to her. She doesn’t need that from you, Ryan.”

Unable to believe he'd come in my office to chastise me over a matter not his business, I glared at him. "I don't judge her. And even if it was your business, which it isn't, Quinn and I have resolved the matter."

"You told her virtue is important to you. What the fuck is that if not self-righteous bullshit?"

"I clarified I referred to myself—"

"That wasn't the only fucked-up statement you made," he growled. "You hurt her. I could say don't do it again or else, but no one has any wish to feel Noah's wrath, so I can only ask you to take better care with what you say to her."

Fury surged in me. "My conversation with my sister isn't your business. I'm not perfect and try to correct my mistakes. Quinn accepted my apology—"

"She didn't express any anger when she spoke of the incident," Reid interrupted. "She even defended your reasons for feeling as you do. I heard how hurt she was. Considering what happened Saturday night at your family dinner, I understand. How you feel about her is especially important to her. *You*, Ryan. How *you* feel about her," he stressed. "She couldn't give less of a fuck about anyone else's opinion."

"Anything else? If not, please leave. I will call Quinn on my lunch break."

"No!" he said, alarmed. "She doesn't know I decided to talk to you."

"Obviously, this needs to be addressed."

"Ryan, she just agreed to accept my calls again, instead of sending them straight to voicemail. If you tell her I confronted you, she'll block my fucking number and never talk to me again."

"The only reason I'm agreeing to this is because I think Quinn has deep feelings for you, but I resent your interference."

"Noted," he said, sounding very Noah-like. "One other thing."

“I need to get to work.” I glanced at the time. It was almost ten and Noah still hadn’t arrived. Or, if he had, he hadn’t called me to his office. Until I saw him and gauged his mood, my nerves were on edge. “How long are you here for today? I can come to your office after lunch.”

“I’ll be heading to the law firm in the next forty-five minutes. I just wanted to tell you your contract has been held up. Nicholas wants a couple of provisions removed.”

“Does it change my salary?”

“Not your base.”

“My allotted time at KMG?”

“No.”

“Then take as long as you wish. I signed the thing without reading it, so I don’t know what provisions you refer to.”

“You will have it by the end of the week. Take your time reading it so you can sign the updated contract without any reservations.”

“Thank you.”

“You received your direct deposit without issue?”

I nodded. “Twenty-five hundred dollars. I was receiving thirteen hundred fifty-five dollars a week at T.S., so I was expecting twenty-seven-oh-eight and fifty cents, but it’ll do.”

“That’s for one week, Ryan. Your paycheck in two weeks will be double that.”

“What?”

“You heard me clearly,” he said with a smile.

My brows snapped together. “There’s...uh...I think there’s been an accounting error,” I squeaked. “My salary was five thousand dollars a month, not every two weeks.”

“Your salary was fifty-four-seventeen a month,” Reid corrected. “You aren’t working for T.S. Marketing, Ryan.”

“B-b-b-but...” I swallowed. “I don’t think you understand me. Twenty-five hundred dollars a week equates to ten

thousand dollars a month.”

“I wasn’t the smartest in my graduating class, sweetheart, but I didn’t fail math.”

“But—”

“You received a very generous bonus for your Amage presentations.”

I nodded weakly. Most of it had gone to Sandy. “Is my salary commiserate to the other KMG executives?”

“Does it really matter?”

“Well—”

“Dorset had a much larger base salary than yours,” he interrupted. “Whether he did or not has no bearing on your value. You managed to convince the Amages to go ahead with Aunt Réjane’s perfume. I’m surprised Noah is *only* paying you ten thousand dollars a month.”

I did quick calculations in my head. “If I live frugally and continue to work at Keegan Enterprises, I’ll reach my goal in seventeen years.”

“Don’t forget to count your bonuses.”

“You’re right!” I said happily.

“If you’d like, I could suggest to Noah that he give you a base salary of twenty-five per month.”

I blinked and laughed nervously. “Twenty-five what per month?”

“Thousand,” Reid supplied, serious.

“That’s...that’s...” Insane. Unimaginable. Outrageous.

“Yes? No? Maybe? Noah will give it to you if that’s what you want.”

I shook my head weakly. “Thank you, though. Ten grand a month seems almost too much.”

“You sell yourself short,” Reid chided. “You’re quite talented. Noah sent me the finished product of your videos. They were amazing.”

“Thank you, but I was just doing my job.”

“Understood. However, whatever salary you desire is yours.”

I opened my mouth.

“As long as it is above the current ten grand.”

Rolling my eyes, I snorted. “Then I want a million per contract, payable under any circumstances, including early termination, and a half million for each goal I achieve.”

“Done,” Reid said with a shrug. “I think you have about ten goals to reach between the two contracts.”

“Ten goals?” I echoed, believing he understood my facetiousness at the amount I threw out. “What are they?”

“Tied into your bonuses.”

“You know what I mean, Reid!” I flared. “You’re telling me I had eleven goals to meet.”

“I am?”

“Didn’t I receive a bonus *for* meeting a goal?”

He frowned, before understanding dawned and he nodded. “Yes, yes, of course! You did indeed.” He cleared his throat. “That means we owe you four hundred ninety thousand dollars.”

I gasped as he pulled out his cellphone and started punching in numbers.

“No!” I huffed. “Don’t you dare! Are you insane? I was joking.”

His finger hovered above his phone. “Are you sure?”

“Positive!”

“Fine,” Reid said unhappily, shoving his phone back into his pocket. “Don’t you have a goal of having a big bank account?”

“I am. Your point?”

“My point? You’re kidding me?”

“I’m not,” I said stiffly. “I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“You’re declining a guaranteed two million dollars and an extra five hundred thousand dollars. Why?”

“What do you mean *why*? I don’t deserve that much money, Reid. We both know it. The *only* reason that amount is even on the table is because...because...” I couldn’t finish the sentence because I felt sick at the idea.

“Noah’s cock doesn’t rule his business decisions, Ryan,” Reid snapped. “Even if it did, why wouldn’t you accept? Why *shouldn’t* you accept?”

“Because I want to earn a salary based on my talents not my pussy,” I bit out, too angry to filter myself.

Drawing in a deep breath, he shook his head. “Life’s short. Why worry about why you’re getting such a salary? You would achieve your dream in months. Weeks, if Amage gives the contract to Sauncier.”

“I don’t know how to make you understand why I feel as I do.”

“Do you understand why?” he asked, not unkindly.

Did I? I wasn’t sure anymore. I was so proud of my degree, earned because of my hard work. “I have always tried to lead by example, Reid. It’s what my parents would’ve expected of me.” At the words, I lowered my lashes, still so hurt over everything I’d learned.

“They aren’t here any longer and you would lead by example if you took the money you asked for. Didn’t you tell Quinn to charge higher than what she intended for her work?”

It didn’t surprise me she’d told Reid what I advised. “It’s different,” I insisted. “Quinn is an independent contractor. I’m not. Unless I win the lottery where I never have to work again, where could I go once my contract ends to continue to make so much money? Such a salary might price me right out of any other positions.”

“Or open all types of doors to you. If you met all the goals, you would add several million to your bank account.”

“There would be no cushion. Purchasing a house would put a dent in the money. Without adding to my savings account, my expenses would eat it up until I was broke again.” Suspicion welled into me. “Did Noah put you up to this?”

“He did not,” Reid said tightly. “I thought Quinn once mentioned you wanted to retire by forty. I suppose I was mistaken.”

“You were not,” I conceded. “Half the world believes either Quinn or me or both of us fucked Noah and you for me to get the position here.” The idea horrified me because I knew what my parents would’ve thought about me if they’d been alive.

“*You* know that isn’t true, Niobe. Fuck what everyone else says.”

I glared at him. “I don’t have excessive pride like she did. She lost fourteen children because of her arrogance. A mortal placing herself above the divine. I’m not doing that. I’m just trying to be fair to everyone, including myself.” I was on the verge of tears. If I didn’t believe my father had already planned what he did before my parents confronted me, I would’ve wondered if my behavior drove him to his extreme act. But from the time he sat at the breakfast table and announced they had an errand to run, he’d declined Quinn’s demand to accompany them. He’d awakened, knowing what he’d do. The last thing he’d called me was a dirty slut. I sniffled but blinked back my tears before they escaped. “I’m not a whore. I’m not sleeping with Noah to swell my bank account or inflate my paycheck.”

“You’re not a whore by any means, Ryan,” Reid said gently.

I nodded. “Th-thank you.”

He allowed a couple minutes to pass in silence. “By the way, you no longer have to worry about the school loans.”

In control of my emotions again, I squinted.

“When Quinn was talking to me, she mentioned you were repaying her loans. I took care of it. While I was at it, to thank

you for being such a marvelous big sister, I also paid off what you owed.”

I fell back against my chair, unable to think clear enough to offer a simple thank you. “It’s too much. All of it.”

“Your pay?”

“No. I appreciate that.” It was so much more than I expected. Now that I was over my shock, however, I was so appreciative. “I’ll be able to rebuild my savings account. I’m referring to everything else. Do you know how much I owed for my loans alone?”

He grinned. “Indeed I do, since I paid them. What do you mean by everything else?”

“*Everything else,*” I said wildly. “The designer clothes and the personal stylist and the driver. Spending a day on a yacht being pampered and not having a care in the world. It’s so, so lavish, but I know it isn’t going to last. I don’t have Keegan money to bring into a long-term relationship.”

“This isn’t old-time Britain where a dowry was required to make a good match.”

“I know. I also know you can’t understand what I mean. That if I let my guard down, I’ll be lost.” I was already lost. For him. *To* him. “Reading about the Keegan wealth and experiencing it are two different beasts. I can’t get used to that. It would be an impossible lifestyle to maintain, attending galas in ten or twelve thousand dollars’ worth of clothes. That blue chinchilla coat is the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever worn. Do you know he just gave it to me? It had to cost at least three thousand dollars.”

Reid frowned. “If it is the coat you had on when you arrived at the Amage function, it wasn’t three thousand dollars.”

“How did you know—”

“Society pages.”

“Right,” I squeaked. Last week, I’d been so hellbent on ignoring Noah, Reid, and Quinn, I hadn’t looked for photos from that night. “H-how much was the coat?”

“I’ll text you a link for one in a similar style.” He got to his feet and headed to the door. “See you later, Ryan,” he threw over his shoulder, walked out, and closed the door.

Five minutes later, his message arrived. When I clicked the link, it led me to *Neiman Marcus*, and a replica of my coat, as he’d promised. Then I saw the price and almost slid to the floor in a dead faint.



Noah

Although Quinn benefited from confirming my slightly altered truth about the night of the ball, she had gotten the courage to confess to me, however roundabout it might’ve been. Without her last letter to *Ask Ida*, I never would’ve known the real story. Quinn had also allowed me a glimpse into Ryan’s head when she’d let me listen to their conversation.

Designer clothes were the least I could give her. While Ryan had been engaged in conversation with Lemon, Reid, and Logan, I’d whispered my intentions quietly to Quinn. Since I never wanted Ryan to find out I was repaying Quinn for her little white lies, I’d had no choice but to accompany her on her shopping expedition to pay for her purchases. I didn’t want to call Celine and risk her accidentally revealing anything to Ryan. I didn’t know what the hell Quinn wanted, so I couldn’t call ahead with instructions to the boutique my sisters once frequented. Rosa couldn’t handle it because she might let something slip, too. Besides, if Quinn went alone and I was invoice, the bill might somehow fall into Ryan’s hands. Then she’d discover the truth before January 2nd...*Fuck*. Paranoia had me in its grip.

So, here I was at one o’clock, still at a fucking boutique with Quinn. After the shop owner took away yet another six outfits without Quinn choosing anything, I sat down and glared at her. She was sitting on a plush couch, after enjoying a light lunch and a glass of wine.

“You have one more fucking shot to select clothes, Quinn,” I said in exasperation. “I’ve been here the entire fucking morning and we haven’t made one bit of headway.”

She made a face at me. “I-I was kind of joking,” she said softly, and tipped her head back to stare at the ceiling. “God, Ryan must be having fits. *I’m* extra. If this is a lot to handle for me, it’s awful for her.”

“You’re an extra what?” I asked in exasperation.

Breaking out into laughter, she lifted her head and looked at me. “I’m an extra nothing. It just means I’m high-maintenance. Ryan isn’t...well, she isn’t basic,” she said, thoughtful. “Maybe she’s extra and I’m extra-extra?”

I blinked at her, clueless.

“Never mind.” She sighed. “There are so many outfits I’ve loved. Most of them,” she admitted. “But have you seen the fucking prices? If you were my man, I’d select a few things. My pussy is worth its weight in gold. Under the circumstances, spending your money feels gross. Fuck, this is the worst fucking time for an existential crisis.”

“You’re having one?” I asked, unsure if she was serious.

“Definitely. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have such a disturbed sense of integrity. Pangs of conscience isn’t my thing. Ryan’s the pro.”

“You love her but resent her, and I don’t appreciate it.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you appreciate,” she snapped. “One, it isn’t your fucking business. Two, fuck off. Three, shut the fuck up and don’t come at me over something you have no fucking clue about.”

Annoyed at how long she’d kept me in the shop, I stiffened. “If it involves Ryan, it is my business. You’d do well to remember that.”

Her eyes widened, then narrowed.

“The only one of you appreciative of Ryan is Logan. The rest of you—”

“Don’t you fucking dare put me in the same category as that pussy and that bitch.”

Was the pussy Dakota and the bitch Armani? Bemused, I frowned at her.

“And I wish that dickhead falls off the face of the fucking Earth,” she continued. “Preferably with Dakota and Armani.”

“Dickhead’s Timothe,” I guessed, then asked about the other two.

“It doesn’t matter.” She scowled. “Fuck, yes, it does. Armani’s the fucking traitor, an asshole, a bitch, a dickhead. You name it, she’s it.”

Heat crept up my neck because I’d acted in a similar way to Alessia, who, as it turned out, was telling the truth. DNA results proved she carried a Keegan. However, *my* family wasn’t the issue right now. I looked at Quinn. “Why come so hard down on Armani?”

Quinn glared at me, blew out a breath and relayed the story of Armani snitching about Ryan’s birth control and first sexual experience. Listening to Quinn as she fought back tears on Ryan’s behalf turned my fucking stomach. It was hard to think about the shame Ryan had endured. No wonder she’d been so mortified at the thought of sleeping with a stranger.

“Fuck all of them,” Quinn finished. “Ryan insists I think of those people with respect, but they’re the ones who fucked us up, especially my sister, with their bullshit. Then those motherfuckers had the fucking gall to fuck themselves up and abandon us.”

“Excuse me?” I said, on the verge of laughter at her statement, even though it was so heartbreaking. Quinn’s grief had turned to anger.

“You heard me. Armani is judgmental about how I live. Ryan isn’t. Her attitude is a product of her own shame perpetuated by our parents making her feel lower than dirt simply because she acted on physical desire. They valued her fucking virtue over her. They berated her, the killer humiliated her, and left Ryan with those fucking words on the day he stole

Mama from us. He couldn't handle living? Bye, fuckhead. He had no right to take himself and her. Fuck, the traitor is a product of their bullshit, too. She married the first motherfucker she fucked, and you see how that turned out."

The shop owner, Laura, cleared her throat. "I've found several more outfits for Ms. Hagen, Mr. Keegan."

Quinn glanced away and sighed. I understood she wasn't interested in clothes now.

"She'll look at them in a moment."

"Of course," Laura responded, taking the hint, and leaving us alone after carefully hanging up the clothes on one of the dressing room door hangers.

While she was present, I texted Reid, ordering him to the fucking boutique. I needed to get to the office to meet with Ryan and fuck her.

The moment we were alone, Quinn got to her feet and went to where the clothes hung. She glided her fingers over a cashmere sweater. For the first time, I saw the longing on her face as she took in each piece.

"I'm so fucking angry with my parents." Her attention returned to the sweater. "Ryan keeps offering excuses for what they did."

"You don't do what your father did if you're not deeply troubled."

"Fuck, who isn't deeply troubled by one thing or another at some point in their lives?"

She still refused to look at me, so I merely said, "True."

"Deep down, I knew the truth, even after Armani denied it. But when Timothe told me Saturday evening, I was so fucking livid. I didn't think how he would tell my sister. I would've told her myself when she arrived. I was just so fucking happy that she got there." She backed away from the clothes. "Life's so fucking funny."

"How?"

“Ryan has made it her life’s mission to set good examples for Logan and me. Do right for us. See that we have as much as possible. The line’s so fucking blurred. She wouldn’t even talk about her sex life with me. It pisses me off so much that she acts like my mother instead of my sister. Her martyrdom annoys the fuck out of me. But there I was, Saturday night, so fucking happy she’d arrived to...” In the brief time I’d known her, I’d never seen her look so sad. “Protect me. She was there and I could be as much of a bitch as Timothe required, and Ryan would protect me. Even at her own expense,” she added, the shame in her voice clear. “Armani, Timothe, and Dakota... mean nothing. It’s Ryan who holds our family together. So, yeah, it feels gross to take your money because I sent in that letter to *Ask Ida* for my sister. Not you. I want you to swoop in and be her knight in shining armor. She’s our rock. Who’s hers? You care about her. It’s been even more obvious this past weekend. You wouldn’t treat Logan and me as you do if you didn’t have feelings for her. And, yet you do yourself a disservice.”

I frowned at her.

“Being part of a family doesn’t require payment to do the right thing.”

“In my family it does.”

“Reid’s said as much. You motherfuckers are as dysfunctional as we are. The only difference is you’re wealthy and we aren’t.” She walked back to the couch and sat. “Just look after my sister. Respect what she wants. Don’t force her to accept your decisions.”

“I assume you mean about her future as a career woman if she and I have a long-term relationship?”

“Yes.”

I refused to comment.

“You’re a decent guy. If you treat Ryan right and act like Logan and me are part of your family, then we’ll respond in kind. Your willingness to spend so much money on me is so very appreciated, but you’re fucking insane. You can’t buy

loyalty or regard, Noah. Love and friendship aren't for sale. Have a little more fucking self-respect. Goddamn. What the fuck is wrong with you? What you did for Logan and me just by including us means more to us than what you can buy. I'm having enough fucking trouble trying to steer Ryan to a life of her own. Yes, I have setbacks sometimes. Sue me. I'm human. I'll lose my fucking mind if I have to teach you the meaning of valuing yourself."

"Who do you think would give you the most trouble?" Reid asked, standing in the doorway of the private consultation room. "Noah or me?"

Gasping, Quinn turned in her seat. "What are you doing here?"

I stood. "I texted him. I need to get to the office. And based on your requirements to spend money, he's better suited."

She faced forward again, not speaking.

"Good luck," I murmured, clapping Reid's shoulder. "She's all yours."

"Noah?"

"Yes, Quinn?"

"What makes you think I want Reid's money?"

My cousin scowled at the back of her head. "You agreed to answer my calls."

"I hope you two can settle things," I said sincerely.

"Don't leave yet, Noah. Please?"

"I need to get to the office, Quinn."

"In case Ryan hasn't told you, I'm the pain-in-the-ass younger sister you never knew you needed," she replied.

"You have five minutes, then I'm leaving you in Reid's care."

She waited a moment, then said, "I said I wouldn't ignore your calls, Reid. Nothing more."

"Would you at least look at me?"

“Nope. Why are you here?”

“This is a trick question,” Reid complained. “How do you want me to answer that?”

“Truthfulness would be nice,” Quinn said blandly. “The first thing that pops into your entitled fucking brain.”

“Noah told me to come while you shopped, then pay for whatever you chose and drive you home,” Reid said. “Something I’m more than happy to do.”

“Why?”

Uncertainty dropped into his features, and he glanced at me. I shrugged, unsure how to convey what I thought Quinn wanted to hear.

“Because you want clothes I can afford to pay for?” he asked tentatively, wincing when she stiffened.

Dumb ass. Even I wouldn’t have given that answer.

“You have two more tries, Reid, and then fuck yourself forever if you don’t get it right.”

“Because in the last several weeks, you’ve fucked me several times, and this is your reward? I have repeatedly told you that your puss...” He glanced at me. “Er, that you’re, especially certain parts of you, are worth its weight in gold.”

The stupid fucker was digging a hole so deep he’d never climb out. “I move to forfeit Reid’s attempts to respond,” I said, trying to lighten the moment.

“On what grounds?” Quinn asked after the briefest pause.

“You have an unfair advantage. I doubt he’s had an in-depth conversation with you in ages. He can’t know the answer you’re searching for.”

“Request to forfeit denied,” she said flatly. “He knows the right answer. He more than fucking knows.”

One look at Reid’s clueless expression and I saw he *didn’t* know. But I knew how proud Ryan was. She’d walked away from a thousand dollars in cash. Quinn admired Ryan, so she’d follow her sister’s ideas. While I believed she wouldn’t

hesitate to have a man spend lavishly on her if she slept with him, she felt differently about Reid. I wish I could've conveyed to Reid that all he needed to say was he'd buy whatever she wanted because he cared about her and wanted nothing more than her happiness.

"What do you want me to say, Quinn?" Reid sounded helpless. "Tell me."

"If I have to tell you, dickhead, it's meaningless."

"May I talk to my cousin a moment?" I asked, not waiting for her response. I nodded to Reid and started out the door.

"You may," Quinn called, stopping us in our tracks, "but it still forfeits his answer."

Reid and I glanced at each other. As much as I wanted to school him, Quinn refused to give an inch. She wanted *his* unfiltered response.

His arrogance, coded in Keegan DNA, dissolved. He couldn't charm, order, or buy his way into Quinn's good graces. As one, we turned to her again.

She got up and walked to us. "So, tell me, Reid, why?"

He gave her a stark, vulnerable stare that told me he understood exactly what she desired, and he wanted to give her the world because she was his world. Tension drifted from me. Even Quinn's look softened, and she gave him a tender smile.

Clenching his jaw, he glanced away. When he looked at her again, his expression was cold and indifferent. "Because it's no less than what I do for all my women?"

A small noise escaped Quinn, disappointment and despair running across her face. For a moment, I thought she was going to cry, but her look hardened and I saw the death of her love that birthed unadulterated hate.

I think I was too caught up in the moment because a sense of foreboding rose in me.

"I have held you up long enough, Noah," she said briskly. "Thank you for the sentiment, but I have to get going."

“I’ll take you home,” I told her.

“No, you won’t. You don’t have time,” she said evenly. “That’s why you called your cousin. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

She tried to scoot past me, but I blocked her path. “Go to the fucking car, Quinn. You’re upset. Anything can happen to you.” And Ryan would roast my fucking balls for my role in her sister’s misfortune. “I’m taking you home.”

She threw me a sullen look. “Why?”

“I’m not playing this fucking game with you. I’ve told you why. Now go to the goddamn car.”

She opened her mouth to reply.

“It’s a fucking order, not up for debate. When I walk out of this shop, I expect to find you in the Town Car.”

Although she didn’t give me a sign she’d comply, she left. I grabbed Reid by the collar and yanked him closer. “You’re a stupid sonofabitch. Why did you answer as you did?”

Reid gave me a bleak look. “Megan called me during my drive here. She’s pregnant.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

I have enjoyed reading your advice, especially to Concerned Sister, never thinking I would need any myself. I cannot thank you enough. You were the gateway to leading me to a woman who means everything to me. I haven't been honest with her, and I fear if she ever discovers the truth, she might walk away. She now knows the story, but not all the details. Her sister, my cousin, and I are trying to protect her by withholding information. Recently, I tried to show my appreciation to her sister by taking her on a shopping spree. She didn't buy anything. Yet, I couldn't confess my whereabouts to my girlfriend. She believes I went upstate to visit a sick aunt. No such person exists. Should I take these secrets to my grave or should I get everything out in the open?

- An Extremely Concerned Boyfriend

One of the dead forefathers said two can keep a secret if one is dead. Rightly so. Honesty is always the best policy. What is wrong with you? By the way, sending me such questions serves as a conflict of interest. Don't write to me again, under the circumstances. You know what you need to do, stick to the plan and get it done on January 2nd.



Noah

“Noah,” Ryan cried, rubbing her pussy as I drew on one of her full tits, switching from one to the other, and nipping, licking, and sucking.

Her body was under mine, and her moans of pleasure hardened my dick painfully. Unable to ignore my need to be inside her, I grabbed her hand, to stop her fingering her clit. I thrust into her. She cried out and wrapped her legs around my waist, grinding against me. One of my hands migrated to her neck as I slammed into her, gently applying pressure to her throat, just so she'd feel a light squeeze but not hard enough to do damage. Ryan gasped in surprise, the pleasure on her face heightening my own. My grunts joined her cries.

“Fuck,” I moaned, removing my hand from her neck and slanting my mouth over hers.

She parted her lips, allowing my tongue entry and melting into my touch. I pumped into her, our mouths absorbing the sounds of pleasure. Her orgasm washed over her, turning her

movements jerky. She clenched her pussy around my cock, and I couldn't hold on. My cum jetted into her, the force of my climax drawing my fucking soul out of my body.

A moment later, I rolled next to her and took her into my arms. She rested her head against my chest, sighing in satisfaction.

“What a great way to wake up,” she whispered, kissing my chest.

I grinned, her words echoing my thoughts.

“I agree,” I replied, stroking her wealth of curls.

“Do you want me to cook breakfast? I've been craving pancakes.”

“Unnecessary. Angelo will soon start breakfast,” I said, referring to my live-in chef and remembering Quinn's reaction, hiding a grin at Ryan's groan.

“A chef?”

“A chef,” I concurred.

The smell of coffee wafted into my bedroom, and Ryan's stomach growled.

“I'm hungry,” she mumbled.

“It seems so.”

“Should I offer to help him?”

“Absolutely not. If he needs your help for two people, he should turn in his resignation today.”

Her laughter died at my seriousness, and she widened her eyes, ignoring another stomach rumble. “Um, I-I enjoy cooking. Will it anger him if I invade his kitchen?”

“The kitchen's mine, Ryan. Cook to your heart's content. If he doesn't like it, refer to my previous statement.”

“Harsh.”

“Truth,” I countered. “Anyone who stands in the way of whatever you want will face the consequences.”

“Your staff will hate me with that attitude, Noah.”

“They’ll hate me, Ryan. And that promise isn’t applicable to only my staff. Now, do you really feel like cooking this morning, sweetheart?”

Guilt crossed her face, and she lowered her lashes.

“I thought not.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to. I read your expression. What do you want to eat?”

“Uh—”

“Don’t feel guilty. It’s misplaced.”

She sighed, relenting. “Would you ask him to make pancakes?” she questioned, her nervous giggle revealing her lingering hesitancy.

Ryan acclimating herself to the luxuries afforded her as my girlfriend pleased me. A mere week ago, she would’ve fought tooth and nail to cook. Her reluctance would’ve been outright rebellion. “He should come in any minute. I’ll tell him you want pancakes.”

“Ask him. Don’t tell him,” she protested, lifting on her elbow to give me a bemused look. “It might make him resentful of me.”

Maybe she hadn’t adjusted. “Then he’ll find another place of employment, Ryan. He’s here to prepare meals for anyone who wants to eat.”

The knock on my bedroom door interrupted her response. “Sir, you awake?”

Ryan squeaked, alarmed at her nudity.

As if I’d allow him to see her naked body. I yanked the covers over her. “Yeah, come in, Angelo.”

He opened the door and walked in, dressed only in red flannel pajama pants and a white wife-beater that revealed his heavily tatted arms.

It was his usual attire that I'd never had a problem with since it didn't affect the quality of his food. He'd never attended culinary school, but he whipped up some of the best food I ever tasted, and I paid him handsomely for it.

Ryan slid deeper under the covers, the sound of her movements drawing Angelo's eyes to her. They widened ever so slightly. A blush rose in her cheeks. He stared at her, and I could only imagine the impact of her beauty. Golden skin. Dark hair. Gray eyes.

Annoyance quickly overrode my understanding. He had yet to look away from her, so I cleared my throat. Immediately, he redirected his attention to where it belonged. Away from her and on me.

"Er, sorry, sir. What would you and the lady like for breakfast?" He threw her another quick glance, offering her a smile, which fell away when he looked at me again and saw my displeasure.

"We want pancakes, eggs, and bacon with a side of fresh fruit," I said coldly.

"Right, Mr. Keegan," he said, backing toward the door. "Coming right up!"

With that, he left Ryan and I alone again.

"We should dress while we're waiting for breakfast," she said, hopping out of bed, displaying her naked body.

"Agreed." I stared at her plump ass as she retrieved her overnight bag.

"I'm going to shower. Wanna join?" she questioned with a smile and a wiggle of her eyebrows, several products in her hands.

"Say no more." I got out of bed and hurried after her into my en suite bathroom, anticipating her warm, wet walls gripping my hard dick.

My large walk-in shower allowed us to comfortably fuck and freshen up, impossible at Ryan's apartment. Her place was

far too fucking small, and the area wasn't the safest. After a few more sleepovers, I'd ask her to move in with me.

"Are you just going to stand there?" she asked, holding the shower door open, the escaping steam fogging the mirrors.

Grinning, I stepped into the shower, shutting the door behind me. "I was thinking," I confessed as warm water hit my skin, the shower head and the built-in jet spray soaking me within seconds.

Ryan lathered her hair with shampoo. "About?"

"You," I replied, moving her hands so I could massage her scalp, before combing my fingers through her thick mass of hair.

A soft sigh escaped her. "That feels amazing."

Once conditioner replaced her shampoo, she asked, "What were you thinking about me?"

"Your apartment," I told her, "and I know what else would feel just as amazing."

"Oh yeah?" she purred, smirking as she played along. With my cock so hard, she couldn't mistake my meaning. "What might that be?"

"Why don't I show you?"

I wrapped an arm around her waist and slanted my mouth over hers. She parted her full lips, allowing my tongue access to hers. One of her hands traveled up to my hair, and the other clutched the arm that entrapped her against me.

Our lips still attached, I backed her against the wall and lifted her into my arms. Immediately, her legs wrapped around my torso. In one smooth motion, I thrust into her, and we both moaned at the sensation.

"You're so fucking wet," I whispered, lightly nipping her earlobe and driving deeper inside her.

An incoherent sound of pleasure escaped her. I slammed into her, and her moans grew louder. Resting my head in the crook of her neck, I inhaled her scent, loving the way she

smelled. Breathing in her aroma heightened my orgasms. The combination of her natural fragrance dancing in my nose and feeling her tight, wet pussy drove me insane.

Our fucking was hard and fast. Within moments, her release hit her, and she cried out. My seed rushed into her. Thank God she was on birth control. I didn't want children. Wrong. I didn't want children unless I married her. I loved her but didn't know how she felt about me. Besides, we hadn't cleared up her future career plans. We'd pushed it aside. Every praise I gave Ryan was the truth. That didn't mean I wanted her to continue working.

She kissed my jaw, and I smiled down at her then kissed the top of her soaked head.

"That was amazing," she sighed, lust still darkening her eyes.

God, but she was gorgeous. Every time I looked at her, I marveled at her beauty.

"I more than agree," I murmured, unable to think of a better start to our day.



That's Life by Frank Sinatra blasted through the limousine's speakers as my driver approached Keegan Enterprises an hour later.

Ryan sniffed and shook her head. "And you talk about my singing."

"Hush, woman. Mine isn't nearly as bad." I resumed my singing.

She rolled her eyes and smiled at me. Ryan had her window rolled down ever so slightly, and the small crack allowed sunlight to stream into the car, haloing her in a beautiful radiance. With her cheerful expression, she looked supernaturally gorgeous.

Shit! Halloween was just a week and a half away. Throwing a party the Saturday before the holiday was a Keegan family tradition. What better time to present her to my family and

friends in the place our romance began? “My siblings and I are hosting a Halloween party on the 29th. You’re coming—” I caught myself just in time. She’d take umbrage at an order. “I’d like you to go with me.”

Her eyes widened, her silence putting me on edge. “Like a date?”

“Yes, I’d like you to be my date for the party.”

“I’d like that, too,” she murmured, her smile tender.



Ryan shouted the words to *Twistin’ the Night Away* by Sam Cooke, leaning forward as the song directed while gyrating her lower body. I chuckled in amusement and mimicked her movements, a far worse dancer than her.

At the close of the song, Ryan beamed a smile at me. The layer of sweat on her forehead attested to all the dancing we’d done in my living room since we’d arrived at my place a couple of hours ago.

Yesterday marked the first night Ryan had stayed over. Tonight started out more for convenience than anything else. Tomorrow should’ve been our presentation to the Amage brothers, but Channing Powers had called and rescheduled. He promised to be in touch with Ryan as soon as possible.

Although she was the account executive, I didn’t appreciate that asshole calling her. To keep the peace between me and Ryan, I decided to see how it all played out. Even if her reason for sleeping over had been postponed, I didn’t mind her company. Her in my arms and her sweet scent allowed me to sleep like a baby. If I slept alone tonight, my king-sized bed would feel too fucking big without her next to me.

“What the hell is a Watusi?” I questioned, slightly breathless. Though an active man, I rarely worked out for two straight hours, and I hardly ever focused on cardio. My gym sessions lasted an hour, with a focus on resistance training.

“A type of cattle.”

Her love of trivia continually impressed me. “Sam Cooke was shouting about cows?”

She giggled. “They are the kings and queens of the bovine world and can trace their lineage back thousands of years. I’d sing about them, too.”

I rolled my eyes, my grin remaining. “You, ma’am, are blowing smoke up my ass.”

“And what a fine ass it is, sir.”

She stepped into my embrace and tilted her head up for my kiss. She hummed low in her throat. “The Watusi was a dance popular in the 1960s,” she said when we came up for air.

“No shit,” I said, taken aback. “The song’s that old?”

“Yeah, it came out in 1962. You don’t know about Sam Cooke?”

“I know *of* him. I just never listened *to* him.”

Ryan walked to the black leather sectional and sat. “Your parents never played him?”

“No.” I sat next to her. “My father preferred jazz and classical, and my mother listened to French songs.”

“Can you sing in French?” she asked, scooting closer to me so I could wrap my arms around her and lean back with her. She rested her head in the crook of my arm.

“I know French songs. But can I sing them? I can’t carry a tune, so that would be a no.”

She looked up at me as I glanced down at her. “Actually, the dance referenced in the song refers to the Tutsi of the African Great Lake region. Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda. They speak Bantu and are also known as Abatutsi and Watusi. Spectacular dances are part of their tradition.”

“Your love of facts continues to amaze me.”

“I’m Jill of all trivia, mistress of none,” she teased.

We smiled at each other. Unable to resist, I planted a kiss on her delectable lips.

Our kiss quickly intensified, and I nipped her lip, encouraged by her moan. However, before things escalated, the next song on her playlist, *Pony* by Ginuwine, distracted her. Squealing, she jumped from the couch to dance.

My ego might've been a little bruised if she didn't grind to the beat or step between the vee of my legs and gyrate, rewarding me with a lap dance. Even if she sounded fucking awful belting out the song, I smiled at her joy. She sang her heart out, unconcerned I'd told her she sang terribly.

She moved off my lap, pointing her finger at me, still singing and dancing. Smiling, I stood up and planted my hands on her hips, rocking with her. In response, she wrapped her hands around my neck, still fucking singing. I tried to move in sync with her, but she out danced me again.

"I'm hungry," Ryan announced at the song's conclusion. She grabbed her phone from the coffee table and plopped on the sectional again. "Do you want a pizza? I'm thinking about ordering one from *Mamma Mia's*."

"Yes. Pepperoni with nothing else on it."

She nodded, and I returned to my place next to her. Peering at her phone screen, I saw she was checking out our order.

I snatched the device. "I'll pay."

"Hey!" She reached for it. "I got it, Noah. It's fine."

Holding my phone out of reach, I hurriedly logged into my account at the pizza parlor and quickly paid using my stored information. "Too late. Order's placed."

"I'll Cash app you the money, then."

"And I'll reject it," I replied, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her closer to me, loving the way her body felt against mine. "It should be here in thirty minutes."

"Whatever."

She sounded annoyed, and I prepared my counter arguments if she made a big deal out of it. Day before yesterday's conversation with Quinn remained fresh in my mind, so I was trying my best to step back and not demand everything went my way. Quinn's insight also gave me another perspective to view Ryan. And myself.

Perhaps Nathaniel only sought me out for help or favors because I'd only made myself available to him that way. Maybe I thought that was the only thing I was good for, or I owed it to him because I felt responsible for our mother's death.

Yesterday evening, I'd called him for the first time in recent memory just to say 'hello' and to check on him. After overcoming his shock, he'd thawed. I'd even spoken briefly to Alessia.

Reid's revelation had fucked my entire fucking day. My cousin was upset and asked me to undo whatever underhanded machinations had allowed me to move so fast against Megan. He felt it would be easier if she were here. To me, her presence would complicate matters by upsetting Quinn and thus troubling Ryan.

In the car, once Reid and I parted ways, Quinn had been like a block of ice, on her phone calling one man and another and another, lining up dates—and I used the word loosely—with shocking rashness.

"Reid's not the end of the fucking world," I'd snapped, so frustrated I'd yanked her phone away. "If you want to fuck your way through Manhattan because you enjoy it, then do it. If you're punishing yourself for falling for Reid, then stop being a fucking fool. Fuck Reid, Quinn. He's going to regret his stupidity."

She'd shuddered, but she hadn't cried. I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Honestly, I hadn't known what to tell her. My sisters hadn't ever come to me for advice. Nathaniel was the only one who'd given me a chance. I didn't know how to be a big brother to a girl. I only knew Quinn needed that from me.

“I don’t know how to help you,” I’d said after a moment. “Ryan’s at the office. We’ll head there.”

“She’ll wonder why we’re together.”

Fuck, I knew that. “I’ll tell her I bought clothes for you,” I said bleakly. “I’ll think of a reason. When’s your birthday?”

“Long past.”

Of fucking course it would be. “I’ll think of something. You need her right now. I can’t be so selfish that I don’t bring you to her.”

I’d never understand women. Whatever I said thawed her.

“No. Don’t do that. Just give me my phone back and drop me off at a bar. I’ll get home okay. I’m fine, I swear. Don’t tell Ryan anything. It will distract her from you, and whatever you two are doing is too new.”

“If you’re out for a good time, keep your dates.” I held the phone out to her. “Otherwise, cancel them. You’re not hurting anyone but yourself.”

Her lower lip had trembled as she reclaimed the device. I thought she’d let her dates stand. She didn’t. She’d canceled all of them.

When we pulled up in front of a hard to get-into eatery, she’d straightened in her seat. “I’m not leaving you to drink alone and try to find your way home.”

Close to six in the evening, I dropped Quinn off at the apartment she shared with Logan. Not once had I called in to my office nor had Ryan contacted me. I’d phoned her immediately. She’d been cold to me until I explained an aunt who lived several hours away took ill. She forgave me and accepted my invitation to come to my place.

And here we were.

“I’m happy you’re not a pineapple person,” Ryan said, glancing up at me. “I tried a pineapple and pepperoni pizza once and almost threw up.”

Her dramatic shiver made me chuckle. “Pineapple on pizza is tolerable,” I said. “I just don’t go out of my way to get it.”

“Tolerable is too kind a description, but to each their own.”

I brushed my lips over hers, serenaded by *Over The Rainbow* by Israel Kamakawiwo. Her playlist’s mix of songs intrigued me. The artists ranged from Sam Cooke to Israel Kamakawiwo to Tupac. “You like all these songs?”

“Duh. That’s why they’re on my playlist.”

“Smart ass,” I said with mock severity, laughing at her smirk. “You have varied music taste.”

“Both my parents loved songs of all genres. It’s in my genes.”

My heart ached at the sad look entering her eyes. Yet, I understood her emotions at losing a much-loved parent.

“Sweetheart,” I whispered, kissing her brow, her nose, her cheeks and tangling my fingers in her hair.

“It’s okay, Noah. Truly.”

I waited for her to continue, giving her a moment to collect her thoughts.

“Daddy was a Dental Assistant,” she said softly. “Did I ever tell you that?”

“No.” Although I knew it from my background check.

“His first love was boxing, but he gave up that dream for Mama. Then, after choosing a career he could tolerate, he got his certification. He always intended to become a proper dentist, but he had an army of kids to help care for, so he never did. He’d always say he’d do it after Logan turned 18, but y’know...”

She trailed off and averted her gaze. When she looked at me again, I doubted she saw me. A faraway look clouded her gorgeous eyes. Distracted, she made tiny circles on my arm with a slender finger.

“My mother was a chemistry teacher. She was a whiz at the subject, something I didn’t inherit from her,” she said with an

airy laugh, her tone wistful. “Armani and Quinn favor her, you know. My brothers and I resemble our father. We weren’t rich my any means, but we had a decent life. Armani’s house has been in my father’s family since the 1950s and was paid off by the time we moved in, so we never had to worry about having a roof over our heads.”

Doubting she’d appreciate the extent of my probe into her life, I feigned shock. “Really?”

She nodded. “I could go on for hours about them but tell me a little about your parents from you, not from my research.”

Pleased by her interest in my life, I planted another kiss on her delectable lips. She sighed in contentment and a foreign feeling settled into me. Happiness. The moment brought more joy to me than words could describe. It was as shocking as it was unsettling. I pecked her forehead, and she nuzzled closer to me.

“Talk before we’re sidetracked, Noah.”

“Would that be a bad thing?” Her proximity to my hardening cock made a distraction a genuine possibility.

“No, but I want to hear about your parents.”

“Fine. I’ll start with my father.”

From an early age, he’d been more devoted to work than his children. If it didn’t involve my mother, he didn’t care much about familial matters and duties.

“My father met my mother when he and my grandfather went on a business trip to France, and she was a secretary for the Amage brothers’ business. Outside of his business, my mother was the only thing my father truly cared about,” I continued, sharper than necessary. “When she died, he locked himself inside of his office, a shell of his former self.”

Ryan took my hand in hers and lightly squeezed it. “I’m so sorry. It would’ve helped if had he been there for you.”

Lifting her hand, I kissed it.

“There’s so much I could say about my mother,” I said after a moment, deciding not to comment on my father.

“Yes. From everything I learned about her, she was a grand lady.”

“She was. She’d drop everything in an instant for her family. Especially me,” I admitted. Pulling away from Ryan, I shook my head. “She died because of that intense love. If I hadn’t gotten sick, she wouldn’t have gotten on that plane an —”

“Noah!” Ryan interrupted, incredulous.

A tear sliding down my cheek shocked me.

She thumbed it away and placed her hand on my shoulder, her look tender and concerned instead of judgmental and mocking.

“Don’t even go there. You’re capable of many things. Controlling the weather and a 200-ton machine isn’t on the list.”

“I know.” My mother’s death was the only thing able to bring me to tears, even after all these years.

“That’s why I can’t come up with a name for her fragrance. She was such an incredible woman. How do I choose something to show her elegance, her value, and how much I still miss her?”

“I understand. I couldn’t capture my parents’ lives with a simple word.”

“Talking about her fills me with so much nostalgia, Ryan. When she was alive, everything seemed so easy. My family was close, and one person in the world always had my back. Her death caused a seismic shift in our lives.” On the verge of tearing up again, I cleared my throat. “I’ve thought about calling the fragrance *Colle*, or glue in French. She held us together, but I didn’t want something meant to honor her forever associated with an adhesive.”

She smiled. “I understand,” she repeated. “No matter how symbolic the reason. Besides, in today’s world, assholes would mock the name.”

“One of my thoughts,” I admitted. “If someone ridiculed anything dedicated to her, it would enrage me. To avoid that, I thought it best to choose another name.”

I hadn't taken her into my arms again, so used to shutting everyone out to protect myself. But Ryan lifted my hand and ducked under my arm, settling into the crook, and forcing me to lean back. “Truly, I understand, especially the nostalgia part, Noah. I will always have a hole in my heart because my parents won't see my important moments.”

Silence fell between us, each of us lost in our own memories. Yet, it was peaceful. Soothing, a balm to the brokenness I'd so long felt. Therapists had tried to heal me, but any strides I'd make would crumble under my family's accusations.

“What's nostalgia in French?” Ryan asked, breaking into my thoughts. “Nostalgie, right?”

I nodded. “Why?”

“Well, um...” she said, fidgeting with the buttons on my shirt and lowering her gaze. “You might think it's silly, but, um, have you considered calling the perfume that?”

I froze. I was a fucking dumbass. Why hadn't I ever considered such an obvious name? “It isn't silly, Ryan. It's perfect. *La Nostalgie*.”

Her anxiety fell away, and she smiled at me. “I'm happy to be of service.”

“I'm happy I have such a gorgeous, intelligent woman in my life.”

At the happiness on her face, she looked as radiant as a goddess. “Thank you.”

The woman in blue who'd lived in my memory had been perfect. Had I never discovered her identity, I would've turned her into a divine being no woman could've compared to. That hadn't happened. I knew who she was, and her flawed complexities *made* her perfect.

No wonder I was in love with Ryan Hagen.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Ryan

“I wish your place had a tub. Preferably a jacuzzi tub, but any type would be great,” I said, strolling out of Noah’s bathroom in nothing but a towel, my damp curls moisturized and put into two long braids.

Noah had showered to prepare for the Keegan Halloween party. With two hours until it started, he should’ve been dressing, but he lay naked on his bed, scrolling on his phone. A towel was the only thing that covered him. Not that I minded the view.

The gods sculpted the man’s fine body. Defined biceps and massive forearms revealed his love of weightlifting. It surprised me to learn he had a personal trainer. Enormous hands with long, solid fingers perfect for cupping my generous tits and big ass. A strong neck and jaw with firm lips made for kissing and pussy eating, and an elegant nose.

He glanced away from his phone to stare at me, his eyes darkening when he noted my state of undress. “What’s wrong with showers?”

“Nothing, and yours is great, plus we can shower together,” I said, thinking back to our failed attempt at shower sex in my apartment’s shower/tub combo. “However, a hot bubble bath accompanied by relaxing music after a long day is heaven,” I mused, moisturizing my skin and face, a daily habit.

“Well, when you say it that way,” he drawled, tossing his phone aside and patting the spot beside him. “Come here.”

Smirking, I dropped my towel, loving the way he examined my naked body as I approached him. When I was within arm’s reach, Noah wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me to him, stationing me between his thighs to kiss my midsection. He licked and kissed my skin, and my pussy throbbed. He trailed his mouth down to my nearly bare feminine mound. Pushing closer to him, I lifted my leg to give

him better access and rested my foot on his thigh. My core tightened, slickening with anticipation. Unfortunately, he stopped before he tasted me.

“You smell so fucking good,” he muttered, his warm breath dancing over my sensitive skin.

I slowly slid my foot down his thigh, marveling at how rock solid it was. As I stood straight again, he drew a taut nipple into his mouth, and I groaned in pleasure. My eyes slipped closed, and I buried my fingers in his silky hair.

A few minutes later, he pulled away, settled his hands on my hips to push me back, and stood. His eyes bore into mine as he allowed his towel to fall to the floor. His hard, massive cock sprung free, and my mouth watered.

I wanted to taste him, but he never gave me the chance. It was no different now.

“Lie back,” he directed.

At my compliance, he parted my thighs and ran his fingers along my wet slit. Holding my pussy lips apart, he tongued my clit. I gasped and grabbed onto his hair, my back arching as he ate me out. He eagerly lapped at my clit, before giving it a nice, long suck that made me cry out, before he resumed his licking.

“Fuck,” I moaned, the wet heat of his tongue driving me insane.

Despite my grip on his hair, he raised his head, displacing my hands, and aimed a sexy smirk at me. “You like that?”

I nodded, only able to say, “keep going,” which was more than enough for him.

With a chuckle, he resumed tonguing my pussy, faster and faster. He shoved his hands under my ass cheeks. I lifted my thighs and held my knees up as he tongue-fucked me. I cried out, a shudder running through my body. He savored me with his wet tongue, tormenting me with his teeth, while his perfect lips eased the ache that he created. The combination drove me wild and brought me to the brink of ecstasy.

“Play with your tits while I eat you,” he ordered, his dominant tone bringing me ever closer to orgasm.

Complying at once, I rolled my sensitive nipples, pulling them and grinding against his mouth. Pleasure overwhelmed me. Between the nipple play and pussy eating, the combined sensations were more than words can describe. My mind blanked as my orgasm neared and my cries grew louder.

“Not yet,” his sadistic ass ordered, moving his mouth long enough to douse the impending explosion.

Lowering my legs, I panted and tilted my hips in a silent plea.

He sucked my clit again, bringing me back to the brink before lifting his head.

Barely able to think straight and needing to come, I raised up on my elbows and met his gaze. “Please,” I whimpered, feeling like I’d burst.

“Not yet,” he repeated.

I groaned in frustration, my head lolling back. He flicked his tongue over my clit, and I trembled. Grinding my pussy against his mouth, I moaned.

After several torturous seconds, he uttered the one word I longed to hear, “Come.”

The sound of his deep voice set me off.

“Noah,” I screamed as I came, pussy juice gushing out of me. “Oh, fuck!” I cried as he continued to suck my hole. My entire body shook, and my eyes rolled into the back of my head. He gently nipped and licked me through my orgasm, then moved his mouth away.

I tried to come down from my high, but he didn’t give me a chance to recover before looming over me and positioning himself between my thighs. The head of his enormous dick teased my entrance. Noah slammed his mouth against mine and pushed his tongue past my lips. Tasting my own sweet juices sent my need for him into overdrive. He buried himself

inside of me in one hard thrust, and I screamed in pleasure and pain. My pussy was still sensitive from his tongue lashing.

He put a hand around my throat as he pumped into me. At the slight pressure of his fingers, I moaned and raked my manicured nails down his back and shoulders, the scraping of my nails against his skin coaxing a groan from him. He slammed into me, possessing me as he rode me hard. His deep grunts drowned out my sounds of pleasure. When he removed his hand from my neck, he buried his face in the crook, kissing and sucking my skin.

“Holy shit,” I moaned, coming for the second time, this orgasm more intense than the last. Shrieks of ecstasy erupted from me. I whimpered, “I love you,” before my vocabulary ditched me. I doubted my words truly registered with either of us.

Seconds later, Noah stilled and grunted, quickly pulling out of me, and busting on my thigh. A few minutes passed before I cracked an eye open. He stared at me with such a satisfied look, I giggled.

“You love me?” he asked after a moment.

My eyes flew open, and the memory floated back to me. Mortification hit me. “You heard that?”

Amusement lit his face, and he raised an eyebrow as he rolled off me and gathered me in his arms. “Was I not supposed to?”

My cheeks heated, and I shrugged, brushing off my revelation, spoken in the heat of passion. “I mean—”

“I love you too, Ryan,” he interrupted, immediately shutting me up. “I’ve known my feelings for a while.” He gave me a bemused look. “I have never believed in love at first sight.”

“Neither do I.” The admission bewildered me and led to a startling realization. I’d never believed in romantic love. No kind. Not at first sight or after a slow burn. “Growing up, I thought my parents loved each other. Maybe they did, but they weren’t in love toward the end. Maybe they’d never been.” Remembering the resignation in my mother’s eyes and the

defeat in my father's saddened me. Melancholy threatened to ruin my moment, but I hurt for them and us—my siblings and me. "I'm sorry, baby."

He tipped my chin up and stole a kiss. "Don't apologize," he said tenderly. "You listen to me about my family. Your family is as fucked up as mine, so we should know what not to do."

Laughing, I nodded. "True."

Turning on his side, he gently pulled his arm from under my head and guided me to the pillow. "I can't describe how happy I am at hearing those three words from you. Even if it was only in the heat of the moment, it still fucking thrilled me."

"The confession slipped out during mindless ecstasy, but I do love you. Knowing you feel the same way makes me so happy. I worried it was too soon or it would be too weird to say since you're my boss, or—"

"No explanations needed. You said it. Twice."

Butterflies formed in my belly, and I twirled one of my braids. Suddenly, I felt like a teenager again, asking my crush if they returned my feelings. "Does this mean we're an item?"

He quieted, considering my words, but then he nodded and grinned. "Yeah, I suppose it does mean we're an 'item'."

"Okay." His confirmation left me giddy. "I need another shower."

"You know," he said, bringing a hand to his chin. "It'd be more time efficient and much better for the planet if we showered together."

At my laugh, he chuckled. "It just so happens I agree with you, Mr. Keegan."

He brushed his lips against mine. "Call me that when I fuck you again," he said, his look smoldering.

"As you wish, Mr. Keegan," I purred.

Despite having two back-to-back orgasms, I wanted a third. As he led me to his large walk-in shower, his cock rising, his steps quick, I knew I would get it.



One more mind-blowing orgasm and two hours later, Noah and I arrived at his brother's 5th Avenue mansion, the same house we first met and fucked in. An urgent business call had briefly delayed our departure, so by the time we pulled up, the Halloween party was in full swing. Briefly, I wondered if Quinn would be among the guests, but I hadn't seen Reid in days, and she hadn't mentioned him.

Noah grabbed two glasses of champagne when a waiter held out a trayful. Once we both took a few sips, Noah guided me along the perimeter of the ballroom, where the eight-seat tables had been set up. The middle of the room served as the dance area. Across the room was the band on a makeshift stage.

Noah nodded here and there. More than a few curious looks turned my way, but I followed his example and ignored them. At another door on the opposite side of the room, I saw Nicholas. He sat a couple of tables away, talking to two men, but when he spied us, his mouth snapped shut and he stared at us.

His look of dislike made me swallow, and I glanced at Noah. The warning in his eyes wasn't lost on his brother, who turned away and resumed talking.

Noah didn't give me a chance to dwell on the wisdom of being his date tonight. The Amage gala had been business related. This was personal and made a clear declaration about our relationship.

The small hallway we found ourselves in led to another door. When he opened it, chilly night air greeted us as we stepped onto a lit terrace, as decorated as the rooms inside. There were people out here, but it wasn't as crowded, and the walls muted the music.

"You're going to give someone a heart attack, looking like that," Noah whispered in my ear after we finished our champagne and he set the glasses on a table.

I smiled at his words. More than a few people ogled me. My Sailor Moon costume didn't leave much to the imagination.

"You almost gave me one, at first glimpse of you."

Giggling, I rolled my eyes, thinking about his protests when he'd first seen me. "I was nearly out of a costume because of you."

Two things he'd informed me of the moment I'd walked out of the almost empty dressing room, meant for a significant other and now mine during my visits. He loved how I looked in the outfit and wanted no one else seeing me in it. Thankfully, I'd won the battle.

"Can you blame me? Every straight man here tonight won't be able to keep his eyes off you."

He informed me his low effort costume as a generic vampire was his yearly go to. But with the black cape lined in blood red satin, and his vintage style tuxedo, he could pass as Tuxedo Mask, Sailor Moon's love interest. Only a top hat and the character's famous plain white masquerade mask were missing.

"They'll see I'm not interested in them, considering I'm here with my boyfriend," I teased, the word sounding oh-so right rolling from my tongue.

A pleased grin spread across his face. "I'm happy to hear that."

"Noah!" a male voice boomed, interrupting our banter.

We swiveled our heads in the call's direction.

A tall young man, the spitting image of Noah down to the jet-black hair and stunning blue eyes, bounded toward us, a pretty, pregnant brunette trailing behind him. From a single glance between Noah and the man, I knew this newcomer was a Keegan sibling.

"We were trying to get your attention inside, but it was so noisy, you didn't hear. How are you?"

Noah slipped his arms around my waist and pulled me closer. "Just fine."

“We have a wedding date set. December 1st,” the guy continued before Noah spoke.

“Congrats,” I said, noting the woman’s happiness matched the unknown Keegan’s.

“Why so soon?” Noah asked, but the question went unanswered as the woman held out her hand for me to shake.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling as we shook hands. “I’m Alessia, Nathaniel’s fiancé. He’s Noah’s brother. It’s nice seeing you, Ryan.”

I searched my memory but didn’t remember meeting either of them. Something she knew since she’d introduced herself and Nathaniel. On the other hand, I had been a trending topic for days after the fiasco of the press conference.

“Hey, Ryan,” Nathaniel said, grinning.

Noah scowled and started to speak, but I interrupted him.

“I’m so sorry I can’t recall if we’ve met,” I said, giggling nervously. Opinions were divided about me. Facts skewered or embellished. Outright lies written. It made me so anxious that was their introduction to me.

I shifted my weight.

“Nate was with me when you had the press conference,” Noah explained, tightening his hold on me.

Nodding, I looked at Nathaniel again. I realized he’d been at the elevator with Nicholas when I’d gotten off after the shit hit the fan.

“Noah hasn’t been able to stop talking about you,” Nathaniel said mischievously.

“Aren’t you wanted somewhere?” Noah growled. “We’ll talk later about the wedding date.”

“Nope, bro,” Nathaniel chortled. “I’m right where I belong, in the company of the two most beautiful women here.” He smirked at Noah. “And you.”

“Fuck off,” Noah snapped, but it packed no heat.

“I love Sailor Moon,” Alessia told me. “It is one of my all-time favorite anime.” She inspected Noah from head to heel. “You’re Tuxedo Mask!”

“Not,” Noah said. “The anime that isn’t childish is too fucking unrealistic for my tastes.” He changed the subject. “You never answered my question, Nathaniel.”

Nathaniel’s humor fled, and he stiffened even as disappointment dropped into his features. “You wanted a date, so now we have one. It’s over a month away.”

“A month and a day,” Noah said sharply.

Alessia’s expression crumpled. “That’s more than enough time to plan a wedding,” she said tentatively, as uneasy as Nathaniel.

Noah must’ve terrorized them. I wished I could get his attention and offer a silent plea on their behalf. He wouldn’t have liked anyone interfering in our relationship.

“I swear I love your brother. I’ll sign whatever prenup you want me to—”

“That isn’t up to him,” Nathaniel told her.

Her shoulders sagged. Trying to appease one Keegan annoyed the other.

“You’ve called me and talked to—”

“You don’t want a big wedding, Alessia?” Noah interrupted.

“As long as I marry the man I love, it doesn’t matter if the ceremony is in front of a judge and two witnesses.”

“That isn’t what I asked,” he said.

Our affair and confessions of love felt too new and fragile for my interference. Besides, he hadn’t intervened with my family until the argument took a turn for the worse.

Alessia shrugged. “Dreams of fairytale weddings are for little girls. Until reality intrudes.”

Noah dug into his pocket and pulled out a business card, holding it out to her. “Tomorrow evening, email me what you

want,” he instructed as she took the card and looked at it. “A photo of your desired gown. How large a bridal party you’ve imagined. Menu. Guest list. Your clergyman. Honeymoon destination.”

Mouths agape, Nathaniel, Alessia, and I blinked and stared at each other, then at Noah.

“Call me as early as possible Monday morning,” he continued. “That’s the direct line to my office…” His voice trailed off and he glanced at me.

My heart sank. I didn’t like his uneasy look.

“Get my cell phone number from Nathaniel so we can talk that evening. Nathaniel,” he went on without missing a beat, “Have Nicholas give you the number for the jeweler he uses.”

“Uh, okay.” Nathaniel seemed at a loss for words. “Uh, isn’t it the same one Mom and Dad used?”

“I’ve not had an occasion to frequent his shop, so I’m not certain,” Noah answered.

“Nick is in asshole-mode,” Nathaniel said wryly. “I hope Tina convinces him to retire early.”

“Or someone knocks him the fuck out,” Noah grumbled. “Just stay out of his way and I’ll do the same.”

Nathaniel nodded, then hesitated. After a moment, he gave Noah a quick hug, so fast a blink would’ve lost the gesture. “Thank you, Noah. Truly.”

Alessia stepped closer to Noah, stood on her tiptoes, and kissed his cheek. “This means a lot,” she said timidly. “To me, but especially to Nathaniel.”

The tips of Noah’s ears reddened but he nodded, watching as they walked away, heading toward the door to go back inside.

“What you did is…wow, Noah. Remarkable. You’re such an extraordinary man.”

He turned to me and settled his hands on my hips, stealing a quick kiss. It shocked me. I wasn’t sure how many invitees

were from the office, but such a public display left no doubt about the status of our relationship. “It has recently come to my attention that to be a valued family member, offer the same.” He smiled tenderly at me. “I’ll allow no interference in my personal life. My brother deserves the same consideration. I’ve helped him out of his many fuckups. I should put the same effort into something positive in his life.”

“That’s beautiful,” I said, so mesmerized by him it felt as if a spell had been cast over me. The depth of my feelings left me breathless and a little afraid. Life’s roulette dealt too many blows. As much as I tried to live in the moment, I had forgotten how.

Noah was a force of nature, and I feared his dominance sweeping me away and consuming me. And I didn’t want to lose myself in the opulence of his lifestyle. Self-reliance meant security. Love rarely lasted. Sometimes, it died bit-by-bit, in slow, painful degrees. I’d seen it with my parents. Other times, it burned away as quickly as it had flared.

“I want children,” I blurted.

“Excuse me?”

Damn. “That didn’t come out right. I just...we haven’t talked about any of that and...it doesn’t matter right now. Forget I said anything.”

Taking my face between his hands, he tipped my head up and kissed me. “A party isn’t a place to talk about kids,” he said when we came up for air. “Tell me what’s really on your mind.”

“I don’t—”

He silenced me with another kiss. “Why are you upset?”

I thought for a moment and remembered the look he’d given me. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“What do you mean?” he asked slowly.

Later, I’d regret not picking up on his note of panic.

“When you were talking to Alessia, something about the way you looked at me,” I admitted. “God,” I groaned. “I sound

pathetic. Forget that, too.”

“You’re never pathetic, Ryan,” he said, sincerity ringing in the words. “I might have to leave soon for a business trip. That’s what the earlier call was about.”

“Okay. If you leave, how long will you be gone?”

“I hope no more than three days, sweetheart.”

Foreboding bloomed in me, and I shivered.

He mistook it, thinking I was cold and moving to take off his cape. I held up my hand and shook my head. “Covering with your cape would hide my costume.”

“That’s the point.”

“And here I thought you were concerned.”

He grinned. “I am. It just so happens you wearing my cape has an added benefit.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’d love another glass of champagne.”

Lifting my hand to his lips, he kissed the back of it, before taking it into his and guiding me inside. The warmth of his hand enveloping mine melted away the bad feeling, allowing me to breathe easy again.

Once we secured more champagne, we found a hallway not as crowded as other areas. Loveseats and tables lined two walls, offering plenty seats away from the blasting music and loud conversation.

We sat on a loveseat and exchanged gazes, staring at each like no one else existed. We sipped champagne, wrapped up in each other. When we finished our drinks, we set our glasses on a nearby table.

“Is there a reason we’re hiding in a hallway instead of mingling with other guests? Or better yet, your family?”

Noah leaned back and wrapped an arm around my shoulder, pulling me close to him. “I wouldn’t call this hiding. Just escaping the noise.”

I rolled my eyes but relaxed against him. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

“My family and I aren’t the closest, and I don’t know half the guests here. I’d prefer to skip these events, but if I did, the press would speculate about a family feud. It’s easier to show up and hide, as you put it, than deal with rumors and my siblings’ bullshit.”

“That’s dumb. Not what you said,” I clarified at his frown. “Being forced to attend events to uphold an image is awful. You’re the CEO of a billion-dollar company. It’s a reasonable assumption that you won’t always have time for parties.”

“Logically, you’re right. It just doesn’t make for a good headline. Besides, that’s the life of a Keegan. Especially this particular Keegan.” He pointed to himself.

My lips turned down. I’d had a small dose of such attention, but thankfully it didn’t take long to die down. However, things might take a different tone in the future. “As your girlfriend, I’ll have to get used to the same life?”

My question wiped his frown away. “You’ll have to deal with more attention from the public, yes. However, as my girlfriend, I’ll do my best to ensure they minimize the intrusion.”

“How kind of you,” I said, forcing a lightness into my words. The infringement of my privacy, because I was dating Noah, terrified me. I kept that fear to myself, however. I didn’t want him to think that’d scare me away. If I wanted to be with Noah, and I truly did, I’d deal with it.

He examined my face, and I fidgeted under his scrutiny.

After a moment, he asked, “Did what I say scare you?”

“A little,” I admitted. Honesty was always the best. “But I’ll deal with it.”

“Just because you’re with me doesn’t mean you won’t have privacy. Alessia and Nathaniel, for example, haven’t gotten that much media attention.”

“But Nathaniel isn’t the eldest or the majority owner of the family business. You are. Then there’s the minor fact I’ve been thrust into the limelight because of my role at the company. It will be a madhouse once they catch wind of our changed relationship.” Accusations, mudslinging, debates over Noah’s behavior and how honest my defense of him had been.

“We’ll talk about this another time when we aren’t in the middle of a party. Now, let’s go dance,” he said, standing up and offering me a hand.

I smiled and accepted his hand as I stood, deciding to push my worries aside and just enjoy myself and my newfound love.



“I need to take these shoes off,” I moaned, plopping next to Noah on the L-shaped sectional tucked into another quiet corner in another part of the house.

After our conversation, we’d returned to the epicenter of the party and spent a solid hour dancing. Now, my feet were aching.

“When we first met upstairs, you were shoeless.”

It took me a moment, but I remembered the tiny detail, and smiled. “I sure was.”

If it wasn’t for Quinn, those shoes would’ve been lost to me. They’d been the last thing on my mind when I left the mansion. Hell, I barely remembered leaving.

“Feel free to remove them again. By the way, I’ve always wondered what happened to that beautiful ball gown.”

“It was a rental, so I had to return it.”

Suddenly, he stood, and I followed his line of vision. A good-looking couple, the woman dressed as a medieval princess and the man as a knight, strolled toward us. Once they closed the distance, I recognized the woman as the one who had been in Noah’s office the day he and I had kissed. Soraya, I believe her name was. The mystery man must’ve been the

esteemed Graham Morgan. I paid scant attention to him, though. As usual, Noah commanded my attention.

“There you two are,” he greeted, hugging Soraya and shaking Graham’s hand.

My feet hurt so fucking bad, I remained sitting, though I smiled.

“Where the hell have you two been?” Noah demanded. “I thought you wouldn’t show up.”

“In between searching for you, we were pulled into conversations that held us up,” Soraya answered, before smiling at me. “Ryan, right?”

“That’s me,” I said with a grin.

“Ahh.” Graham smirked at Noah. “The woman he can’t say enough about.”

“Graham!” Noah barked, the rebuke sharper than when he’d had a similar response to Soraya’s words the day I met her.

Noah opened his mouth, but Soraya interrupted whatever he’d intended to say, no doubt saving her husband a tongue lashing. “You two are together now?”

He and I looked at each other, before we said “yes,” in unison.

The four of us grinned.

“Congrats. How long have you been dating?” Soraya asked as she and her husband sat on the couch opposite us. “I love your costume, by the way. I loved Sailor Moon when I was a kid.”

Noah dropped next to me and wrapped an arm around my shoulder.

The feel of his big, muscular arm around me brought me comfort, and I snuggled against him before answering Soraya. “Thank you. And officially? About two hours.”

“Two hours?” Graham and Soraya echoed, each looking simultaneously amused and bewildered.

“Unofficially, we’ve been seeing each other for some weeks now,” Noah explained, before changing the subject. “How are the kids?”

“They’re great. It’s a fight to get Lorenzo to leave his room with all the toys he got on his birthday, and the kid hates school. Chloe is on track to make the honor roll again,” Graham supplied, his happiness clear. “Chloe is with Genevieve, and Lorenzo is spending Halloween with Soraya’s mom.”

“How old are your kids?” I asked, looking at Soraya. Graham was down-to-earth and easy-going, but he was also Noah’s friend, and I didn’t want to make a bad impression.

“Chloe’s ten,” Soraya answered, her contentment as obvious as her husband’s. “Genevieve is Chloe’s mother,” she added. “Lorenzo is five and the only child we share for another few months.” She placed a protective hand on her belly.

Noah looked at the pride gleaming on Graham’s face. “You two are pregnant again?”

“Yep. In about eight months, Lorenzo will have a little brother or sister,” Graham answered.

“That’s great,” Noah said with genuine enthusiasm. “I’m going to be an uncle again.”

“Congratulations,” I offered.

“Thank you,” Soraya answered, smiling at me. “Why don’t you and I go dance so these two can chat about boring business shit? It’ll be easier to gossip about them, too,” she teased, winking at Graham’s playful frown.

“Sounds great,” I said around a laugh, and removed my shoes. “I can’t wait to hear Graham’s dirt.”

“And I can’t wait to hear Noah’s. Don’t leave out any details, either,” she ordered, getting to her feet and waiting for me to do the same.

“We’re right here, you two,” Graham said.

“Yeah, at least lie to us,” Noah added.

Soraya shook her head. “You know we’re joking. We’re just going to get to know each other better.”

“A café is better than a dance floor, but have fun,” Noah called as we walked away.

I turned my head and stuck my tongue out at him, though the idea wasn’t a bad one. Perhaps Soraya and I should make a coffee date to get to know each other better. After all, she was the wife of my boyfriend’s best friend. Since I intended to be a lasting part of Noah’s life, I wanted to become closer to others he cared about.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Noah

“I’m done.” Tired, frustrated, and missing Ryan, I got to my feet, glared at the executives sitting at the table and stormed out of the conference room. We’d reached an impasse. It was almost seven on a Sunday evening, and I’d arrived for the meeting hours ago.

“Mr. Kee—” I didn’t wait to hear whatever the receptionist intended to say.

“Noah, fuck, wait,” Nicholas called, but I didn’t stop.

I’d been gone five days already and each day pissed me off a little more. Months ago, Zokale executives approached Kee-Tel with an offer, good in theory. Tina was all for the deal, convinced it was a win-win for us.

Zokale wanted to break into the overseas market. With an exclusive agreement between the two companies, we’d offer their telecom services to our customers. Tina had finally swayed me into seeing her vision. Right after my father died, I investigated expanding Kee-Tel, then decided against it. The company was profitable selling equipment. Offering services would bring in a new revenue stream and a new set of problems.

“Noah!” Nicholas yelled, hot on my heels as I stalked toward the elevator. “Where the fuck are you going?” he demanded once he caught up to me.

I punched the down button. “I’m done, Nicholas. They’re the most unreasonable motherfuckers ever. It isn’t worth my fucking time. I have amended our offers as they asked. Does it matter? Fuck no! Every day, they demand more.”

“This deal is worth a fuckton of money,” Nicholas snapped as the elevator doors opened.

“It isn’t worth the headache. Yesterday, they wanted a twenty-million-dollar guarantee and fifteen percent of the profits.” Regretfully, the elevator doors closed and left me in

Nicholas' company. "The day before, they asked for a fifty-percent profit share in smaller markets. When we arrived, they wanted inclusion in the New England market. Today, twenty million skyrocketed to seventy-five-million. New England ballooned into the entirety of our domestic clients. It isn't happening."

"Tina wants the deal to go through."

"Tina isn't here," I reminded him. She was at home, ill. I thought my brother should've stayed in Manhattan to look after his wife. As usual, he disagreed, but I hadn't made much of the matter since he seemed to accept my relationship with Ryan. "And I'd vote the deal down as would most of Kee-Tel's shareholders."

"I will talk to Mr. Zuri," Nicholas promised. "Express your concerns. Go to your hotel and I'll stop by at my usual time to strategize. Food's better at your hotel anyway."

"Don't bother. There's nothing more to plan."

He wasn't listening to me. "If we can't reach a deal tomorrow, I won't ask you to stay any longer."

"Nich—"

"Legal has combed the contracts. Our financial department's forecasts show nothing but blue skies ahead. This deal has the potential to earn the company billions."

"Which deal are you referring to?" I asked coldly. "The original one? Today's? Or the one from five days ago?"

"I'll admit what they demanded today caught me off guard."

"We don't need them. They need us. My final offer is a guarantee of twenty mil, ten percent profit share, confined to our smallest markets, and a five-year contract with the option to extend. In return, I want guarantees their services are up-to-date and can deliver optimal speed through our fiber optic cable."

I pressed the down button again.

"Fine, Noah," Nicholas said once the elevator arrived.

Stepping in, I allowed the doors to close, glad we'd booked accommodations at separate places.

A couple hours later, I reclined in bed, wearing only gray sweats, shoved slightly down. Ryan had bought me several pair to lounge in, along with jeans and polo shirts. While she admired my suits and trousers, she thought it abominable that my wardrobe consisted of one pair of jeans. My workout clothes were for gym days only.

"Noah," she groaned.

Holding my cell phone with one hand and my cock with the other, I watched Ryan grind her fingers against her clit. Unlike me, she was completely naked. Nipples tight, legs spread, and pussy glistening. Her call caught me off-guard. No, not the call. Her nakedness. Since I'd left, we chatted every day at least once, but we were dressed. Tonight was different. She meant to drive me fucking batshit and refused me a moment to take off my lone piece of clothing.

I couldn't look away. I had to see every pussy rub that matched her moan. Each small jerk of her body and lift of her hips.

"I can feel your big dick inside me, Noah," she breathed, arching her back.

I fisted my cock. "Your pussy is so fucking hot and wet, baby." She was soaking and my balls were throbbing. "I'm thrusting deep and hard. As soon as you come, I'm pulling out and lapping your juices."

"I'm coming," she cried, rolling against her hand and drawing cum from me. Jizz rained on my stomach, but I didn't care.

"I miss you so much, Noah," she whispered moments later.

"I miss you too, baby," I replied. "As soon as I see you, I'm going to fuck your brains out."

She giggled. "Promise?"

"Oh, indeed, Ms. Hagen."

“I’m so fucking horny, Noah. My Rabbit isn’t even helping.”

“It isn’t big enough,” I said smugly. “It’s a waste of time and good pussy. Don’t use it until I fuck you again.”

“What if I ignore your order, Mr. Keegan? What then?”

“Disobey me and find out,” I said silkily.

“My pussy is throbbing.”

At her words, my cock jumped.

“Please, Mr. Sir, can I use my little Rabbit?”

“What do I get in return?”

“I’ll suck you dry.”

That was all the incentive I needed.

Our call lasted for another hour, but once she discovered I hadn’t eaten, she ordered me to find food. “Wait up for me, so I can tell you goodnight.”

Her smile lit up her face. “Don’t be long. I have a real taskmaster for a boss. If I’m late, he might spank me.”

“Hold that thought, Ryan. Give me an hour.”

She blew me a kiss. “Bye, Noah.”

I jerked off in the shower with thoughts of Ryan’s pretty pussy in my head. Anxious to talk to her again, I almost skipped eating. Unfortunately, I *was* hungry, so I ordered room service: smoked salmon salad, wild mushroom soup, fresh fruit, and a bottle of wine. By the time, my meal arrived, it was way over the hour I’d promised. I hadn’t even bothered to dig out fresh sweatpants and, instead, kept my towel around my waist to save time.

My suite was expansive, and I regretted not inviting Ryan to accompany me. There’d been nothing stopping me. She would’ve enjoyed the living room bigger than her apartment, complete with a dining area for six on one side and an office area on the other.

As I sat at the table to begin my meal, Ryan called. Grinning, I answered, propping my phone against the wine bottle.

“My eyes are drooping...you’re just eating now?”

Spearing salad greens and a chunk of smoked salmon with my fork, I nodded.

“Okay, then.” She sounded so disappointed. “I have a long day tomorrow. Enjoy your meal, babe.”

“My soup needs to cool, and the salad and mixed fruit are already cold.” I picked up my wine glass and sipped. When the attendant brought the bottle of wine, he realized he’d forgotten a corkscrew, so he’d taken the bottle and returned with it already open. He poured a small bit for me to taste. Once I nodded in approval, he filled my glass and left. Oddly, it was already buzzing in my head. Even my ears were ringing. “What’s going on at work?” Another sip to cover the distaste of that word.

She heard it anyway and frowned, sitting up in bed. Her pale green nightgown revealed her beautiful golden skin. Her generous tits pressed against the thin material, her hard nipples tempting me to jerk off again. “I like my job, Noah.”

The statement was like dousing freezing water on me. I drained my glass, then grabbed the bottle and poured more wine.

“I thought this was settled.”

“I’m not there, Ryan,” I said with irritation. “You should’ve taken off.”

“Just because you’re away doesn’t mean the work stops,” she huffed. “I like my job.”

“You’re very good at what you do,” I conceded, drinking more wine.

“Besides, you didn’t tell me not to report to work in your absence.”

“Point made. Take off until I return.”

“No.”

I threw her a dirty look. “That’s an order, Ms. Hagen.”

“Shove it up your dickhole, Mr. Keegan.”

“You just told me—”

“I know what I said, but it is getting close to the final presentation at Amage. There’s a lot of fine tuning of details. You have yet to sign off on certain aspects. We have a tight deadline.”

Agitated, I gulped more wine. Our discussion killed her playfulness and the sadness in her eyes hit me in my gut. I thought about giving her a ‘tour’ of my suite again, but I’d already done so twice. By now, the layout and décor burned into her memory.

“How was your day? Any progress?”

“None.” Each time we talked, she asked me those two questions and I gave her the same answer. It fell under the category of business. She had enough on her plate without the added stress of my problems.

“Do you want to talk about it? Maybe, I can offer a little insight.”

She was smart, so I had no doubt that she could. Except I didn’t want her to. “Sweetheart, there’s a reason I steer clear of business conversations during our calls.”

“Noted,” she said coolly, giving an exaggerated yawn. “Hey, bud, I’m exhausted. I’ve stayed up way past my bedtime, so I’m going to turn in.”

I drained my glass again. Drinking on an empty stomach was never smart. My head had gone from buzzing to swimming. Flipping off my common sense, I poured more wine. Missing Ryan, the day’s frustrations, and the argument between us coming out of left field added to my rising annoyance. Instead of ending the call with reassurances, I turned into an asshole. “If I can, I will call you tomorrow.”

Her mouth tightened and she lifted her chin. Ryan and I butted heads regularly, so her irritation and disapproval didn’t

surprise me. It was the wounded look in her eyes that caught me off guard.

“Talk to you soon, Mr. Keegan.”

Not allowing me a chance to respond, she disconnected. For long moments, I stared at the phone, searching my brain for the exact moment the conversation deviated. Her mention of work kicked it off; yet it was so inconsequential we should've easily recovered.

Sighing, I laid the phone on the table and turned my attention to my meal. Halfway through, someone knocked on my door. It was after one in the morning, so it had to be an accident. The rap-tap-tap came again. Standing and grabbing my nearly empty glass, I stomped across the room to the door and gazed through the peephole. My mind was playing tricks on me. That was the only reason I saw *her* standing in my hotel's hallway, seeking entry to my room.

“Please let me in, Noah.” She sniffled. “We need to talk.”

“How the fuck did you locate me, Miss Buford?” I demanded.

“Reid,” she answered in a small voice. “I know you're angry with me.”

“Wrong. I'm through with you.”

A sob escaped her. “Please. Five minutes. You can call Reid and verify.”

I unlocked the door and swung it open. Through the peephole, she'd looked pale and sad. Face-to-face, the small baby bump worsened her haggard appearance. Sighing, I stepped aside. “Five minutes, Megan.”

As I returned to my table and sat, I drained my glass then refilled it with the little wine left in the bottle.

“You have to talk to Reid,” she said, surprisingly close to me. I just had time to set my glass down before she launched herself against me, wrapped her arms around me and buried her face in my neck, sobbing. “He never wants to see me again. I love him so much, Noah. I can't lose him.”

Carefully, I stood, only now remembering my state of undress. “Miss Buford,” I said, trying to gently dislodge her so I could move away. She cried harder, her body shaking. “Megan, calm down. It isn’t good for you or the baby.”

Sniffling, she leaned back. Her eyes were puffy, and her nose was red. I wondered how long she’d been crying. “He doesn’t even care about me that much.”

“I care even less,” I said flatly. “But you’re pregnant. Your stress can jeopardize your baby.”

“I’m so sorry I hurt Ryan. I never meant to—”

“Save it. You sent the information to Ingrid Warrington under your own free will. You meant to hurt Ryan.”

“It wasn’t premeditated,” she said tearfully. “It was spur-of-the-moment of the moment bad judgment.”

“It doesn’t matter—”

“Please, Noah. I need my job. I don’t have to work in the principal office. I can work in another location. Reid hates me and he was giving me money to survive, paying for my hotel.”

Fogginess clouded my brain. Otherwise, I would’ve questioned why he’d pay for her to stay in a Charlotte hotel.

“I haven’t eaten today,” she continued, “and I have nowhere to sleep tonight.”

She opened her small purse and got a cheap, off brand phone. First, she let me hear how little minutes left until she needed to pay again, then she punched in Reid’s number. When voicemail picked up, the message said, “Reid Keegan.”

“Reid, I’m here. Call back so the three of us can talk and you can assure him I’m being honest. Please. It’s the least you can do for your unborn child.” She disconnected and raised woeful eyes to me. “If he hasn’t called in five minutes, I will leave.”

“Give me a few minutes to dress,” I said with a sigh. “We’ll go to the lobby, and I’ll book you a room for tonight and tomorrow. It’ll give me a chance to talk to my cousin myself.”

Reid was in love with Quinn. Whether he saw a future with Megan didn't negate his responsibility to her baby as its father.

"Thank you, Noah. I am indebted to you."

"No need to be. I'm looking after my cousin's child, not you." Turning, I went to the bathroom, grabbed my discarded sweats, and put them on. When I'd taken off my suit earlier, I'd left my billfold on the counter, so I scooped it up, then opened the door.

Arms wrapped around her waist, Megan sat in my vacated dining chair. She got to her feet and hung her head, far removed from the confident woman she'd been a few, short weeks ago. Maybe, it was wrong of me not to feel any pity toward her, but I drummed up none. She'd hurt Ryan, made her a victim of Megan's ruthlessness. Ryan was innocent of everything else. Innocent, like Megan and Reid's unborn baby.

As fair-minded as Ryan was, I wondered how she'd feel about Megan's current predicament. Knowing Ryan as I did, I thought she'd want me to help because Megan was vulnerable and pregnant by a Keegan. Her baby was my relative, so no matter how Ryan felt about Megan Buford or my decision to help her, she would have to understand.

I drained my glass. "Come, Miss Buford."

Her eyes gleamed. "I intend to, Noah," she said, standing on tiptoes and slanting her mouth over mine.

It was the last thing I remembered.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Ryan

I couldn't remember a happier time in my life. It was like living in a dream I never wanted to end. Declaring our feelings was the best thing that ever happened. It put us on even ground, where neither Noah nor I felt taken for granted or feared a one-sided relationship.

We spent our free time together, including daily lunches. By Tuesday, our office romance turned into an open secret. Even if we had wanted to hide it, the snapshots from our dates appearing on gossip sites would've made it impossible.

It didn't take long before a photographer followed me home and discovered my address. I hadn't ever thought one way or another about what celebrities faced having their every move documented. It was excruciating. The first morning the paparazzi besieged me, I'd just stepped onto the stoop. They'd tossed personal questions at me, demanding I verify if I was dating Noah. I couldn't get inside fast enough. He'd sent three guys from his building security. One to barrel through the crowd. Another to keep a firm hold on me as we made it to the car. And the third to drive through the frenzy once we were all safely in the vehicle.

Soraya and I exchanged phone numbers and kept in contact. Noah hadn't immediately gone on his business trip, so the Friday after the party, he invited Quinn, Logan, Alessia, and Nathaniel to his penthouse for the weekend. By that time, Noah and I had christened almost every room at his place. He gave me the run of it, and it felt like a second home. When he took Logan and Nathaniel to his library for brandy after Alessia asked Quinn and me to go over some of her wedding details, it was the first time I gave myself permission to not fret over my sister and brother.

Quinn was going through something. Not only hadn't she gotten her tongue pierced, but she also seemed sad and a little distant. I asked if she wanted to talk about it and she said no.

And it was fine. *I* was fine. If she needed me, I was there, but she was a grown woman, and I wasn't a horrible sister for focusing on my life.

The next day, Noah took us on the yacht. Reid's absence disappointed Quinn, though she still refused the two times I tried to talk to her about him or whatever was bugging her. We arrived at Noah's penthouse in the late evening, where everyone except Alessia drank, feasted on whatever Angelo sent to our drunken asses, danced, talked, and laughed. We didn't get out of bed until noon that Sunday, and I didn't care.

Nathaniel asked Noah to be his best man, and the shocked joy on his face touched me. For so long, Noah had sold himself short. He wasn't perfect, but no one was.

Like all good things, the cloud I'd been floating on rudely disintegrated without warning. There were supposed to be seven years of feast and seven of famine. To me, it encompassed all areas of my life. I hadn't even made it to seven weeks.

Exactly one week before Thanksgiving was a day that would live in infamy for me. Whatever could go wrong did.

Noah had just returned from his business trip the day before, having left the previous Wednesday. I had missed him like crazy. Our disagreement on Sunday had kept me awake all night. A discussion on several serious topics were becoming urgent. When he called late Monday evening, he'd sounded strange, but we made up and that was all that mattered.

Then, it all came crashing down.

This particular Thursday I was running late. Last night, Quinn and Logan came to my apartment for dinner. I'd invited Noah, but he'd declined. The Kee-Tel deal he'd left town for was on the verge of falling through and he couldn't get away from the office.

Admittedly, I was disappointed. We'd only had a brief meeting in the afternoon for him to sign off on the final box design for *La Nostalgie*, and then he'd been distracted.

Still, I enjoyed my brother and sister's company. After dinner, we played *Joking Hazard*. For days, Quinn wasn't herself, but swore she was fine and changed the subject. In the middle of our game, Armani and Dakota showed up. She also invited us to Thanksgiving dinner. Benedicta and Benedict Arnold seemed contrite and genuinely sorry. Forgiving was easier than holding a grudge, so yeah, whatever.

Once my siblings left, I texted Noah and asked if he had a minute to talk. His one-word reply of *no* left me even more disappointed. I fell asleep after three in the morning, so when my alarm went off at seven, I dismissed it, not waking until eight-thirty. Fuck up number one.

My second SNAFU arrived as a voicemail. Curtis, one of the security guys, had called, asking if they could pick me up for seven forty-five, instead of the usual eight-thirty.

If I had been wise, I would've just gotten the fuck back in bed and yanked the covers over my head. Of course, I didn't. That would've been too fucking easy.

I wasn't peeping out my door to see if the coast was clear until five after nine. Already over the day, I wore no makeup, had my hair in a long ponytail, and dressed in slim ankle trousers, a long-sleeved pleat front blouse with a faux leather trench coat because it was fucking cold, and stiletto red-bottom booties. Not Louboutins. My wild little sister had borrowed my shoes to wear at a party. She'd taken it upon herself to paint the bottoms with red lacquer.

Leave it to Quinn.

No one milled about in the chilly morning. The bracing air smacked me in the face and jumpstarted me. Joe hopping from the stoop startled me. Not only hadn't I seen him in weeks, but I also didn't notice him until he moved.

"Hey, Joe."

"What up, Ryan?" He walked off, crossed the street, and disappeared down the church alleyway. The shortcut would place him right near my car. Since the subway station was that

way, I didn't question his behavior. Besides, I never took that route. To me, it was safer walking the extra distance.

I parked Sandy on the next block, so I put the strap of my purse in a crossbody and descended the steps, following Joe's path by crossing the street. Or I tried to. Suddenly, photographers swarmed from the alleyway, bombarding me with questions and snapping shot after shot of me.

Joe, that fucking asshole, had tipped them off.

Growling in frustration, I tried to go forward, then swung around to return to my apartment. In every direction, I met human barricades. The moment I spied a small opening, I shot through it, running as fast as possible in the stilettos. It wasn't that I couldn't run in heels. It was how much slower I moved in them.

They were hot on my ass, chasing me down the block and circling me like sharks when a heel snapped and I went sprawling, landing hard on my right knee. Instead of helping me, my fall sent them into another frenzy. When I got to my feet, I saw Sandy parked a couple of cars down.

The photographers didn't leave me alone, but they allowed me to limp to Sandy, get in and drive away. In the parking garage, I realized I needed shoes. Maybe the maintenance department had super glue. I'd go straight to my office, call for the glue, and tidy up until someone brought it to me.

I removed my shoes, shocked the broken heel hadn't caught on any of the car pedals. Thank goodness for small favors.

The heating system in the building was topnotch, so I took off my coat, not wanting the hassle of carrying it. As I locked my door and limped toward the glass doors leading to the elevators, my phone rang. Reaching my office and asking Billy for a fuckton of ice was more important. My fucking knee hurt.

Those assholes.

The ringing stopped, indicating voicemail had picked up. Immediately, another call came through. Maybe I imagined urgency, or maybe it was my shitty day, but I leaned against

Sandy, set my shoes on the hood, and got my phone out of my purse. Not in time, because it stopped before I answered. When it rang again, I answered immediately.

“Ryan?”

The male voice was vaguely familiar. “Yes?”

“Three times the charm, huh, girl?”

“Excuse me?”

He laughed. “This is Channing Powers. Are you ready for that presentation?”

Today? Fuck no. “Y-yes, of course, Mr. Powers. I also have updates on the commemorative perfume. How are you?”

“Can’t complain. And you?”

“Fine. What—”

“I asked how you were feeling, Ryan,” he chided. “Not about how gorgeous and shapely you are.”

I laughed nervously. “That’s a little out of line, sir,” I told him as gently as I could because he was more than out of line. “I’m running a little late,” I said, forging ahead. If I gave him too much time to dwell on my reprimand, he might take issue. “If we could schedule the meeting for after lunch, I’d be so grateful.”

“The brothers have moved the meeting to Paris.”

“I-I don’t have a passport,” I admitted. “I will talk to Noah about who can go in my place. I brief him every day, so he might give the presentation himself.”

“Noah isn’t the best choice. He and Claude don’t get along. And we’re expecting you as the account manager. Talk to Reid about an expedited passport. He’ll get it done.”

I doubted it, but I’d take Channing’s advice. My mind spun with everything I needed to do before next Thursday’s... “The meeting’s on Thanksgiving.”

He laughed. “Aren’t you a doll? There’s no such holiday in France. It’s business as usual.”

“You’re right, of course.” There would be many more Thanksgivings to spend with my family. It’s just that I wanted to invite Noah. If he would’ve accepted, it would’ve been our first holiday together. We’d celebrated Halloween, but not on the actual day. “It’s been a long morning,” I added into the silence.

“I know that feeling. Sauncier will make their presentation the same day,” he informed me in his quick change of subject. “They’ve requested you to present first.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Claude intends for both account managers to be at the meeting. I suppose Sauncier wants you up first so they can piggyback on your words and adjust accordingly.”

Shit.

“You have nothing to be nervous about. On the contrary, the brothers and Boyd have repeatedly sung your praises since your first meeting.”

“Thank you for that. I hope it is as effective this time and the Sauncier manager doesn’t outshine me.”

He chuckled. “Claude and I will give you a few pointers over dinner next Wednesday night. We’ve booked suites for you and the Sauncier guy at the Ritz.”

Oh my.

I would have to talk to Noah about calling Celine and make it clear I only wanted to borrow the clothes. There was no way I could accept another coat that cost so much, but I needed a wardrobe fit for the Ritz.

“We’d love for you to have dinner with us in our suite,” Channing said. “In all honesty, I had to twist Claude’s arm to be fair and offer you this opportunity. Sauncier’s guy is arriving Sunday, to wine and dine us, and sell us on why we should choose them. He’s having dinner with us Monday and Tuesday.”

“In other words, next Thursday’s presentation will be just a formality.”

“Correct. I think the poor fellow wants to force us into an early decision. His wife’s upset he won’t be home for Thanksgiving.” He chuckled. “He wanted to bring her, especially to the dinners. He even hinted at her tagging along during his presentation. His unprofessionalism shocked me. This isn’t a get-together. This is business. No plus ones allowed. Luckily, that won’t be a problem with you since you’re single.”

He must’ve been too busy to keep up with the Society pages and gossip columns. Besides, maybe it was a good thing Channing Powers and Claude Amage didn’t know about Noah and me. “I will be alone,” I promised, giddy at the realization I’d be going on my first business trip to Paris and staying at the Ritz.

“That’s perfect, Ryan. Perfect. Why don’t you send me the digital files on Réjane’s perfume? By the time we see you next Wednesday night, it can be signed off on and in production.”

“Really?” I squealed, reminded of my injured knee when I jumped up. Shoes and ice could wait. I’d go straight to Noah for his final approval. “I will send those files in the next half hour, Mr. Powers.”

“Call me Channing. You make me feel like an old man.”

I laughed, so happy my day had made a one hundred eighty degree turn for the better. “I will send them, *Channing*.”

“That boy hasn’t gotten you a secretary?” he demanded. “We might have to steal you away. Give you an office twice the size of Noah’s as well as a secretary.”

“I share his secretary,” I said. “And I’m fine with that. I hate to be rude, but I must get going. I will call you when the files are on the way. Is the number on my call list good to reach you?”

“Anytime,” he said, and a few moments later, we said our goodbyes.

Grabbing my shoes and unable to stop smiling, despite the pain roaring through me, I went to the bank of elevators. Not only was my knee hurting worse, but my limp was more

pronounced. Maybe because I hadn't seen to the injury immediately?

On the elevator, I opened my messages and saw one from Noah asking why I hadn't arrived yet, as well as Billy's usual one. Since I'd see Noah shortly, I responded to Billy, asking him to bring me as much ice as possible, along with clean towels and unused plastic bags if available.

In the lobby, I waved at Jose, not having time to stop and inquire after him. By the time I pressed the 'up' button for the building's elevators, Billy texted and asked if I was okay.

My heel broke, and I fell and hurt my knee.

A moment later, I boarded the elevator, and it took me to floor twelve. Hobbling off brought me into a madhouse.

Billy stood next to a cart holding a huge bucket of ice and a stack of serving towels. Someone must've been filling the soda dispensers in the cafeteria with ice when I messaged him.

Nicholas was pacing back and forth. Mrs. Mikes worked the busy phones. Reid, who I hadn't seen in days, leaned against the wall directly across from the elevator. And Noah?

Noah? He stood near Mrs. Mikes' desk, arms folded, legs braced. With such fury in his eyes, I feared his head might explode.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, addressing him first to calm him. "I overslept." Trying to keep the situation as peaceful as possible, I walked forward and groaned at the pain. I stumbled and would've crumpled to the ground if Noah hadn't moved so quickly.

He steadied me, holding onto me a little longer than necessary. The combination of anger and fear in his eyes arrested me, and I couldn't move. But the startling realization of just how much I'd missed him in his absence settled into me. His presence soothed me and brightened my day. As excited as I was about Channing's phone call, it didn't compare to how happy I was just to look into his blue eyes.

“Ryan, sit,” Mrs. Mikes said, during a lull. “I can see to your knee until the doctor and x-ray tech arrive.”

“The who?” I asked, wanting to protest when Noah released me and stepped back, allowing Mrs. Mikes to help me to a chair.

She pushed the other chair in front of me so I could raise my injured knee. I dropped my ruined heels on the side of me and removed my purse, setting it next to me.

“I must cut your pants,” she said, backing away to answer the phone again.

“Do you need anything else, Ryan?” Billy asked, the concern in his eyes touching me.

“Ibuprofen and glue for my shoes.”

“Maintenance probably has stronger glue,” he said, “but I can get you something for pain. Would you like water?”

“Mexican Coke?” I asked hopefully.

He glanced in Noah’s direction and swallowed.

“It’s okay, Billy,” I said quickly. “You didn’t know I preferred them over regular Coke. I’ll just take water.”

“I’ll order a supply of Mexican Coke especially for you,” Billy swore. “How many do you drink a day?”

“You mean a week? Three. Four, at most,” I said.

“I’ll take care of you,” he said, rushing off just as Mrs. Mikes returned with a pair of scissors.

I leaned my head back, unable to watch her cut the most expensive pair of pants I’d ever bought myself.

“Are you okay?”

At Reid’s question, I lifted my head, wincing when Mrs. Mikes brushed against my knee. “Why wouldn’t I be?” I said, hoping my fall, the reason for it, wasn’t on the internet yet.

“Why wouldn’t you be?” Noah snarled, speaking for the first time since I’d arrived. “Why wouldn’t you be?” he repeated, sounding like he’d dropped in for a visit from hell.

“Possibly because you were fucking chased down the goddamn street. You could’ve been hit by a fucking car or trampled.”

“Oh, my,” Mrs. Mikes said at the worst possible moment as she stepped back to answer the phone again.

It drew everyone’s eyes to my knee. There wasn’t much blood. It was scraped, but I was quite sure the fucking swelling warranted her reaction.

“Do you know why this happened to you, Ms. Hagen?”

I kept my face expressionless. Noah had gone white, but the torture in his eyes broke my heart. “Yes, Mr. Keegan. Fucking assholes don’t know how to back off.”

“No, you work in my company. I paraded you in front of the media, not thinking what a target it would make you.”

Alarm danced down my spine, but Billy’s return interrupted anything I might have said. When he glanced at my knee and winced, I wanted to kick him. Instead, I snatched the ibuprofen from him, popped them in my mouth, and washed them down with water.

“Anything special you’d like for lunch?” he asked.

“No,” Noah answered. “She won’t be here for lunch.”

“Why?” I asked carefully. “You want me to rest my knee or you’re implying I’m fired?”

He opened his mouth to speak but couldn’t get the words out. It gave me a little bit of hope I’d convince him my life was in no danger. How I handled these next few minutes would make or break my job. My relationship, too.

I couldn’t be with someone who needed to dictate any part of my life. Most especially my ability to earn money.

Our locked gazes didn’t block out our audience. Everyone had fallen silent. Still, Reid and Nicholas, standing next to Noah, had a reason for awaiting my arrival.

“Come and see my knee for yourself,” I told him.

Where he stood wouldn't allow him a particularly good assessment.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he glanced away, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

"I want a lobster roll for lunch, Billy," I said, not taking my eyes off Noah. "Regular Coke is fine."

"Okay, Ryan. When do you want it?"

"As soon as possible. I'm starving."

"You got it," Billy promised, lumbering off.

Noah didn't protest, but he was still ashen, hurt, and vulnerable.

My big, strong, arrogant man hid a wealth of pain. But he was good and kind, so very misjudged. Silent, he went to the cart with the forgotten ice and grabbed a plastic bag hidden on the second shelf. He scooped ice into the bag.

Reid released a breath. "Do you need me to clarify any section of the contract?"

Just as promised, he'd had it sent to me so I could read and review it at my leisure. "I glanced at it. Everything's there. The clauses with the bonuses, my salary, all the perks. It's easy to understand, so I can't think of any questions."

Noah carefully moved the chair where my leg rested, so he could sit and put my leg across his lap. He studied my knee for long moments, and I wondered what went through his head. I regretted not signing the contract. He still could've fired me since there was a clause for that, too. Yet all the benefits for me felt unfairly bloated. Except I didn't know what had been in the original document. I'd never received a copy and I'd been too busy working on what I'd been hired to do to remember to ask about it.

"Did you read all of it?" Reid pressed.

I dragged my gaze away from Noah. "The thing's twenty-five pages, Reid." Okay, I exaggerated. "I read the first five and reviewed the signature pages to make sure everyone had signed."

Noah wrapped one of the kitchen towels around the bag of ice and settled it on my knee.

“Ryan—” Reid started.

“Oh,” I interrupted, smiling tenderly at Noah. He returned it, and I wanted to hug and kiss him so badly. “I almost forgot to mention I need an emergency passport.” I dragged my eyes away from Noah to look at Reid. “Channing Powers called me. The Amages have moved the meeting to Paris. A week from today.” I couldn’t keep the happiness out of my voice. I giggled at the shock on Reid’s face. “I know, right? Me? On a business trip. The Sauncier guy is getting there on Sunday to wine and dine them. We’re all getting suites. At the Ritz. In Paris. Claude and Channing want me to have dinner with them next Wednesday in their suite—”

Noah shot to his feet, knocking over the chair, and allowing my leg to drop to the floor. “Get that motherfucker on the phone.”

I didn’t know if he spoke to me, Mrs. Mikes, Reid, or Nicholas.

He stared at me, face red and eyes wild. “Now, Ryan!” he ordered. “You’re out of your fucking mind if you believe I’ll allow you to go on a business trip at all, but *they’re* fucking insane if they think you’ll have dinner in their suite.”

“The only one who’s insane is you, Noah,” Nicholas snapped. “You want the fucking account? She’s going to the dinner and the meeting.”

“Get the fuck out of my face,” Noah said, turning to his brother. “You came and showed me the footage of Ryan. Your job’s done. Go back to your office.”

“Reid, get Ryan’s passport,” Nicholas said, stepping to the elevator and pressing up on the call button.

“I’ll break every bone in your fucking body,” Noah swore, sending Reid an ugly look.

“We have spent thousands of dollars because of Amage. You’re fucking seeing it through or I’m not signing off on the KeeTel deal.” Nicholas glared at me, then threw Noah a

disgusted look as he stepped onto the elevator. “The terms you gave Zocale benefit Keegan Enterprises. In other words, *you*, as majority shareholder. The rest of us get scraps, so fuck you.” The doors closed.

“You hired me for this, Noah,” I said, trying to stay calm and pretending he hadn’t talked down to me and treated me like a child. It wouldn’t help to have everyone fired up. “Nothing is going to happen to me. Channing promised that he and Claude would give me tips.”

He choked, as if I spewed filth.

“I thought you’d be happy,” I said, bewildered. “Channing’s even willing to sign off on *La Nostalgie*. I need your approval on the box design first and—”

“Fuck Amage. Fuck *La Nostalgie*. You’re not fucking going. There’s going to be no one for you to meet because I’m going to fucking kill Claude and Channing.”

“Dramatic, much?” I huffed, rolling my eyes. “I’m getting very fucking insulted you think so little of me. You’re implying I’d fuck them.” Why else would he threaten to kill them? He’d shed his mien of a dignified businessman and transitioned into a jealous fucking boyfriend.

“Why the fuck do you think they invited you to their suite, Ryan?” he sneered. “For dinner and conversation?”

“Yes!” I snapped, wishing I could stand and stomp to my office. “I’m assuming they’re smart enough not to try anything, because I could sue them for sexual harassment. I know you aren’t fond of either of them, but you’re going overboard, so—”

“I hate those motherfuckers.”

“If that’s the only reason you’re acting this way, then that’s a *you* problem.”

“It isn’t,” he gritted. “The problem is you. Working. Risking your fucking life. Not listening to me and being a naïve little fool.”

I gasped and got to my feet, ignoring the pain and the falling ice pack. “Women work every fucking day, Noah. Business trips are where we go. We make presentations. We have dinner with businessmen. When it’s done, we go home to our families.”

“No. You’re out there, vulnerable to ruthless motherfuckers and overzealous reporters. You’re in here, stressing out over details for briefs, campaigns, and budgets. In one fucking morning, you’ve been hurt, and you’ve made an appointment to fuck,” he said coldly. “Go home, Ryan. You’re fired.”

“You’re a fucking insecure, untrusting asshole,” I yelled. “You don’t care how important this is to me. What a sense of accomplishment I feel. It doesn’t bother you I have dreams of a seven-figure bank account. It’s all about you.”

He stared at me, the man I’d met at my first interview, not the man I thought him to be. I saw nothing but cold distance in his eyes. “Your career is that important to you, Ms. Hagen?”

I lifted my chin, refusing to show him how devastated I was, how my dream of a future with him was so short-lived. “Yes, Mr. Keegan.”

“Then choose. Your career and your fucking bank account. Or...” His voice trailed off.

Before he finished the sentence, I knew what he’d say. I shook my head. “Don’t do this, Noah,” I said, desperate. “Please.”

He swallowed. “Choose, Ryan. Your career and your money. Or me.”



Noah

The past few days without Ryan had been excruciating, and I’d been counting the hours until I was back in town. I’d had every intention of heading to her apartment. We had an exceedingly difficult conversation ahead. Instead, by the time my plane landed, Kee-Tel executives wanted another amendment, placing all our strides and compromises in

jeopardy, so I'd gone straight to the office, thus winning a reprieve. Losing Ryan would be inevitable. She wouldn't care I'd fucked another woman because I was drunk off my ass. It would be that it happened in the first place and with her bitter enemy.

After a long conference call, I'd slept for a couple hours on the couch in my office. Upon awakening, I'd grabbed a quick shower in my private bathroom and put on clean clothes.

By the time Nicholas stormed into my office to show me a clip of the back of Ryan as she ran, I was just finishing a breakfast sandwich Billy had made for me. Observing the chase horrified me but her crumpling out of view almost stopped my heart. I'd feared she would be trampled. The clip ended when she'd stood and limped forward.

Nicholas said he'd gotten the video from a photographer friend who'd alerted him to what had happened. My brother hadn't understood my panic or my anger, since she'd seemed to be well enough to drive off. When I asked what the fuck happened to her security, he'd said they had CE classes, per our requirements, to remain part of the building safety team. He'd also pointed out I hadn't made them her permanent detail, so company protocol was followed.

I was fucking exhausted, missing Ryan, worried about her, and even less tolerant of Nicholas's bullshit. If Reid hadn't walked into my office, the argument between Nicholas and me might've turned into another fight. I needed to talk to Reid about Megan. I was angry my cousin had turned his back on her and ashamed of my own behavior. Even if I didn't remember the details. When Nicholas awakened me, Megan and I had both been naked and wrapped around each other. He'd been as disgusted by my behavior as me. Because I was running late, he'd taken it upon himself to check on me.

He'd said I'd given the front desk permission to have my door unlocked. Though their timeline was a little off, the staff had verified my brother's account. Once he saw me to Zokale, he'd found lodgings for Megan then headed to the airport.

Reid came to my office to request the go ahead to deposit the money into Ryan's account, but she hadn't mentioned the contract to either of us. I suspected she'd given it a cursory glance. She wanted a seven-figure bank account, so she'd get it. But it was best to tie that money into her work, even if it came from my personal funds. I wanted her to read the fucking contract before I approved the transfer. We'd just gotten a plan together when Curtis called and said he'd spotted Ryan on a security camera. Limping, he'd said. I'd ordered Rosa to find a doctor who could come and check her out.

At some point, a few photos of the incident were leaked, and the phones went wild. Then Billy called and told me Ryan needed ice and was finally on her way up.

I'd ordered him to get his ass to the reception area and stalked out of my office to wait for her. Nicholas paced, Reid and Billy waited, and Rosa managed the phones.

Finally, Ryan had hobbled off the elevator. In my entire life, I'd never felt so many emotions—relief, longing, fury, desire, and fear. Her lack of makeup took nothing away from her beauty. Her golden skin remained flawless, silky-soft and enticing. Her eyelashes were still long and thick, her lips pink and kissable.

Her voice had been a little strained and slightly tired sounding. Yet she'd been just as vibrant as ever, while the moment she'd fallen played on repeat in my head. Somehow, she had eased my concern. I'd stood down, and not fired her to keep her safe.

Then she'd hit me with Channing's invitation. Of course, she wouldn't understand my feelings about *everything*, especially that fucking dinner, but she knew my mother had been killed in a plane crash, returning from a business trip. She knew Channing Powers was a fucking snake and Claude Amage a fucking lizard. She'd met both. So, she understood why I told her she couldn't go. To her, it was a personal affront. She wasn't looking at the fact that I, her boss, was giving her orders. No matter how we tried not to let our private relationship infringe on our working one, it did.

And it wouldn't fucking work.

She'd been so excited about going on a business trip and staying in a suite at the Ritz. She'd expected me to congratulate her and share her happiness. The hurt in her eyes at my behavior made me feel like the lowest motherfucker alive.

But she wouldn't compromise, and I couldn't.

I wanted her to care about me, trust me enough, choose me, and damn her career. I wanted her to understand me enough to know my unhinged response had deep roots.

Tears slipped down her cheeks. I looked away.

"So many things from your past affect you now," she said, so miserable my heart ached. "I...tell me why you feel so strongly about...about..." Sniffling, she swiped at her wet cheeks. "I know why you don't want me to travel. You can come with me, Noah. If it puts your mind at ease." She met my gaze. "Tell me why you're so furious over Channing's invitation."

The explanation she deserved and would lend clarity to the situation was one I couldn't give. Protecting my mother was the main reason. However, confiding such a traumatic event to Ryan to bend her to my will was emotional blackmail. She deserved better than that.

I deserved better.

"Something," she pleaded. "Anything."

"Is it not enough I've told you the invitation is to fuck you?"

"You don't like Claude and you don't like Channing. Admittedly, they're both assholes. Yet, you're still doing business with them, so I see no reason you're so set against this meeting and private dinner. If I were a man, you wouldn't give a fuck."

"You're fucking right I wouldn't," I snapped. "You're not. You're a beautiful, desirable woman, and they will use that. If you want the fucking contract, you'll have to fuck them."

“Do you hear yourself?” she cried. “You’re insane. As badly as you want the Amage account, why would you hire me if you believed I had to open my legs to them to win it?”

“Fuck, I wasn’t thinking.” That hadn’t been a motive in the beginning. I’d given Channing the fucking ammunition the night of the gala. My possessiveness toward Ryan made her their target.

“Do you know the money you’ll lose if you withdraw our bid for the contract? Not only the value of that contract,” she continued, undeterred by my silence, “but the money you’ve put into it to win it.”

What could I fucking say?

Ryan cocked her head to the side. “What about *La Nostalgie*?”

I closed my eyes, not wanting to cancel production. Honoring my mother’s memory meant as much as creating a happier memory for that dark day. But she was dead. I’d miss her for the rest of my life and protect her legacy. Ryan, very much alive, needed my protection too. If it meant forever squashing the perfume’s release, that was fine. Beating Sauncier no longer mattered. Only she did. I hadn’t tied the money I intended to give her into perfume sales, offering a greater chance she’d accept the bonus without arguing.

I looked at her again. Her gray eyes were grave, searching. “Cancel production.”

She limped to the closest chair and sat. She glanced at Rosa, then Reid, then me. “Before you do that, could you appeal to Mr. Andrews?”

“You’re still the account manager, Ryan. There’s no guarantee you wouldn’t have to meet with Channing or Claude.”

“It’s your mother’s perfume. I’d refuse to go without you.” Sadness fell over her again and she pursed her lips. “What about Kee-Tel?”

Nicholas’ threats. He wouldn’t agree to the deal if Ryan didn’t go to Paris. “It will get done. I will sleep in my office

for the next week to work on pushing the deal through.”

“You slept in your office?”

I nodded. “Last night. And only have had a couple hours of sleep.”

She sniffed. “No wonder you’re so grouchy.” She glanced between Reid and me. “Are you sure their motives are prurient?”

“Positive,” I responded.

Absently, she massaged her knee. “Maybe the Sauncier person *is* going.” She gave me a hopeful look. “I could dine with them. They might not give me pointers, but I could listen.”

I gave her a thoughtful look. “Reid, find out when Dorset is arriving in Paris.”

He nodded.

“Who’s Dorset?” Ryan asked.

“Sauncier’s man. A former department head at KMG and the account manager for Amage.”

“Ohhhh,” she said, her eyes widening. “If he’s arriving when Channing claimed, will it ease your worries enough so I can—”

“No,” I growled. “There’s no reason for you to travel.”

“Didn’t *you* just go on a business trip?” she demanded.

“That’s different.”

“No, jackass, it isn’t. Unless you possess magical powers to keep your plane safe while you’re onboard, you’re as much at risk as me.”

“It is different,” I said flatly, glaring at Reid. He looked so amused.

“How?”

“It just is, Ryan.”

“Hmmm. My life is more valuable than yours.”

“Can we not get into a philosophical debate?”

She gave me a violent look. “If Mr. Andrews doesn’t work with you on *La Nostalgie*, my time here will be over since I’m not going to Paris. I was hired for Amage.”

Fuck, she was right. That’s what I wanted.

Wasn’t it?

“Until I find another position, I guess you can rest easy.”

If she found another position. I wasn’t above interfering with any possibilities. If she didn’t work here until I convinced her to retire, I’d see to it she wasn’t employed anywhere else.

She studied her hands. “By the way, Mr. Keegan, don’t use your vast network of white-collar thugs to hinder my prospects.”

To keep that from happening, I came up with another idea. “When I call Boyd, I will ask if he can convince the others to allow your presentation at their New York office, Ryan.”

Hope flared in her eyes and her sweet smile eased me. “Would you care to know why I’m so set on a certain figure for my personal wealth? You’ve never asked.”

“I saw no need. Money rules the world, so why wouldn’t you want such security?”

“It’s a different type of security I seek, Noah,” she whispered. “My parents left their house to Armani. When I turned eighteen, she said I didn’t have to move. Maybe she was sincere. Her husband didn’t, *doesn’t*, like me. You saw how he runs the house. The first chance he got, he would’ve thrown me out, not caring if I was homeless. Dakota *might* have taken Logan in as the baby of the family. Meaning I would’ve left Quinn to Armani, who didn’t want that responsibility.” She lowered her lashes. “I don’t ever want to worry about having a roof over my head or eating. I want to buy a house and have money saved for repairs and upkeep.”

I hated she bared her soul in front of others. Were we alone, I could’ve sworn she’d never have to worry again and taken her in my arms to kiss away her despondency. We had an

audience, so I remained practical. “Are you sure Quinn isn’t wrapped up in your goal?”

“Isn’t she always?”

“Quinn’s a grown woman. She knows you love her and will always be there for her. Let her live her life, so you can be free to live yours. You don’t fret over Logan as you do Quinn. How many years separate you?” I already knew from my background check. “All three of you.”

“I’m five years older than Logan and three years older than Quinn.”

“Not an enormous gap for you to mother her as you do.”

“I worry about Logan. Not as much as I do Quinn. She took the deaths of our parents hard. She had nightmares and fell into a deep depression. I thought I was going to lose her. I *had* to be her mother figure. Armani had her kids and husband. They were her priorities. Logan grieved for Mama. He rarely spoke of our father. Quinn wanted to be with Daddy. She wanted to *go* to him.” The tears glistening in her eyes turned them silver. “I swore to my parents if they could hear me and helped me to save Quinn, I’d always take care of her, no matter the cost.” She sniffled and swiped at escaping tears. “I was afraid they wouldn’t listen to me. They died angry and disappointed in me, so I didn’t know if their punishment would take Quinn from me.”

Rosa swiped at her wet cheeks.

“I don’t know how *not* to mother Quinn. Maybe it’s a crutch.”

No maybe in it.

“You think so.”

I couldn’t judge Ryan’s tone, so I didn’t deny or confirm.

“I see it on your face, Noah,” she said with a sad smile. “Just say it.”

“Your treatment of Quinn is a crutch,” I said carefully. “One you needed since you had no one to worry about your well-being.”

She nodded. “I never wanted Quinn to worry or to feel any shame at however she conducted her life. When our parents were alive, she was quieter. We couldn’t wear makeup or heels until after our sixteenth birthdays. They monitored our reading material. We had one computer that Quinn, Logan, and me shared. We each got five hours a week. For every rule we broke or poor grade we received, they subtracted fifteen minutes from our allotted time.”

Considering her upbringing, her sunny disposition amazed me.

“I don’t want money for money’s sake, Noah. I want it for safety and security. Not only for me, but for Quinn and Logan too.”

I nodded but said nothing. She was softening toward me again and I knew she’d made her decision. “You’re not going to Paris, correct?” I had to make sure.

“No,” she said with a sad sigh, and her lips turned down with unhappiness. “I would prefer knowing the entire story. Something deeper made you go ballistic. However, *La Nostalgie* means everything to you. You’re extremely competitive and you’re chomping to beat Sauncier. Yet, you’ll give up both. For me. That swayed me to change my mind. I want to go. I wish I would’ve seen pride, encouragement, and excitement in your eyes. Heard it in your voice.”

She made me feel so fucking low. I wanted to tell her there’d be many opportunities for business trips, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. A working environment left her vulnerable in so many ways.

“If it was just about traveling...” Her voice trailed off and she gave an indignant sniff. “I understand your trauma, so either you could’ve come with me, or I would’ve gone on my own.”

“I think not, Ryan.” My voice was clipped. “I’m your boss.”

“Except when *you* decide you’re my boyfriend,” she snapped.

I thought of Megan. My stupidity blackened my mood further. “I own the company as your boss and head the Keegan family as your boyfriend.”

Her gaze landed on a paperweight, but it was too far away for her to reach it without getting up. I was grateful for small favors. Otherwise, she would’ve lobbed the thing at my head and knocked me the fuck out.

“Boss I agree with. I cannot gainsay your decisions if I want to keep my job. However, being the end all, be all, of the Keegan family doesn’t give you authority over me, Noah.” Her gorgeous eyes narrowed. “Especially as only a boyfriend.”

“Are you saying I’ll have more influence over your decisions as your husband?”

“Of course. Marriage isn’t something to take lightly. It’s a binding contract in the eyes of the law and in the sanctity of the church. That doesn’t mean I’d allow you to run roughshod over me.”

“It just means it would be harder to walk away,” I said, thoughtful. Marriage would make it harder to lose her.

“I take my role in my family seriously, Noah,” Ryan said, “but the dynamics change when you have a significant other. Unless it is a matter of life or death, you, our relationship, has to take priority in my life. I expect the same consideration from you.”

“There will be times where we have to put each other’s feelings aside and do what’s best for our family,” I said carefully.

“It depends on what it is.”

“It doesn’t matter the circumstances,” I replied in a tone that brooked no additional argument.

“You think?” Ryan challenged. “Give me an example.”

“Timothe,” I said, because I could think of no one else I detested as much as Ryan disliked Megan. “Suppose Armani was out of town and Timothe needed your help taking care of the kids. He requested you stay with him until she returned.

For whatever reason he also didn't have access to money and he needed that too. But he and I had come to blows and I didn't want you around him. He isn't your family, Ryan, but those kids are. Armani is, and she'd expect you to help."

She studied me and my muscles tensed. Ryan was so perceptive and, to me, guilt rang in my scenario. When she sighed and glanced away, I breathed easier.

"We both know you'd say fuck me and do whatever was needed to help."

"Either I'd take the kids with me and tell him he could visit them until Armani returned or I'd give him the money he needed. If I had to stay at the house, then I'd invite you to stay with us. I would find a way to take care of my sister's children without disregarding your feelings and disrespecting our relationship." She huffed. "That's a pretty shitty scenario just to make your fucking point. I've already given in. What more do you want me to say? I'm disappointed I won't experience a business trip. Doubly so because I would've gone to Paris and had a whole freaking suite at the Ritz."

"You would've been working," Reid pointed out. "You wouldn't have gotten much sightseeing done."

"I would've been working in Paris and staying at the Ritz, Reid. Hello? That would've been an experience on its own." She looked at me. "My career is important to me, Noah," she said softly. "I can't retire until I'm ready. You have got to let it be my call."

I frowned. "Aren't you intending to work until you have a certain amount in your bank account?"

"Yes. That isn't going to happen overnight."

"It could," I told her, testing the waters.

"Yeah, sure, maybe if I was a shareholder in a big company. I don't know of any other way."

"Bonuses," Reid supplied.

"True," she said, then changed the subject. "Oh God," she groaned, shaking her head, and glaring at me, alleviating my

concern she was in pain. “I can’t believe I’m about to say this.”

Happy expectation flooded me, but I stayed calm. “What?”

“Depending on *stuff*—” She gave me a meaningful look.

Us, I silently inserted.

“I might find a position with little to no travel involved. And if there is, driving distance only.”

“Cars are more dangerous than planes,” I told her.

“Take it or leave it,” she huffed. “You’re lucky I’m willing to compromise that much.”

For now, I was thankful and relieved she’d allowed reason to take over. Although she still intended to work, she had indeed chosen me.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Ryan

An ancient human pulling a cow's udders and drinking the white liquid squirting out is one of life's mysteries. For that matter, who saw a fucking mushroom sprouting from the ground and decided it looked tasty enough to pluck and eat? That curiosity allowed me to enjoy my cup of joe, and I was forever grateful to the long dead Ethiopian's discovery of the delicious, bitter bean.

Coffee.

One of life's simple pleasures and a drink I adored, a magical beverage that energizes its drinker. As I sipped on my coffee and cream, I sighed in contentment.

"You look like you're enjoying your coffee," Soraya noted, sipping a decaf.

I nodded, grinning. "It's fucking delicious. You have fantastic taste."

Several days after the Halloween party, she and I had met up at a food truck run by a friendly foreign man. I'd gotten a kick at her outrageous orders when I discovered it was a private joke between them to throw off other customers.

Nowadays, I rode to work with Noah. There was something different about him. I couldn't put my finger on it, so I decided not to address it. But since my first meeting with Soraya had been an early morning date before either of us went to work, Curtis had driven me. Soraya and I had taken a little longer than necessary, enjoying ourselves so much that day, we decided to meet at the same place today, and this time, we intended to treat ourselves at a nearby spa.

Reid discovered Sauncier's final presentation would indeed happen in New York. Channing Powers and Claude Amage were the only two in on the Paris meeting. Everyone else believed Keegan Media Group and Sauncier would make joint presentations in the local office.

To say Noah was furious was an understatement. I thought he *would* kill one of them. Thankfully, out of the lesser of two evils, he did the next best thing. Moved to take over the company. While I understood he wanted retaliation, KMG would automatically win the campaign. I asked him to consider removing Channing and Claude from the board after the meeting. He'd agreed, warning me he would buy the company out, so even if Sauncier won, they were fucked.

It was better than nothing. The challenge to win the contract remained in place. Noah sent word he'd open our presentation, which Boyd didn't think would be a problem.

My presentation to Amage had been postponed again and I was told they'd call me with the new date and time. The closer the time came for the decision on the pillar campaign, the more nervous I got. Noah's impending takeover of the company notwithstanding, I had worked long and hard on creating what would be an unforgettable campaign should the contract go to KMG.

As best I could, I overlooked the niggling thought that I couldn't win either way. If Sauncier won and Noah went through with the takeover, the contract would become null and void. If KMG was awarded the contract, I'd always wonder if it was because of my work or because they were fucked anyway, so why not give it to me.

I tried not to think too hard about the no-win situation, even as I asked Noah, on several occasions, what he intended to do with a perfume house. His attention was focused on the huge Kee-Tel deal as was Nicholas's and Tina's. KMG had been awarded several huge accounts from an international makeup brand, a well-known designer of couture, and a famous champagne house.

With Noah's attention focused on telecommunications and most of the hard work out of the way for Amage for both *La Nostalgie* and our bid for the marketing contract, I was invited to KMG meetings and asked for input on other accounts. Unfortunately, by the time the contracts were awarded, my own with KMG would've expired. After the scene in the office two weeks ago, I knew Noah wouldn't offer me a permanent

position at the company, so I'd quietly begun to search for another job. Confessing to Noah would either make or break our relationship. No matter what he said, he didn't want me to work. No matter how I pretended, I wouldn't be comfortable without money in the bank that *I* earned. It was an impasse on hold. Whether we liked it or not, the shitstorm was brewing and if we didn't address it soon, it would drown all hopes of a future between us.

This time, I'd read any contract of whoever hired me from front to back. By the time I remembered to get the revised one Reid had left for me to bring it home, it had disappeared again.

It didn't matter. My direct deposits came like clockwork. Now that I didn't have to worry about rent, I could focus on a new car and my bank account. Sandy was in the parking garage of Noah's building, after he'd purchased a space for her. At the beginning of the year, I intended to look into storage for her.

"I've been coming here forever, so I couldn't think of a better place to take my new friend."

My smile widened. After the death of my parents, the few friends I'd had dwindled away as my primary focus became my younger siblings, maintaining my grades and feeding us. Quinn and I had come a long way. Honestly, she was my best friend, but another pal was nice.

"We're almost done with our food, and we still have some time to kill before our appointment. What do you want to do till then?"

"We can just chill here and chat."

"Well, in that case, what's it like living with Noah? Graham told me you two moved in together," she said, leaning forward, a small smile on her lips. "When Graham and I first moved together, we fucked like rabbits."

I giggled, my cheeks heating up. Fucking anytime was one of the perks of living with Noah.

"Same for you guys, huh?"

I laughed again, not denying her assessment, but not giving her a firm answer, either. “Are you certain you want details about our sex life, Soraya?”

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head no. “You’re right, I’ll pass. Noah is like a brother to me, and I wouldn’t want to know about my brother’s sex life.”

“Thought so,” I declared, leaning back in my seat.

“But honestly, how’s living with him?”

“Its...great,” I answered after a moment’s consideration. “I haven’t lived with anyone since my brother and sister moved out and I’ve never lived with a boyfriend, so I wasn’t sure what to expect. Our backgrounds are so different. But so far, so good.”

She nodded in understanding. “Same with Graham and I, Let me tell you, the lifestyle difference is an adjustment. But if you two love each other, it’ll work out.”

“We do. We say it all the time. I believe he means it as much as I do.”

“You two have any firm plans? Marriage? Kids? All that classic shit?”

“We’ve touched on the topic, but nothing in-depth. It’s on the table, though.”

For the first time, I envisioned a future with a partner, one involving marriage and children. So much had changed in just a few, short weeks. Thanksgiving had come and gone. I’d wanted to try my hand at preparing a holiday meal, so Angelo had ceded the kitchen to me, Quinn, and Alessia, on standby if we needed him. We’d received compliments all around, even from the chef himself, and I’d been so proud. After Mama’s death, Armani had always overseen important occasions. I had invited her, Timothe, their kids, and Dakota, his son, and his girlfriend, but they’d declined, claiming it was unfair of me to usurp Armani’s position.

Fuck you very much. My Thanksgiving had been fabulous without their crusty asses.

Last weekend, Nathaniel and Alessia's wedding had been beautiful, extravagant, and newsworthy. The Keegans turned out in full force. I'd met Reid's father. When I asked about Noah's sick aunt that he'd missed work over, Ed Keegan had looked so confused. Noah had interrupted whatever he'd been about to say and steered his father away not long after.

Later, Noah simply told me the woman was much better.

Life was wonderful. This holiday season would be extra special. On the fifteenth, Noah and I would trim our first tree together. I'd invited Quinn, Logan, Graham, Soraya, and their kids to help. By then, Nathaniel and Alessia would also be back from their honeymoon. I'd tried to contact Reid, but he wouldn't answer his phone. He'd also ignored my texts and emails.

"I think we can get going now," Soraya said into the silence, grabbing her bag and standing.

I mimicked her, my mind filling with thoughts of how a life with Noah would be, hopeful and nervous at the prospect.



Noah

"You want to marry Ryan?" Quinn's disbelief annoyed me. I expected her, of all people, to be happy at the news. "You two only just moved in together!"

"And?" I demanded, grateful for Dakota and Logan's silence, although their unreadable expression grated on me, too.

Quinn studied me. "Is she pregnant?"

"A baby isn't a reason to marry," I snapped. "That's asking for fucking misery."

"Says you. Reid didn't get that memo."

I didn't want to talk about my cousin or think about his baby's mother. Since the day the paparazzi chased Ryan, Reid wouldn't return my phone calls, rarely showed up to his office at the law firm and hadn't been seen in my building. He hadn't even attended Nate and Alessia's wedding.

Another no show had been Tina. Her illness turned out to be pregnancy. I wanted her to take maternity leave. Nicholas laughed in my face, so she came to the office every day. As for me, my secrets dampened my happiness. If I confessed to Ryan I'd slept with Megan, she'd never forgive me. I feared discovery every day. Ryan wasn't stupid. She sensed something wrong. At times, her searching look probed my deepest soul. However, without proof, she had nothing to accuse me of, so she remained silent.

Seeing no other way, I went to Uncle Ed for help. By now, Megan had returned to London, so he flew there on my behalf. She signed a non-disclosure agreement. In return, I began paying her fifty thousand dollars a month. If she opened her mouth, the money stopped.

It wasn't the best solution, but for the first time in my life I'd allowed a situation to spiral out of my control. I didn't know what else to do. Uncle Ed visited the hotel to reverify Megan's story, on the off chance I'd missed something to prove I hadn't betrayed Ryan. I couldn't put my finger on what bothered me so much—other than the obvious. I'd fucked Megan. Everyone my uncle interviewed verified the facts. Confirming I'd cheated on Ryan sent me into panic mode.

Ordinarily, I didn't believe popping the question after three weeks of living together was wise, but I couldn't think of any other way to bind Ryan to me. Other than pregnancy, which was out of the question. Unless I grew even more desperate.

Besides, I wanted to marry Ryan. I loved her. We'd been seeing each other for a little over two months and worked together, so I knew her. I knew I wanted her face to be the first one I saw when I awakened and the last one I kissed before sleeping.

“Why are you asking us?” Logan asked. “Shouldn't you pop the question to Ryan?”

My shoulders sagged and I rubbed my eyes. Perhaps believing asking for Ryan's hand in marriage would be an easy task was naïve. While it was old-fashioned thing, and traditionally done with the bride's parents, I wanted to ensure

Quinn and Logan's support. So, while Soraya and Ryan went out, I thought it the perfect moment to invite them over and win their approval. However, her siblings objected.

"Why isn't Armani and Timothe here?" Dakota questioned.

"Because I told Noah not to invite those two," Quinn said, "so if you have an issue with breathing oxygen instead of Timothe's asshole, get to fucking stepping."

Dakota scowled at Quinn before looking at me. "Let's address the elephant in the room."

"Of course," I responded, barely tempering my annoyance.

"Are we really okay with giving our blessing to a man against women in the workplace?" he asked, pinning Quinn and Logan with a hard stare "Ryan has dreamed of being in the advertising industry forever. Do you really think she'd put that aside to marry? And even if she does, I doubt she'd be happy staying at home."

"Noah's rich, big bro," Logan said with a surprising lack of couth. "Anything Ryan wants, she'll be able to have."

"She wants her own bank account," Quinn said, "filled with money she earned. She wants happiness and a family."

"No, she doesn't want to be alone," Dakota said. "That's why she's always up your ass, Quinn." He shrugged. "I'm surprised you aren't pushing this marriage, so you can be free of her clinginess."

His words made me regret inviting him. "If you don't shut the fuck up, I'm throwing you out."

"I'm part of the family—"

"Bro, you're wrong for talking about Ryan like that," Logan chided.

"I'm de facto head—"

"You're de fatto head, jackass," Quinn said.

"You sound so fucking stupid, Quinn," Dakota barked. "What does that even mean?"

“Don’t talk about Ryan, dick face,” she replied. “That’s what it means. Ryan doesn’t have to fear ever being alone because I will always stand by her and be in her life. She can’t pay me to go away.”

Dakota shook his head. “Jesus, she’s brainwashed you.”

“Nope, she sure hasn’t,” Quinn said icily. “She’s my best friend. Do you need a fucking dictionary to look up the definition since you can’t relate, having no personal experience with friends, besties or otherwise.”

“I have friends. You have johns.”

Hurt flitted across Quinn’s face. Seeing her expression, Dakota smiled. In response, anger swept into her eyes.

“You have a fucking decision to make, Dakota,” I said coldly. I was on edge about too many fucking things to count. I didn’t need this asshole insulting Quinn. “Don’t insult Quinn and leave in good health. Or continue being an obtuse fuckhead and depart with a few teeth missing.”

Dakota scowled at me. “It’s Ryan’s fault Quinn turned out as she has. Now, Ryan clings to Quinn and doesn’t care what she does.”

I opened my mouth to blast him, but Quinn interrupted me. “Not only are you Timothe’s cocksucker, you’re a stupid motherfucker. If you ever repeat to Ryan the bullshit you just spouted, you’re going to miss more than a few fucking teeth. The only person Ryan holds back is Ryan, fuck face. Why? Because your father was as much of a miserable motherfucker as his oldest son and daughter. Get this through your fat fucking head, Dakota. I had no say so on whether Ryan and I were sisters, but I *choose* to be her friend. Do you fucking understand now?”

Dakota threw her a dark look.

“This is a bad look in front of Noah,” Logan said. “He called us here to ask permission to marry Ryan, not to hear our putdowns.”

“I thought you were against this?” Dakota asked, suddenly outraged.

“It’s silly he’s asking us for Ryan’s hand in marriage,” Logan admitted. “It isn’t our decision to make but I don’t care if he marries her. He’s a fine man and he puts up with us.”

“Ryan is high-maintenance,” Dakota said, glancing from me to Logan. “She likes clothes and watches. She has a champagne bucket list with vintages priced in the thousands.”

Logan rolled his eyes. “Like I said, he’s rich, so he can support her. Champagne and all. He also makes her happy. What more can I ask for in a spouse for our sisters?”

“Quinn? Married?” Dakota snorted. “The day that happens is the day I’ll eat a fucking barbecued crow, guts and all.”

“Fuck, but I should marry someone just to watch that happen,” Quinn chirped. She sounded as flippant as always, though sadness dulled her eyes. “Lucky for you, I’m not a masochist, so you’re safe, fuck face.”

“Noah,” Logan blurted before Dakota responded, “since you’re asking my opinion, I say go for it.”

Quinn gave me an unhappy smile. “I like you, Noah. I’m so happy you found each other. But I know my sister. She wouldn’t be happy just staying at home.”

“You’re right, she would not be,” I agreed, laying my final card on the table. Searching for a way to convince Ryan not to work was very important. Eventually, I’d get my way on the matter but considering everything else, my determination on that matter went to the back burner. “If she wants to work, I won’t stand in her way. I plan to move my company toward more gender inclusivity, and I want Ryan to head that division.”

“Ryan doesn’t have a degree in political science,” Dakota said. “What qualifications does she have to run a gender inclusivity department?”

“Besides having a pussy?” Quinn said dryly.

Dakota glared at her, and she smiled sweetly.

“Your intentions are either bullshit to change the public’s perception of you or because it’s the easiest way to appease

Ryan by throwing this bone to her.”

I refused to give Dakota the satisfaction of a response. I was quite serious about the new department but not about Ryan’s role.

I didn’t want her to work, but I wanted her happy. I had ideas on how to rework her current contract to get her the bank account she wanted. However, I couldn’t immediately demand Ryan stop working and that was where her position in the as-yet-created department would come into play when I told her about it later. In my heart, I would give her six months in the new department. If she didn’t decide to retire by then, I intended to take her on so many extravagant vacations, she’d realize she didn’t have time to work. I was certain the invitations to sit on charitable boards and committees would also begin to pour in the moment I announced our engagement. Hopefully, that would be enough to keep her busy. When her current contract ended and I took my time about settling the legalities for the new department, Ryan would enjoy her unrestricted time.

“I’m in love with your sister,” I said into the silence, looking at each Hagen sibling so they’d see my sincerity. I might’ve betrayed Ryan, which I’d regret until my dying day, and I might be finagling her career intentions to keep her safe and healthy, but I spoke the truth. “I want her by my side in every aspect of my life, so I’m willing to do whatever I need to make that possible.”

Quinn muttered, “M’kay.” She took in a breath, then spoke again. “If you’re willing to do all that for my sister, you have my blessing. But if you hurt her, I’m cutting off your dick and feeding it to my neighbor’s chihuahua.”

Noted. I’d make sure she’d never discover my transgression with Megan. Something dawned on me. “What happened to your tongue piercing?”

“I lost interest in it,” she said with a little sniff.

“When do you intend to propose to Ryan?”

Logan's question redirected my focus back to the matter at hand.

"Tonight," I replied.

"Tonight?" All three Hagens echoed, looking at me like I sprouted another head.

"That's so soon!" Quinn protested.

Dakota narrowed his eyes. "You waited for the last minute to ask us?"

"Are you sure you don't have an ulterior motive for this sudden proposal?" Quinn asked, eyeing me with suspicion.

Yes. "No, Quinn. I love Ryan. I thought you'd be happy for us."

"I would be...I am..." Her shoulders heaved and she blew out an agitated breath. "I don't want you to break Ryan's heart. I...never mind. You aren't Reid. I'm being unfair to you. Reid's an irresponsible man whore."

"Who's Reid?"

Dakota's question drew Quinn's attention away, so she missed my wince.

"A worse asshole than you, Dakota," she said with irritation, then addressed me again. "Do you need help with anything?"

"Yes. A lot actually. Thank you."

"Well, I can't stay." Dakota stood. "I'm watching Eli tonight, so I have to go. I'll see y'all later."

"Can you get the Shepard's pie recipe Armani made, Quinn?" I asked once Dakota left. "Would you mind preparing it? It'll be a more personal touch than if Angelo does it."

"Sure. I take it you already have the ingredients?"

I nodded. "Afterwards, we can clean up."

My place was always spotless, so we wouldn't have much to do.

"Clean up?" Logan asked with a frown.

“Clean what? This place is fucking immaculate,” Quinn said, as if she read my mind.

“Everything must be perfect. Once we finish cooking, I’ll fill you in.”

The three of us spent the rest of the day jamming to a bunch of songs I’d never heard and filling my penthouse with romance. We turned it into the perfect place to get engaged, complete with chocolate cake, a bucket with several bottles of champagne on the island, and a trail of roses leading to the bedroom. The large windows revealing the Manhattan skyline heightened the dreamy aura. Once Logan and Quinn left, I headed to my room to prepare to ask an especially important question, my stomach in knots.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Ryan

“Remind me to run to the pharmacy tomorrow.” Kicking my shoes off, I shut the entrance door to Noah’s penthouse. I’d had such a lovely time with Soraya and couldn’t wait for our next spa day. I wanted her to meet Quinn and would invite her whenever Soraya and I went out again.

Stress was giving me hallucinations, because I swore a funny look had crossed Soraya’s face at the mention of my sister. She’d changed the subject and I’d let it go. Once we went our separate ways, I stopped in at the office, though I’d stayed only a couple hours before calling it a day.

Happy to be home, I breathed in deeply.

Imagining I smelled *La Nostalgie* reminded me of my dedication to the parfum’s success and Noah’s determination to honor his mother. I set my purse on the table in the entry hall, disappointed Noah wasn’t waiting for me as usual. A good thing, perhaps, amid a breakdown from overworking. The scent grew stronger, though I hadn’t touched the fragrance today, although I would continue to live and breathe it for a few more weeks. Unfortunately, that also included another press conference. The purpose of putting myself in front of the media again was to discuss *La Nostalgie*.

Advertisements for *La Nostalgie* blitzed all channels, especially social media. Samples were already available. Pre-orders on the dedicated website and through the House of Amage exceeded expectations, driven by excellent early reviews from beauty influencers and perfume review sites. I’d curated a list to send promotional material and mini bottles. Consumer samples were hard to find, not by design but demand. The website and the story behind the perfume went live last night. From my allotted budget, I’d also hired a production team to film a short, twenty-minute documentary about Réjane Keegan.

Perfect by Ed Sheeran suddenly piping through hidden speakers caught my attention. Any moment I expected Noah to appear, take me in his arms and dance to a song he swore had been made for me.

“Noah?”

No answer. I picked up my pumps and set them next to my purse, then walked out of the foyer.

A scene from a romance novel greeted me, snatching away all other thoughts. The living room had been turned into a bouquet of roses in shades of purple and pink. Everywhere I looked, beautiful flowers met my astonished gaze. Rose petals, framed by a row of candles on each side, carpeted the hallway floor.

Speechless, I followed the trail of rose petals that lead to the staircase. There were more on the stairs, but before I could go up, Noah walked out of the library, grabbed my hand, and led me down the hall to the kitchen. On the island, champagne rested in a silver bucket, with a heart-shaped chocolate cake next to it.

Grinning at me, he grabbed two oven mitts and went to the oven, removing a pan and setting it on the stove top. The aroma was delicious and familiar. My mouth watered.

“What’s all this?” I questioned, closing the distance between us.

Taking me into his arms, he kissed me. “Just a little something,” he murmured.

“How detailed.” I pushed away hair that flopped into his eyes. He needed a haircut. “What’d you cook?”

He released me and gave me a smile. “I didn’t cook anything. Quinn got your grandmother’s shepherd’s pie recipe. She and Logan came over and made it.”

That explained the smell. Oh mercy, what a mighty fine man I had. “Logan admires you a lot.”

“He’s a good guy.”

“Yeah, he—”

Another kiss interrupted me. “I have a surprise for you in the bedroom,” he said a moment later.

“What is it?” I glanced around, searching for clues as to what it possibly could be that would warrant all of this.

The contract! KMG had won the Amage contract. I’d been so bummed out when the entire day passed without any news.

Frowning, I took in everything again. A business deal wouldn’t warrant rose petals and heart-shaped cakes, would it? There was only one other possibility.

No! The idea of Noah popping the question was so ludicrous, I immediately pushed it aside.

“I’m searching for clues,” I admitted. “Every idea I have I dismiss. So, tell me.” I turned puppy dog eyes on him.

He tsked. “If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

Snuggling close to him, I wrapped my arms around his waist and laid my head against his chest. “Please let me see it now?” I teased, guessing his gift should’ve been the night’s finale not the beginning.

“After dinner,” he said, just as I predicted, guiding me to the table in the dining room.



“I’m so fucking stuffed,” I groaned, pushing the empty plate away from me.

After he and I devoured the pie, we washed it down with a glass of wine, before enjoying some of the chocolate cake and a little more wine. Though I didn’t consider myself a light weight, I rarely drank alcohol, so the two glasses I’d downed had me tipsy. If he offered another serving, I’d decline. I had to save some sobriety for the champagne.

Noah stood from his seat. “I’m going to run to the little boy’s room, then we can get to your surprise.”

The rat! Forcing me to wait so long. I held back a groan, my curiosity getting the best of me. I’d toyed with the idea he

intended to propose, but our relationship was still so new, too soon for him to even consider it.

He looked at my face and, noticing my sour expression, smiled. “Don’t worry, I won’t be long. I’ll be right back to escort you to our bedroom.”

He hurried away, so I leaned back and pulled out my phone, deciding to pass the wait with mindless scrolling on various social media timelines.

I waited and scrolled. And scrolled, and scrolled, and scrolled for an eternity. Really, about ten minutes, but still too long.

Tired of looking at memes and people’s dumb takes on issues, I pocketed my phone and stood up. Another few minutes passed without a sign of him. Fuck, I couldn’t wait any longer.

Walking down the hall and up the staircase, I was careful with my footsteps so I wouldn’t crush the petals. At our bedroom door, I didn’t bother to knock, I just threw it open. And found my answer for his holdup.

Before me, Noah kneeled on one knee, an opened ring box in his hand.

A soft gasp escaped me, and my hand flew to my mouth as I stumbled toward him. When I stood in front of him, my stunned gaze went from him to the gorgeous diamond, radiant shaped ring.

His intake of breath recaptured my attention. “Before I met you, I’d never encountered such a gorgeous, outspoken, strong woman.”

The love in his eyes made my heart flutter, and I prayed he saw how much I adored him.

“When we first met at my office, you pissed me off, but also fascinated me. And after having the pleasure of discovering what a beautiful soul you have, you’re the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with.” He removed the ring, then dropped the box on the floor, and lifted one of my trembling

hands. “Ryan Hagen, will you do me the honor of being my wife?”



Noah

I had never been so relieved to see Ryan. After hurrying to our bathroom to freshen up and retrieve the diamond ring from my pocket, I returned to my bedroom and waited for her to storm in and find out what was taking me so long. I’d expected a five-minute wait, but she’d been more patient than expected. It took her fifteen excruciating minutes before she came to investigate.

She stared at me with teary eyes, her expression unreadable.

The continued silence made my heart pound. Guilt and fear of losing her had led me to propose, but nothing had ever felt as right. With or without my horrible indiscretion, I would’ve proposed to Ryan. She had become my world, and without her, life held no meaning.

Yet, she still hadn’t answered me.

Jesus Christ, what if my worst nightmare came true and she said no?

“Ryan?” I whispered.

She swiped at a stray tear. “Y-yes,” she stuttered, sniffing. “Yes, I will be your wife.”

Relief hit me so hard, all I could do was slide the ring on her finger. It was a perfect fit. Smiling, I stood, and she launched herself into my arms.

Our lips met, parted, allowing our tongues to mate. Our arms slipped around each other, our bodies pressing closely together.

After a moment of intense kissing, I pulled away and gazed into her eyes, amazed and awed at the love in them. “I love you, Ryan.”

“I love you too,” she replied, reclaiming my mouth.

Before long, she and I were both undressed.

Lips still attached, we migrated to the bed, my dick hard and ready for her. She broke the kiss and pushed me down onto the mattress, examining my naked body. I, too, returned the favor, admiring her golden beauty, my mouth watering at the sight of her full tits, wide hips, and bare pussy.

Done with eye-fucking me, Ryan straddled my legs. Leaning down, she teased the tip of my dick with her tongue. I gasped at the sensation, losing all reason when she took me fully into the wet warmth of her mouth. She feverishly sucked and licked me, encouraged by my moans and my tightening grip on her hair.

When she brought me to the edge, she allowed my cock to spring from her mouth, and stroke it with her hand.

“Ryan,” I moaned.

She smirked at me, before dipping her head again and swirling her tongue around my cock head. Slowly, gradually, she licked her way up my shaft. Her teasing would kill me. She’d bring me to the brink before pulling back.

“Ryan, baby.”

In response, she deep throated me, and I jerked. She alternated between swallowing my dick and gliding her tongue over the tip.

“Ryan,” I managed when her pleasurable torture eased.

Before I came, she crawled up and slid her soaked pussy down my cock, gasping at the sensation. I grabbed onto her hips as she rode me, moving my hips to her rhythm.

Her eyes closed. “Noah.” Her soft moans turned into loud cries as she came. I quickly joined her, pumping my release into her.

Afterwards, she rolled to her side and snuggled against me. Turning, I threw an arm over her waist and buried my face against her hair. The familiar scent of coconut invaded my nose, and I smiled.

Ryan would be my wife.

Chapter Forty

Ryan

I sat at the desk in Noah's small home office, sipping a glass of white wine and typing what I intended to say at the upcoming press conference, scheduled for the day after the Amage presentation and separate from the one for *La Nostalgie*. If KMG won the Amage advertising contract, then I'd announce it on camera. If we lost, I'd congratulate Sauncier, however meaningless that win would be.

In a few, short days, my life had become a wonderful, mad dream. The date had been set for my final presentation—two days from now. Today was the tenth, meaning in five days we'd trim our tree. We'd chosen it last night, but it wouldn't be delivered until the morning of the fifteenth.

Noah had released a statement to the media about his proposal and my acceptance, and well-wishes were pouring in from around the world. We were the public's darlings, all ill-will forgotten for the time being.

I thought I'd have time to plan my wedding, but nope. Noah gave me three months. He opened a bank account for me, then, at my protest, changed it to a joint account to be used for the wedding and the reception. The man had no concept of a budget. If I wasn't so completely in love with his fine ass, I would've also demanded at least six months, but his eagerness to marry me stole the last of my good sense. For a woman always so determined to follow my head in a relationship, my heart won with almost anything involving Noah. Once he told me of his plans for the company and the active role I'd play, I was a goner.

If he'd asked me to skydive from the moon, I would have. Noah owned me, heart and soul. I was so glad Quinn hadn't allowed me to back out of the masquerade ball. I still would've met Noah, but I don't think the intensity would've been there from the moment he sauntered into his corporate office.

Taking a break from my document, I yawned and picked up my phone to check messages. Just as I was going to set it down again, a message from Noah came through. His monthly dinner with Graham was over and he'd be home soon.

I thought of several ways to greet him. In our bedroom, with a few candles lit, and completely naked. In front of the warm library fireplace, lounging on a mountain of pillows. Unable to decide, I typed a brief message with a heart emoji and the words, *be careful*.

Before I pressed send, my fucking battery died and I huffed in frustration, dropping back into the chair and glaring at my computer screen. An email alert popped up in the lower corner and I frowned. It wasn't the fact that I had incoming mail, it was that the sender was Megan Buford.

If only I'd remembered that curiosity had fucked up some nosy ass cat. Her message was simple enough: *Ask Ida is Soraya Morgan's column. I found a few that may be of interest to you.*

Attached to the email were five images. Even as I downloaded the first one, I was rolling my eyes for entertaining Megan's childish bullshit.

At first, the words didn't register. No. Scratch that. The words registered, but the *Ask Ida* letter writer didn't click in my head. By the third column, I had no doubt Quinn was Concerned Sister. When I opened the final attachment, I didn't have to be a rocket scientist to understand Noah had written this one.

In that moment, my world fell apart again, and I became that sixteen-year-old who'd lost her parents and had no one. Yet, in so many ways, this blow was ten times as brutal. The two people I trusted most in the world, the man I'd given my heart to and the sister I cherished, had betrayed me. Not only that, but Reid had also known. Soraya. And I was almost certain, Graham. He and his wife were best friends and had no secrets.

I stared at the screen, unable to do anything, even cry. I doubted I blinked. My body felt leaden. Realizing I had

nowhere to turn hurt worse. I didn't even have my apartment anymore. I'd put so much faith in Noah, it had never occurred to me I'd ever need it again. Besides, in my head, I'd always have my sister to turn to. She had been as much of a liar as the man I loved.

The ringing doorbell snapped me out of my pain, and I stumbled out of the room and down the long hallway. A moment later, I swung open the door, blinking at the sight of Nicholas Keegan.

"Noah isn't here," I said woodenly. He hadn't offered Noah any congratulations on our upcoming marriage. I'm not sure why he was here because he didn't seem happy to see me.

Megan's email crushed me, dampening my unease in Nicholas' presence. I needed to figure out my next move.

Nicholas brushed past me and stopped near the console table in the entry hall. "I'm not here for him. I don't know why this woman thought I wanted to be involved in my brother's drama." Disgust rang in his voice. He scowled at my engagement ring, then met my gaze. "I...Megan Buford sent me a very disturbing video."

"She has a video too?" I asked, watching as he tapped his phone screen. "She sent me an email with images of the column."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Ryan."

"Megan—"

"I'm going to have her charged with harassment," he spat. "I was on the way over here to talk to you about the account. She has been calling me for days. Tonight, she's gone too fucking far. If Tina had seen this, she might've thought it was me."

"What—"

He shoved his cell phone into my hand and pressed play on a video. The camera panned around a hotel room. I recognized the walls from when Noah and I video chatted during his business trip a few weeks ago. It took a moment for the moans to register. Just as they did, the camera turned to Megan. Her

face, her baby bump. Her pussy plastered on Noah's mouth. I couldn't see his face, but his dark hair was as unmistakable as his hotel room. My hand shook and I let out a sob, trying to give Nicholas the phone. Except the horror wasn't finished. The video changed to Megan riding Noah's cock. His features remained hidden, but the décor was the same.

The room spun and I staggered, on the verge of fainting. Nicholas loomed in front of me and I reached for him. He grabbed his phone. Vaguely, I heard the door close and realized he'd left.

Sobs tore from me, and nausea twisted in my stomach. I fell to my knees and, somehow, managed to reach the trash can on the side of the console before vomit spewed out of my mouth, emptying my stomach. I curled up on the floor, my body racked with sobs, the videos playing on repeat in my head.

“Ryan!”

I didn't know the amount of time that had passed before Noah called my name. It could've been a minute or an hour. A year or a day. It didn't matter because my heart was irrevocably broken. I hadn't realized how much I trusted Noah, how much I loved him, until tonight. He'd betrayed me in every conceivable way, and I'd never forgive him.

Crouching, he reached for me, but I scrambled back and stumbled to my feet.

“Ryan?” he said, standing and coming toward me.

I dodged him. “Don't fucking touch me,” I screamed, completely unhinged, not caring about my tears or my runny nose. “I trusted you!”

“You don't anymore?”

His confusion enraged me further. “You're a fucking liar and a cheater,” I snarled. “All of you lied to me about the ball, but you! *You!* You fucked Megan Buford.”

He froze, paled. Yet he offered no denials. “Ryan—”

I recoiled at the sound of my name on his lips. “I'm leaving.”

“Who told you?”

“No one told me. I saw the videos!”

If possible, he went even paler. “What video?” he asked in a strangled voice.

“*Videos*. One of you eating her pussy and the other where she’s riding your cock.” My breath sawed in and out of my lungs so fast, I thought I’d hyperventilate. The horror on Noah’s face didn’t help. “I don’t ever want to talk to you again. Or Quinn or Reid. None of you.”

He closed his eyes, not bothering to question me. The fucker knew his game was up. “Let me explain,” he pleaded, bleakness settling into his gaze. “I never meant for you to find the newspapers. I thought I’d locked them away.”

“Newspapers?” I spat. “I haven’t seen any fucking newspapers.”

“Then how—”

“Megan Buford,” I snarled. “She sent me a fucking email with copies of Quinn’s letters. *Your* letter.”

He didn’t threaten diabolical retributions or display any anger. If he hadn’t been guilty, he would’ve been furious. “Listen to me, sweetheart.”

“Fuck you. There’s no fucking listening to a liar. All of you knew the truth and didn’t think I needed to know. I thought I was imagining things when I saw how buddy-buddy you and Quinn were. But it was real. You two bonded over your shared fucking over of me.”

“That isn’t true. Quinn loves you. I adore you. We only wanted to protect you.”

“By fucking lying to me? I can’t tell you how many times I asked Quinn for the truth.”

He came toward me, but I dodged him again and ran to the door. “I’m leaving, Noah. I’ll never be able to trust you, any of you, again.”

“Ryan,” he said, catching up to me and grabbing my arm, turning me toward him. “You’ve got to listen to me,” he said, desperation in the words. “Quinn told me about when your parents discovered you were on birth control.”

Horror washed through me. “It wasn’t her business to tell.”

Noah took my face between his hands. “Yes, it was,” he whispered. “She wanted me to understand what drove you and her. Why she felt she couldn’t tell you the truth.”

“I had every right to know. It doesn’t matter how uncomfortable it made her, she shouldn’t have kept it from me. But stop diverting my attention away from you. You’re guiltier than she is.” I shoved him away from me. “You fucked Megan. No wonder she hates me. You used that fucking business trip to get pussy from her.”

“Ryan, listen to me. *Please*. She came to my room because Reid wouldn’t talk to her. She didn’t have anywhere to go, so I was going to pay for a two-night stay at the hotel. Right before we were supposed to go to the lobby, I drank the last of my wine. The next morning...Fuck, Nicholas was looming over my bed because I’d overslept.” He hung his head. “Megan was next to me.”

The pain of those words made me double over. The death of my parents devastated me, compounded when I discovered the truth of what actually happened. I thought nothing would ever compare. But I was so, so wrong. At least then, I believed I had my sisters and brothers. Now, I was completely alone.

“Ryan—”

I flinched at the sound of his voice. Grabbing the edge of the console for support, I straightened. “It’s over, Noah. I never want to see you again.”

Chapter Forty-One

Noah

The door to the black SUV swung open, revealing my driver, Wilbur. “We’ve arrived, sir,” he informed me as he held the door open, allowing me to exit the car.

He handed me the case with Ryan’s laptop and the handle to a rolling trunk with everything she’d worked on.

“Thank you. I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Keegan.”

I’m not sure why I bothered to show up at the presentation. I’d already canceled tomorrow’s press conference. Inside, I was broken. The past two days had been torturous. Ryan left her engagement ring but hadn’t taken her phone or her laptop. Quinn was inconsolable. Nothing I said helped her. Since the night my world fell apart, she and Logan had been at my apartment. Hoping she’d heard from Ryan, I’d called Quinn. Not an hour later, her and Logan had shown up at my door.

Had either of them known about Megan, I’m sure they would’ve turned against me too. I just couldn’t bring myself to admit such a transgression. I wasn’t attracted to Megan Buford. Once, I’d respected her savviness. In the back of my mind, something niggled at me, but I was too distraught to figure out what.

I couldn’t think beyond my worry for Ryan.

Our only method of contact with her was email, but even if she had a way to check her messages, she wasn’t. I’d sent dozens of emails and they’d all gone unanswered.

I knew why she left her devices. She didn’t want me to track her, and I definitely would have.

“Mr. Keegan,” Ms. Jovan greeted with a smile.

I responded with a simple nod, hoping against hope Ryan showed up. She had put so much time and effort into the bid. As she’d requested, I’d made all involved believe I had spoken

out of anger and really had no intention of buying the House of Amage.

“The Amage brothers’ and the other executives have already arrived. You can go up right now, Mr. Keegan.”

In my adult life, I’d never felt as wretched or removed from the business at hand. Over the years, I’d gotten so accustomed to being alone, it hadn’t bothered me. Then, Ryan stormed into my life, and it had felt like a brush with heaven. Now, she’d left, hating me. Because I’d betrayed her and lied to her.

“Sir?”

Clenching my jaw, I glanced away. My emotions were ragged, naked on my face. Each time I looked in the mirror, my guilt, sorrow, and regret reflected. I didn’t want the weight of anyone else’s probing gaze.

“Thank you, Ms. Jovan,” I said, turning toward the elevator.

“Noah!”

The sound of Reid calling my name halted me. Shocked, I turned. As he closed the distance between us, he raised his hand.

“I’m so sorry Megan did what she did,” he said, low. “She was with me when I opened the email you sent to me weeks ago. I didn’t think anything of it. I never changed my email.”

“What do you want?” I asked coldly. I didn’t give a fuck why that woman exposed my secret to Ryan. It was done and she was gone. She’d been his problem, then he’d turned his back on her and she became mine.

“She should never have sent that email to Ryan.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Quinn called me a short while ago and told me that Ryan was gone. She blames me for Ryan’s disappearance. I thought Quinn hated me before, but she detests me now. She wants me to die slowly and painfully.”

“Quinn might be on to something.”

“I’m here to see if there’s anything I can do to help since the email debacle rests on my shoulders.”

“Fuck the email,” I snarled. “What about the fucking videos?” I still hadn’t found them on Ryan’s phone or laptop, though it didn’t matter. She had to have seen them since she knew what happened on the business trip.

“What videos?”

“Mr. Keegan?” Ms. Jovan called. “They are waiting for you, sir.”

“Yes, of course.” Turning, I started for the elevator, but when I heard Reid’s footsteps following in my wake, I didn’t have the energy to tell him to fuck off. At least, he refrained from talking to me on the ride up.

In the conference room, I shook hands with everyone except Claude Amage and Channing Powers. Lucky for them, they had the sense to not fuck with me. Reid followed my lead, then sat, while I walked to my designated seat, placed the brief case on the table and opened it. I couldn’t read Ryan’s name on the placard designating her place at the table, without breaking down. Instead of opening the presentation and then ceding to Ryan, I had to do the entire thing alone. As quickly as possible, I wanted to get through the meeting and return to my penthouse.

“Let’s get to it.” My words were flat and cold. It didn’t matter. Nothing...my entire existence meant nothing without Ryan, especially as things had ended. I had deceived her, disrespected her, and devastated her. Days before, I’d forced her into a corner, demanding she choose between me and her career. And I’d been so fucking high-and-mighty.

I claimed I deserved better. Than? Ryan was the best of the best. She had never put unfair conditions on me. Unfortunately, I couldn’t say the same for myself.

“Noah—” Reid started, but the opening door interrupted him.

“Here you are, Ms. Hagen,” Léon said, stepping aside so she could enter.

My breath caught as she walked into view. She looked ravishing in her royal blue pencil skirt and matching blazer

with a simple crème V-neck sweater underneath. The colors contrasted with her golden skin and the décolletage revealed the mounds of her full breasts. She wore the top half of her hair in a ponytail, allowing the rest of the thick mass to flow down her back.

“*Merci, Léon,*” she said

He nodded and smiled, before closing the door.

“*Bonjour, messieurs,*” she murmured, lacking her usual joy.

“*Comment ça va?*” Hugo asked.

“*Bien, merci,*” she said. “*Et toi?*”

“*Bien,*” he responded.

“Hello, Ryan,” Boyd greeted.

“Mr. Andrews.”

He studied her, then eyed me. Everyone else but Ryan followed the direction of his gaze. She refused to look my way, but at least she was here.

“We were just about to start,” I said carefully. “But I cede the floor to you.”

She drew in a deep breath and forced a smile. “Th-thank you, Mr. Keegan.” Pursing her lips, she glared at Reid, then sailed to her spot between us. Once she reached me, she went rigid, but her coconut scent wafted to me and in that moment, I would’ve run naked through Times Square if she would’ve taken me back.

I had mourned my mother’s loss for most of my life, lived in the shadow of her heartache and premature death, fearing what might be, instead of appreciating what was.

“Your computer,” I told her, sliding it to her. I feared, if I opened as planned, she’d leave.

She faced me and the sheen of tears in her eyes gutted me. “Thank you, Mr. Keegan,” she whispered, and her voice cracked.

“Ryan—”

“Don’t, Noah. I have nothing to say to you. I’m here out of contractual obligation.”

“Where have you been? We’re all worried sick about you.”

She ignored me and looked at Boyd. “Let’s begin.”



Ryan

My heart shattered all over again. Seeing Noah was harder than I’d expected. After running to our room, removing my ring, and grabbing my purse and a pair of sneakers, I’d fled, having nowhere to go. Everyone I’d trusted had betrayed me, so I’d checked into a motel, intending to book a flight on the first available departure. It didn’t matter the location as long as it was stateside because I didn’t have a passport. But I’d put my everything into the bid for the Amage account and I wanted to see it through.

Once I made that decision, I’d spent yesterday preparing for today. I’d pulled myself together and went to Macy’s to purchase the outfit I wore since I’d abandoned all my clothes at Noah’s place.

When I left the meeting, I didn’t know what would happen. An unconscious fear had been horribly realized. It wasn’t until I found myself with no one that I understood I’d clung to Quinn in part because I was afraid of being alone in the world. Now, I was, and it was everything I’d always imagined. Desolate, lonely, and frightening. Yet, the guilt from my parents’ accusations was finally severed and I put myself in Quinn’s place. It didn’t matter if I’d asked her ten million times and she’d lied just as much. I’d always been accusatory and just this side of judgmental. The shame I carried had morphed into something darker.

“Would you like a glass of water?” Noah asked.

“No.” The less I spoke to him, the better. The pain in his face and voice shouldn’t matter to me, but it did. If I wasn’t careful, my heart would overrule my common sense and I’d

hear him out. I didn't care the circumstances. He could give me no valid excuse for cheating.

A smaller table and a single tripod were at the front of the room, indicating that's where Noah and I were going to do the presentation. It was an old-school set up, but based on their building, the Amage brothers favored vintage things.

"Mr. Keegan, when you take your seat, we may begin."

Claude's words was news to me. To my knowledge, today was supposed to be a joint presentation, and I shouldn't have been dealing with Amage one-on-one until after, *if*, KMG won the contract. Not that it mattered anymore.

I looked to Noah. His jaw was clamped and his annoyed expression let me know that he, too, was unaware of this decision. It seemed as if he'd given me the floor when he'd offered me the computer. And, even if he had, he wouldn't take kindly to anything Claude said.

The asshole smirked. "Noah?"

He glared at Claude and began to speak.

"This is a joint presentation, no?" I inserted quickly

Everyone was glancing between Noah and Claude.

"I thought it best for you to present alone, Ryan, as Sauncier had their project manager do. Unless you think she is underqualified, Mr. Keegan?" Claude probed, the smile on his face pissing me the hell off.

Fucking dickwipe.

"Of course not," Noah replied, anger replacing all other emotions. He nodded to me. "You're going to do great."

His deep voice arrowed to my heart, and I thought I'd burst into tears. He walked to his designated seat and gave me a thumbs up after he sat.

I opened the trunk, hoping I'd packed everything a few days ago. Finding my large presentation boards pleased me. Noah and Reid set up the easels. Once I placed the boards in the correct order, I indicated the middle with a sweep of my hand.

“*Amage.*” It still amazed me none of their pillar fragrances had been given the most obvious name.

“A name is not required,” Claude spat. “We already have one.”

“Then it behooved you to let me in on it,” I retorted. “You are quite aware of the importance of a name, *monsieur*. Since I didn’t have a name—I barely had a story behind the new fragrance—I created one to aid in my strategy.” I shrugged. “Using it is up to you.”

I knew they wouldn’t. I doubted they even intended to give KMG the contract. The thought depressed me a little more, but I was determined to give it a shot.

Realizing the men remained silent, I stooped down and pulled out the carton containing product prototypes. Before standing, I carefully cut away the plastic wrapping, then walked around the table, handing each man a black and gold box with an abstract Art Deco design. Back in my place near the boards, I set one box on the top and kept one for myself, which I carefully opened as everyone else did the same. I pulled out the bottle and held it up. It was an upright golden wave with a beautiful, ethereal woman as the stopper that was encircled with crystal.

Even before I removed the top, the others were doing so and sniffing the fragrance inside. Noah stared at me and set the perfume in front of him. His eyes gleamed with pride. Love. *Misery.*

Unable to bear it, I set the bottle on the table, my hand shaking. I turned away.

“You are in violation, *madame.*” Claude’s words landed like a thunderclap in the silence. “You did not have permission to produce samples of the fragrance.”

My shoulders slumped and my head pounded. Noah didn’t respond to Claude and I knew why. He didn’t want anything to interfere in the message he was trying to imprint on my soul. He wanted me to give him a chance to explain. Winning the contract didn’t matter to him. He’d come because he was a

competitor. Perhaps, at first, he'd been willing to engage Claude's pettiness. Not anymore.

I drew in a deep breath and turned, facing Claude and studiously ignoring Noah. "I had twelve, one point five milliliter samples produced, *Monsieur* Amage, for the purpose of this presentation."

"We only produce vials for samples," he said flatly. "You have misused your budgetary funds."

Rage swept over Noah's face. Reid leaned over and spoke to him, giving me the chance to address Claude Assface Motherfucker.

"My use or mishandling of Keegan Media Group's budget is of no concern to you, sir," I snapped, "since it has no bearing on your bottom line. Mr. Keegan allotted me a certain amount of funds to create the most competitive bid. I have no proprietary rights to your fragrance, whatever it might be called." I glared at him. "I have no plans to take those samples with me. If you think I've have committed too grave an injustice, I will leave now."

"Please continue with your presentation," Boyd Andrews interjected before Claude had a chance to respond. "I am very interested in the rest of what you have to say, Ryan."

"Before you go on, *madame*," Claude said, "I must have very bad news about Noah's parfum for his mother. *It* doesn't have a name, so—"

"It does," I said. "If you will let me finish, I can show you." I shifted my weight, unable *not* to glance at Noah. He'd been so busy with KeeTel, and fucking Megan, he hadn't seen everything.

Lips trembling, I blinked to clear away my rush of tears. Before I broke into sobs, I looked at the presentation boards. For a moment, all I saw was Megan riding Noah's mouth and cock. I wanted to sink to the floor and curl into a tight ball. At the very least, I wanted to be alone, away from Noah and Reid. Away from Claude and Channing.

“Ryan...” Noah cleared his throat. “Do you need to take a break, Ms. Hagen?”

I steeled my resolve and stiffened my spine. “I do not.” Swiping at an errant tear and glad my back faced everyone, I pushed forward. I turned and met every man’s gaze, even if my eyes flickered quickly away from Reid and brushed past Noah even faster. “The name Amage has so many meanings. For instance, it is a commune in the *Haute-Saône* department in the region of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté in eastern France, the site of the ancient Battle of Megetobriga. Amage recalls *chevaliers and gendarmes*.”

“Gendarmes are armed police officers,” Claude said with biting amusement.

I *almost* called that motherfucker a motherfucker. Instead, I smiled sweetly. “In modern times, *monsieur*. From the late middle ages and into early modern terms, a *gendarme* was a heavy cavalryman of noble birth.”

“*Tais-toi*, Claude!” Leo ordered.

I had one better but I kept *ferme ta gueule* to myself.

“Proceed, Ryan,” Boyd Andrews said, his side-eye to Claude quite gratifying.

“Amage was also the name of a Sarmatian queen. She acted as her dissolute husband’s regent. Medosacus led a bacchanalian life. Completely debauched. She served as judge, repulsed enemy invasions, and was so successful a ruler that she was known in all Scythia, not merely on the coast of the Euxine Sea where her kingdom was located. Therefore, Amage is a noble name that represents wisdom, strength, and intuition.” I paused. Met each man’s gaze. Only Claude’s was inscrutable. The others, even Noah, looked at me with rapt attention. “But those examples mean little to you as a family, *messieurs*. They are abstract definitions that have no personal bearing on you or your new fragrance. So I asked myself what was the story behind the newest fragrance?”

“We aren’t interested in using a pitiful story to garner the world’s sympathy,” Claude said.

He just didn't know how to shut the fuck up.

Despite myself, I noticed the pain that skipped across Noah's face, which made Claude's words all the more egregious. "You should have something, Mister Amage," I said briskly, uninterested in appeasing him by using his native language. "Before your company fails miserably, when it doesn't have to. You're bleeding money. Why? Because *you* insist on releasing pillar fragrances like clockwork. I've read the reports in the course of my research. You ignore all advice. Flankers might help boost some of your pillars, sir. A *story* to add a soul to your releases, instead of the mindless cash grabs they are. A name that is memorable and has meaning. Whether KMG wins the contract or Sauncier, no one can perform a miracle without your cooperation." *Asshole*. I placed my hands on my hips. "Dorset left very detailed notes. I saw every idea you shot down. I read how Mr. Andrews and Mr. Powers tried to change your mind." I looked him up and down, like the little man he was. "How dare you imply Noah's sincere wish to honor his mother is a ploy when everything is just a game to you. What is absolutely incredible to me is how you blocked some of Dorset's best ideas when he was your project manager at KMG but greenlight everything he comes up with at Sauncier."

A couple of KMG managers, still in touch with Dorset, had filled me in.

Claude intended to stonewall me at every turn. Now that I'd lost my temper, my chances of winning the contract for KMG and leaving in a blaze of glory was nil. I turned, intending to remove the boards for their pillar fragrance and replace them with the smaller ones for *La Nostalgie*.

I needed to leave. I felt Noah's gaze boring into me but if I looked at him, I'd break down.

"What is your vision for our story, Ryan?" Hugo asked.

A tear had slid down my cheek again, so I had to take a moment to compose myself. Swiping at the wetness, I sniffled and turned, ignoring the way my eyes burned and my throat ached because I refused to cry.

“Your story is you,” I said quietly and gave him a sad smile, hurt to my very core. “It is each of you, *monsieur*. It is the Amage Brothers and what each of you contribute to the House of Amage. It is your individuality and how that has made your perfume house such a worldwide icon. In the broader sense, the name Amage means so much: optimism, perception, romance, innovation, insight, charity—” I side-eyed Claude and pursed my lips. “The name Amage as it relates to your family means sophistication, opulence, and glamour. It represents the dedication and determination that brought your family from the ranks of the poorest to the pinnacle of the wealthiest. That’s what we want to hear. Life has meaning. *Family* has meaning. Despite quibbles and foibles, we will be true to each other and love is the bedrock of all that we do.” At that, I almost doubled over. Instead, I blinked and somehow managed to hold back my tears. “I purchased one of your fragrances, *Luxmot*. I had just gotten my first paycheck from my new job after I graduated college. I wondered what the name meant. What was the story behind it? Of course, it’s taken from the words luxury and bergamot.” I smiled. “But it didn’t matter to me. It was from the House of Amage. Furthermore, *I* could afford to buy the perfume. Its *parfum* was still out of reach but there is exclusivity attached to the House of Amage. Nowadays, the consumer has so many choices, even the wealthy clientele you cater to.” Fuck, especially them. “You will have loyalists, where they will buy whatever you roll out. It’s just no longer enough. Fragrances with celebrity names attached are bestsellers. Why do you think that is? We might not know who the hell put the perfume out on behalf of the celebrity but we know that person. We know their *story*. We listen to their songs or watch their movies and read about them on gossip and news sites. With the launch of your new fragrance, you have a chance to give the world a small glimpse of Amage. *The Amage Brothers*. Don’t invite them completely in and ruin the mystique. Just the tiniest fraction will do. And suppose the pillar is named Amage. You can wait three to five years to roll out another pillar. Meanwhile, you can release six flankers—Claude, Hugo, Guy, Leo, Sacha, and Denis. Or you can take a characteristic from each of you and name your fragrances.”

Although I doubted the name ‘Motherfucker’ would make a good selling point.

I couldn’t read any of their expressions and I was done with my presentation. When I began removing the boards, Noah and Reid hurried to assist. The silence in the room was heavy with tension as I waited while my other boards were put on the easels. Once Noah and his cousin returned to their seats, I looked at everyone again.

“Messieurs, *La Nostalgie*,” I said with a lavish flourish of my hand, just as I had when I began my previous presentation. “*The Nostalgia*, in English. We thought it best to go with a French name, to honor the heritage that Réjane was so proud of.”

Claude scowled. I refused to contemplate Noah’s various emotions. Clearing my throat, I nodded to the first board, showing the design of the rounded bottle topped with a vintage style atomizer. “A hobby of Réjane’s was collecting antiques. The shape of the bottle reflects her love of the past.”

I allowed the impact to register and went to the last board, where the box design was. “We chose a simple, clean design with packaging that can be repurposed as decoration or storage for small knickknacks. Green was her favorite color. Mint green is understated and elegant and works well with the minimalistic font.”

Surprisingly, Powers looked impressed. Boyd Andrews kept a neutral expression, while the other Amages paid close attention.

I walked to the trunk and grabbed the folders with the information from my first presentation and this one. At this point, it was just a formality. I couldn’t remember my grand finale, meant to wow the Amage executives. Over the weeks, each part had been approved, so there was nothing more for me to say. I didn’t intend to stay on at Keegan Media Group, so my enthusiasm was gone.

Besides, if I had to choose between winning a contract and having the love and support of my family, I’d pick the latter. Money meant little in a cold, solitary world.

Chapter Forty-Two

Noah

“Ryan, we need to talk.”

We’d just boarded the elevator and I had six floors to plead my case. She’d accepted her laptop, although that didn’t guarantee she’d read or respond to my emails. This was my one chance for a face-to-face conversation. If we reached the ground floor and the doors opened, she’d sprint away.

“We don’t,” she announced, facing forward, refusing to look at me or Reid, though we flanked her.

I hoped the elevator paused, but it didn’t. We were nearly at ground level.

“Where are you staying?”

I scowled at Reid’s question. His interruption stole my last chance with Ryan because the doors opened and she dashed out, as I knew she would. The heels of her black pumps clipped across the marble floor. I dropped the handle of the trunk to go behind her.

“Ryan, damn it, stop.”

She walked faster, nearly running. Fuck, I was desperate, so I lengthened my strides, easily catching up to her. My hand on her shoulder halted her. I turned her to me.

“Who showed you the video?” Reid asked, intruding again as he caught up to us. “And what was in it?”

“Nicholas,” Ryan answered, blinking away tears and drawing herself up. She jerked away from me. “His harassment wasn’t enough, Reid. However you threatened him after he said he’d fuck my tits, and my ass was too big for him to be attracted to me, he—”

“What did you fucking say?” My words came out like a clap of thunder, but she ignored me.

“Ryan—” Reid started, looking at me with unease.

She shook her head wildly. “I don’t care anymore. It isn’t important. He pretended annoyance that Megan sent him the video, showing Noah and her—” A sob escaped her, and pain ravaged her face. “Fuck you. Both of you,” she cried, then glared at me. “I never want to see you again.” She turned and ran out the building.

I couldn’t let her get away from me, so I chased her down the steps, catching her near where Wilbur waited for me. “Ryan—”

“I don’t want to hear it. There’s nothing you can say—”

“I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen. I should never have let her in my room. I was thinking about Reid’s baby.”

She gasped. “Reid’s...with Megan?”

“He left her in the cold and—”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Ryan screeched, darting away. I would’ve run after her, but Reid’s question stopped me.

“Did Megan tell you why I left her in the cold?” he demanded.

“It doesn’t matter. You fucked up your relationship with Quinn because of Megan’s pregnancy. It was just business as usual with you.”

“No, it wasn’t, Noah. I was fully prepared to do right by Megan Buford. The baby isn’t mine, asshole. It’s Nick’s.”

I stared at Reid.

“She’s already in her second trimester. It can’t be mine because we weren’t sleeping together then. I love Quinn, Noah. Megan’s a beautiful woman, but she isn’t Quinn. Over the last four months, I’ve slept with Megan half dozen times, if that. Definitely not around the time she conceived. I didn’t turn my back on that lying little bitch. I went to London to see her and brought her back with me. I set up a bank account for her, allowed her to hire a fucking household staff for the house I rented for her, and am now in the process of buying, in

Ridgewood, New Jersey. She hired a driver for the Range Rover I bought her.”

I stared at him, unable to do anything else as a scenario dawned on me. One that could only be corrected and avenged with murder.

“I may be a lot of things, but I’d never turn my back on an innocent child or its mother,” Reid said in a tortured voice. “That should’ve been fucking obvious when I deliberately broke Quinn’s heart. Do you know what it did to me, seeing the tenderness in her eyes dim and have it replaced with burning hatred?”

I couldn’t speak. All I could think was *Nicholas*. Motherfucking, spiteful, hateful, miserable *Nicholas*.

“Do you?”

I nodded. I hadn’t watched Ryan’s love for me drain away as both Reid and I saw Quinn’s die. But I’d found Ryan devastated and sobbing on the fucking floor.

A buzzing started in my head. The part of the encounter with Megan that I remembered ran through my brain. “She called you and left a message, telling you she was there and the three of us needed to talk.”

“I got the message, but I ignored it. I didn’t know who she meant, and I wanted nothing more to do with her. Nick isn’t leaving Tina, and Megan wants her baby to have the Keegan name. If I hadn’t found her ultrasound photos, I still wouldn’t know the truth.”

“She was in Charlotte because of Nicholas,” I concluded, my anger flaring into an inferno. Turning, I started toward my car, where Wilbur patiently waited with the back passenger door already open.

“Noah, go to your penthouse,” Reid suggested. “I know you’re angry, but Nick will stick to his story. Give me a day.”

Remembering what else Ryan said, I faced Reid. “What did Nicholas do to Ryan and how long ago did this happen?”

Sighing, Reid gave me an unhappy look and confessed what he'd walked in on in Ryan's office weeks ago. Discovering Uncle Ed hadn't followed my orders and destroyed my mother and father's documents and journals didn't matter. Only Ryan and my fuckhead brother did.

On my way home, I called Nicholas and invited him to my penthouse. As much as he had fucked up my life, I didn't want to upset Tina and harm my unborn niece or nephew. The moment I stepped off the elevator, Quinn met me. She looked as haggard as I felt. Her hazel eyes no longer held a sparkle. Quinn was miserable. She always maintained Ryan meant everything to her. No one realized exactly how much until now. Logan had been slightly better and attempted to console Quinn. It hadn't worked. Dakota had put in a half-assed effort and Armani said she didn't have time to bother with Quinn's drama.

She glanced behind me, but the elevator doors closed, and her face fell. "No Ryan." Her voice wobbled and she sniffled. "Did you see her?"

"Yes. She took the laptop—" Fuck, what had become of the trunk? I'd let the handle go to chase Ryan, then hadn't thought about it. I scrubbed a hand over my face. There were no trade secrets inside, so I couldn't care less about its fate. "Email her again, Quinn. She might respond."

The elevator started to descend and I knew Nicholas had arrived, so I headed through the open entrance door, knowing Quinn would follow. Logan waited in the living room. When we walked in, he stopped pacing. I needed to get them to their rooms. They still didn't know about the videos, and I wanted to keep it that way. As Quinn had done, Logan glanced behind me.

"Is Ryan with you?" he asked with hope, though his returning hurt told me he already knew the answer.

"She went to the meeting," Quinn answered, her upbeat tone strained.

In the presence of Logan, she tried to sound optimistic. The forced cheer always had the opposite effect, and I worried

about her mental state.

Logan hurried to her and pulled her into a tight embrace. “It’s okay, Quinn. Ryan’s hurt, but she’s going to come around. She loves us. Let her have some time.”

“She’s my best friend,” Quinn sobbed. “I can’t lose her.”

Logan looked to me for help. The fear on his face reminded me he was only twenty-one and had encountered too much heartache in his short life. I went to where they stood and took Quinn into my arms.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” I said. “Logan is right. Ryan loves you both dearly.”

Clapping behind me drew my attention and I released Quinn, turning and meeting my brother’s mocking gaze.

“Are you offering brotherly affection or hunting another pussy to fuck behind Ryan’s back?” Nicholas asked casually.

Quinn gasped.

“Another puss...what is he talking about, Noah?” Logan asked.

By sheer will, I rooted to the place I stood. If I moved, I *would* kill Nicholas. That was no bravado. It was stone-cold fury because of his crimes against my woman. Showing her a fucking video was a sin but putting his filthy hands on her and speaking to her as he had was a fucking death sentence. “Logan, take Quinn upstairs,” I directed, surprisingly calm. “I need to talk to my brother alone.”

Neither Quinn or Logan moved.

Nicholas smirked. “You didn’t know?” he asked, glancing between Ryan’s siblings. “Noah fucked Megan Buford. Her baby might be—”

I roared like an enraged animal and charged him. My fist connected with his gut and sent him flying. “You’re a lying motherfucker,” I snarled, satisfied at the thud of his body landing on the floor, and stalked toward him. He scrambled out of my reach. “That was you on those videos.” I caught him again and grabbed a handful of hair, punching his miserable

fucking face. “Megan drugged me and let you into my room.” I struck him again and again, unconcerned at the pain of his cracking teeth cutting my fingers.

“Noah!” Logan yelled, his voice reaching me over Quinn’s screams.

“I’m killing you, Nicholas. Fuck with me all you wish but fucking with Ryan is a death sentence.”

“Mr. Noah!” Angelo called.

“Sir! Mr. Keegan,” Lumley cried, alarmed.

Hands grabbed me and forced me away from Nicholas. The moment I released him, he crumpled into unconsciousness.

“Noah, calm down,” Logan said, breathing heavily.

His hold slackened and I shoved Angelo back, rushing to Nicholas again and heaving him to his feet. Motherfucker was deadweight. Not that it mattered. I was livid, barely exerting effort to grab his hair and drag him toward the window to toss him the fuck out.

Quinn realized my intent first and shrieked, inserting herself between me, Nicholas, and the floor-to-ceiling glass. “Don’t do this,” she cried. “Please, please, please. Ryan needs you.”

Her interference allowed Lumley and Angelo to use their bodies to block the window directly in front of me.

“Ryan hates me. Because of him,” I spat, jerking Nicholas like a rag doll. A swath of hair separated from his skull, freeing my hold on him and he collapsed in a heap. “I couldn’t remember anything from that night,” I explained, wild. “I woke up with Megan next to me, both of us naked. I don’t even like that woman, but I let her in because she carried Reid’s baby.” It was the same reason I’d asked Nicholas to my penthouse, because of Tina’s unborn child. Why the fuck should I consider family when they’d never held me in the same regard?

“Because you’re a good man,” Quinn said around tears, and I realized I’d vocalized the question. “That’s why Ryan fell in love with you.”

I glanced at her, backed away. Staggered to the nearest chair. “As much as I loved my mother, losing Ryan is so much worse. Nicholas knows what she means to me.” I hung my head in my hands. “Nothing matters anymore, Quinn. When Ryan confronted me with the knowledge of what I supposedly did with Megan, I was too stunned and appalled to question her. I didn’t know how she’d found out.”

At Nicholas’ groan, I stiffened and growled like a rabid dog.

I jumped to my feet. Angelo and Lumley rushed to block my way.

“You and Megan Buford not only fucked over me, but Ryan.”

“He’s unconscious, sir,” Angelo said with trepidation.

Lumley tried to take a firmer stance coupled with a dose of hope. “Calm down, Mr. Keegan. Miss Ryan will return.”

“Ryan hates me,” I snarled. “Because of that motherfucker.” I attempted to bulldoze my way past the two men. “He fucked over me and Ryan, as well as Reid and Quinn. Nicholas is the father of Megan’s baby, not Reid.”

“What?” Quinn whispered, though I was too livid to address her.

Nicholas groaned again and started moving. Apparently, Lumley thought I wouldn’t seize an opportunity to get my hands on that motherfucker. When the butler started toward Nicholas, I skirted around Angelo.

“I can’t throw you out the fucking window, Nicholas? Fine with me. Stomping you to death will be more gratifying.”

I landed one kick before hands grabbed me and I roared with fury, trying to break free of Angelo and Lumley.

“Noah, please,” Quinn cried. “Please, calm down. Don’t do this.”

“I’ll do the word a fucking service. Get the fuck away from me,” I ordered to my cook and butler, though they didn’t comply.

“Logan, give me your cell phone,” Quinn demanded, sounding somewhat like her old self.

Her brother complied immediately, and she began to dial.

“Hello?” Reid answered a moment later.

“Hi Reid,” Quinn said softly.

“Quinn?” Reid responded, his shock evident. “Baby.” He cleared his throat. “Whose number is this? Are you alright?”

“W-we can talk later. This is my brother’s phone. You need to get to Noah’s place.”

“Why—”

“Nicholas is here,” she announced.

“Fuck. Am I on speaker?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“Noah, you’ll lose Ryan forever if you’re in jail.”

I didn’t answer.

“Fuck,” Reid repeated. “I’m on my way.”



Ryan

Morgan Financial Holdings was on the twentieth floor of a high-rise in FiDi, an area of Lower Manhattan home to Wall Street, the world’s principal economic center. Once I exited the elevator, a black sign with the company’s name in gold lettering hung on two clear glass doors.

I drew in a deep breath, then pushed through one of the heavy doors. I walked to the receptionist and returned her smile. “I have an appointment with Graham Morgan.”

She nodded. “May I have your name?”

“Ryan,” I answered, then opened my mouth to add my last name.

“Have a seat, Ms. Hagen,” she interrupted. “Mr. Morgan will be right with you.”

“Th-thank you.”

Feeling lost, I sat on the couch situated diagonally from the front desk. Two days ago, I’d had to run from Noah after he revealed Megan was pregnant by Reid. No wonder Quinn had been in such a state. Wilbur tried to stop me, but I’d ignored his call. Back at the motel, I’d cried half the day. By early evening, a massive headache compelled me to take a shower, where I came to a couple decisions. First, I’d send an email to my little sister after I dried myself and braided my hair. We needed to talk. Second, I had to send a formal resignation to Noah. I wasn’t sure what penalties I’d face for breaking the contract, though it didn’t matter because *I* was broken. Nothing would ever be the same again.

When I’d pulled up my email, I’d ignored the dozens from Noah. Near the end of the long list of unanswered messages, I’d seen one from Graham Morgan, inviting me to his office to talk.

“Ryan?”

Swiping at a tear, I glanced in the direction of Graham Morgan’s voice. He wore gray trousers and a crisp shirt, sleeves rolled up. He was tall and beautiful, like Noah. Except he wasn’t so buttoned up. But one of the things I loved...had loved...about Noah how well he wore his designer suits.

As I stood, my legs wobbled. I shouldn’t have come. Graham was Noah’s friend and being in his presence wouldn’t ease my heartache.

“Come,” Graham commanded, not giving me a chance to decline.

Rich boys expected obedience. Today, I didn’t have it in me to thumb my nose at the dictates. I followed meekly. He waited until I stepped into his office to close the door. It was then I saw Soraya.

“Hi, Ryan.”

“Hi,” I mumbled, not angry. Not anything. Just there.

“Noah has been frantic,” Graham said, guiding me to a chair in front of his desk and encouraging me to sit. Soraya was

already in the other one.

I licked my lips. “What do you know?” I asked, for some reason still wanting to protect Noah’s ratchet ass.

“Everything,” Graham responded. “About the videos you saw and the email you received.” His mouth tightened and anger wafted from him. “The one that inadvertently involved my wife.”

“Ryan, I had my reasons for going along with Quinn’s request,” Soraya said, then proceeded to explain her decision to agree to Quinn’s request.

“Thank you,” I said, snatching a tissue from Soraya and dabbing my wet cheeks. “You owed me no explanation and I really appreciate you giving me one.”

“We’re friends,” she said. “So, yes, I owed you an explanation.”

I sniffled and nodded.

Graham leaned back in his chair and pinned me with a look. “Is there anything we can do for you?”

“Turn back the hands of time so Noah could make a better choice.”

“Sometimes, there’s more to a story than meets the eye,” he told me.

“Video is irrefutable proof,” I said bitterly. “Nicholas showed me the videos because for whatever reason Megan sent them to him.”

“I know Noah, Ryan. If the indiscretion happened, there are extenuating circumstances.” Graham’s insistence annoyed me, but he ignored my glare and continued. “Noah is too self-possessed to lose such control.”

“Obviously, that’s not true!” I flared. “I know what I saw.” Images I couldn’t forget, especially Megan riding Noah’s mouth with such delight. A sob escaped me and I got to my feet, frantic to get away. “Soraya, thank you so much. I appreciate you clearing matters up.”

She stood too. When she placed her hand on her belly, I remembered her pregnancy. Before I could apologize for stressing her, she smiled. “Friends look after each other, Ryan.”

I could only nod. “Thank you, Graham.”

“I’ll have my driver drop you off at your hotel.”

I wanted to accept the offer, but I decided against it, afraid Noah might discover my location. The Morgans were lovely people who wanted Noah and me to work out our differences. They hadn’t said as much, but the insinuations had been clear. “Thank you, but I can’t.” My lips trembled. “I...how can I ever trust him again? He lied and had an affair. If I give him another chance, I’m asking for a life of misery and infidelity. I know you don’t understand—”

“I do,” Graham cut in quietly. “More than you know. My request that you hear Noah out doesn’t come lightly. If you knew my story, you’d get it.”

“I have to go.” Blindly, I hugged Soraya, turned, and rushed out of the office. The elevator took forever. When it arrived, I stumbled in and pressed the button for floor one.

As I walked outside and looked at the low clouds promising snow, Noah stepped out of the car parked in front of me on the curb. Seeing him in jeans and a long-sleeved pullover shocked me. One hand was bandaged, and his eyes were bloodshot. Despite everything, I soaked in his nearness, not knowing if I wanted to run the other way or straight into his arms.

My heart ached at his sadness. How could he have destroyed us? He couldn’t have...I grasped at straws, clinging to Graham’s belief of another explanation.

Noah swiped a thumb at my wet cheek, then dropped his injured hand to his side. “Hello, my love.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Noah

I would be forever grateful to Graham for his assistance, only obtained when I provided proof I hadn't betrayed Ryan. I'd asked him to let me be in the office if and when Ryan arrived but he'd refused. Nicholas' shenanigans had affected Soraya, a grave offense in Graham's book. Understandable, because my brother's bullshit had almost lost me Ryan.

No almost in it at the moment. She hadn't spoken to me since I'd approached her. Seeing the top of her head surprised me. I was so used to her height in the heels she favored in public. Today, though, she wore sneakers and jeans, with a heavy jacket opened to reveal a gray shirt.

Tomorrow, we were supposed to trim the tree. I hadn't canceled it because, until then, I'd forgotten about it.

"It's cold," I told her. "Let's get into the car and warm up." Of course, I wanted her to come with me of her free will, although I had one last savage move up my sleeve if she didn't. "I need to talk to you, Ryan." As much as I had rehearsed humbleness, my words still came out as a demand.

"Noah—"

"Please," I whispered, my pulse speeding. I wanted Ryan to give in for *me*. Before I told her the real story or told her who else was in the car. "I know you hate me, and I don't deserve your consideration—"

"I don't hate you, Noah." Tears glistened in her eyes, turning them into liquid pools. "I wish I could. I've tried. I just can't unsee what I saw."

I couldn't unsee Nicholas and Megan either. "Come with me to the penthouse." Unable to stop myself, I kissed her forehead.

She shook her head, and my heart sank. "I'm not having sex with you, so don't touch me again." She sidestepped me and it

took a moment to register Wilbur racing to open the door for her and Ryan ducking into my car.

Quinn's squeal mobilized me, and I smiled for the first time in days, then got into the car as well.

"Shhh, it's okay, Quinn," Ryan whispered, caressing her sister's back as she sobbed against her shoulder. "I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to worry you."

The car rocked into motion, but I remained silent to give Ryan and Quinn their moment.

I'd had only a couple hours sleep. After Reid's arrival with the missing trunk, Lumley saw to my hand and cleaned up Nicholas as best he could, providing ice packs and cold compresses. My brother found it in his best interest to confess the truth and show me the videos.

"The full videos," I'd demanded, "not the fucking spliced ones."

He'd removed the ice pack from the side of his face to glare at me. "I don't have—"

I'd jumped to my feet. We were still in the living room. Logan had gone upstairs to email Ryan, but Quinn refused to leave. Whether it was because of me, Reid, or both, I didn't know or care. As I started for Nicholas, she stepped in front of me.

"Talk, fuckhead," Reid ordered, "or I'll tell Quinn to move out of the way so Noah can finish you off."

Nicholas complied, finally understanding the depth of my anger. Enough money incentivized anyone to commit crimes, apparently. Aware of my schedule, my brother paid off more than a few staff members for various tasks or just to look the other way. My wine had been drugged twice. The server added a mild sedative to the bottle and Megan dropped something else into my glass.

The full video showed Megan walking into the only other room on my floor—the suite on the other end of the hallway. The decoration matched the one I'd been in, except the layout was opposite. My bedroom had been on the right; the other

one had been one the left. Whoever had been in the room shooting the fucking video hadn't been smart enough to erase the footage that set up the scene. Nicholas hadn't bothered either. I'd expected to obtain just more extensive recording of their fucking, instead of the gold mine I'd found.

I remained silent throughout the drive, achingly aware of Ryan, her coconut scent, her thigh against mine, her voice. Even though I'd looked after Quinn for the past few days, her words didn't register. It was Ryan, all Ryan. It seemed to take forever to arrive at the penthouse, but we finally did.

She paused when we reached the living room. She ignored Reid and Logan to stare at Nicholas' puffy, bruised face, swollen eyes, bloated lips, and bandaged nose.

"Ryan!" Logan cried, hurrying to her, and hugging her.

"Hey, boyo," she whispered, wrapping him in her embrace.

"You had us so worried," he told her, his voice cracking.

"I'm sorry," she said, unable to stay focused on her brother. Her attention repeatedly strayed to fuckhead. "I was upset and...uh...what happened to you, Nicholas?" she asked, finally giving in to her curiosity and stepping away from Logan to walk closer to Nicholas.

"I lied to you," he confessed, barely intelligible. With effort, he picked up his cell phone from the small table next to his chair and held it up to her. She took it from him but didn't move to look at the screen.

Quinn sat on Reid's lap and laid her head against his shoulder.

Ryan's eyes widened at her sister's actions, and she glanced at me. "What's g-going on?"

"Just what fuckface said," Quinn answered. "He lied to you. That wasn't Noah with Megan. That was Nicholas, who is also the father of her baby."

"You beat him up, Noah?" Ryan asked in shock once she processed the explanation.

“No, he tried to kill him,” Quinn supplied. “I’m sure it was partly for the fucking video, but it was more because of what happened in your office a few weeks ago.”

Not answering, Ryan studied the phone for long minutes, then shook her head and sat it back on the table. “You’re a piece of shit, Nicholas. You’d destroy Noah’s life, *my* life, for what? To satisfy your sick vengeance? How dare you? I’d bet my fucking life Noah didn’t run to Tina telling her of your roaming cock. I take it you told Megan to send those images of the *Ask Ida* column?”

He glanced away, and Ryan bent her head, starting to cry again.

“See what you did to my sister?” Quinn snarled, jumping to her feet to hug Ryan. “Dude, pull yourself together before your man goes over the edge.”

Ryan sobbed harder. “He isn’t my man,” she managed. “I br-br-broke the engagement.”

“I would have too, Ryan,” Quinn said, hugging her again. “Anyone of us would have. We don’t want to love a cheater.”

I walked to them and gently dislodged Ryan from Quinn’s hold.

“Ryan, sweetheart, forgive me,” I whispered. “I take my responsibility as head of my family seriously, but in doing so I neglected you. Had I put you first, Megan Buford wouldn’t have been allowed into my suite and this wouldn’t have happened. I love you so much. Marry me.”

“Oh, Noah, I love you too.”

Even before she said the word, I heard her *but*.

“But we aren’t compatible. It doesn’t matter how much you admire my work, you don’t want a career woman. Or children. Your penthouse is beautiful and is where you want to live. I’ve always envisioned a house to raise a family in. My own money, earned by me. This is a case where love isn’t enough.”

I took her face between my hands and kissed her tenderly. “It is enough. I proposed to you, thinking to sway you into

giving up your job, but I swear I will support your career for as long as you want it. Trust me. Please. I wasn't looking for a relationship and didn't believe in love. At best, I hoped to find someone who I had one or two things in common. But, then, I met you and what I thought I wanted didn't hold a candle to who you are. You're loyal, kind, and caring. Family is as important to you as it is to me. Your work ethic mirrors mine. Before I realized what happened, you'd captured my heart and soul. You became my best friend. Even when you weren't around, you were in my head, challenging me. Only after you expected more from me did I learn to do better. I love you and I intend to lay the world at your feet, whether you're a homemaker or a headhunter."

Ryan laughed through her tears.

"Marry me. Let me spend the rest of my life showing you you're my priority always and forever."

"Yes! Yes, Noah, yes!" she said, standing on tiptoes to hug me amid clapping and whistling from Quinn, Reid, and Logan. She kissed me. "I love you."

"I love you more, Ryan."

Chapter Forty-Four

Ryan

3 months later

“I’ve packed your bag,” Alessia announced, walking into the rectory.

Somehow, Noah had convinced the priest to allow my bridal party to dress at his residence.

Quinn paused the music she had blasting from her phone.

“You’ll have everything you need for where Noah’s taking you,” Alessia continued, radiant in her pregnancy.

Quinn resumed putting hair rollers in my hair. “They aren’t even married yet, Al.”

Not yet. But, in three hours, Noah and I would be husband and wife.

“They’re leaving tomorrow, and she didn’t know what to bring, so I took the liberty of doing it for her,” Alessia volunteered.

As Quinn focused on my hair, Alessia ticked off every item on her list. “I packed an array of clothing for you to pick from and all your favorite toiletries. Unfortunately, I forgot if you preferred pads or tampons, so I packed both. There’s also condoms and pregnancy tests. You never know what you’ll need.”

Her consideration warmed my heart.

“Where’d Noah say we’re going again?” I asked as smoothly as possible. No one would tell me his plans for our honeymoon.

Since he’d given me free rein to plan my dream wedding, I’d reciprocated the favor by allowing him to plan the honeymoon. But, for some unknown reason, he decided to keep our destination a secret until we arrived at the location. The curse of a private plane. He could pull off this sneaky shit.

Flying commercial would've allowed me to know immediately.

"He told me last night," I pressed, nonchalant. "The excitement of the day has affected my memory, so—"

"So fuck you," Quinn said.

Alessia was more diplomatic. "You'll find out tomorrow."

Right.

"Put my playlist back on while I finish you up, please," Quinn requested as she put the last of the curlers into my head. "We'll let those set while I do your makeup."

Quinn had begged and pleaded to do my hair and makeup. She wanted to be the one to doll me up for one of the most important days of my life.

Alessia wrinkled her nose as *Hit Em Up* by Tupac came on. "This is so..."

"Wonderful?" Quinn interrupted, bopping her head to the beat as she rummaged through her gigantic makeup case.

"No," Alessia replied hesitantly. "We're in a rectory. Isn't it like a sacrilege to have that on?"

"It's not the church," Quinn protested.

"Uh, well, no. B-but it's, like, *holy*. Right? A holy man lives here."

Quinn rolled her eyes.

"Can you put something else on, please?" Alessia asked.

"This song is a fucking classic!" Quinn declared.

"*Mary, Don't You Weep* by Aretha Franklin is a classic, too, and better suited. We can play that."

Quinn groaned, and my smile widened. Personally, I didn't mind rap music, although it wasn't ever my first pick, so the interaction amused me.

"Ry, while I get the makeup out, pick another song."

I picked up her phone, happy it wasn't locked.

“Yes ma’am.” I selected *Skate* by Silk Sonic, glancing between my sister and soon-to-be sister-in-law. “Y’all good with this?”

“Yes,” they chorused.

Alessia tapped her fingers along to the beat.

“Close your eyes, I’m about to start,” Quinn directed, grabbed my chin, and turned my head in her direction.

My smile remained as my eyes closed. Anticipation rose in me; I couldn’t wait until this time tomorrow. By then, I’d be Mrs. Noah Keegan.



Two and a half hours later, I gazed at myself in the full-length mirror, speechless. Quinn had outdone herself and made me look better than I ever had. My younger sister had opted for a 1950sish makeup look, with a neutral eyeshadow that still managed to make my eyes pop and made the cat eye eyeliner stand out. My cheeks had been pinkened with rouge, and my lips were scarlet. Though my hair was loose, it framed my face perfectly, and revealed the pearl hoops in my ears. The rollers had resulted in big, voluminous curls that flowed freely, stopping right below my bust and drawing attention to the plunging sweetheart neckline of my wedding gown.

I made it a point to pick a gown with a plunging neckline, to show off my new tattoo dedicated to my parents. For that reason, I hadn’t worn a necklace, deciding large earrings were better, so the tattoo could be my chest’s centerpiece.

My classic bell-shaped wedding dress clung to my body, sculpting my tits and waist and flaring out to conceal my ass and legs, the cathedral train pooling around my feet. It had a pearl-beaded bodice and off-the-shoulder sleeves. All in all, I resembled a Disney princess.

“Alessia, look, look, look!” Quinn squealed, clearly pleased with how gorgeous she’d made me look.

I was delighted with her work, too. Though she hadn’t wanted payment, I would make it a point to have Noah pay her

handsomely for her job today and recommend her to women in his circle.

“Oh, my goodness,” Alessia breathed as the two of them stood on each side of me, assessing me. “You look lovely, Ry.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, unable to believe the woman staring back in the mirror was me.

“Logan should be here in a little while. I can’t wait until everyone sees you,” Quinn said, tearing up. She bit her lip and bowed her head. “For your sake, I wish Mom and Dad could, too.”

I sighed, wondering how my parents would’ve reacted to my appearance and my wedding in general. I wanted to believe they’d be proud and happy, but I just didn’t know.

“You both are stunning in your gowns, too,” I said, changing the subject.

Quinn, my maid of honor, had her now green hair slicked back into a sleek ponytail that revealed her soft-glam makeup and dangling pearl earrings. She’d dyed her hair last week just for today, as my wedding colors were green and purple to pay homage to our New Orleans heritage. Originally, I wanted a Mardi Gras wedding, so the colors made more sense, but unfortunately, the chips hadn’t fallen that way. Everyone in my wedding party had chosen their own gowns. My only requirement was the shade of the dress adhering to my wedding colors.

Quinn matched her column dress to her hair. It had an interesting strap situation with the right side off-the-shoulder, The left overlapped with the right strap and covered that side’s collarbone. Somehow it worked, though. The straps created a unique neckline that revealed some of Quinn’s cleavage, while the left slit exposed some of her long legs and the plain black pumps she wore.

Alessia, one of my bridesmaids, had opted for a sleeveless purple gown that covered more skin than Quinn’s. There was no slit, and some of the fabric pooled at the bottom, concealing her feet. The one thick, diagonal strap was relatively plain. She

wore her hair in a simple chignon, her makeup enhancing her natural beauty and showing off the pearl earrings identical to Quinn's.

Knocking at the door interrupted our examination of one another, and Quinn hurried to it.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Logan," my little brother responded.

Quinn opened the door and allowed him to enter, grinning when he paused upon sight of me.

"Doesn't she look gorgeous?"

Logan nodded. "You look amazing, Ryan. Noah is lucky to have you," he declared, aiming a heartfelt smile at me.

"Thank you," I said, returning his smile.

My brother was so happy nowadays, looking up to Noah like he never had Timothe or Dakota. Noah had taken Logan and Nathaniel under his wing, bringing them on at Keegan Enterprises to personally guide them, despite Logan's intentions to become a marine biologist.

"Are you nervous?" Logan asked.

I shook my head. "Not at all."

Euphoria superseded my nerves. Knowing I would be legally and spiritually bound to the man I loved overshadowed any anxieties.

A moment before Reid pushed open the door, he said, "Knock, knock."

Quinn grinned at him, her kiss stealing his attention.

When I cleared my throat, they separated. "What's up?" I asked, nodding to the envelope in his hand.

Grinning, he looked at me. "I have to talk to you."

"No," Quinn said flatly. "It's her wedding day. Don't come in here with bullshit. You should be lining up as a groomsman to march instead of tormenting my sister."

“I have important documents for you to sign,” he said, staring at me and ignoring Quinn, even when she poked him.

“What?” I asked, suspicious, exchanging a glance with Alessia.

Noah never mentioned a prenup to me. Yet, that had been a small bone of contention between him and Nathaniel because of Alessia.

“Are you going to sign it?” Quinn demanded. By the outrage in her tone, she suspected the same thing.

“I just need five minutes, Ryan,” Reid pressed.

Nausea was churning in my belly. For a moment, I thought I’d throw up, my disappointment was so great. *La Nostalgie* had been a roaring success. Its limited run would wrap up in two weeks. The day after Noah and I reconciled, I received word Sauncier won the Amage contract. I cried for hours. My contract with KMG had once again been restructured. Instead of six months, it was reduced to three. When *La Nostalgie* ended, I would be out of a job.

I had been so busy with wedding plans, interviews, and invitations as Noah’s fiancé, I hadn’t thought of life after the excitement wore off.

“Ryan?” Reid inquired.

“Five minutes,” I said, throwing Quinn a warning look when she opened her mouth.

“Thank you,” Reid said when we were alone and the door was closed. Not meeting my gaze, he opened the envelope and drew out a small stack of papers. “Noah didn’t want a confrontation with you, so he sent me.”

“Right,” I sighed. “If that’s a prenup, he must own a few countries as thick as it is.”

He smiled and sat in the chair closest to me. “If it was a prenup, he would’ve discussed it with you himself.”

“So...?”

He glanced away for a moment, looked at me, then gazed at the top sheet. “Noah had a few bonuses built into your contract. Among which were a share in any profits from *La Nostalgie*.”

“What? Shares of the perfume profits were never mentioned to me.”

“Indeed, they were,” he insisted. “I told you about them and so did Noah.”

“No—”

“Time’s wasting.” He fluttered the page in front of my face, then placed it at the bottom of the stack. “Your signing bonus was never processed.”

I blinked stupidly. “Wh-what signing bonus?”

“The one Noah told you about.”

I searched my memory to recall any mention of such compensation. Either I was more forgetful than I thought, or I was being gaslighted.

He allowed me a cursory glance before it too went to the bottom, and he moved to the next page. “There’s also your severance package.” He looked at me until I nodded, before revealing the fourth sheet. “Your stock options.” He went to the next sheet. “Annual incentive with a guaranteed minimum.” And the next.

“Employee benefit for injuries incurred while on the job.”

My jaw dropped. “When did that happen?”

“When you fell and hurt your knee because you were being chased by the reporters. You were on the clock.”

“I was running late.”

“You were assaulted because of your association with Keegan Enterprises.”

“We both know that isn’t the reason.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s in company policy.” Before I commented, he returned to the paperwork. “The paperwork

assigning the GLS SUV to you.”

“*What* the fuck is that?”

“Your limousine,” he said calmly and resumed what he’d come to do. “Contact information for your security detail.” He shuffled the page to the back. “Your personal secretary.” Next. “Reimbursement for the company perks you didn’t use because we neglected to inform you.”

“Is Noah insane?”

Reid didn’t answer. He went to the next sheet. “The titles to your new Genesis G70. That’s more personal,” he added, taking advantage of my shocked silence, “but it still required legalities.” Next. “Damn it,” he growled in frustration. “This is also personal.”

“What is it?”

He rifled through several sheets. “Just paperwork giving you fifty percent ownership to some of Noah’s personal property in various locations around the world.”

“You’re joking.”

Dragging his attention away from whatever he read, he frowned. “Why would I waste time on today of all days?”

“Oh my God! This...this...this is *crazy*, Reid. This is the Anti Pre Nup. I-I-I mean...oh my goodness. I can’t accept all this from Noah. S-s-suppose I don’t make a good Keegan wife.”

“Do you love Noah?” Reid interjected.

“With all my heart,” I answered without hesitation.

“Then you’ll make an excellent Keegan wife.” He returned his attention to the paperwork. “This details your executive compensation.”

“What is that?” I squeaked.

“A lot,” he responded, turning to the next page. “Signing bonus.” And next. “Stocks.” Onward. “Annual—”

“Okay, Reid. I get it. You’re repeating yourself.”

“I’m not repeating myself,” he protested. “You had two contracts, both detailing the same terms. Besides, those are retroactive. What I refer to now depends on you accepting the position as KMG’s CMO.”

“The Chief Marketing Officer for Keegan Media Group?” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Because yeah. Nepotism. I had faith in my abilities, but I had to jump through hoops to even become a product manager.

“Finally—” He gave me a pointed look.

“There’s more?”

He nodded.

“My head is spinning. What does all this mean? Outside of the job offer,” I added quickly.

“Noah understands the importance of your autonomy, Ryan. You don’t have to accept any future contract at the company, but retrospectively, you’re owed money from your previous contract.”

“H-how much?”

“I’m getting to that.”

“Why is he doing this now?”

“He wanted you paid in full before your marriage. Again, you value your independence and he values you.”

I nodded, then indicated he continue with a flick of my wrist.

“There’s a contract between you and Noah—”

“Another contract?”

He nodded. “More of an agreement.”

My lips formed an ‘o’, but no sound came out.

“Transfer of business ownership agreement,” he clarified.

“Ummmm.” What the fuck else could I say? “Amage, right?”

Reid's lips curled into a half smile. "Yes, as well as half of Nick's shares to Keegan Enterprises. Noah, er, *persuaded* Nick to surrender all but five percent of his shares. He and Tina are relocating to the West Coast to oversee Kee-Tel's LA office, and Noah is splitting the shares between you and Nathaniel."

"Christ," I mumbled, unable to say anything else. I knew the overall value of the conglomerate and adding in the House of Amage. I'd wanted a seven-figure bank account. I'd gotten nine figures. "Jesus."

"You don't have to accept Amage, Ryan. Noah is prepared to keep the company in his private portfolio and sell some shares to Boyd Andrews and Graham Morgan. Or you can acquire the company and sell some of the shares. All proceeds will be yours."

"That might be best. I don't know anything about the perfume—"

"Neither does Noah. That's why he wants to keep Boyd. He mentioned negotiating with the Amages. Except Claude, of course."

"C-can I think about it?"

"The company's his, so take as long as you wish. When you're ready to decide, we'll execute according to you." He got to his feet. "I have to get to the church," he said, rifling through papers. After handing a single sheet to me, he returned the others to the envelope, then smiled at me. "Welcome to the family, Ryan."

I smiled. "Same, Reid."

He scowled. "Noah told you I'm proposing to Quinn tomorrow?"

"Yep," I said, standing to hug him.

He enveloped me in a warm embrace and kissed my cheek, then he left. I glanced at what he'd handed to me, and gasped. Stared at the amount and the details of a wire transfer to my bank account. I got to my feet, then sat again. Squinted my eyes to make sure I saw the correct number.

“Quinn and Alessia have gone across the street to the church,” Logan announced, walking into the room. “Are you okay?”

“Y-yes.” I swallowed and folded the receipt into a small rectangle, then stuffed it into the bag containing the clothes I’d worn on the way here.

“Are you almost ready to be become Mrs. Keegan?” Logan asked after I straightened.

I drew in a breath, somehow calming myself after the shock I’d just received, before nodding. I’d never been as ready for anything in my life.

Chapter Forty-Five

Noah

Logan escorted Ryan into the sanctuary and guided her down the aisle.

“Holy shit.”

Exactly my sentiment, though I side-eyed Nate. Alessia was one of Ryan’s bridesmaids, so my brother’s comment was harmless. *Still*, I didn’t appreciate him noting my woman in any way. Yet, I couldn’t blame his reaction. Ryan was a vision with her curled hair, perfectly made-up face, and elaborate gown.

“Shut up, man,” Graham, my best man, warned my brother, his eyes mainly focused on a pregnant Soraya, also one of Ryan’s bridesmaids.

The church where the ceremony was taking place had grand columns between a copious number of windows stretching to the ceiling. The curtains alternated between purple and green, but ample natural lighting streamed in. Ryan looked even more ethereal.

The guests, who sat in white cathedral benches that had green bows tied at the back, looked at her procession with smiles. Lavender and royal purple clematis were in gold vases on the white column pedestals lining both sides of the aisle.

Finally, Ryan reached me. Logan kissed her cheek and nodded to me as he offered me her hand. Taking it into mine, I kissed the back of it. As Logan joined the groomsmen, Ryan and I faced the priest.

Father Murphey was an older gentleman with coffee-colored skin and short, graying hair. He directed his attention to the crowd, offering our guests a smile. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man and woman in holy matrimony.”

This was it. After the heartache, weeks of preparation and thousands of dollars, Ryan and I would join as one. Megan had

returned to London, her work visa revoked; Tina's pregnancy was thriving; and, best of all, Nicholas had relocated to the opposite coast, after repaying the fifty grand I'd sent to Megan the one time.

Father Murphey turned to me, his face kind. "Noah, do you take this woman to be your wife, to live together in holy matrimony, to love her, to honor her, to comfort her, and to keep her in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?"

Without hesitation, I nodded, my grip on Ryan's hand tightening. "I do."

He turned to Ryan, repeating the question to her.

"I do."

"The bride and the groom have prepared their own vows. Sir?"

I took in a breath to calm my nerves, goosebumps raising on my arm as anxiety bloomed in my gut. "Ryan, you captivated me from the moment you stormed out of my office after cussing me out. Never had I met a woman as beautiful, outspoken, and driven. You made me want to be better to be worthy of you. I love you and look forward to spending the rest of my life with you." Various emotions rose within me. Tears bloomed in Ryan's eyes, and sniffles resonated from our audience. "I, Noah, take you as my wife, friend, and the mother of my future children. I'll be yours when times are hard, and when times are good. I'll care for you in sickness and health. As long as I walk this Earth, I'll protect you and forever be by your side."

She stared at me with a tender gaze and a tear slipped down her cheek. "Oh, Noah."

I swiped her wet cheek with my thumb, not wanting to smudge her makeup. "Don't do that. You'll ruin your makeup."

She gave me a watery laugh.

"Ma'am, please begin." Father Murphey instructed.

Like me, she closed her eyes and drew in a breath. When she opened them again, she focused on me, the love in her eyes amazed me. “I, Ryan, take you to be my husband, and my partner in life. I will cherish our union, and whatever it brings, through the good times and bad. I will nurse you when you’re sick and laugh with you when you’re well. I’ll cry with you, reassure you when things are tough, and celebrate with you when things are great. I not only give you my hand, but the entirety of my heart and love. I’ll stand by you no matter what, and for as long as I’m breathing, I’ll be yours.”

The priest, himself a bit teary eyed, looked at Graham, who had been given our wedding rings by Lorenzo, our ring bearer. Graham dug in his pocket and handed them over.

Father Murphey held out Ryan’s ring to me. “Place this ring on her finger and repeat the following.” He waited until I did as told, then said, “I give you this ring as a token and pledge of our constant faith and abiding love.”

The priest turned to Ryan and handed her my ring, giving her the same instructions. With our rings on, I heard the words I’d longed to hear. “By virtue of the authority vested in me under the laws of the State of New York, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride.”

I grabbed Ryan and slanted my lips over hers, smiling against her mouth. She gripped my neck as I held her waist, and the guests clapped and cheered. Satisfaction bloomed in me. The woman in my arms was mine, now and forever.

Epilogue

Noah

I felt weightless, a sensation I'd grown to love, and one of the best parts of scuba diving. Freedom from gravity, the ability to glide in any direction, was euphoric to me. The beautiful underwater world of the Belize Barrier Reef was a privilege to witness. The second largest reef in the world and the largest in the northern hemisphere, offered a breathtaking escape. Clear blue water, beautiful animals in their natural habitat, and bright coral created a gorgeous contrast and an excellent view. I'd visited the reef before and couldn't think of a better place for our honeymoon.

Rays of sun penetrated the water, alighting our surroundings with a magical glow. A colorful patch of coral a school of fish traversed transfixed Ryan. My heart warmed at her awe, though she was too far away for comfort. Fearing I'd lose her to the vast ocean depths, I swam to my wife and grabbed her nylon clad arm. She didn't protest, swimming under my guidance, her ponytail floating around her.

A spotted eagle ray entered my sight, quickly followed by two more. The stunning scenery halted me. Typically, eagle rays were shy creatures that traveled alone. Instead, these majestic animals swam within a few feet of Ryan and I, less wary of us than expected, but thankfully maintaining a healthy distance. They had venomous tail spines.

Ultimately, the rays swam away, disappearing into unknown depths. Ryan's enjoyment of the dive made me lose track of time. We glided through the water, stopping to investigate from time to time. Eventually, after a blissful eternity, we returned to our villa situated on a small island atop the reef.

"That was fucking amazing!" Ryan exclaimed as she zipped down her wetsuit, revealing a white bikini that made her skin tone pop, which was even darker than usual due to the hours we'd spent lounging in the Belize sun.

“I told you it would be,” I gloated, removing my wetsuit and flashing her a cocky smirk. Initially, she’d been too afraid to scuba dive with me, but after days of coaxing, I’d convinced her to try it.

“Okay, okay. You were right,” she said sullenly as she handed over her soaking wetsuit.

I directed an arrogant smirk her way, her admission pleasing me. However, my expression earned an annoyed eyeroll from Ryan. She turned her back to me, and while I finished removing my suit, she stared at the ocean from where we stood on the old wooden dock that granted residents of the villa unlimited diving access.

Her skimpy bikini barely covered her ass. “Ready?”

She turned to me, giving me a small smile and a nod. “Yeah.”

I held my hand out, and we walked back to our villa together. Holding her smaller, more delicate hand was amazing. After a week of marriage, I couldn’t believe she belonged to me.

Our villa was a small, brightly colored two-story building. The lofted bedroom and en suite bathroom made up the entirety of upstairs. A large wraparound porch dominated the ground floor, while a corner patio had a pair of loungers separated by a small table, and a hot tub overlooking the sparkling blue ocean. The place was quaint, but still rife with luxuries.

“I can’t wait to soak in the bathtub. I’ve always wanted a jacuzzi tub,” she said as we entered the living room.

“Duly noted,” I replied with a small smile, aware of Ryan’s wish.

My condo had many amenities, except tubs. The rain head walk-in showers had built-in seats, but it still wasn’t a tub, fine by me and my staff, but my wife longed for a place to soak.

I’d purchased a house for us on the other side the Lincoln Tunnel. We’d be less than a thirty-minute drive from Keegan Enterprises, and our family and friends. The house was

constructed in the 1920s, and the old building required a few repairs and upgrades. Installing her jacuzzi tub in the master bathroom topped the list.

Upon our return to Manhattan, I wanted to surprise her, but her wistfulness had me rethinking my decision.

“Care to join?” she offered from upstairs, peering over the chest-high fence serving as a barrier, flashing me a playful grin.

It wouldn’t work out. “I’ll pass.”

We’d tried the first night we arrived to take a bath together, and unfortunately, I found it too cramped to be enjoyable, even with Ryan’s naked body flush against mine.

A funny look came over her face, but she shrugged and walked away. “Suit yourself. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Deciding my mind played tricks on me, I went to the kitchen to spend the evening cooking dinner and treating my wife to whatever she desired.



Ryan

I moaned, swallowing the last of the delicious meal Noah whipped up for us. “I didn’t know you cooked.”

It was honey-glazed salmon with a side of asparagus and garlic mashed potatoes, ingredients I hadn’t known were in the fridge. Since our arrival, we’d eaten at local restaurants. He’d also been courteous enough to pour us a glass of my favorite rosé wine.

“Yep. It’s just one of my many talents,” he bragged, sipping his wine.

My glass remained untouched. “I’m happy my husband is so multifaceted.”

Noah’s gifts to me, sent through Reid and couched as work-related, were sinking in. Although he’d gone overboard, he’d left me no room to argue. The envelope Reid had with him

when he visited had found its way into my luggage. Everything he spoke of was written in black and white. I couldn't prove most of the details had been added after the fact, so I let it go.

I accepted the position as Chief Marketing Officer and the shares to Keegan Enterprises. As for Amage, Noah talked me into being majority owner. Boyd's compensation would be tied into company performance. The Amage brothers, minus Claude, agreed to salaried positions with ridiculously small stock shares. Noah, Reid, Nathaniel and Graham also had shares and were on the board, while Quinn, Logan, Alessia, and Soraya were non-voting shareholders.

Noah finished off his wine, before refilling his glass. "I'm pleased I married a woman brilliant enough to recognize how multifaceted her husband is."

"You're so humble," I giggled, blowing him a kiss.

He winked at me and drank again. "You haven't touched your wine," he noted.

Tension hit me as I searched for words to inform him of my news. While he'd prepared our five-star meal, I utilized the pregnancy tests Alessia packed for me. Then, seeing the results, I'd lingered in the tub to soak away my sudden stress.

I'd taken five pregnancy tests, and all were positive.

I remembered my pill most days, but how could I explain that? My carelessness left me uncertain about my impending motherhood and Noah's reaction.

We hadn't had a chance to savor our marriage yet. Fuck, we'd barely adjusted to *being* married. We were still on our fucking honeymoon.

"We've talked about children before. And..." Drawing in a deep breath, I searched for a way to continue.

His eyebrows snapped together. He scrutinized me, my eyes, my face, my tits. I groaned at the shock widening his eyes.

"You're...you're pregnant, aren't you?"

Smart man that he was, Noah pieced everything together from my few words.

I swallowed and nodded curtly, unsure what his reaction meant. I fiddled with my hair, searching my husband's face, and waiting for him to speak. To say something. Anything.

“With...my child?”

Okay, not anything, especially that.

Insulted, I glared at him. “Yes, dick! Who's else would it be?”

“I didn't mean it that way, Ryan!”

“What other fucking way could you mean it?” I grouched. “You were either implying the baby isn't yours or I'm pregnant with your fucking alien.”

Myriad emotions played across his face. “It's just...wow. You're pregnant.” He glanced at me, his expression unreadable. “How far along are you?”

That question could mean so many different scenarios. “Between four and eight weeks,” I said carefully, wondering if he wanted to know because he wanted to protect me even more than normal. He'd ban me from diving again. We'd ferry to the mainland, where the pilot and plane awaited our beck and call and return home immediately. Or he didn't want the baby and—

“Between four and eight weeks?” he finally echoed. “That's a difference of four weeks.” He looked bewildered. “You can't be more precise?”

“Not until I see a doctor. I just confirmed my pregnancy upstairs with home tests. Five,” I added.

“I see.” He snapped his mouth shut.

My pulse sped up and fear he'd reject the idea of parenthood slid into me. Then I called myself foolish. Noah was a good man and family meant everything to him. My pregnancy was unexpected, but we loved each other completely. Still, his silence and inscrutability wore on me.

“Well?” I probed after several minutes of enduring his silence.

“I bought us a house on the other side of the Lincoln Tunnel. Far enough to keep away from city life’s downside, but only a drive away from our family and friends. It was built in 1923, which I figured you’d love since you’re obsessed with the decade’s building style.”

Noah rambled about the house’s features, his planned upgrades and installing my desired jacuzzi tub in the master bath. The news filled me with joy, but his avoidance of my pregnancy left me uneasy. Did he not want the baby?

“Our house has six bedrooms, including the master. So we’ll have more than enough space for a nursery. What color scheme would you want?”

“Um...so you want to keep it?” I asked dumbly, the question challenging my previous assumption.

“Of course!” he exclaimed, his eyes widening further. “Do you?”

Silent, I mulled over his question. Welcoming a child in our first year of marriage hadn’t crossed my mind, but my surprise pregnancy wouldn’t stop me from loving my baby. And I wouldn’t have to put my career on hold to raise it, as we’d be able to afford to hire someone to look after the child while we were at the office. Topnotch doctors would be available to me during my pregnancy, and the baby wouldn’t want for anything. And, most of all, I did someday want children. I guess that day just came sooner than expected.

“Yes. I want our baby.” I relaxed against my seat. “And yellow would be a lovely color for the nursery.”

Noah stood from his seat and kneeled before me, taking my hands into his. He brushed his lips over mine, then pulled away. His look of love and brilliant smile made my heart swell. I couldn’t believe I doubted he’d want our child. Contentment settled into me. I never felt happier or more at peace. My past no longer haunted me with such a bright future ahead.

“I think yellow is perfect too, Mrs. Keegan.”

THE END



Cocky Hero Newsletter

Want to keep up with all of the new releases in Vi Keeland and Penelope Ward's Cocky Hero Club world? Make sure you sign up for the official Cocky Hero Club newsletter for all the latest on our upcoming books:

<https://www.subscribepage.com/CockyHeroClub>

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All writers know the words we put on paper becomes our babies in need of tender loving care, nurturing, and, sometimes, tough love for our characters to grow and our stories to reach maximum potential. Thus, it takes a creative village to birth a project for the market.

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Bibliography

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KINDLE VELLA
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Ace of Spades – Red Rum MC

Playlist

Noah

Lotus Blossom by Michael Franks

Baseball by Michael Franks

Monkey See, Money Do by Michael Franks

No Ordinary Love by Sade

Time, Love, and Tenderness by Michael Bolton

One Bad Habit by Michael Franks

So Good by Al Jarreau

With Imagination by Harry Connick, Jr.

Even If Your Heart Would Break by Aaron Neville

Said I Loved You But I Lied by Michael Bolton

I See Fire by Ed Sheeran

Perfect by Ed Sheeran

Soul Provider by Michael Bolton

One & Only by Adele

Summer Wind by Frank Sinatra

That's Life by Frank Sinatra

My Way by Frank Sinatra

New York, New York by Frank Sinatra

Chances Are by Johnny Mathis



Ryan

Smokin' Out The Window by Bruno Mars, Silk Sonic and
Anderson .Paak

Love's Train by Bruno Mars, Silk Sonic and Anderson .Paak

Take Me Home, Country Road by John Denver

Skate by Bruno Mars, Silk Sonic and Anderson .Paak

I'll Be Good To You by Ray Charles and Chaka Khan

The Secret Garden by Barry White, Al B. Sure and Others

Bring It On Home to Me by Sam Cooke

Stay With Me by Sam Smith

God Bless The Child by Billie Holiday

Over The Rainbow by Israel Kamakawiwo

Wonderful World by Louis Armstrong

Storyville by Paul Weston

Twistin' the Night Away by Sam Cooke

Pony by Ginuwine

Latch by Disclosure featuring Sam Smith

Summertime by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong

Hit 'Em Up by Tupac

Black Hole Sun by Soundgarden

Dear Mama by Tupac

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About Kathryn C. Kelly

Kathryn C. Kelly is a New Orleans native who has called southeast Texas home since 2005. She had intended to travel the world but always return to her beloved New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina had other plans. She is the mother of three beautiful daughters and the daughter of one gorgeous mother whose footsteps she followed in by becoming a writer.

Kathryn is the former owner and editor of Inside Rose Rich Magazine. She and her mother have been published by Jove Books as Christine Holden. The books have long been out of print but they got the rights back to the five novels and have plans to re-release them soon.

Kathryn is a cancer survivor. In 2010, she felt a small lump in her breast. In 2015, at the urging of her mother, she went in for her bi-yearly mammogram and was diagnosed with Stage 2b/3a HER2 positive breast cancer. On November 30, 2016, she rang the bell. During her treatment, she was also diagnosed with Li-Fraumeni Syndrome.

In 2013, Christopher “Outlaw” Caldwell introduced himself to Kat in the most cliché way *ever*. He came to her in a dream. After the inauspicious meeting, he planted himself in her mind and the motherf...*the gentleman* hasn't left yet. In what was only supposed to be one book about the fictitious Death Dwellers MC, Outlaw has become a source of amusement, a well of frustration, and a bone of contention between Kat and one of her daughters.

She is hard at work on Reckless, the book that will bridge the OGs with a new generation of Death Dwellers. Her work has been included in several anthologies and she is looking forward to other upcoming single title releases, including Savage Suit from the Cocky Hero Club World created by Vi Keeland and Penelope Ward. She is a former RWA member. She also served as Vice President for the SOLA chapter of RWA.

She is a New Orleans Saints fan, but roots for the Texans, the Rockets, and the Coogs (U of H) as long as they aren't playing any Louisiana teams. She loves champagne and sparkling wine. One day, she will try Snoop's brand. She still loves Chivas Regal but had a chance to taste Sassenach Scotch. A #lifegoal is to one day buy herself an entire bottle and keep it all for herself.

In her head, she is a biker babe with a Harley in her garage, waiting for her to hit the road. In reality, she has yet to hop on a bike and ride. She loves Cards Against Humanity, has very strong opinions that she keeps to herself, has to take her time to talk in public so nothing untoward pops out, and always strives to see the best in people and in life.