

*Secret Baby*  
*with* **BROTHER'S**  
**BEST FRIEND**

AVA GRAY


SECRET BABY WITH  
BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND

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## BLURB

**Not once... but twice.**

**I slept with him twice.**

**With the one man that I was supposed to stay away from.**

Not only that...

I got pregnant the first time around and never told him.

My world is spinning.

How complicated could my life be?

Especially now that Chase is also my boss?

That's not the only problem.

Chase is also my brother's best friend.

And let me just say that my brother would be furious.

He would be *furious* if he found out who the father of my first child is.

But I couldn't keep my distance from Chase.

Even if that meant getting pregnant *again*.

This time, it cannot remain a secret.

Chase is about to find out about everything.

*Will that be the end of our story before it even begins?*

## GEMMA

I stood at the top of a ladder, using push pins to hold a swag of holiday greenery in place.

“I don’t understand why you didn’t hire decorators to come in and do this,” I said as I stepped down.

Mom moved back from where she had been holding the ladder steady. Together we picked it up and moved it along the wall another six feet.

“I haven’t had a reason to decorate in years, Gemma. This is the first time either you or your brother have been home for Christmas in, oh, I don’t know how long,” she said. “And now everyone’s coming home, and there’s a grandbaby.”

It had been four years since I was last home at Christmas. John hadn’t been home for at least the two years before that. We didn’t see him much after father’s passing.

I sighed as I climbed up. Guilt tried to sneak in and ruin my mood. “I’m sorry about that,” I started.

“Hush, we’ve gone over this. You had your reasons.”

My reason was named Amelia, and she squealed and giggled in her playpen in the middle of the den.

“We are doing this for the memories, and new family traditions,” Mom stated.

Every year growing up my father had hired decorators to give the old mansion a holiday make-over. There were themed Christmas trees in every room. Garlands festooned with gold ornaments and red ribbons adorned balconies, balustrades, and

railings. It was beautiful and magical, and as I got older, I realized, excessively impersonal.

We had the family tree in the den. It was a smaller, more intimate family room than the grand halls and rooms that made up Orchard View. It was the tree, that on Christmas morning, all the presents would be wrapped and displayed under. This was the only room we chose to decorate.

“Maybe we should put some string lights around the entry. The lights always look so pretty in the snow,” Mom sounded wistful.

“I agree. Can we hire someone to do that? I don’t think I’m capable of hanging lights outside. This ladder isn’t tall enough.”

“If we can find someone this late, then yes, I’ll hire someone to light up the front of the house,” she said.

I climbed up and down the ladder, pinning and hanging. We laughed. We made plans to bake cookies. We discussed what we should get for my brother this Christmas. We made happy memories to replace the gloom that had descended on Orchard View.

Christmas morning with a toddler who barely understood what was going was the best. We didn’t have the flurry of ripping everything open with frenetic haste. Amelia picked a box and then walked it over to either me or to Mom. She helped us unwrap the gift. Tearing paper distressed her, so we went slowly and meticulously. Her delight lit up the room each time. She took her new toy, and toddled over to show it off, and then played with her toy for minutes on end before realizing there were more boxes for her to open.

By nap time, we hadn’t even made it through half of her presents. By the time John and his girlfriend arrived, unwrapped boxes were tucked back under the tree for Amelia to open them the next day.

“Is there anyone here?” John’s bellow as he slammed the front door was our clue that he had arrived.



He strode in as if he still lived here. It was his house too, so technically he didn't need to knock. It seemed presumptuous of me to think he would knock on the front door of a house he hadn't visited in years.

"It doesn't look like anyone bothered to decorate for Christmas," he said.

"I hadn't realized you were already here," Mom said.

John handed her his coat and helped his girlfriend off with her coat before dumping that on into Mom's arms too.

"Aren't you even going to say hello?" I asked. I stood at the back of the entry hall with my hands on my hips.

John cast a glance at Mom. "You're still here?"

"Um, hi?" the woman with him said.

He stared at his girlfriend, and then at me.

With a glance to make sure Amelia was occupied in her playpen, I stormed across the entry hall.

I pulled the coats out of Mom's arms and dumped them on John.

"She's not the help, put your own coats up." I pointed to where the coat closet was.

I looked over at the woman John had brought to Orchard View. She was the first of his girlfriend's ever to make it here, as far as I was aware.

"Hi, I'm Gemma." I stuck out my hand. "And this is our mother, Katherine."

"She's the nanny," John said, returning after he put the coats away with much grumbling.

"I was Gemma's nanny before I married—"

"Should we go in? The entry is hardly the place to discuss this," John announced with a huff and strode into the formal drawing-room.

"We're back here, this year. Keeping things, a little cozier," Mom said as she walked past him and continued to the back of

the entry hall.

“We came for dinner. Has anyone even set the dining room?” John complained as he trailed behind.

I could feel his sneer and judgmental glares at the casual and comfy clothes Mom, and I had on. He and his girlfriend were dressed for a semi-formal party. Her cocktail dress shimmered emerald green and looked like velvet. John wore a dark olive-toned suit with a green and red tie— his nod to it being Christmas.

“I told you it was just us when I asked if you would like to come. I did say casual,” Mom said.

“I’m not in a tux,” John sneered back.

“Oh, what a sweet baby,” John’s girlfriend cooed as she entered the den and saw Amelia.

Amelia was dressed for the occasion in a red and green plaid taffeta dress with a deep lace collar. Her wispy blonde curls created a halo effect in the lights of the Christmas tree.

“This is Am—”

“Jennifer and I are engaged,” John announced rather suddenly, cutting me off.

My attention went from Amelia to him and Jennifer. His hand was locked around her arm at her elbow. He hadn’t even met his niece yet. He knew about her and seemed rather uncomfortable by her existence, but he had never met her.

He kept jostling Jennifer to get her attention every time she started to look at Amelia.

Mom started to gush with excitement. It took me a second to catch up.

“That’s wonderful,” I said. “Congratulations.”

No one hugged like they do in the movies. We all kind of stood around awkwardly. Jennifer’s eyes darted back and forth like she was nervous.

“Mrs. Peters, would you be interested in helping to plan—”

“No,” John cut her off before she could finish asking. “She’s not Mrs. Peters. I told you before that she’s the nanny.”

“John, I know you don’t like it, but I am your stepmother,” Mom said.

I could tell by her expression she was tired of this conversation. With a shake of her head, she held her hand out to Jennifer.

Jennifer kept looking to John for permission. This whole thing had to be strained and uncomfortable for her. She slipped her hand into Mom’s and mom covered it with her other hand.

“I’m not John’s mother. I was the nanny for Gemma before I married their father. John has never forgiven me.”

“You were only after his money,” John complained.

I rolled my eyes. The only person after our father’s money had been John, but he never saw that.

“I was never after your father’s money. Come why don’t we have dinner. It should be ready. Gemma, will you check to see if the roast is finished?”

I lifted Amelia into my arms, and we headed for the kitchen. In the past few years, I had learned how to cook. At first out of necessity, and then because it was fun.

“Your uncle is a poopy pants,” I said in baby talk to Amelia. “Are you ready for dinner?”

“Din,” she said with a wide grin. She didn’t quite have a grasp of full words, but she had some.

I stuck my finger in her mouth. “Is that a new tooth? Did Amelia get a new tooth?” I buzzed kisses on her cheek, and she giggled.

I slid her into a highchair I kept in the kitchen for when we cooked together. She sat and babbled commentary as I narrated the work I did.

“I’m opening the oven. Be careful it’s hot.”

The roast was perfect and needed to rest for a few minutes. By the time I had all the sides out of the warming drawers and

pulled from chilling in the refrigerator, the roast would be ready. I carried dishes into the informal, small dining room before I grabbed Amelia and returned to the den to announce dinner was ready.

I stopped before I opened the door. John's voice was loud and angry, and he was talking about me.

"She's ruined herself coming home with that bastard. Has she even mentioned who the father is? No, she probably doesn't even know."

"John," Jennifer said, "that's your sister."

"Exactly, and that's why she had better—"

"Had better what?" I asked as I slammed the door open.

Everyone froze and stared at me.

I didn't care, I was angry. He had given me a hard time for not coming home for over three years. This was exactly why I had stayed away. I didn't need his condescending judgment. I had needed support and I knew it was not going to come from home. I hadn't meant to hurt Mom; I was so afraid to disappoint her.

"That's why you had better come up with an acceptable father for your..." There was no missing John's glare, he hated the very existence of my daughter. "Mistake."

"Amelia is a gift, not a mistake. I'm not ruined," I growled back at him.

"You're never going to find someone to support you, not with that."

I wanted to claw his eyes out, he couldn't even acknowledge the baby was a person.

"I can support myself just fine. I have a job."

"Internet marketing is not a real job. All you do is play online. A real job would keep a roof over your head," John scoffed. "A worthless job for..." He trailed off but gave me a half nod.

I knew exactly what he left off: a worthless job for a worthless sister. As if he would know about having a real job. All the

properties he or I lived in were inheritances from our father. My dad made sure I was taken care of, a place or two to live, and an allowance. But he gave John the one thing he cared for most in this world, his company.

John may have inherited the business from our dad, but all John had to do was simply make sure the cogs in the machine dad set up kept running smoothly. He never had to start from scratch, find a job and cover his bills. I had, before I came home with my ego bruised and a baby, I hadn't even told my mother about.

Amelia began fussing, she didn't like the energy in the room. I didn't either.

"We're leaving," he announced.

"But we just got here. We haven't had dinner," Jennifer said.

"When I need you to point out the obvious, I will tell you," he bit out at her.

"Get our coats," he yelled at Mom and snapped his fingers at her.

"She's not the help, she's your stepmother." I got up in his face and snapped my fingers at him. I may have reacted like a brat, but he was acting like a pompous ass.

"She's not my mother."

"Well she's the only mother I've ever known, and she was our father's wife, so start treating her with respect."

"Or what? You'll never make it on your own. If you expect me to help you out after this—"

"I don't need your help with anything, John."

We were bickering like children, but this was the first time I fought back.

"I think you need to leave, John," Mom said as she led the way out of the den. "I'm sorry you got to see us at our worst, Jennifer."

Mom and I stood in the large entry hall and watched them go.

“I’m going to have a bit of a lie-down,” she said as she started up the grand staircase. “I’m sorry but you wouldn’t mind putting dinner up for later, would you?”

“It’s okay. I’ve got it.” I more than had dinner taken care of. I also had a plan to show John I really didn’t need his help.

## CHASE

I strode into John's office. He leaned back in his chair; feet propped up on the desk. He was too relaxed in my opinion.

I slapped a folio onto the desk in front of him before sitting on the edge. "We've got a ton of shit to do for the end of year, and you're daydreaming."

"Not daydreaming, just imagining all the glorious schadenfreude headed my way."

He pulled his feet down, and sat up, rolling his chair up to the desk.

"Sounds like you had an interesting holiday," I said.

"Interesting is a word. Took Jennifer up to meet Gemma. Did you know Katherine is still there? I thought she had left years ago."

"You're step-mom?" I shook my head. "You haven't mentioned her in years. So, Gemma? Your sister's back in the states?" I could barely remember the last time I saw his sister. She was a tiny little strawberry blonde thing kicking around in a pool floaty while the rest of us tried to drown each other in the name of fun.

"She's been back since late September," he said as if I already knew.

"How is she?" I asked.

"She ruined herself in Europe. If you ask me, she should go back. It would be for the best." He opened the folio I had

dropped and flipped through the pages. “Jennifer insisted that I take her to meet the family. I never should have told her when Gemma got back. But now that we’re engaged, she wants to do family things.”

He spun in his chair and stopped to face me. “Can you believe it, they were in pajamas when we got there. They had the nerve to invite us for dinner and they were wearing matching pants and sweatshirts. It was embarrassing. Had to rescue Jennifer before she did something truly disastrous, like invite either of them to help with wedding planning. I’ve contracted Suzanne Oliver to organize this wedding. Suzanne Oliver. You don’t even know who I’m talking about,” he chuckled.

“Not a clue, man,” I admitted.

“Suzanne Oliver is the top fucking wedding planner in the city. In the City. Very exclusive, waiting list a mile long just to have a consultation with her. Jennifer had booked a consultation with her before we even started dating. Now that’s what I call forward-thinking.”

Wishful thinking was more like it. “Sounds like she got lucky.”

“She did when I proposed. Do you ever think you’re going to take the plunge?”

“What, get married? I’m married to CP Manhattan, and right now we need to go over some of this year-end bullshit.” CP Manhattan, the company our fathers built from the ground up. I always knew I would be here someday, in the CFO office. I hadn’t planned on being in charge for the past ten years. This was a long-term relationship. I accepted that, and that’s where my focus was. It was where I needed John’s focus to be.

“I need your attention, man. We are ending the year in bad shape, and we need to get some growth strategy going so that next year isn’t a disaster. I’m headed into a week with lawyers and accountants. I need to know, at the very least, you’re on top of the fiasco that our marketing department has become.”

“Marketing has always been a lame dick department. What did they waste my money on this time?”



“You do know that they are in your pipeline? You should be able to tell me what is going on with them.”

He shrugged. “Why do we need a marketing department? The market and them both suck. They don’t seem to be able to hit a trend lately.”

“Marketing isn’t all about trends.” I shook my head. “John, when was the last time you checked in with your department heads?”

He shrugged. “Hey, you know who Theda Wu is, right?”

“Yeah, she’s a designer. Are you bringing her in to help with our marketing department issues?”

He scoffed. “Don’t be dumb.”

“Then why do I care about Theda Wu?”

“You are clueless about women’s fashion.”

“I am neither a woman nor into fashion. I should earn bonus points for knowing she’s a designer. John, I need you to be up to date on why we essentially had an entire team walk out on us.”

“I told you, they sucked. I see no harm in letting a bunch of losers seeing themselves out. HR will take care of bringing in a fresh new team.” John leaned back in his chair as if the problem was solved.

“You’re not concerned there is supposed to be a major pitch regarding this outreach initiative we’re on target to kick off at the end of the first quarter?”

“Whoever we get in will have plenty of time. So, I have got to tell you about this major surprise I have for Jennifer. She’s going to flip.”

I reached up and pinched my temples together. It was too early in the day to deal with John when he was so distracted. This was the wrong week to try and cut back on coffee.

“Tell me, so we can get back on track,” I groaned.

“I scheduled a personal luncheon and fitting for Jennifer with Theda herself. Not some person who works for her, but Theda

Wu.”

“That’s terrific. Can I count on you to get marketing put back together? I need you to analyze their whole approach. This outreach program could not only turn us around, but it could also put us firmly back in the black. The marketing behind it needs to be solid. Can you handle it?”

John stopped whatever fidgeting he was doing and looked at me.

“I know my job, Chase. You don’t have to speak to me like I’m in kindergarten. I know the end of year crunch is always a mess for you, but you don’t need to spill your stress all over me. Okay?”

“Yeah man, I’m sorry. I came back from the holiday to learn we no longer have a senior marketing team, and you are heavily preoccupied with wedding planning stuff.”

“I’m not preoccupied. It’s fun, it’s different. If I do this right, I won’t have to ever do it again. It’s that important. But I hear you, Chase. I hear your concerns. I’ll see what’s happening with who is left in marketing. I will have them bring in new folks with fresh ideas. It’s not the cluster fuck you think it is.”

The tension left my brow. If John said he was on top of things, he would make sure everything was taken care of.

“You can go play with your lawyers and accountants pulling all of the numbers together for the year. You won’t have to worry about a thing. What else have you given me?” He flipped through the papers in the folio again. “Are our client numbers really down that much?”

I stared at the side of his face? Where had he been this past quarter? Right, with his head up Jennifer’s proverbial wedding dress and her thighs blocking his ears. I sighed.

“It’s going to be good to get you married,” I said. I hadn’t meant to say it out loud. I wanted his laser focus back on the books. I was stuck with ADHD John. I grew up with the man and I had never seen him so easily distracted before.

“You have no idea. Married and then kids, and I’m gonna beat your ass to the punch.”

I chuckled. “No need for a beating, I’ll hand my ass over. You can have this one.”

John flipped through the folio again. This time I think he actually read the pages in front of him as he started to repeat some of the information.

“So, with the new year we’re playing hard ball with this outreach initiative. We’ve got an increase in outside sales hiring projected... marketing rolls out their plan... Wait.” He flipped back to an earlier sheet. “Is this the timeline? I can’t work with this.”

“So, reschedule,” I said.

“You’re going to have to take it. Jennifer and I have a lot of commitments in January. You’ll have to head up the outreach program. Prioritize sales. How’s product development? Maybe what we need are some upgrades.”

“Upgrades are in the works. But they won’t do us any good if we are losing existing clients, and not bringing in new ones. John, we have a plan, I need you to—”

“When did this plan happen? Why wasn’t I involved?” He cut me off.

“It happened when you took Jennifer to Aruba to propose. I believe you said to ‘handle it.’ I’ve done that. Now, I need you on board.” I needed him back. It was like he never returned from that trip.

“I’m on board. I’m on board. January is going to be a mess. You can handle it. Marketing is easy. They do a little slide show and a song and a dance, and you say, ‘it looks great.’ And they go and make postcards. Harmond in sales is your guy. Hand over the outside sales growth to him, he’ll step up to the plate. We’re good, Chase. It’s going to take more than a bad quarter or two to topple CP Manhattan.

No, he was right. A bad quarter or two wouldn’t bring down the mighty CP Manhattan. But who knows, maybe a wedding could.

## GEMMA

**M**om stood at the door with Amelia in her arms. “How do I look?” I asked. Nerves made me jittery. I twisted back and forth showing off my outfit. I had my hair pulled back into a loose bun, and I wore a forest green dress with black leather trim I had purchased in Switzerland when I first started working. It wasn’t designer. I had been determined to make it on my own and couldn’t afford haute-couture, but it was nice and office suitable. I liked it.

“Very professional. You’ll be fine,” Mom said with a smile.

I looked up and down the street. My car hadn’t arrived yet. “Okay, Amelia will most likely need a change in about an hour. She’ll be grumpy, and you’ll think she wants a nap, and then you realize it’s a diaper. She’ll be happy after that. Next time she gets grumpy it will be nap time.”

“I know, Gemma. She’ll need a snack before nap time, and she will be starving when she wakes up.”

“She’s not good with words.” I fussed with the little sweater she had on over her dress. Tears pricked my eyes. I hadn’t been away from her for longer than a few hours since she was born. I didn’t know if I could do a whole day. I didn’t know if I could do the job.

“We have a busy morning planned. We have the big house to unpack, and lots of dusty sheets to wash,” Mom said as she tickled Amelia with kisses. “We’ll send you pictures and messages. I expect you to be too busy to reply much. It will be okay Gemma; you can do this.”

This was my grand scheme to prove John wrong. I could succeed without his help. I started brushing up my resume the day after Christmas. And just my luck, CP Manhattan had job listings for their marketing department posted online. The hiring process had been crazy fast, and within two weeks I had an offer.

The townhouse wasn't big, by my standards it was 'the small house in the city.' Having grown up at Orchard View, everything seemed smaller. Moving in was a matter of unpacking into the closets and pulling down the dust cloths that covered all the furniture. Knowing Mom, being as hands-on as she was, she wouldn't call in a service to help until it was time for the dusting and vacuuming. Even then she might only do it because Amelia could be a handful and Mom's personal assistant, Yana, would be busy getting the kitchen ready.

A black car stopped in front of our stoop. I was down the steps by the time the driver was out and asking if I was Gem Lafayette.

"That's me," I confirmed. It would take a minute to get used to not correcting everyone with Lafayette-Peters. I didn't want to give anyone a hint that I might be related to John, the current P in CP Manhattan.

Once at work it was difficult not to walk around like a deer caught in headlights. Everything was so flashy and high-tech. The jobs I had in Switzerland had been for smaller companies in smaller facilities, and I always worked remotely. Nothing quite matched the spectacle of working in lower Manhattan.

After my initial meeting with my hiring manager, Maggie, I was whisked off to HR to get last-minute paperwork signed, and my ID badge. I was on my own to navigate the maze of floors and cubicles back to the marketing department.

I knocked on Maggie's door. She was a few years older than me and dressed like a social media influencer. Maybe it was the sophisticated Boho fashion, the over-the-top jewelry, or the perfect makeup that made me think that she looked ready for a photoshoot.

“All set? She asked looking up from her computer.

I nodded.

“Great. I hope you brought running shoes, because you are hitting the ground running.” She picked up a stack of file folders and printouts. “Follow me.”

I had thought my first day at the job nerves had settled, but this had them zooming about and bouncing off obstacles. I trailed behind as she walked through another maze until we were in a glass-walled conference room. It felt a bit like a fishbowl with everyone able to look in at what was going on inside.

A few moments after Maggie dumped everything onto the table, another woman, Bria, joined us.

“I figured you haven’t had a chance to grab any supplies yet,” she said as she slid a legal pad and a few pens across the table to me.

“Thanks,” I said.

Both Bria and Maggie were dressed much more casually than I was. Maybe I needed to rethink my business wardrobe. At least I had worn some color. I had been nervous because I hadn’t worn a black or gray business suit. And I was concerned that my up do wouldn’t be considered professional enough. Bria’s hair was in a messy bun, and it looked intentional.

“So, is it just me, or am I dressed too much like a banker?” I asked.

This made both Maggie and Bria laugh.

“First day everyone always does that, don’t worry about it. Dress how you’re comfortable, but no pajamas,” Maggie said.

“I hope I can wear jeans?”

“You can wear fashionably professional jeans.”

“What does fashionably professional even mean?” I asked.

“It means designer, darker denim, not faded, not something that looks like you wore them while gardening. Holes that are

intentional and not exposing too much flesh, edgy”— Bria made finger quotes— “not trashy. If you’d wear them out clubbing or to the beach, probably not best for work.”

I wouldn’t need an entirely new wardrobe, but I could modify the one I had to fit the culture around here.

“You are going to want to be comfortable because we have a lot of work ahead of us and not a lot of time.”

Maggie slid a few of the folders in my direction and a few in Bria’s.

“Gem, when you were hired, we mentioned that we recently had an upset in the entire department,” Maggie started.

I nodded. I knew I was a fresh hire to bring in fresh ideas, and that there had been some reshuffling in the department.

“The hiring process has been too slow for our needs. But we need to get started even if we don’t have a full team right now. It’s up to us to prepare a presentation regarding CP Manhattan’s outreach initiative. Numbers are low and we’re haemorrhaging clients. This campaign must serve as a means of attracting new clients and giving confidence about our products and services to our existing clients.”

Bria let out a heavy sigh and shook her head.

Maggie continued, “The red folder has the numbers we are currently looking at, and our goals.”

My gaze scanned over the information and the bar charts. “This is perfect,” I beamed.

“Perfect?”

“Yeah, we’ll be able to actually track the impact marketing has on the overall health of the company. It’s exactly the kind of project I was hoping to get involved with.” This would provide me with actual numbers that I could use to back up my claims that internet marketing wasn’t a joke job. I knew I would never win John over to thinking that I wasn’t anything but his annoying little sister, always in the way. Maybe I could prove to John that my career choice wasn’t worthless, and he could see that marketing wasn’t simply playing online.

“I’m glad you feel that way because we have to present something to the big wigs at the end of the week,” Maggie said.

“What?” I felt my stomach plummet. “End of the week isn’t enough time.”

We would need more time to prepare a concept and design a campaign. And I wasn’t ready to make a presentation to my brother. He couldn’t know I was there so soon.

“Peters has already stepped away from this, so we’ll be working with Campbell. He’s not been involved with marketing since I’ve been here. I figure we don’t have to give him a campaign launch, but we do need to tell him where we are headed, the concepts, etc. He should be fine with words, not pictures.”

I nodded, but I lost the thread of anything she was saying. Campbell, the C in CP Manhattan. My throat went dry. I hadn’t seen Chase Campbell in years.

Three years and a few months to be more specific...

*That year I had spent the summer at the Hamptons with my old high school friends. We had gone off to our separate universities and were reconnecting. We had all changed so much. I chopped my hair off into a bob and dyed it red. Jasmine had gotten engaged. Elizabeth was going to join the Marines. Sophie and I had taken gap years after graduation, so we were effectively a year behind everyone in their studies.*

*We spent the days lazing about the beach and the nights looking for parties. My friends were out to get laid as often as possible. I wasn’t ready for that level of fun. Jasmine was the one who found out about the party we ended up at that night. Hollywood types and financial types were everywhere. And they all partied as much as, if not more, than college students. Booze was readily available, as was a variety of other substances.*

*Some man, he was practically middle-aged, stumbled into me and asked where the bathroom was. I told him, being intimately familiar with the house. It was my family’s, which*



*meant John would be lurking around some corner at any minute.*

*This guy put his arm around me, and we staggered off toward the main house. He told me he could get me into movies, he was a producer. He stopped and looped his arm through another man's arm. When the other man turned around, I froze. Chase Campbell. I hadn't expected to see him. I hadn't seen him for years, not since the funerals. He was more handsome than I had ever remembered.*

*And I remembered a lot. The first time I had fallen in love with him his hair was a mess of dark curls, and his skin was golden tan. I had thought he was muscular then, but he had been seventeen or eighteen and just a skinny kid. Grown-up Chase was no longer a skinny kid, he had filled out with glorious muscle definition. His hair was still a mess of dark curls, but shorter. And his jaw was covered with a dark beard that looked five days longer than sexy stubble.*

*Chase had given me a grin and checked me out. My toes curled from his expression alone. We agreed to meet at the beach later, and then he took the producer guy away and left me. It was a good thing because moments later John discovered I was at his party, and he chewed me out.*

*It was the same thing from him as it had always been, "Stay away from my friends," and "You are not welcome here, leave."*

*I met Chase at the beach later that night, and I finally understood why my friends were crazy trying to get laid. The sex had been more than I had ever imagined. I didn't get an opportunity to see him again that summer. And with the way things developed, I was pretty sure he didn't realize the redhead he made love to in the dunes was his best friend's sister.*

*I sighed. I hadn't seen Chase Campbell since he got me pregnant.*

## CHASE

“**W**hy the hell isn't he here?” I barked at John's assistant.

She blinked at me and I paced back and forth in his empty office. The bastard told me he would be in this morning before the gown appointment he had with Jennifer.

“I don't know what to tell you, Mr. Campbell. He hasn't been in all morning, and he is not taking calls.”

I stopped pacing and looked at her.

I raked my hand through my hair and tried to squeeze my brow together. I had the marketing pitch to attend, and I wanted to run some budgetary numbers by John before signing off.

“Sorry,” I apologized. She didn't deserve my stress. Jillian was smart and capable, that's how she managed to put up with John for the past five years. So far, she'd lasted longer than any of his other assistants.

“When do you expect him to be back?”

“Honestly?” She quirked her eyebrows up. “I don't.”

“That's what I was afraid of.”

If he didn't want to be present or reachable, he would have to live with my decisions.

“If he does bother to check-in, please let me know.”

“Of course, Mr. Campbell,” she said as I strode out of John's office.

Back in my office, I slid into my chair, pulled the bottle of Tums out of the drawer, and angrily chewed two tablets. I grabbed my bottle of water and cursed that it wasn't coffee as I gulped half of it down.

I checked my email and shot off a few responses that did not require answers from other sources. I reviewed some of the past marketing campaigns. I wanted to know what I was headed into. Some of the campaigns from the old man's time were entertaining. And then I found the last campaign that the marketing department of CP Manhattan produced.

John was right. It was little more than a postcard. In fact, in the past year marketing had done little more than a few internet ads and postcards. Postcards did not elicit client confidence, they wouldn't for me, and I wouldn't expect that from our clients either.

By the time I made it to the executive conference room, I was dead set against postcards and ready to protest anything marketing had to present.

Two women sat on either side of the head of the table and a third was leaning over and discussing something with them. I had to pause for a moment. It wasn't professional to ogle. It didn't matter that I was suddenly in the presence of an angel with the body of a wet dream. That reaction had to be smothered and kept to myself.

"I'm Chase Campbell." I extended my hand to the other women, before reaching out to the angel. I was rewarded with a perfect grin set in a perfect face with a delicate chin, broad high cheekbones, a little nose with a delightful smattering of freckles, pale green eyes so large they made their owner look like she was animated, and a mass of golden strawberry blond ringlets.

"Nice to meet you," she practically whispered, and my balls squeezed in tight trying to hear her better.

"Mr. Campbell, I'm Maggie Jakes, the new head of marketing. This is Bria Marsters and Gem Lafayette. We are your marketing team."

Gem, it was the perfect name for her.

I shook my head, clearing the inappropriate and sudden onslaught of lustful thoughts. I focused on Maggie.

“We understand—”

“No postcards,” I blurted out.

“Excuse me?” Maggie asked.

“No postcards. I’ve reviewed some of the past campaigns, and —”

“And the team that up and quit did so because they were limited to nothing but postcards,” the one named Bria said. I liked her, no-nonsense, cut to the point.

Maggie sighed. I glanced quickly at Gem to see if she sighed as well. A sigh with her figure could be dangerous— to me. I quickly put my focus back on Maggie.

“Well, this isn’t exactly how I had intended on getting here, but we’re here. So, let’s talk postcards.”

And we did. And I learned a great deal about what this marketing department wanted to be allowed to do, and why the previous department walked.

“And that brings us to CP Manhattan’s social media presence,” Gem said. I didn’t want to stare at her, fearful that I might stop paying attention to the words while I was focused on how her mouth moved. What would those pearly white teeth look like biting into the plump pink flesh of her lip? I felt my groin tighten and reminded myself I needed to listen to the words coming out of her mouth. I flipped open the leather-covered notebook I always brought to meetings and began taking notes. This gave me a reason not to look at her. And writing her words down was good, in case I got lost in the dulcet sound of her voice.

“We have a Twitter, I think,” I said.

“The fact that you aren’t sure demonstrates exactly how out of sync CP Manhattan is with the rest of contemporary businesses. Welcome to the twentieth century.”

I looked directly at her, disappointed my angel could be that dumb. “It’s the twenty-first century Ms. Lafayette.”

“Exactly, but it doesn’t look like CP Manhattan is quite aware of that fact. The company doesn’t have any other social media presence beyond a website and Twitter. No one manages the Twitter account.”

“I believe John Peters is in charge of that,” I said, recalling something John said about tweeting.

“He may be, but he actually isn’t,” Gem continued. “The last tweet that CP Manhattan did was over five years ago, and the last reply posted was nonsensical. The company got in rather early with Twitter, but tweets and comments have been few and far between.”

“I don’t think our clients...”

“But your clients do.” She pushed a printout to me with names in one column and numbers in several other columns.

“CP Manhattan’s current clients are on social media. CP Manhattan’s future clients are as well. And the competition knows this.”

“So we need to make sure to use Twitter more,” I shrugged.

“It’s more than that. More than Twitter. The website also hasn’t been updated in over five years. I’m not sure what happened at that point. If these issues all dated further back, I’d understand, but they don’t. Your photo on the ‘About Us’ page makes you look like a teenager.”

I ran a hand over my beard. I knew the photo well. John and I had taken it the year after we took over the business. We were fresh-faced and eager to prove we could handle the jobs fate had given us twenty years too early. That photo was almost ten years old.

“Tell me what you propose.” I sat up and looked each woman in the eyes. I may have lingered over Gem’s a little longer, but I ended up looking at Maggie. That was her cue to tell me more.

“This outreach initiative needs to be done in several phases. The first phase requires us to create more positions at CP Manhattan. We need a full-time Social Media Manager, and we need a full-time website team.”

“You want us to pay someone to play on Twitter all day?”

“That’s going to be your first mistake, thinking that running social media is playing,” Gem said. She wasn’t afraid to tell me I was wrong. I liked that. John would hate her; it was a good thing he didn’t come.

“Social media takes careful planning and positioning. That position is the very front line of the company’s brand. How they respond to incoming messages and tweets sets the tone and mood of people’s expectations of the company. Have you ever looked at the fast-food industry tweets? They are all sarcastic, snarky, and funny. They play with each other. And that fits their branding of being fun food, and happy enjoyable memories being made with their food.” Gem was certainly enthusiastic about the use of social media for client reach.

“Rebranding?” I asked.

“Not at all but taking the existing brand to the people. CP Manhattan is a niche market. But we don’t know what demographics really plug into that niche.”

They made perfect sense. We needed to expand ways for people to find us. That would never happen with postcards.

“How many positions are we talking about?” I asked.

Maggie cast an excited glance to Bria and Gem.

“Ideally five, in addition to the positions we are still filling within the department. Two on social media, and three on the website.”

“Why three for the website? Once you’ve updated the images...” I held my hands up, I didn’t know what else would need to happen.

“Websites need to be constantly maintained. Three is the minimum. We need both technical and creative people on the website. Hiring out for a corporate website is a thing of the

past. Maybe for a design overhaul, but weekly maintenance, we really need that in-house.”

I leaned back and crossed my arms behind my head. Had John ever paid attention to the marketing department, or had he told them since postcards were good enough for our fathers, they’d be good enough for us? If I were checking out a potential business and their website was five years old, I’d probably not go with them.

“And no postcards?” I asked.

“Mr. Campbell I’d like to never see another postcard come out of my department again,” Maggie said with conviction. Both Bria and the lovely Gem nodded in agreement.

John wasn’t here.

“Send me the job parameters and descriptions and I’ll sign off for HR to create your positions,” I said. “Let’s do this.”

## GEMMA

*About 2 weeks later...*

“**E**verything is looking great,” I said to Matt, our new web guy.

It had taken HR almost a full week to process the hiring approvals before we could post the openings anywhere. Of course, the open positions were posted to an internal job board first. Matt, from the Helpdesk, contacted Maggie immediately. It was great to have someone familiar with the company, we could dive right into making small, but necessary updates to the website before we could instigate a full-blow revision.

“I’ve got some ideas for how we can create a phased rollout for the new website,” he said.

“Write it up. Nothing’s going to happen until we have the campaign finalized,” I replied.

“And the rest of the team is hired,” he said with a grin.

I couldn’t agree more. My time was divided between working on the outreach campaign and getting our social media presence up and functional. Getting the resources and accounts and setting the tone that would align with CP Manhattan’s branding all fell in my lap.

I spent my time juggling concept development, creating a social media presence, keeping everyone on task, and keeping Chase up to date. As the junior member of the marketing team, it fell in my lap to keep everyone on track so that we could meet our timeline. We needed a major support campaign



designed and ready to go by the end of the first quarter, and January was almost over.

The presentation had gone better than any of us had expected. Chase was enthusiastic and invested in our progress. I liked that he was involved, even though simultaneously I was terrified he would figure out who I was, or John would accompany him to my office one day. He was in our department practically every day, claiming he wanted to be hands-on. I swear I blushed every time he said it that way. I wanted him to hands-on me, but that wasn't exactly professional.

"Mr. Campbell, what are you doing in my office?" I asked.

"I thought I told you to call me Chase?" He was stretched out in a chair, hands tucked behind his head, his feet up on my desk. He looked comfortable and snuggle-able. I wanted to stretch out alongside him, curl up against his warmth. He still had that sexy beard, and his hair seemed to always be out of sorts, like someone kept running their fingers through it. I wished they were my fingers.

I pasted on a smile I could control and pushed those thoughts down. I needed to be professional. He was just being friendly. Okay, overly friendly. I hadn't seen him put his feet up on Maggie's desk once.

"Here for today's update?" I asked.

My office was small, I had to brush past him. That tiny bit of contact scrambled my brain every time. Shamelessly, I grabbed his ankles and lifted his feet, and then dropped them onto the floor. "Feet go on the floor, not furniture. Didn't your nanny teach you any manners?"

The grin he gave me cut through my resolve like a hot tire iron through butter. No resistance whatsoever.

"I'm here for your figures anytime."

Don't blush, don't blush, don't blush. I shook my head trying to get rid of the images his choice of words put into my head.

"Not figures, progress reports. I don't have any spreadsheets to show you," I corrected.

“I’m a numbers guy,” he laughed. “Marketing is all new to me. You knew what I meant.”

The problem was, I wasn’t sure I did. I never realized he was such a flirt. The only time I had any real interaction with him, other than that one magical night on the beach in the Hamptons, he didn’t flirt. He was my hero, and he would make sure I was safe, but he didn’t flirt. It wouldn’t have been appropriate. I hadn’t even been seven, and he was in his late teens or early twenties, but it didn’t stop the younger me from falling in love with him back then.

Part of that problem was, I was still in love with him. I was determined to do my job no matter how difficult he made it.

“Please, don’t make this hard for me,” I said. There may have been too much of a giggle in my voice. I tried not to react to him, but he had me all giddy.

He leaned forward and in a deep whisper said, “You make things hard for me.”

I stopped fighting the blush and locked eyes with him. I was sure my cheeks flared like a beacon in the dark. I swallowed hard.

He held my gaze. We stared at each other for a few moments too long. He broke the stare-off first by darting his eyes to my mouth before meeting my eyes again.

I sat like a dead weight dropping into my chair. I tried to speak, but I couldn’t get my mouth to form words.

“Should you be saying stuff like that at work?” I whispered.

“I never would have said that if I wasn’t one-hundred-percent certain that you didn’t feel the same way. I’m not some sexual predator at work,” he said.

I still held his gaze. I was frozen in place. “Um, yes,” I managed.

What the hell was I doing? No, I couldn’t throw myself at Chase. It didn’t help that he was ready to catch me. I had a job to do.

“I have a job to do,” I managed to say out loud. “Let’s shelve that for a moment so I can process, and we’ll circle back to it after the progress report.” I sounded like a robot to my own ears.

“Fair enough,” Chase said. He was so comfortably at ease, switching from off-the-scale sexual tension to business performance in the blink of an eye.

I was shaking with nervous energy and an internal fight. I swallowed hard and refused to look up at him, keeping my eyes on today’s progress.

“Matt has been busy documenting all the minor updates the website needs, and he should begin implementing those changes today or tomorrow. We should have the entire site spruced up by the end of next week. Yesterday we interviewed two candidates for the web team. No one else has applied for an internal move to our group. Maggie is conducting preliminary phone interviews for the Social Media Manager.”

I ticked things off a checklist as I let Chase know what was happening.

“You know this could all be sent in an email,” I said. I felt my cheeks still burning.

“I prefer the personal touch, Gem,” he said. The rumble in his voice felt more predatory than professional.

I closed my eyes and sighed. “Okay, circling back. Would you mind?” I nodded at the door indicating he should close it.

He reached back with his long arm and swung the door closed.

“Mr. Campbell,” I started. How the hell did I say this?

“Chase,” he corrected.

“Chase, you are not incorrect in your assumptions.”

“Then go out with me,” he said with all the confidence in the world. I wanted to say yes and launch myself at him. The knots in my stomach were all for it.

“With you insisting on having a ha—” No I couldn’t say hands-on, he’d twist my words. “With you being actively

involved, I think it would be best if we try to turn the flirting down a notch or ten. I like your company, but...”

“But you don’t want someone else to overhear and possibly misinterpret, landing either or both of us in sexual harassment training?” He finished for me.

“Something like that.” I twisted my fingers together.

“Go out with me, Gem.” The earnestness in his expression made my toes curl.

I wanted to say yes, it was a fight not to. I bit my lips together and shook my head. “This probably isn’t the best time or place,” I said with a wince.

Chase nodded. “Definitely not appropriate for me to tell you how beautiful you are, or that—”

“Geez, Chase, don’t say that stuff here. We have to work together.” I could feel my eyes go wide, staring at him in disbelief.

He smoldered at me. “I did that to see your reaction. I’ll dial it back. So that we are perfectly clear, you will go out with me at some point.”

“I would be flattered if you asked me again later.”

He stood up and extended his hand across the desk. I shook it. Touching him felt like a mistake. His hand was big and warm, and soft. And I instantly remembered how it felt on my body.

When he left, my concentration apparently left with him. I couldn’t focus. I looked at my to-do list and found taking action near impossible.

My phone rang.

“Yes?”

“I think now is a suitable time to ask you to have dinner with me later.”

“Chase,” I said exasperated. It was easier to maintain my resolve when he wasn’t so close. “I don’t think dating the boss is my best move right now.”

“Fair enough. How about, you tell me when you’re ready for me to ask you out.”

“I can do that,” I said. My cheeks hurt from smiling.

“Can?” he asked with a teasing tone.

“Okay, okay. I will do that. When I’m ready, until then it’s a cease-fire. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” he said and then ended the call.

I don’t know how I was able to function the rest of the day. I smiled like an idiot the entire commute home.

“Good day at work?” Mom asked as soon as I walked in the door.

“Fantastic,” I said. I picked up Amelia and kissed her soft cheeks. “Your daddy likes me, and I don’t know what to do,” I whispered so Mom couldn’t hear me.

“Change so you can help us finish opening the bedrooms,” Mom called out.

“Do we have to do all the bedrooms? How many guests are you expecting, ever?”

“A good hostess is always prepared.”

I rolled my eyes. It didn’t make sense to me to open the rooms that would never be used. They could stay safely wrapped up in dust cloths until they were needed.

I wish I could keep who I was safely wrapped up in a dust cloth. If I started dating Chase, he would know who I was, he would have to. And then John would find out. It would be a mess. I couldn’t date Chase until I had hard numbers to prove John wrong.

## CHASE

“**T**his is all fantastic work, let me take you out for lunch,” I said as soon as Maggie finished going over the changes they had made to the website.

Not much had been done, but it was now current with information and pictures. John never was available for a photo session, so we used headshots taken the year before for the annual report. The little changes made a huge difference.

“Sorry, I have an interview. Maybe next time?” she answered.

“Matt?” I wanted him to say no. I willed it with every cell in my being.

“Sorry, I’m meeting my girlfriend.” He gathered his things and darted from the conference room.

“It looks like just you and me, then,” I smirked. I was entirely too pleased to have an opportunity to take Gem out for lunch.

“Go, let the boss treat you to lunch,” Maggie said before she followed Matt out the door.

Gem watched Maggie leave and then turned to me. “I thought we agreed, no dates.”

I chuckled. “This is lunch, not a date. You saw that I invited everyone in the room.” I spread my hands to emphasize my innocence.

“You did that somehow. You rigged it,” she scolded me. It was adorable how her face scrunched up and her mass of strawberry blonde curls bounced as she wagged a finger at me.

“I promise, no nefarious subterfuge, just really good luck.” I winked.

She sighed, which was always a feast for my eyes. “Fine.”

“Such a hardship, Gem. Is being in my company really that painful?”

She looked at me and her gaze pierced me in place for a few moments. I was officially pushing it. I wanted to push it farther. I stepped in close. I could feel her breath on my skin. An inch closer and we would be touching.

“Truce,” I said. “We can stick to business and the weather.”

“Let me put these back in my office and grab my purse. I’ll meet you by the elevators,” she said as she jumped away from me.

“Sounds like a... plan,” I paused a bit too long before I said plan. I wanted to say date, but that was not allowed.

We didn’t speak in the elevator. Tension radiated off Gem in palpable waves. I shoved my hands deep in my pockets. I wanted to slam the stop elevator button and crush her against me. I needed to know if her lips taste like the strawberries they were painted up like.

“Where are we going?” she finally asked.

“There’s a little place around the block,” I said.

“Hole in the wall, but the food is really good?” she asked.

“Not this time. It’s a little bit nicer than a hole in the wall, and the food is exceptional. We may have a bit of a wait,” I answered.

“Any place worth eating at has a bit of a wait,” she said.

“I hope you like Greek food,” I said as I stopped and indicated we had arrived.

“Oh, I love Greek food. I especially love Americanized Greek food. Have you ever been to Greece? I always find the food there is overly goaty, but the beaches are to-die for.” She practically swooned talking about Greece.

“Have you been there often?” If she loved the beaches in Greece, I’d take her there. I’d take her to any beach she wanted.

“I went to school... I did a year abroad, and we went a few times. You can go anywhere in Europe by train.” She spoke enthusiastically about a few of the places she and her roommates adventured to using Eurail passes.

I nodded and listened. I didn’t like to talk about my European experience with private jets, yachts, and race cars in Monte Carlo. That was always better shown than talked about.

“Do you like to travel?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I like going to different places, but once there, I want to stay and be comfortable. I’m not terribly a fan of going somewhere for a week and seeing a lot of touristy places of interest”— she finger quoted places of interest— “swarming with tourists as much as possible. I’d like to hang around for a week or two and see the sites at my leisure. Otherwise, the trip is more work than the daily grind the vacation was supposed to help you relax from.”

“I couldn’t agree more. I prefer rental properties over hotels,” I said.

“Exactly. Hotels never serve breakfast on my schedule. I can make a bowl of cereal without having to order room service. And lunch and dinner would be out anyway.”

“It sounds like you’ve actually been able to travel quite a bit to form such definite opinions,” I pointed out.

She shrugged. “It only takes a few times of doing it one way or another to figure out your preferences.”

We continued to talk about travel. We ordered food. I ordered wine. We talked more. Never once did I inappropriately proposition her during our lunch. No matter how many times she inadvertently left the innuendo door wide open, I did not walk through it.

We ordered dessert, and the way Gem’s face lit up when they brought her a thick slice of baklava dripping with honey made my groin tighten. I was tempted to order her a second one just



so I could sit back and enjoy the show of her lips wrapping around that fork. Her eyes closed and the sinful humming sound she made as she thoroughly enjoyed the experience made me want to cover her in honey so I could do that to her.

I cleared my throat and excused myself to the restroom. I couldn't have her, not today, not until she said yes. My cock needed to calm down. After doing what I needed, I washed my hands and splashed cold water on my face. I really needed the cold water applied elsewhere, but this was a restroom in a restaurant, no facilities for a cold shower.

When I returned to the table Gem looked ready to leave.

"We've been gone for hours," Gem pointed out. "Bria and Maggie are not going to be happy, and I have so much work to get done. Why didn't you say anything?"

I shrugged. "I didn't realize I kept you away from the office for so long. You can completely blame me." I gestured for the check and paid.

Gem walked as if she were in a hurry. I wanted to slowly stroll in her company, or slightly behind so I could enjoy the view.

"What am I supposed to say? I was utterly charmed by our boss's charisma and wit? That every time he smiled at me I forgot how to breathe and what my name was? No, I can't say that. I'd have to say something like we were brainstorming, or that you brought up the idea that maybe I should make the lateral move to Social Media Manager, and we bring in another general marketing specialist, or a graphic designer to take my open position."

"Say that, exactly that. Is that all my smile does to you? We could find out what more I could do for you," I said. I was treading on the thin ice of harassment if she decided she wasn't interested in me. But that wouldn't happen. Not when her gaze cut to my hands and my mouth, and then she licked her lips.

"But we didn't talk about any of that," she replied. The blush on her cheeks and her rapid breathing told me she was fighting to maintain propriety.

I wanted to push that limit, I wanted her so hot and bothered she couldn't think straight. I wanted her to think about my mouth and my hands on her.

I wrapped my fingers around her arm, gently, with skin like hers, I imagined she was susceptible to bruising. She wasn't mine yet, she wouldn't wear my marks proudly until it was her decision. I stopped her.

She turned to look up at me, her gaze taking in my fingers on her arm. She looked so delectable with bright red lips and dark sunglasses. Her perfectly arched eyebrows raised above the dark frames.

"I think moving you into the role of Social Media Manager is a valid concept. The department is having a hard time finding a good fit. They might have an easier time getting a designer or another marketing person in." I held her gaze for a moment. "There, we brainstormed."

She laughed, and not for the first time that afternoon, my balls tightened, and my cock pulsed. I wanted her.

"What am I going to do with you?" she asked.

"You'll never know the possibilities until you're ready to go out with me," I reminded her of our bargain. I may have overstepped my part of the bargain to refrain from flirting heavily, but it was getting harder each day to be around her, knowing she was interested but not knowing exactly why she kept saying no.

She stepped into me— we were close, we could have been closer— and rested her hand on my chest. I still had a grip on her. It was a fight to keep my hand loose. I should have dropped it, but I wanted to hold her.

"I've had a wonderful time with you, and I would very much like to find out how much more wonderful it could be. I'd be very flattered if you would consider asking me out again," her voice was a throaty purr. It was sexy as hell.

I laughed at myself. I wanted this woman. I wasn't going to be willing to play her games for much longer. "I'm going to ask you out for dinner, when will you be available?"

I pulled her closer, pressing her breasts against my chest. My other hand reached up to hold her against me. My breath stopped in my chest. That small taste of her against me would never be enough. My cock pressed against my trousers, wanting to come out.

“I’m available tonight.”

She twirled out of my grasp. Damn her ass as she moved. She had to be putting an extra wiggle in there as she walked away.

## GEMMA

**W**alking away from Chase took a strength I did not know I possessed. I swished my ass in a tantalizing fashion hoping he was watching. I wanted him and I no longer had the wherewithal to deny those feelings. I was glad he was still interested.

A man like him didn't need to wait around for me and my stupid crush and my stupid rules. But he had when I asked. It wasn't fair to expect him to wait any longer.

Back in the office, no one commented on my prolonged lunch, or the stupid grin on my face. Now I just needed to wait for Chase to ask me out. That hadn't happened, I left him, hopefully with his jaw hanging open, before he had a chance to say anything. I had wanted to be a sexy tease. I only hoped it worked.

I sat at my desk, placed my phone in front of me, and watched it. Would he call me immediately? I was being stupid. He would not call me—

The phone rang. It was Chase. I let it ring a few times so he wouldn't think I was too eager.

"Hello?" I spoke.

"Gem, meet me for dinner." He sounded in control, not like me who was out of breath because I ran back to my office.

"Let me check if I'm available," I teased.

I heard him groan.

“I’m done playing these games, Gem. Dinner tonight. Meet me at eight.” His voice was raspy, thick with lust. Or maybe I was projecting my own desires onto him.

“I would love to. Text me the details. I’ll see you then.” I hung up on him before I melted into a puddle of human goo. I wasn’t going to be good for anything the rest of the day.

I shot Maggie and Bria an email letting them know about the brainstorming at lunch. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea of being the Social Media Manager. It could be fun for a while.

I checked to see if Matt needed anything.

“Yeah, the rest of my team,” he joked.

“You and me both,” I replied. “I’m headed out early if you’re good.”

He gave a nonchalant nod, and I left him alone.

“You’re home early,” Mom said.

“I couldn’t focus. I have a date!” I practically squealed.

“You have a date? Does he know about Amelia?” she asked.

“Mom! I’m a little more worried about what I’m going to wear. I haven’t been on a date since before Amelia was born. I don’t know if I have anything to wear.” I started to panic.

“Is it a fancy date or a casual date?”

I thought about that for a moment. This was Chase, and for lunch, he had taken me to a nice restaurant, not some dive.

“Fancy, I think,” I finally answered.

“You can’t go wrong with basic black. You have that nice little wrap dress. It shows off your figure nicely,” she said.

I spent my time getting ready. I did my makeup, washed my face clean, and reapplied my makeup. The black wrap dress was perfect. I read a story to Amelia before Mom put her to bed. I called a car and went to the address Chase had given me.

I stood in front of what I assumed was the restaurant. Chase arrived less than a minute later.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I said. I gestured back at the bright neon sign. This was a hole-in-the-wall restaurant. Literally.

There were no tables or chairs, just pizza by the slice from a counter at a window.

“It is the best pizza in town,” he said. He gave me a slow up and down look-over. I crossed my arms and did the same to him.

I intended to mock him, not be floored by what I saw. He wore comfortable, faded jeans. The kind of fading that comes with years of use, not from the store. They hugged his thighs like nobody’s business. He wore a faded movie fandom shirt and a leather jacket. He looked good enough to eat.

“I’m afraid I’m overdressed,” I said, indicating my choice of clothes.

“You look beautiful.” He leaned in and kissed my cheek.

That kiss made up for everything that had not gone as I had hoped. I had been expecting to be wined and dined. Not pizza and hang out, then again hanging out might not be so bad.

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked.

He looked down at my shoes and smirked. “I enjoyed talking with you today. I thought we could do that without taking over a table for hours. But those shoes make me think you won’t want to do a whole lot of walking.”

“I can walk just fine in these.” I demonstrated by walking a bit away from him, swinging my hips, and then stalking toward him. My shoes were not made for outside winter weather, but I was the idiot who put them on, because I thought they looked hot. I tried to walk with a sexy slither while not slipping on any snow or ice.

His gulp told me I had succeeded.

“I can think of a few other things we could do where those shoes would look fantastic.” His voice was low and rumbly.

It made my entire body quiver.

He stepped in close and whispered, “Shall I tell you, or should I show you?” His lips brushed my ear. “You’re shaking. Am I making you nervous?”

I felt too hot and chilled. It was as if I had a fever and Chase Campbell, was the only cure.

“Show me.” I had a difficult time speaking. I was breathless and giddy, and he hadn’t even touched me properly.

“We should eat first. For energy.” His eyebrows quirked up, and he gave me this sexy little half-smile.

“For energy,” I agreed.

He ordered for us, two slices and two cans of soda.

He kept his eyes locked with mine as he folded his slice and licked up the seam he had created. It was surprisingly erotic, and a wet heat pooled between my legs. If I had been more stable, I would have attempted something similar, like deep throating the slice. In my current condition, I would choke myself, and that would not be sexy. Besides, I wouldn’t know if I was doing it right. I’d never had a cock down my throat. Never wanted one, until now.

I nibbled at my slice and blushed at the thoughts Chase was giving me. Would he really want to lick me like that? Did I want to suck him down? I barely tasted my pizza, and before I knew it a black car had arrived, and we were climbing in the back seat.

Chase reached into a pocket and brought out a pack of gum.

“I don’t mind garlic if you don’t,” he said, offering me a piece.

“Huh? Oh, thanks.” I really didn’t understand what he was getting at. I folded the stick of gum onto my tongue.

He groaned. “Do that to me.”

“What?” I didn’t think I had heard him properly. “You want me to... Oh.” I had to have blushed like a neon sign. Without realizing it, I had flirted with my food. Next time I would be sure I was aware when I was being sexually suggestive.

It wasn't long before the car stopped, and a liveried doorman opened my door. I slid out and looked up the side of the building as I waited for Chase.

"Warehouse?" I asked.

"Not anymore. They are exclusive lofts. I'm on the fifth floor."

We kept our hands to ourselves on the short ride up. The industrial elevator had gates and sliding doors and call buttons that required an operator. His front door was one of those sliding steel industrial doors with rivets, and it hung from an overhead track. He slid it open. His loft was spectacular. Even only on the fifth floor, he had a view that took in his neighborhood and opened to the skyscrapers.

"Oh, Chase, this isn't what I expected," I gushed.

"No?" he asked as he shrugged out of his coat. He reached out for my coat. "What did you expect?"

"I pegged you as a high-rise penthouse kind of guy."

I figured he would be like John that way. John refused to live in the boring townhouse. He wanted a bachelor pad, not a family home. This was neither a glass and chrome bachelor pad nor a stately family home. This was comfortable and oddly cozy in its way.

Most of the walls were old, exposed brick. The floor was hard wood, and polished, but the wear from years of factory use was obvious. His furniture was plush and overstuffed upholstery, not leather. And he had art on his walls.

"It's more comfortable than I... I guess I expected what you see in the movies from the hot young executive. This is positively bohemian in comparison." I sat on the couch and slid to the side, propping my legs up and crossing them at the ankles. I adjusted the slit in my dress to expose my leg. "Can I take my shoes off; will this floor give me a splinter?" I asked in my best playful pouty tone.

"Keep your shoes on," he said as he stalked toward me.

"But I wanted to get comfortable."



“I can help with that.” He placed a knee on the couch next to me and reached for the tie on my dress. “Maybe loosening this will help.”

The tie to my dress slipped open under his deft fingers. Nerves throughout my body started pinging with anticipation. Chase was going to touch me. This was all about us touching each other. I had dreamed about doing this for my entire life, and more so for the past three years.

My dress unwrapped, exposing one lace covered breast.

## CHASE

**G**em was a feast for my senses. She smelled like mint and roses. Her skin was softer than pedals, and the sight of her made my brain go fuzzy. Displayed before me, half undressed, with her cream flesh framed in pink and lace against the background of the black dress, I could barely breathe.

“I never realized that pink was my favorite color,” I said as I ran my fingertips over the exposed mounds of her breasts. She arched up against my hands.

I skimmed over the satin that held her breast, trailing my thumb over the peak of a nipple that pressed out to me.

She whimpered and writhed. I cupped her full breast and longed for the skin and not satin and lace against my palm. I continued to drink her in. I let my gaze and my fingers trail over her soft middle. Like a magnet, my fingers trailed directly to the juncture of her thighs and the matching pink panties that hid the delights I was eager to sample.

When she reached up to me, I fell into her arms. My lips slid over hers like they were made for each other. She made soft gasps as our mouths parted and met. Her teeth bit into my lower lip. My tongue danced with hers. It was as if she knew exactly how to kiss me and turn me into a single-minded lunatic.

“Skin,” I demanded.

Gem clawed at my t-shirt.

I reached back and grabbed my shirt to yank it off. My lips left hers long enough to make the shirt go away. I pressed back against her, the mounds of her breasts so warm, so perfect against my chest.

I needed to taste that perfection and lowered my mouth to suck on a nipple through the thin barrier of her bra.

I pressed my hips up against her, forcing her thighs apart until I felt her warmth through my jeans. My cock throbbed, demanding to be closer. Gem did something with her bra and suddenly I had a rosy, pink nipple, in the flesh, to suck. I moaned against her.

“Chase, I need you,” she said in the most heartbreakingly sexy voice I had ever heard.

At that moment, with that voice, she could have asked me for anything, and I would have given it to her.

I wanted to touch her, I wanted to be inside her, but not on the couch. She deserved the comfort of clouds, to be worshipped like the queen she was. We could save the fun fuck on the couch for later. I lifted back onto my knees. She was a sight, and it took willpower not to collapse back across her and take her then and there.

“Come.” I held out my hand and eased her to a sitting position.

She tucked her breast back into the bra, and I was sad to see it go, even though I knew it was only temporary.

I walked backward, guiding her toward the corner of the loft that had been walled off to make my bedroom. She took her hand from me, and as we walked her hands reached behind her and she removed her bra. Dropping it as we moved. She smiled, still the shy giggly woman who I flirted with at work. She didn't realize she was a sexual goddess who held powers over me.

“Condoms are in the bedside drawer.” I nodded at the table as we entered the room.

“Chase...” she said my name as she pulled a foil pack from the drawer.

“Yes?” I reached out for her, wanting her back in my arms.

“I don’t have much experience, but I’ll do my best.” She looked down, avoiding my gaze.

I lifted her chin to look into her eyes. “You already have me turned on and dialed up to ten. I doubt we will have any problems.”

“Really?” she asked.

How had she missed my kisses, my erection trying to get at her from inside my jeans?

“Woman, you are so sexy. Bed,” I commanded.

I hooked my fingers into the panties at her hip as she turned to climb into the bed. She gasped as I pulled them down her legs before she continued into the bed. Everything about her was peaches and cream. That manicured bit of hair hidden in her underwear was redder than the golden curls on her head.

I kicked off my shoes and dropped my jeans, pushing my shorts down at the same time.

“Oh,” she said.

I paused. “What’s the matter?”

“You’re glorious,” she said.

My cock pulsed and throbbed and jerked as if preening from her compliment. I took the compliment; she didn’t know what glorious was. She’d find out once I buried myself in her.

She shifted and reached for her shoes. I stilled her motion, wanting her to keep the shoes on. “Leave them,” I said.

She held out her arms and I climbed in, not hesitating to press my kisses against her skin. Warmth and sweetness teased my tongue as I licked a trail down her neck and between her breasts. They were warm and sweet. She was mana, and I didn’t know how long I could taste her before I was consumed by fire.

Her fingernails bit into my shoulders. I had never experienced a pain so sweet as Gem trying to hold on to me.

I tenderly bit, more than kissed, her stomach as I continued down her body toward my goal. She undulated under me. Her moans drove me on. She fisted my hair in her hand, tugging a sensual zap that traveled through my body like lightning.

Wrapping my hands over her thighs, I spread her legs.

“Chase, are you doing what... oh... aye aye oh.” Words failed Gem as I stopped teasing and licked exactly what I was there for.

Her seam parted and the pot of gold— her clit, was directly under my tongue. If her body was mana, then the honey I lapped from her core was pure ambrosia. I was singular in my goal, make the woman under my mouth cum hard and scream.

I ran my tongue over and around her, dipping into her depths.

Gem writhed and called my name. She was under my control. Her hips lifted to me when I inserted two fingers deep inside. So tight, so hot. She was wet and ready. Her muscles sucked at my fingers.

“You are so ready,” I growled the next time she called out my name.

Gem’s muscles clenched, fluttered and clamped down out of control. Her entire body thrashed as she hit her orgasm. She screamed, not even trying to stifle the sound. It was glorious.

I thrust my fingers deep until she tried to squeeze me out by clamping her thighs together.

I sat back and wiped my beard. She did not disappoint.

“Holy shit, Chase,” she panted around the words.

I smiled as I crawled back up her body.

Using my knee, I knocked her legs apart. With one hand I lifted her knee to my hip and hooked my hand under the heel of her shoes.

“Ready for more?”

“More?” She sounded almost panicked. “I can’t move. I’m limp.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a hidden reserve once I get started.” I reached for the condom and slid it on. “Ready?”

I wasn’t ready for the feel of her pussy around me. Her quivering muscles roared back to life, and Gem alternated between panting and screaming my name. It was a heady combination, and it didn’t take long before my rhythm grew erratic leading up to my release. She screamed again, and I shouted with her as I felt her pull everything from me. I came harder than I could ever remember.

I fell to my back, slipping from her body. “Be right back,” I said with my hand on the condom.

“I think you broke my shoe,” she said, holding up two pieces that looked like they once belonged together.

“I’ll buy you a new pair,” I said as I crawled back in bed and wrapped my arms around her.

“I can’t stay long,” She whispered, almost as if she didn’t want me to hear.

“Stay as long as you can,” I replied. I’d have her in my arms as long as I could, even if she couldn’t stay with me until morning.

This bed never felt so big or lonely after she left. Gem wasn’t the first woman to have sex and then leave. I propped myself up on my elbow. I’d had sex with other women in this bed. Disgusted with myself, I threw back the blankets and climbed out of bed.

It was late, but never too late to send a message to my assistant. He’d get it in the morning and take care of everything. I needed a new bed. A bed that only ever had Gem in it. And new sheets.

I texted, “Order new mattress and all new bedding, ask questions in the morning.”

I groaned when my phone began pinging in the morning. Five-thirty, Tanner was up and reading through my requests of the night. I rolled to a sitting position in a tangle of sheets on my couch.

What was wrong with me? I couldn't sleep in my own bed because women, other than Gem, had been in it. I was thinking like some crazy teenager.

"Have you ordered?" I asked.

"Not yet," he responded.

"Hold off on that request."

"Will do. Time to hit the gym, see you at the office."

Back at the office, I had back-to-back meetings. I wanted to see Gem, but I didn't have time to pop into her office for a chat, and she deserved an in-person visit, not an emotionless text, not after the evening we shared. By the end of the day, I no longer harbored delusions about replacing my mattress. And thoughts of her didn't immediately cause my cock to thicken and jump, ready for action. Maybe what I needed was to not chase after her skirt every day so I could think clearly.

"Chase, pack your bags!" John slammed into my office a few days later.

"Did you bring me coffee?" I asked. "If you're going to start the day by yelling..."

"I thought you were giving that up?"

I shrugged. "What's the emergency?"

"I can't go to the conference in Germany, you'll have to go."

"To Germany?"

## GEMMA

“Hey, have you seen Chase this week?” Maggie asked.

I shook my head. “He hasn’t come by for his weekly updates. I emailed our progress report to him.”

I hadn’t seen him or heard from him since our date. Since I had to leave him in his bed. I hated having to leave him the way I did, half asleep, warm and naked. I wanted to stay curled up against him, running my fingers through the hairs of his chest. Touching his skin.

I wanted something that I couldn’t have yet. Time with him.

I still answered to my mom. I had to be responsible for Amelia. Spending the night in his arms was off the table. What was on the table? Were we a couple now? Could I let my team know I was seeing the boss?

But I couldn’t say that, couldn’t confess that I had basically thrown myself at our boss. I couldn’t tell if I had scared him off, or if he was mad at me. I didn’t know what I had done, and I was afraid to ask.

“No, something must have come up.”

Yeah, hopefully that something hadn’t been a mistake between us. Guilt surged through my veins. What if I ruined the entire campaign because I couldn’t keep my raging hormones in check? I couldn’t believe I slept with Chase. Again. It was spectacular. More intense and satisfying than the first time, and that time had been the culmination of all my years of hard crush and being in love with him. Not that I exactly knew what



I was doing this time— after all my experience with men was limited to Chase, and now Chase again— but this time had been so much better.

Maggie stood in my office door nodding her head.

“You look distracted,” I finally said. I had to stop thinking of myself and my mistakes.

“Yeah, no. Actually, I wanted to confirm your move to social media. I want to make an offer to one of my old colleagues. We have a lot to do and not much time to get it done.”

“Preaching to the choir,” I responded. “So, you really liked that idea?”

“Having you focused on building our social media platform will give us a base to roll this outreach program on. Without it, I don’t think it will take off. I have a friend who left the job at the same time the last marketing director walked out. He’s interested in coming back if we have an opening. I can have him in here by the end of the week.”

“The job openings exist, so why not do it?” I asked. “Do I need to officially interview for the position or put in any paperwork?”

“I’ll give HR a call. Congratulations you are now the Social Media Manager. It will be nice not to have to get you up to speed.”

“What about these other things?” I asked, gesturing to the stacks on my desk, as if Maggie understood my organizational process.

“Get them wrapped up and be ready to hand everything over. I’m going to give Brian a call and see if we can get paperwork started. The sooner he’s here the sooner you can focus.”

I smiled a fake smile but laughed a real derisive laugh. As if I could focus, stuck in this mire of guilt and stupidity I got myself into oversleeping with Chase.

I couldn’t think about that. I had a job to do, and I needed my focus. I managed not to succumb to my guilt and fears once, when I found out I had gotten pregnant after the first time with

Chase. I could rally and do it again this time. Of course, last time I had an ocean to separate us, and now I worked with him. A few floors and attitudes were all that separated us now.

I did my job and managed to get myself home, all the while half of my brain still constantly fought back thoughts of Chase. Maybe he was busy? Why couldn't I text him? What was stopping me from reaching out and telling him I had a good time? Because I really didn't want him to think I was as desperate as I was.

"Are you going to see that man again?" Mom asked during dinner.

I spooned food into Amelia's mouth as she tried to shove a handful of ground meat into it. Feeding her was always a messy task.

"I don't know," I said with a shrug.

I wanted to. I needed to. Amelia needed me to make an effort with her father.

Half of the food in her little fist made it to her mouth. Unfortunately, half the food in her mouth fell out in the process. Good thing she was adorable with those big dark eyes and eyelashes a mile long. She smiled and shoved another fist full of food in.

"Well, I think you need to tell him he's dating a single mother if you do. The last thing you need is to get attached to him only to have him run off once he finds out there's a baby involved."

She was wrong. The last thing I needed was to fall in love all over again with Amelia's father and have him completely ignore me, just like he had for my entire life.

I was already not telling Chase so much, like who I really was, and who my brother was. Mom was right, Amelia should not be one of my secrets.

"If he asks me out again, I will be certain to tell him," I said.

"Good," Mom replied. "You deserve to be happy. I can't imagine how hard the past few years have been for you. I'm so

glad you came home.”

“I’m glad I came home too,” I said. “Staying away seemed like the right choice to have made. Until I came home, and then it seemed like maybe staying in Europe, hiding from you, had really been the coward’s way out.”

“Nonsense. We both know why you did it. John can be very vocal regarding his judgmental opinions. He would have been particularly hard on you. It’s not as if he’s accepting now.”

“No, he isn’t,” I said with a sigh.

“That’s why it’s important you let your date know. You don’t want to end up with someone like John. He’s a catch on paper, but in person...” she trailed off with a chuckle.

“I hear you, Mom. I’ll be sure to tell this guy.”

I picked Amelia up from her highchair and brushed all the food particles off her front. “Did any of that go in your mouth?”

Amelia began making her almost talking babble sounds. “Nah, nan, nan.”

“Nanna is going to be her first word,” Mom said with a hint of pride.

“Followed by ‘Nanna I want,’” I teased.

Mom’s personal assistant walked into the kitchen and the informal dining area where we had dinner. “Is everything okay here?”

“I think there’s more food on the floor than in Amelia,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll take care of it,” Yana said. Yana helped Mom run things. She did everything from help cleaning, to cooking, and handling the grocery shopping. Mom had other part time staff in and out during the week. Yana was the only full-time employee we had, and she had traveled with us from Orchard View.

“Thanks. We’re off to bath and bedtime,” I announced before we left the kitchen.

Getting Amelia ready for bed always took time. She was my world and worth every second. But it was still time that I could easily get lost in my head during. Talking constantly to Amelia through the bath and then reading several stories to her helped me not to get bogged down with my thoughts and worries.

When I returned to my room, my phone buzzed with text messages and a voice mail.

I thumbed through the text messages first. My stomach dropped. There were two, and they were from Chase.

“Gem, need to talk,” followed with, “Call me.”

Apparently, I had left my phone in my room for hours, so I checked the time stamp. The first text had come in during my commute home, but I hadn’t noticed.

I listened to the voicemail, also from Chase. “Gem, we need to talk. Call me, no matter what time. I understand it’s been a few days, but we need to talk.”

I sat on the bed with a heavy heart. He was going to tell me the other night had been a bad mistake.

I pressed the call back number.

“Gem?” I wanted to sink into his voice, instead tears pricked my eyes.

“Sorry, I left my phone in my room and only now saw all your messages.”

“Come over, we need to talk,” he said.

I wanted to see him, but I didn’t need an in-person performance to get dumped.

“It’s kind of late, is this something you can say over the phone?” I kept all emotion from my voice, afraid he would hear the second I started to cry of a broken heart.

“I know I haven’t been around the past few days. I need to see you before I leave town.”



## CHASE

**T**he second I saw her face I knew that avoiding Gem for the past few days had been a mistake. She looked sad and nervous as I opened the door.

“I’m here. What did you want to talk to me about?” she asked.

I stepped back, inviting her in. I wanted to wrap her in my arms and kiss away the frown that furrowed her brow. Instead, I offered to take her coat.

“You didn’t bring me down here just so that you could...” she paused.

Her eyes went wide, and her little mouth made the perfect O. The kind of shape that was irresistible.

“We need to talk without being interrupted. I got busy with work. I realize I should have called—”

“What’s all this?” she interrupted, looking at my loft.

I smiled wide and knew that she appreciated my gesture. A little effort went a long way. I ordered Chinese takeout, which wasn’t very impressive. But I had lit candles and scattered rose petals all over the table. I wanted it to be romantic. I wanted it to look like it mattered that she was here. Because it did.

“I have to go to Europe tomorrow.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Finance, business stuff. Investments, investors. My business partner was originally supposed to take care of it, but he’s getting married. He’s dumped it in my lap. Look,” I took her

hand and walked to the table. “Valentine’s Day is coming up and I’m going to be out of town that day. I wanted to take you out for a special dinner and realized I was running out of time. Especially when I hadn’t bothered to tell you how wonderful the other night was.” I stopped and gazed down at her.

“We have more of a show not tell situation here. It wouldn’t have been impressive for me to say hey, come on over, I’ve got candles and chocolate.”

She smirked up at me. “I don’t know. Did you try?”

I shook my head.

“So instead,”— she crossed her arms over her chest— “you made me think you were breaking up with me, and that you had to see me in person and do it immediately so that whatever was going on at work wouldn’t be impacted. Instead, you made me think the worst.”

I wrapped her in my arms and stroked her hair and held her against my chest. “Gem. I’m sorry you misunderstood my intentions. I was attempting an apology and a seduction. Can you stay?”

She sighed and looked up at me. God, she was breath-taking.

“For a little bit. Not all night.”

I ducked my head down and kissed her. Our lips brushed together. She was soft and sweet. And tasted better than anything I had ever experienced. She was cold water on a hot day. She was ambrosia. I kneaded my fingers into her soft skin, holding her closer, pulling her into me.

“I’ve missed you,” I growled.

She let out a soft moan. “You didn’t call me. You could have texted.”

“Hey,” I said, “you didn’t call or text me either.”

She pouted and I wanted to kiss the expression off her face.

“I emailed you at work, and you never responded. You’re usually in my office. What was I supposed to think?”

I peppered her upturned face with kisses. “You’re right.”

She twisted her finger into my shirt at my chest. “You could make it up to me,” she said with a giggle.

“Oh yeah?” I asked. “How’s that?”

“Well...” She blinked those big green eyes up at me and I was lost.

My chest tightened and my heart pounded harder. I leaned down and kissed her again. This time she snaked her arms around my neck and held my head in place. Her fingers dug into my scalp as she fisted my hair.

Reaching down I grabbed her ass in my hands and lifted her onto the table. Suddenly, we were tearing each other’s clothing. Her fingers deftly unfastened the buttons of my shirt. I found the zipper in the back of her dress, I exposed the skin of her shoulder, but no more. Not to be deterred, I shoved her skirt up and ran my hands up her warm thighs until I found the top of her leggings. I pulled at them, frustrated. Her clothing wasn’t coming off the way it should.

“Let me do that.” She backed away and she squirmed out of her leggings and panties.

I fumbled for my belt and shoved my pants down.

She spread her thighs and I pressed against her. She was hot and wet. Gem skimmed her hands along the skin of my ass. We were skin on skin. I pulled her to the edge of the table and slid into her slick pussy. Everything was perfect.

She sighed, and I felt the weight of the world lifted from my shoulders. All the mistakes were forgiven. All my stupidity forgotten, gone. All I needed was to be in her arms, making love to her. “Wait!” She pounded on my chest. “Wait, Chase, stop. Condom. You need a condom.”

“Fuck. Be right back.” I ran into my bedroom, grabbed a condom, and returned to where she was. She sat perched on the edge of the table waiting for me. Her dress was half off one shoulder. Her hair was a mess, her skirt was up around her waist, her leggings, and panties in a wad on the floor next to her shoes. I slid up to her. She folded her arms around me, and I was back where I belonged.



Gem's noises spurred me to action as soon as I slid into her heat. All I wanted was more squeaks and purrs, moans of delight from her. She clutched my shoulders as if she would fall if she let go. I held on because I was falling for her.

My plans for the evening were all messed up, and I didn't care. I had planned a long game, seduction over dinner, rose petals, a bubble bath, and then my bed. But this worked. This worked well.

She screamed my name as she came. I had no choice but to follow her down into the orgasmic hole that opened in the universe and sucked us in before it spit us both out, spent and panting.

Still pressed together, I took her hand and kissed her palm.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm better than okay," she paused, "that was rather unexpected."

I ran my hand through my hair. "I had a plan and that was on the list, but a bit farther down in this evening's activities."

"Maybe we can go back to your list? And when it's time, do that again?" she asked.

I laughed. "Absolutely. That sounds like a very good idea."

I eased away from her body and noticed the condom was missing.

"Shit," I bit out.

"Is something wrong?" she asked. She leaned back on her hands and looked so relaxed and perfect.

"No, Nothing." I ran my hands up and down her thighs and found a towel and did a little clean up. The condom had fallen off as I pulled out. I located it, took care of it, and then situated my clothing back on. I hated zipping her back up in that dress. I wanted to chew on her delectable shoulder some more. But we had an agenda. Dinner first, seduction later.

"I'm going to clean up a little bit." She bent to scoop up her clothes.

“Leave them,” I said. “Don’t put them back on, make it easier next time.”

It was good logic, but knowing she wasn’t wearing panties made concentrating during our dinner difficult.

“This is really good. The Chinese takeaway uptown isn’t quite as tasty.” She lifted more noodles into her mouth. “Well, what else did you want to talk to me about?”

“Mostly this...” I gestured at dinner.

“And you wanted to touch me.”

“I want all of you. I’m going away for two weeks. I needed to make sure that you knew how I felt.”

Gem put her chopsticks down. Her eyes were wide, and she looked nervous again. “I need to tell you something that I probably should have told you earlier... I have a kid. She’s two and a half and—”

“Wow, wow.” I pushed back from the table. “You have a kid. Don’t you think maybe you should have told me this earlier?” The news bowled into me unexpectedly.

“I’m telling you now,” she said flatly.

“What are you trying to do here? Are you trying to trick me into being your baby daddy? You really should have told me this sooner.”

“I get that. I understand, but you have to understand where I’m coming from,” she pleaded.

“No, you need to understand where I’m coming from. I’m not out to get married and have kids.”

“I get that Chase, but would you listen for a minute?”

Everything in my world came crashing down at that moment. Gem had a child. I was not ready.

Kids were not something that I did. I stared at her and crossed my arms. I didn’t know what to think. I let out a heavy breath.

“Fine, be that way,” she fumed. She pushed back from the table and picked up her clothes from the floor.

“I think our conversation for the night is done. You should go.”



## GEMMA

“**I**’m sorry I couldn’t tell you about my daughter...” I hit the backspace button erasing every word. “I waited to make sure...” Deleted. “She’s not only mine.” Delete, delete, delete.

I shouldn’t have walked out on him the way I had. I should have stayed and made Chase listen to me. But he was gone. He left for Europe. And I felt horrible. I should have told him about Amelia earlier. The look on his face cut me to the core. He looked like I had deceived him so utterly. Like I had manipulated and connived and lied. I hadn’t, I just hadn’t told him about her right away.

So many times, I started to send him a text trying to explain. I deleted them every time. They didn’t make any sense. What words should I use to tell him that I couldn’t tell anybody about Amelia? How would I tell him that he had a baby he didn’t know about from a night he probably didn’t even remember? How was I supposed to do this?

I would do it one day at a time. That’s how I would survive.

I went to work. If all my job was, as John called it, “playing on the internet,” then I shined in my new role as Social Media Manager. It was fun. I enjoyed my job. I no longer cared whether I could show John who was right and who was wrong. Well, he was still wrong, and I was still right. But it really wasn’t about that vendetta anymore.

I was making a difference. CP Manhattan was positioned to appeal to a younger demographic, an untouched client base,

and as an expert in the field. Our social media platform was growing by leaps and bounds every day. I obsessively checked the numbers, so I knew we suddenly had a Twitter following. I had competitors who engaged in friendly banter with me. I made infographics for Instagram, positioning CP Manhattan as a fun industry expert.

I buried myself in work. And I went home, where I lost myself in taking care of Amelia. I continued to narrate everything we did because Amelia wasn't talking, and it was starting to bother me.

"I'm going to call the paediatrician," Mom said after I asked if Amelia was using her words. "I think we should have her assessed."

I nodded. I didn't want to face the possibility that Amelia was developmentally behind, but it needed to be done. Just as telling Chase I had a child had to be done.

"Let's go to Orchard View for the long weekend," Mom suggested. "Let's get out of the city, get some fresh air. You seem so stressed. I think getting away will help you feel better."

I couldn't have agreed more. Getting out of the city where it was gloomy and the snow that was left on the streets was dirty and slushy. It was cold and miserable here.

"Orchard View for the weekend," I sighed. "That would be nice."

It was dark when we pulled up to the estate. The lights were already on. Mom had told the groundskeeper to make sure that the heat was on and that there were lights for us when we got there. She and Yana unpacked the car. I carried Amelia up to her room and then I crashed, exhausted, into my own bed. But I couldn't sleep. I couldn't think about anything other than that look on Chase's face when I told him I had a kid.

He had been looking at me like I mattered. Like fucking me on the table was the most magical thing he had ever encountered, and then in the blink of an eye, his expression changed. There

was no smile tugging at his lips, no mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

I pulled out my phone and stared at it. I needed to get this over with. I needed to text Chase. My thumbs began flying over the words faster than I realized I was thinking.

“Chase. I know I left in a hurry before I had a chance to properly explain. I know you probably couldn’t have heard me that night anyway. I hope you can hear me now when I say I had no intention of misleading you. My family isn’t supportive. They’re very judgmental. I had to keep my baby hidden for several years before I felt safe enough to tell them about her. Now, it’s been so ingrained in how I live that it’s a habit I’ve gotten into. Most of my friends don’t even know about her yet. The ones who do, I left behind in Europe. She is my everything. She is amazing. And I hope you decide that what we have together is worth at least meeting her. What happened between us happened so fast. I wasn’t prepared. Had we gone at a slower pace I might have had time to properly tell you about my life. And let you know that there was a child. I’m sorry, I didn’t tell you sooner. I hope you’re willing to meet her. She’s an amazing baby.”

I had to stop typing. I was becoming redundant and pitiful. I didn’t read over the words, afraid that I would delete everything again. I hit send. The message was gone. It was out there.

I stared at my phone waiting, hoping to see those three little dots that indicated he was texting me back. But there was no response. There was no checkmark to let me know that the message had even been read. I just stared at my phone until I fell asleep.

The next morning after breakfast, Mom dressed Amelia in the most adorable snowsuit that was all baby pink and soft yellow with roses on it. And then we went out into the snow to play. The air felt cleaner at Orchard View than it did in the city. The snow was pristine sparkling white. Amelia had never played in snow before. Her giggling and joy were infectious. She rolled in the snow, and she threw it and I tried to show her how to make a snowball.

We piled snow up into a big heap like we were making a snowman, but with a lot less shape to it. Her little nose turned pink, and I took so many pictures. I showed her how to make a snow angel and took pictures of that. She had so much fun.

Neither of us wanted to go in but we needed to. It was cold outside, and it felt like it was getting colder even though the sun was out and shining and the sky was blue.

“Coe.” Amelia looked up at me and said, “Coe.”

“Cold. Yes. It is cold,” I said. “Cold.”

“Coe,” she repeated.

It was good to have her talking. She needed to talk more.

I picked her up and asked, “Should we go inside and get some hot chocolate with marshmallows?”

She clapped and giggled and laughed. She was the joy that she always was, and Chase needed to meet this child of his. He needed to see how happy, how beautiful, and how precious she was. I knew once he met her, he would change his mind about kids. He had to, he already had one and she is simply perfect.

“Are you going to send me some of those pictures?” Mom asked once we were inside.

“I’ll send them right now.” I stomped the snow off my boots and sat down in the kitchen. Once I had a hot cup of chocolate in front of me, I began selecting which pictures to send.

I picked the cutest ones. Included in the pictures I picked was a selfie of the two of us smiling, and so many snow angels. I hit send.

I froze as I realized I accidentally sent all those pictures to Chase. I didn’t breathe for a second. Could I unsend them? Did I want to unsend them? Maybe that was a good mistake to have sent him all those pictures. Maybe not.

I took a few deep breaths and took a sip of my chocolate. I put the phone down. I needed to finish the hot chocolate before I did anything else and make another stupid mistake.



I tried to go so slow and sip the chocolate. But I couldn't. I practically gulped it down and then I picked my phone up again. This time I made sure that when I sent those photos, I sent them to my mom.

I sent Chase a text. "Sorry, that was an accident. I meant to send those pictures to my mom. I sent them to the last number I had texted and that was you. Please don't think I was doing that on purpose."

I put my phone down and stared at it, terrified he was going to text me back immediately, terrified that I managed to screw things up even more than I already had.



## CHASE

“Do you need anything Mr. Campbell?”  
I looked up at the air host’s voice.

“Would you like some noise-canceling headphones so you can rest?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, thank you. I’m fine.”

“You know how to get my attention if you change your mind,” he said, tapping the call button before leaving.

I returned to thumbing back through my text messages. There, the text from Gem. I still hadn’t read it. I wanted to, but I didn’t want to get angry. I didn’t understand why I was angry. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair to her. But then again, she hadn’t been fair to me, springing her kid on me like that. That’s not what I expected. With her age, she had to have been a teen mother. What was I getting myself into?

Whenever I thought about Gem, her lips, her smell, and her warmth, none of that mattered. Because that was Gem. Her laugh was infectious, and her grin brought sunshine to the gloomiest days and considering the way the weather had been this winter, I needed her smile. I needed her smile more and more.

This was a long flight, and I would much rather think about the beautiful Gem, than reflect on the bullshit I had to deal with from John. There I was staring at my text messages, unread. And a day later according to the time stamp, there were two more.

I eased my chair back and put my feet up. At least I didn't have to elbow my way into a comfortable position. Flying first class had its benefits.

With a deep sigh, I clicked on the text. I read through her first text twice. What kind of a family did she need to hide her child from? I couldn't quite wrap my brain around that one. Gem was used to hiding her child. And then I remembered her saying something about not having as good Chinese takeout uptown.

Gem was an uptown girl. I thought about that. I thought about the way she dressed and the way she'd talked spending summers on Greek beaches.

Oh, that made sense. Gem's family was well heeled, like mine. If she was as old as I thought she was, she would have had to hide that child for a few years. Until there was nothing they could do about it. At which point they had to either accept the child and welcome her back into the family fold or completely kick her out.

If she still lived uptown, which she did, then odds were good, they had accepted her and they had accepted her daughter.

She was right. I needed to meet the child before I made any decisions. I couldn't focus because of Gem. What kind of an idiot would I be to let her go simply because she already had a baby? It'd be the same kind of egotistical idiot who she had to hide her kid from.

I didn't want her to have that part of me. I didn't like that part of me. She deserved a response. I checked the other messages before I did anything. I couldn't move when the pictures loaded. They were in the snow, both so beautiful. Gem and her daughter, a tiny, little cherub, who looked like a miniature version of Gem. But with darker eyes. She looked familiar. And it wasn't that she looked like her mother. There was something else there. Maybe it was the familiar look of that soft, doughy roundness that all babies had.

It looked like they were having a good time in the snow. They were clearly not in the city. Somewhere, upstate, maybe.

I needed to meet this kid. She was cute.

The next message said, “Sorry, that was an accident. I meant to send those pictures to my mom. I sent them to the last number I had texted and that was you. Please don’t think I was doing that on purpose.”

She may have thought she was sending those pictures to her mom. But those were pictures for me. She knew it was going to take that beautiful smile of her child to convince me that I was being an idiot.

I texted her back, “We need to talk. I’ll call you when I’m home.”

Putting the phone down, I eased myself back and figured the flight would go faster if I was asleep. I could dream of Gem and not have to think about any of the past week dealing with distribution partners who wanted to expand into Europe when we didn’t have a product ready to deliver that would work in the European market. I don’t know what John had been thinking about setting that up. Then again, ever since he got engaged, I’m pretty sure John stopped thinking.

A change in the cabin pressure woke me. The long flight was almost over. The plane would land at JFK soon and then I could be with Gem again. As soon as I am on the ground, I’d make arrangements for her to come over, since she never let me know where she lived.

I fished out my phone, intending to text her asking her to come over, telling her what time my flight was expected to arrive. But then my phone started buzzing. It was an incoming message from John.

I clicked the message. “Dinner. 8 PM. That Greek place by the office you like so much. You’re meeting...” The rest were names I didn’t recognize.

I would have to go straight to the restaurant from the airport. I wouldn’t get to go home. I wouldn’t get to put my luggage away. What the hell? Why was he scheduling everything so tightly? The man wasn’t using his brain.

I texted him back, “You handle it.”

As soon as I hit send his reply came in. “Can’t. Doing wedding stuff with Jennifer. If I miss cake tasting, she’ll kill me.”

I typed my message in. “I’ll speak at your funeral. Be dead.” I hit send.

My phone rang with John’s ringtone.

“You’re sending me on all of your errands. I don’t know who these people are. I don’t know what their expectations are. Why are you making meetings for me and not giving me an agenda?” I said as soon as I picked up.

“Chase, it’s finance. That’s your ballpark. You know that you know how to fake it with the best of them. This is a venture capitalist group. They’re only in town through tonight. We’re lucky they’re available to meet with us.”

“Fine,” I said with a heavy sigh. “I’ll do it this time, send me an agenda, email it to my phone. I’m not going into this blind, not like what you did to me in Europe. Why are you telling these people that we’re going to have a product for their market?”

“Because Europe is a logical expansion.” I could hear the misguided enthusiasm in his voice.

“I agree, it is. But it’s a long-term goal, not something we can make delivery on next week.” I spread my hand over my brow and squeezed my temples together, letting out a heavy breath. “Email me the presentation you want me to give. Send me everything you know on this group. And I’ve got”— I glanced at my watch— “maybe forty-five minutes before this bird touches down. So you’re going to send everything to me right?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’ll send everything to you,” he sounded like the petulant child I felt like I was talking to.

“And John, stop doing this to me. Take your own damn meetings. When I’m back in the office, you and I are going to have a real serious sit down over this.”

“Come on, man.”

“No, no John. You just sent me on a wild goose chase through Europe to talk about having our product in their market when we have no intention and no plans on expanding into a European market. Unless you’re making other plans, you’re not discussing with me.”

“Europe is the next logical thing,” he said.

“Long-term,” I reiterated. “John, I spent all week apologizing that we didn’t have a product ready to ship. You sent me out there thinking this was a meet and greet for potential partnering, investing for a European expansion. They were asking about deliverables. Their expectations were dramatically skewed. This should have been handled differently, and not by me. Europe would be nice, but are you planning on retooling all manufacturing so that we fit in the metric system? Not this week. You’re thinking with your dick, not with your head. I need you to get your head back in the game.”

“I know. I know,” he said. “As soon as the wedding is over, I’ll be able to focus again. I need to get through this.”

“There’s no reason why you cannot let Jennifer and her family take over the wedding planning. You do not have to be involved every step of the way.”

“Man, when you get married, you’ll understand,” he said with an I-told-you-so tone.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“If and when I get married, I’m still going to be able to focus on work. That’s all I’m asking you to do. Focus on work when you are at work.”

He laughed, “That’s what you think. Just you wait.” He ended the call.

I immediately flipped to my email and waited for his assistant to send the agenda and the presentation. After five minutes, I navigated back to the text messages from Gem and scrolled through the pictures of her and her beautiful daughter. Yeah, if and when might be a hell of a lot sooner than I ever thought it would be.





## GEMMA

**B**anging on my poor keyboard, I took my frustration out on the computer equipment. The tweet in front of me required a witty response. And all I could think was, “Who cares?”

I pushed back from my desk, I needed to get out of the office for a few minutes. Clear my head. I tapped on the doorframe to Maggie’s office. The door was open.

“Hey, I’m going to go get a coffee. Do you want anything?”

She picked up her coffee cup and wagged it at me. She was good. I paused briefly outside of Bria’s office; the door was firmly shut. That meant she was deep in creative mode, and she needed to be left alone. So, I kept on walking. Matt and Brian were nowhere to be found. I was on my own for coffee.

Once outside, the dismal weather hit me hard. It was cold, it was gray. It was wet. The end of February gloom wasn’t helping my mood at all. Without a reply from Chase everything in my life seemed to have gone from bad to worse. The weather was bad. My mood was worse. The stress was impacting me physically. My face was breaking out, and my hormones weren’t behaving. I hadn’t had my period. I was off schedule by almost a week.

If that wasn’t enough, Mom continued to press me about Amelia’s vocabulary. I wouldn’t know anything until she was assessed. She was two and a half pushing three. How many words was a toddler supposed to know? I knew she should be talking more than she was. But how much more was more? At

what point did baby babble turn into real speech? We had an appointment, but it wasn't for weeks yet.

I didn't know what to do about work either. Social media marketing started off as fun. It was almost like playing for a week or two. And suddenly, now, it was work. Instant Twitter responses depended on my ability to be witty. It was hard to be witty when everything was so dreary. Plus, I was sad. Chase hadn't texted me back. I was afraid to text him, afraid of what he would say.

Wrapped up in my thoughts, I walked down the block and into the coffee shop. The warmth of the shop wrapped around me when I opened the door. The rich smells of coffee, chocolate, and cinnamon made me decide that I deserved something to make me happy. Instead of coffee, I got hot chocolate with extra whipped cream and a muffin. Because muffins always made my mouth happy. And if my mouth was happy, maybe the rest of me might think about being happy too. And maybe, if I was happy, I'd be productive. Because I certainly wasn't being productive in the mood, I was in.

I ate my muffin, more like a mini coffee cake with sugar crumbles on top, and slowly made my way back to the office. A black car pulled up in front of the doors to the CP Manhattan building. Shit.

If that was Chase, what was I gonna do? I couldn't see him right now.

A tall woman who looked familiar stepped out of the back of a car. Her hair was long, medium brown, and straight. It took a moment before I recognized her as Jennifer, John's fiancée. Damn. I couldn't go into the building now.

What if I ran into her in the elevator? She would tell John she saw me. I couldn't have her do that. I turned around and walked away. I had no destination in mind other than to keep myself away from work. Now was not the time to be found out by John. I didn't have accurate numbers yet. I had numbers. They were good numbers, but they weren't enough to prove that my job and marketing made a difference to his business.

Those were the kind of numbers I needed to prove to him that my job was not simply playing on the internet.

Suddenly my stomach, even full of muffin, had this weird hollow emptiness inside. It had to be the stress of getting caught by my brother. I knew part of it was the stress over Chase. What would happen if he didn't want to meet Amelia? Could I continue to work this job if things were over between us? Why was I still at this job? If John found me, he would fire me immediately.

Every day was a risk coming here and if Chase wasn't talking to me, was it worth the risk? Of course, I was making up wild conjectures in my head of what he would say the next time we saw each other.

I braced my hand on my abdomen. No wonder I was stressed. I was a mess.

He hadn't texted me back yet. I thought he was supposed to have been back from Europe by now. Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he was still there and that's why he couldn't respond to any of my messages.

I didn't know. I ran my hand over my face and tried to force my brain and my insides to calm down. The stress was messing me up and I did not like it. I stopped walking and took a deep breath to centre myself.

“Look Gemma, you're badass. You can do this. Now, turn yourself around and take your ass back to the office. You have work to do.”

Following my own instructions, I headed back. One foot in front of the other, I forced myself back to the building.

Dammit if there wasn't another black car pulling up in front. Why was I so concerned? Black cars pulled up in front of our building all the time. Half the time they weren't even for our own offices. CP Manhattan didn't take up that much of the building. We only had four floors. Why would I assume that all of the cars were for our office?

It was time to ignore the car and just keep walking. Go through the doors, go up the elevator, and go back to work. I

had a destination, I had tasks to be done. If I needed a distraction, I could look up delayed speech patterns in two-and-a-half-year-olds. I could do that.

Except for some reason, I couldn't move. I stood there with a muffin wrapper in one hand and a warm hot chocolate in the other. I stood there and I watched Chase step out of that car and walk into the building.

That asshole was in town, and he hadn't texted me? He hadn't called me, hadn't stopped by my office. How many days had I been playing these games in my head?

How much longer was I going to put myself through this? I may have decided when I was five that I was in love with him and that I wanted to marry him some day. When I was fourteen at his father's funeral, and he didn't recognize me, I knew better. I knew better and yet I continued to ignore the reality. Because the heart wants what the heart wants, and my heart wanted him. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I sniffled. I couldn't go back in there. I couldn't go into that building, and up the elevators to CP Manhattan, and go into that marketing department pretending to be happy and smiling like I cared anymore.

I turned around and started walking. I don't know how long I walked for. Eventually, I was on the other side of the city. It was cold and getting dark. I was miles from home and miles from work.

I ducked into the nearest cafe, ordered a cup of coffee. It was bad but warm. I pulled out my phone and shot a quick text to Maggie.

"I am so sorry. I wasn't feeling well. So sorry about that. I'll be back in the office tomorrow morning."

The next call I made was to a car service to come to pick me up and take me home. When I got home Mom already had Amelia in her highchair and they were singing together. Amelia didn't say words, but she sang along as Mom fed her some beans and rice.

"Hey," I said.

“Oh Gemma, are you okay? You don’t sound too good.”

I shook my head. “I’m not feeling the best. That smells good. What’s for dinner?”

“Yana ordered some Cajun food. There are red beans and rice and some kind of sausage, and then a jambalaya. Are you hungry? Do you want to have dinner?”

I looked at her, I felt numb. “I don’t know. Yes, maybe. I just... I’m just really tired and confused.”

“Sit,” Mom ordered.

I sat. I shrugged. “I told that guy about Amelia, and he hasn’t called me back.”

Mom gave me that ‘I-told-you-so’ kind of look. The kind she would give me if she caught me playing with a bee. ‘It’ll sting you,’ she would say. And then I’d get stung. And she’d have to deal with me crying and blubbering about being stung by the stupid bee after she had told me not to play with it. It was a look I deserved.

“Well, this is why you needed to tell him so that he didn’t confuse you or break your heart,” she said matter of factly.

I couldn’t tell her my heart was already broken. “You’re right.”

“Why don’t you go have a nice hot bath. I’ll put Amelia to bed. Maybe in the morning, you’ll feel better. Get your head on right. You can eat dinner later once you’re hungry.”

She was right. As I climbed the stairs to my room, I thought maybe I should just quit. But I wanted the job, and I liked the job. And dammit, I really wanted to prove John wrong. Now, I needed to get over the fact that I’d have to work with Chase.

I could be an adult; I could do it. If he wanted to ghost on our relationship and pretend that nothing happened between us, I could let him play that game. I didn’t want to. But I was prepared to do it. I needed to stop running away and hiding when things got messy.



## CHASE

**A**fter a follow-up breakfast meeting with the venture capitalists that lasted well past lunch, I headed straight to Gem's office. She hadn't responded to my 'let's talk' text. To be fair, I had wasted time responding to her. I didn't want to waste any more time.

"She's gone out for coffee," Maggie said as she spotted me. Hopefully, I wasn't too forlorn looking as I stared into Gem's empty office.

"She should be back soon. Want me to tell her you were looking for her?"

It took a few moments longer than it should for Maggie's words to sink in. I was ready to camp out and wait for her. But CFOs did not wait for Social Media Managers, no matter how sexy they were.

"Yeah, that would be great." I nodded and headed back to my office.

I reviewed my texts, having missed a few last night and this morning.

"Welcome back to the States. New linens are on the bed. Dinner is in the fridge. Your choices are manicotti or green chicken enchilada. Instructions on the containers. I will email your meal plan for the week for approval before I go shopping. I've delivered a new tub of chocolate protein builder to the gym." I read the first message from Tanner. It came in last night.

I hadn't even noticed that I slept on new sheets. I made a note to review and approve the meal plan. Tanner did the shopping for the cook, coordinated my meals with the cook, and even acted as a go-between with the gym's nutritionist. Without him, I wouldn't have a skincare routine, and I'd shave with disposable plastic razors.

There were more messages from this morning.

"The cleaner told me to tell you no more rose petals on the carpet. They get ground in. Slick move BTW. Let me know if you still need that mattress replaced."

In the last one, he wrote, "Your favorite Tom Ford suit is at the cleaners. You didn't try the new coconut roast coffee. It's decaf."

"That coffee smelled too good to be the fake stuff." I sent back. I stopped myself from requesting him to order condoms. Tanner might buy my toilet paper and deodorant, but there were some things a man took care of himself. I always sent my own flowers, and I bought my own condoms.

"Shit," I yelled.

"Is everything okay, Mr. Campbell," Sandy, my executive assistant asked, through the intercom. "I heard you yelling."

Everything was not okay.

"Dropped something, didn't mean to startle you," I replied. Yeah, I dropped the fucking ball when it came to Gem.

The message to Gem sat there on my phone with a red exclamation mark next to it. The message had not been sent. She had no idea that I wanted to talk, to meet her child. She had no idea that I had responded. I instantly hit 'try again.'

Immediately I called her office. It went to voicemail. I called Maggie.

"Is she back yet?" I demanded to know.

"Gem? No. I'm sorry I don't know what happened," Maggie replied. "I expected her back much sooner than this. I'll be sure to let her know you are eager to get brought back up to speed."



“Thanks,” I said before ending the call.

I punched in the extension for John’s office. “Is he in?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Campbell, Mr. Peters is out for the rest of the afternoon. Do you need me to reach out to him for you?” John’s assistant asked.

“No thanks, I’ll call his cell.”

“Very well, Mr. Campbell. Let me know if there is anything I can do to assist.”

Can you make time fly? Can you go back in time and undo my stupid mistakes? There was nothing she could help me with.

I spent the rest of my day reviewing my notes from my meetings in Europe, filling in gaps that I had missed. I handed Sandy my notes. She would compile the completed report while I worked on my review analysis to include at the end of the document. It was a struggle to keep my personal opinions regarding why I had made the trip out of the report and present the travel justification in an objective fashion.

The next morning, I bribed the door security guard to call me the second Gem walked in the building. I wasn’t going to wait in her office like some lovesick puppy waiting for her to come in. But I wanted to be there as soon as she arrived. My heart leaped to my throat the second I saw her. She did not look pleased to see me. I didn’t blame her.

Even her choice of clothing and hair style for the day were severe, unfriendly. Typically, she wore her hair down in a riot of ringlets that I always found irresistible to touch. Today the mass was coiled tight against her head, and her dress was matronly, functional grey. I wanted to reach up and pull the pins and let her hair cascade down.

“Did you get my text?” I asked.

She didn’t speak as she breezed past me and started putting bags away before she sat down. She looked at me. I couldn’t read her expression. Her continence was perfectly controlled, showing no emotion.

“I got it this morning.”

I squeezed my temples together. This was difficult without caffeine. “I sent that message a couple of days ago. There must have been a connection issue on the plane.”

“A couple of days ago? You certainly took time responding to my messages.” Her face may have been controlled, but her voice was not. Anger and the threat of tears laced her tone.

“Do we have to do this, here? Right now?” she whispered. She sounded tired.

“You’re right,” I agreed. The office wasn’t the best place for us to hash out our relationship issues. I wanted to have one with her and that’s why I was there. I reached back and swung the door closed. Her gaze followed the motion before returning to me.

“I don’t know if I want to talk to you right now. I don’t know what to do with you in here pretending like nothing happened.”

“Gem, listen,” I said.

She pointed at me. Anger and hurt were all directed at me from the point of her fingertip.

“I put myself out there. I told you the truth, knowing that this could happen, and it did. Do you have any idea how hard that was? And you wonder why I didn’t tell you immediately? And here you are, do you expect me to throw myself at you like nothing happened?” She kept her voice low, menacing.

How dare she tell me that I was acting like nothing happened? She tossed a wrench into my expectations. At the very least I was going to be surprised. My shock was an honest reaction.

“I am very aware of what happened. I don’t owe you any explanations. I don’t know why I came here this morning.” I stood and paced back in front of her office door. I wanted to charge out of there. Something in my gut prevented me from putting my hand on that door handle and ripping the door open.

“You’re right, you don’t owe me anything. You don’t owe me your time. You don’t owe me explanations. But I would think

that you could treat me like a person with feelings. Come on, Chase.”

I stared at her. I didn't know what she wanted from me. I didn't know what I wanted from me. I turned to leave, placing my hand on the door handle.

“Chase?” she asked.

I could hear her voice quavering with emotion. I turned to look back. She swiped at tears rolling down her cheek.

“Ignore them. I'm ignoring them, they're an anger response.”

I nodded.

“You're right,” she continued. “You don't owe me anything.”

But I wanted to. I wanted to be beholden to her, to tell her where I was and what I was doing. I wanted her to care and need to know. I didn't know how to deal with the emotions battling in my body. I hadn't felt so confused over a woman since I was nineteen. I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

Neither of us said anything. We stared. It was a show-down of wills, and neither of us gave in.

It was the wrong choice.

“I think it's best if we keep our interactions to a working arrangement. I think the term relationship is a little too loaded now,” I finally said. “You can email you the status report so that I don't have to waste time coming down here.”

“If you say so.” She nodded curtly.

“I think that's best.” I returned the nod and left. In the elevator, I pulled out my phone and looked at the pictures of what I could have had that I just lost. Gem with her nose pink from the snow, and a beautiful daughter I didn't even know I wanted until it was clear I would never have.



## GEMMA

“**Y**ou’re going to break something.”

I jumped, caught by surprise. “Oh, hi Bria. I’m getting all this clean and organized. It felt so untidy and scattered.”

“Uh-huh, that’s what you’re gonna call it?” She leaned against the door frame with her arms crossed. “I recognize a rage cleaning when I see one. Is there something we need to discuss?”

I stopped mid-move with a handful of notebooks and stared at her. What would we need to discuss? It took me a minute longer than it should have.

“Oh, no we are good. Work is good. This”— I shrugged and twisted indicating my office cleaning frenzy— “has nothing to do with work.” I dropped the notebooks onto an empty shelf.

“Man trouble then?” she asked.

I turned to her with a sigh. “That obvious?”

She stepped into my office and closed the door behind her before having a seat. “I told you, I know a rage cleaning when I see one.”

Lowering myself into my chair, I felt defeated. Chase had won and I was the one left holding my heart in my hands.

“Can I ask you some advice on a personal issue?” I asked.

“Does this potentially involve anyone who might work here?”

I shook my head, “No one in the department.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.” She raised her eyebrows at me.  
“Anyone...”

This time I nodded.

“I have a better idea,” she said as she stood. “Instead of having a nice little chat in your office, let’s ditch this place and get a drink.” She looked at her watch. “It’s half past, so we’re only ducking out a little early.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” I cast my gaze around my office.

Bria laughed. “Now that you’ve started you want to finish cleaning this, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“Come find me when you’re ready to leave,” she said.

“I should be done in ten minutes, fifteen tops,” I said as she left.

Twenty minutes later we were walking out of the building discussing potential places to get a drink and find a quiet corner to talk.

“I’m not usually the Happy Hour type. I don’t have a clue,” I confessed.

Bria gave me a quick up and down look. “You’re what, ten years younger than me, and you don’t hit Happy Hour?”

I shook my head. “I don’t live the standard single and mingle lifestyle. That’s part of my problem.”

“There is a good place another block up. They have cheap drinks and good chicken wings.” Bria pointed in the direction we were headed.

I followed her into a building and up to the second floor. I never would have thought to have looked there for a neighborhood bar with food.

“The burgers here are also really good if you’d rather not snack.” Bria shrugged out of her coat as she slid into a booth.

“Snack is good,” I responded. “Can I get a white wine and a sparkling water?” I ordered.

“I’ll have a light beer,” she ordered. “And we’ll split a large order of wings.”

Once the waitress left our table Bria turned all her attention to me. “Is this about Chase Campbell?”

“Is it that obvious?” I asked with a roll of my eyes.

“Are you serious? That man has been in your office constantly since this project began. I’d have to be blind not to notice something. And I am not blind.”

I couldn’t tell if I was blushing from the embarrassment of being caught in the middle of something with Chase, or the embarrassment of my co-workers knowing when I was trying to be discreet.

“Pretend for a minute you don’t know who I’m talking about,” I said.

“Sure. I’ll pretend. So, you wanted to ask about this guy you’ve been seeing?”

I scrunched up my face, thinking. “It’s more about how we’re both handling some information. I should probably start with the fact that I have a kid at home.”

Bria’s eyes went wide at the news. I hadn’t been very open regarding my home life, and I hadn’t shared that I was a young, single mother with anyone at work.

“The problem is, I didn’t start with that information with this guy when I agreed to go out with him. We almost had a second date, and that’s when I told him.”

“And he overreacted?” she added.

I nodded. “I told him as soon as I saw a reason to. I mean, one dinner date if I never wanted to see him again, no harm no foul in not mentioning my daughter. Right?”

She stared at me. Her steady gaze was only interrupted by the waitress delivering our drinks.

Bria took a long drink of her beer. I sipped my wine.

“You have your reasons for keeping your family personal. But I don’t see anything wrong with a second date as a good time to tell someone about your kid.” She leaned forward, over the table. “You went on two dates with Chase Campbell?”

“What happened to pretending you don’t know who I’m talking about?”

She sat back with a laugh. “Be it Chase, or some rando named Tad, a second date seems like plenty of warning. And frankly, if a guy freaks over your kid, then he’s not worth your time. Besides, you really shouldn’t be dating—”

“There is no policy against dating within the ranks at CP Manhattan. I checked,” I said defensively.

“It’s not,” Bria said with a sigh. “It’s not dating at the office, so much as who we are pretending, we aren’t talking about. Chase seems to be a good guy, but...”

She trailed off and I waited for her to continue.

“But what? Is he a notorious womanizer?” I couldn’t wait any longer.

She shook her head. “Not Chase. You probably didn’t hear about everything that happened with the other owner, John Peters.”

I suppressed a grin and kept my ass firmly planted in my seat. Bria had rumors about my brother John. John, who always acted like he was Mr. Perfect. The anticipation was going to kill me.

“No, what happened?” I hoped I didn’t sound too enthusiastic.

“Peters was the corporate womanizer. That is until he went head-to-head with a gold digger from acquisitions.”

“How do you know she was a gold digger?” I asked. Her story had me on the edge of my seat.

“After they were engaged, they had a huge fight in the fifteenth-floor atrium about the size of her ring. Huge fight, so many of us were there and heard it.”

“You heard this, yourself?”



“Gem, when I say it was a huge blowout. They were both yelling. She threatened to call HR and start a sexual harassment suit if he didn’t cough up another three carats. He called her a gold digger.”

“Seriously? And they’re still engaged?”

“You’ve probably seen her.”

Bria had no idea. And I had seen the ring on her finger. I figured it was ostentatious because John was showing off.

“She sweeps into the office like she owns the place,” Bria continued.

“So, what happened?” I asked.

“She got at least three more carats, and a week later she was ‘retiring from her career.’ I don’t remember if her quitting work was part of the argument, but it was definitely part of the making up.”

I sat back in my chair. “I hope he gets a good prenup.”

Jennifer wouldn’t be able to touch any of my assets, or the properties I shared with John. But our father only bequeathed his CP Manhattan shares to John. All that money and the future of the company were at risk.

I smirked. It would serve John right. Jennifer had seemed reasonably nice when I met her at Christmas. She had seemed rather cowed by John and deferred to him. It was good to hear she had some backbone when it came to putting up with him. I hadn’t pegged her as a gold digger. My brother was such a snob, he was the type to have dating requirements. It wouldn’t surprise me if he needed to see family tax records going back three generations to establish a pedigree. He was a total elitist.

“I can’t imagine,” Bria said with a shake of her head.

“Right?” I shrugged. I could imagine. I had a rough prenup already drafted as part of the estate that was left to me. My father was more interested in taking care of the money and properties he left me than he was in making sure I was protected. But Bria didn’t need to know that.

Before I realized it, I had a pile of chicken bones on my plate and both my wine, and the sparkling water were gone.

“This was fun,” I said.

“It was. I’m glad we did this. And look, Gem, I won’t tell anyone in the department about who you are or aren’t dating.”

“Thanks, I didn’t think you would. Besides, from what you already said, I’m the last one to realize that everyone could already tell something was going on.”

“If he likes you, he’ll come around. And if he doesn’t—”

“I’m a professional, it won’t affect my work,” I said.

“No, I was going to say his loss.”

I thought about Bria’s words all the way home. “His loss.” She was right. She had to be. Chase had to be the one missing out on his daughter. If I faced the fact that I was the one missing out on Chase, I might not be able to go on.

“How was work? You’re home late,” Mom said when I got home.

“I went out for drinks with one of my co-workers.”

“Making friends? Oh, Gemma, that’s great.”

“Yeah, it is. She said something that got me thinking. That guy I was seeing, it’s his loss if he doesn’t want to meet Amelia. Not mine. On the same concept, by hiding Amelia, you lost out on knowing you had a granddaughter.”

“Gemma, we’ve gone over this. I understand. I really do. I know your brother more than he would like.”

Mom folded me into a hug.

“I am so sorry I did that. I was so scared. I don’t want to be scared about hiding her anymore.”



## CHASE

I opened my refrigerator door looking for anything to eat. I felt empty in my soul and thought, maybe some food would help. Maybe my problem was physical and not emotional. I refused to believe that breaking up with Gem was affecting me this way.

Front and centre on the top shelf was a small basket of chocolate-covered strawberries. I don't know how I missed them. I clearly hadn't opened the refrigerator for a few days. I picked one up and took a large bite. It was sweet and juicy. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the play of flavors on my tongue, the rich fudge, the sweet fruit. They reminded me of Gem, rich, creamy, and delightful. She would love these.

I knew exactly why Tanner had bought them and placed them where I would find them. He thought I had a new girlfriend that I wanted to impress. He was making sure that I had the necessary tools for seduction. I hadn't told him anything. Of course, leaving rose petals strewn all over the apartment before I left for Europe would have been his number one hint.

Unfortunately, there was nothing to say at this point. Based on my last conversation with Gem, I didn't have a girlfriend. And I wasn't going to if I kept acting like some ignorant dick. This wasn't acceptable.

I was making decisions without exploring my options. I hadn't even met her child, and I was acting like I was willing to throw away all my feelings for Gem. I wanted her. I wanted her kisses. I wanted her body. I wanted her laughter. I needed

her in my life. And if that meant she came with a kid, then I had better step up.

I looked around my apartment, it was empty. Just me and the brick walls. The art, the furniture, none of it held any meaning. This place was nothing but a shell to sleep in. For the right woman, this could be a wonderful home. For Gem, it could be our home.

I looked at my phone and flipped it in my hand a few times. What was I waiting for?

I texted Gem. I owed her an apology and that needed to happen sooner than later.

“Meet me at a coffee shop, neutral ground?” I hit send before I finished my message.

I began typing again. “Apologies need to happen, and I would like to do that in person. The pizza stand where we had our first date?” I immediately deleted that text. The pizza stand where we had our first date was not neutral. That location might have an emotional attachment, no matter how tenuous, for Gem. I needed someplace even more neutral, more central.

I tried the text again, this time I suggested a coffee shop in Greenwich Village. That seemed neutral enough. I waited for her to respond. As I waited rather impatiently, I ate one more of those chocolate-covered strawberries because they weren’t going to last long enough for me to give them to Gem. I would have Tanner buy more. If I had anything to say about it, they would be necessary. Gem would get chocolate-covered strawberries every day of the week if she wanted them. I needed her back. And I needed to figure out why I kept messing up.

My phone buzzed with a text from Gem. “Why can’t we just talk on Monday?”

My thumbs flew as I typed in a response. “Because you deserve a real conversation outside of work.”

Having this conversation over text messaging seemed impossibly drawn out and incredibly long. I wanted to know what she was thinking. I wanted to be able to look at her face

and see as she formulated her thoughts and watch her brow crinkle up as her lips pursed together. I wanted to see her smile as she solved a problem and came up with solutions. Instead, I stared at the flat screen of my phone and waited for her to say yes or no, or to change the location.

“Sure.”

“I can meet you there. Tomorrow morning, before lunch.”

“I can do that.” I texted back. “If things go well, have lunch with me.”

“Let’s stick with the coffee for now. I can’t make any promises beyond that.”

Tomorrow morning couldn’t come soon enough.

By the time Gem walked into the coffee shop the next morning I figured I had been too late. She looked tired and listless with dark circles under her eyes. Her eyes should have had flashes of green sparkles. They had no life to them. She looked worn down.

I had been responsible for that.

“Do you know what you want? I’ll go up and order it,” I said as I pulled out a chair for her.

She sat and looked up at me, blinking slowly a couple of times.

“A regular coffee. Nothing special. Black.” She shrugged.

A moment later I was back with a black coffee for her and a green tea for myself. If I couldn’t have caffeine, I saw no point in coffee.

“Thank you for coming,” I said as I returned with our drinks.

She stared at me.

I felt my gut clench. She was giving me the time. I needed to make the most of it and stop messing around.

“I handled the entire situation poorly. When I talked to you in your office, I doubled down and made everything worse.”

She took a sip of her coffee and nodded. “Go on,” She prompted.

“When you told me about your daughter, you caught me off guard and I didn’t respond well. You deserve better from me. I have this friend. He’s highly competitive. And he’s recently gotten engaged and is getting married.”

She nodded. So, I knew she was listening, even though she wouldn’t look at me.

“He’s pressuring me in a very oddly specific way that resulted in me responding negatively to your information.”

She looked up at me, her expression blank. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Let me try to explain this clearly. I responded poorly to you telling me you have a child because I was being pressured regarding expectations from outside sources.” That made sense, I don’t know why she wasn’t following along.

Her brow furrowed, and then she began nodding.

“So, for some reason, you think, because I already have a daughter that I want for you to become some kind of a father figure? Look, Chase, that’s not what any of this was about. So, if you are feeling that pressure, that’s not coming from me. That’s an internalized issue that you’re having with your friend. That’s not on me. That’s on you,” she said.

I nodded in full agreement. “You’re right.”

“That is your problem, Chase, but you ended up making it my problem. And now it’s gotten between us. I’ll accept your apology because we need to be able to work together like professionals.”

“Go out with me again,” I directed.

“Why should I? You’ve made it very clear through your rejection and your lack of communication that there is no reason for us to continue.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “Gem, give me a second chance.”

She blinked up at me. “What does this second chance date look like for you?” she asked.

“It looks like taking you and your daughter out for a day, the park, the zoo.”

“It’s too cold for the zoo.”

“Fine, the Natural History Museum. Would a day at the Natural History Museum be acceptable?” I asked.

“You want to take me and Amelia out for a day at the museum?”

“Yes, and to the finest lunch in New York City,” I said with a grin. My heart sped up with anticipation.

“Okay, a second chance means that we are a package deal. That means your friends are going to see you dating a single mother and her child, and they are definitely going to think that I’m out trying to trick you into becoming a father figure for my daughter.”

“If anyone says anything I’ll shut them down.”

She nodded. “It means that our choices and schedules will be determined by a toddler and that sometimes things will have to change because of her health or mood. Do you think you can handle it?”

“I can handle anything,” I said.

I knew I could handle that. Because when it came down to it, I wanted Gem, and if this is what it took, then I was all in. I needed to call Tanner. I wanted some of those strawberries to give to Gem when I saw her and her daughter for our first date with the three of us.





## GEMMA

“**I**’m run down, exhausted all the time,” I stuck my tongue out as prompted by the nurse. I decided to stop at a clinic on the way home from work. I know Mom would have called a doctor to come to the house for me, but I didn’t want her to worry.

“Any fevers?”

“None,” I said as the nurse practitioner felt my neck for swollen glands. “I’m sure this is all from the stress at work. But I’m throwing up practically every day. I was wondering if maybe it’s my gallbladder?”

“How’s your pain?” She began pressing against my abdomen after I mentioned my gallbladder.

“Nothing specific, the odd headache,” I answered.

I shook my head when she asked if I had specific twinges or pinching in my side.

I was convinced it was a combination of nerves from the impending launch at work and my date with Chase. He was finally going to meet Amelia. But I had never been so nervous to be throwing up.

“Let’s have you pee in a cup so we can rule pregnancy out. If that’s negative, then we’ll run some blood work. I don’t think it’s your gallbladder.”

I nodded. I took the offered plastic cup and went to the restroom to fill it.

I clapped the sides of my feet together as I waited for the nurse to return with my results.

“Ms. Lafayette?” Someone knocked on the exam room door as they opened it.

A different nurse walked in with a stack of pamphlets. I knew what all of that meant.

“But we used protection,” I whined.

“And sometimes that fails,” she responded. She hadn’t even told me my pregnancy test was positive yet. “Do you have an obstetrician?”

I shook my head. “I guess it’s time to find one.”

I had a date with Chase in two days. I had a marketing campaign to launch on social media. I had a toddler who didn’t talk. I did not have time for this, for another baby.

I made it through the next few days in a complete fog. Now that I knew I was pregnant, suddenly my clothes didn’t fit comfortably, and the wrong smells made my tummy lurch.

I did not see Chase before our date at the museum. I don’t know how I would have handled things. I was terrified I would just blurt it out, “You got me pregnant, again.” And then I would have to explain everything, including Amelia.

I was already stressed enough, freaking out over this pregnancy was not something I could handle now. I needed to figure out what my next step was. Should I just pack up and leave? Go back to Switzerland for another three years? If I did that, by the time Mom found out she had a second grandchild, Amelia would be older. And any chance I had with Chase would have been long gone.

No, I needed to let Chase know. It was more imperative now than ever before. I still didn’t know how to do that. I was still stuck on how to tell him I already had one of his children, and now I was going to have another one. He didn’t even know who I really was. How could he? I told him my name was Gem Lafayette, I was pretending to be someone else and not John Peters’ little sister.

For a moment I thought that maybe this was the true litmus test. If Chase could not figure out that Gem Lafayette was previously known to him as Gemma Lafayette-Peters, did I want him around?

I stopped that train of thought. I couldn't put this on him. I was not being honest with who I was. And if he didn't know, that was on me, not on him.

He freaked out so badly when I told him about Amelia. How was he going to take this news? How would he deal with the news that I was John's sister?

I wasn't exactly lying about who I was. But I wasn't being completely truthful in the same way John wasn't being truthful about who he was. His name was Jonathan Lafayette-Peters. He chose to go by John Peters. How was that different from what I was doing? I convinced myself they were the same thing.

The morning of our date I was up before my alarm clock. I checked the weather and decided I would need to dress warm, and I would need to make sure that Amelia was dressed in layers.

After I got myself dressed, I opened the door to Amelia's room, and I watched her sleep. Her hair was a curly mess. Her face was perfect with her little nose and her round cheeks. I didn't want to wake her up. She looked so peaceful.

"Amelia baby, it's time to get up."

She ground her tiny fists into her eyes.

"Uhm mum mum." While her muttering wasn't quite a 'mama,' or a 'mommy,' it was her talking and saying 'mommy.'

"Yes, baby. It's mommy." I picked her up and held her close. She was warm and sleepy, snuggly. "We're gonna have a big day today. You're going to meet one of mommy's friends. And we're going to look at dinosaurs."

She snuggled against me. Dinosaurs didn't seem to draw her that much as they did to me. I decided not to tell her we were

meeting her father in case, by some miracle, she decided today was the day to start talking.

I changed her before we headed downstairs for breakfast. Mom wasn't up but Yana was.

"Good morning, Yana."

"Good morning," she said. "You're up early."

"Amelia and I are going out for the day," I said.

"Do you want me to make you breakfast?" she asked.

"Let me," I said. "I like to cook."

After we ate and finished getting ready, we walked to the museum to meet Chase. It was cold. But I think that air helped wake me up.

He was waiting for us at the top of the stairs, hugging himself against the cold weather.

"Ready to go in?" he asked as soon as we arrived.

I nodded. Once inside we removed our coats, and I removed the extra blanket covering Amelia. I knelt next to the stroller and picked up her hand.

"This is my friend Chase. Can you say hi?"

She shook her head. She wasn't going to talk.

"Chase, this is my daughter Amelia."

He looked down at her and didn't say anything for a long time. I held my breath as he cut his gaze away from her and looked at me and then looked back at her.

"She looks exactly like you," he said.

"I've been told," I giggled. I couldn't help it, compliments from Chase made me giddy.

"I brought these for lunch," he said, handing a box to me.

"Oh, what is it?" I asked. I started to open the box, but Chase stopped me, resting his hand on mine.

"Wait for lunch. I thought you could put them in the stroller, so I don't have to carry them around."

I nodded and placed the box, along with our coats in the basket under the stroller seat.

We walked through the exhibits and found our way to an interactive exhibit where I could let Amelia out of her stroller, and she could touch and bang things that made noise. She giggled and had a good time. “She’s not what I expected,” Chase said, as he watched her.

Amelia sat on my lap. We found a button that made noises and lights show up on a screen every time she hit it.

“What were you expecting?”

He shrugged. “I was thinking, you know, a baby.” He mimicked holding motions with his arm.

“But you saw her pictures, right?” I asked.

“I did. After that I expected her to be a little more self-reliant and talkative. She doesn’t talk much. Is that normal?”

I shrugged. What was normal? What was developmentally behind? I wouldn’t know until she was looked at. Amelia communicated in a way that was normal for her.

Amelia started making angry sounds as she pushed the button and hit the button harder.

“Is it not making the sounds you want, baby?”

She made her angry growling sound.

“I think maybe we need to not play with this game any longer.” When I tried to lift her away from the game, she fought me and started whining.

I heard Chase let out a breath. I didn’t need for him to add his frustration to hers. He agreed to go out with me and a toddler. And he should know that toddlers get cranky.

“Hey, Amelia,” he said, kneeling. He reached his hands out to her as if he wanted to pick her up.

She held her arms out to him for him to take her. Butterflies fluttered in my insides, or maybe that was the new baby giving me that excited nervous tummy feeling.

I wasn't sure which surprised me more, Chase's action, or Amelia's reaction to him. She didn't go to other people that easily.

He lifted her and he started speaking with small cooing sounds. "I think it's lunchtime. I'm kind of hungry. Are you hungry?"

She nodded, keeping her eyes on him the entire time.

He turned to me and said, "I know the best place to get lunch after the museum. Why don't we go do that? Maybe a little food and Amelia here will feel better."

I blinked up at him. "Yes, of course." They looked so natural together. I know people said she looked like me, but I couldn't help but see how much she looked like her father as he held her.

He hadn't gotten angry with her or complained at all. He knew exactly what she needed. He knew exactly what we all needed. It was lunchtime. He helped Amelia with her coat. And then I held her while he got his coat on. He insisted on carrying her once again. After I got my coat on, we went to the hot dog stands that were parked right in front of the museum.

Chase had been right. He knew the best place for lunch after a day at the museum. We sat on the steps as we ate our hot dogs. I helped Amelia by breaking her hot dog into small bites. We were about halfway through our lunch when Chase nodded to the stroller.

"You can open the box now," Chase said.

I handed him our hot dogs. He easily balanced them in one of his large hands. I lifted the box from where I was storing it. I opened it with a gasp.

"Chocolate covered strawberries," I exclaimed. "My favorite."

"There's one for each of us. Pick your favorite," Chase said with a grin.

They were all my favorites. I couldn't decide between the dark chocolate or the marbled chocolate. I showed Amelia the box.

"Which one should we eat first?" I asked.

She reached for the one closest to her. Milk chocolate with dark chocolate sprinkles.

“Okay,” I said, picking that one up.

I blushed when I made eye contact with Chase. I closed my eyes and took a bite. Perfection. When I opened my eyes again Chase was positively smoldering at me. The heat in his eyes made all my nerves dance.

It took concentration to break off a piece of the chocolate and strawberry and feed it to Amelia. Once she had a taste of the desert, she was no longer interested in her hot dog.

“Can I finish this for you?” Chase asked.

Amelia nodded and tried to grab at the strawberry for more. By the time we finished the treat, she was rubbing her eyes and ready for a nap. Next thing I knew she was lying back on her own and fast asleep.

“Wow,” I said. “That’s exactly what she needed. Food in, and out cold. Those strawberries are amazing. Where did you find them this time of year?”

“I was thinking that I needed food, so why wouldn’t she be hungry too? The strawberries are my little secret. You’ll have to keep seeing me if you want more,” he smirked.

“You drive a hard bargain, Chase. I’d like that. To see you more. But I think we’re done for today,” I said pointing at my sleeping child.

“Let me call a car to take you home.”

I shook my head. “The fresh air will keep her asleep longer. I don’t mind the walk.”

The truth was I didn’t want Chase to know where I lived. I was sure that over the years he had to have been to the townhouse before. Would he remember who that townhouse belonged to?

“I can accept that,” he said and then he kissed me. “I look forward to doing this again, with both of you.”



I was in the clouds the entire walk home. I kept seeing his smile as he asked to see us again. I kept thinking about how Amelia looked in his arms. They were a pair, they belonged together.

I needed to tell Chase who she was but I didn't want to scare him off.



## CHASE

“Well, it’s out there. We just have to wait for the numbers to come rolling back in,” Maggie announced.

I met the marketing team in the conference room the morning of the official launch. Maggie looked pleased, as she should have been. They pulled off the outreach launch, updated our website, and created a social media platform all in less than two months, all with an understaffed department. Clients had been responding before the official launch date. Even without supporting numbers, I considered this to have been a successful project.

“I think we need to celebrate,” I said.

“Shouldn’t we wait to see what the numbers look like before we celebrate anything?” The new guy, Brian, asked. More than once, he reminded me that he wasn’t new to CP Manhattan. He had returned to our employment mid-project and was thrilled to be doing something with a little more substance to it. Apparently, John, as COO, wasn’t particularly supportive of marketing efforts in the past. This was interesting to learn from an employee who wasn’t afraid to tell me.

“We’ll see feedback in as little as twelve hours, but the real impact isn’t going to be traceable for weeks. That’s when we should start to see inquiries, and then sales increases.”

“I still think you should celebrate a job well done. This was my first time working with the marketing team. I want to say

that it was very impressive. I'm taking everyone out to celebrate. Clear your schedules for Thursday night." I spoke.

"We'll also have some initial numbers by then. We should have a reason to celebrate at that point," Gem said, with a smile. I loved her smile. It did things to me that my body had no right to respond to while I was at work.

"I heard your little project launched," John said the next time I saw him.

"Little project?" I asked. "Have you not been paying attention? This is the outreach program the board signed off on at the end of last year. We've been working toward this for almost two full quarters."

"Right. Do you have results yet?"

"It's too soon for results. It just released," I reminded him.

"Then it's too soon for you to be celebrating. You don't celebrate until you see the numbers. I think you overestimate the impact that marketing and social media have on our client base."

I shook my head. "I think you're the one missing the big picture here, John. After all, you're the one who thought marketing was nothing but a bunch of postcard campaigns. There's much more to it than that."

He shrugged. "Well, we'll let the numbers tell the story. And then you'll change your mind."

I didn't think I would. We were already getting reports of improvement such as return clients and buyer satisfaction.

The first analytic reports showed positive interactions with our campaign. By Wednesday we were trending on social media in our niche.

"Are you ready to go?" I asked as I walked into Gem's office. The entire marketing department had been surfing on a high since the analytic reports started showing numbers higher than projected. By the time of our celebration, everyone had already been in good spirits for days.

“I thought we were supposed to meet you at the bar?” she asked as she pulled on her coat.

“I wanted to make sure you didn’t get lost,” I said with a smile.

“Right, are you personally escorting the entire team or just me?”

“Everyone else has already left,” I said with a sweep of my hand, indicating the empty department offices. “So, it’s just you. I seem to lose you from time to time, and I couldn’t stand for that to happen tonight.”

She smiled with a soft giggle. “Someone’s gonna notice that I’m getting extra attention.”

All the extra work leading up to the rollout had interfered with my ability to see Gem outside of work. I made sure I was in her office every morning for updates and for a chance to see her smile. Her smile was better than any of the coffee I’d stopped drinking. But smiles and flirting across a desk were not the same as being able to touch her, kiss her. This celebration marked the end of that.

“You are not getting nearly enough extra attention. If they complain, let them complain, they’re jealous.”

“Jealous of who? You or me?”

“Me,” I smirked. “Definitely me. You don’t smile like that at everyone, do you?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “It’s my smile.”

I stepped in close and helped to pull her coat closed over her ample breasts. I could hear her catch her breath. I felt it too, we were close enough for a kiss. I leaned in.

“That’s not merely a smile, Gem, that’s something special. And I’m thrilled to be the one it’s for,” I whispered.

She closed her eyes and licked her lips. Then suddenly she jerked back.

“I believe we have a work event to get to.” Her cheeks were flush, and she stepped out of my grasp.

I couldn't keep my hands off her on the elevator ride down. I wanted handfuls of supple flesh, but too many other people getting on and off the elevator prevented me from crushing her body against me. I consoled myself by placing my hand on the small of her back and holding her arm as she stepped through the doors of the building.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Bria suggested a little place up here. It's nice." She pointed toward a building up ahead.

When we arrived, everyone was already crowded into a booth and the first round of drinks had already been ordered.

"You couldn't wait for us?" I asked.

Maggie held up her glass. "We have a good reason to celebrate tonight. The numbers coming in have been fantastic."

"I know, that's why we're here."

Maggie stood and changed seats leaving an opening for Gem and me to squeeze into. The fit was tight, but since Gem was pressed against me, I wasn't going to complain.

Gem squeezed into the booth

"And get this," she continued, "we're seeing an increase in inquiries from a demographic we had overlooked before. The outreach campaign is working. We're reaching potential new customers. The sheer fact that we're reaching a new client base is massive."

I agreed. These were the kinds of figures that made businessmen like me happy.

"We should have gone to a place that had a dance floor. I feel like dancing," Maggie said.

Brian pointed to the other side of the bar. "Can't dance but they have darts you want to go for around?"

"Yes." She and Brian scooted out of the booth and took their drinks with them.

"Darts sound like a good idea," Matt said. "I think I'm gonna join them. Coming?"

He looked from Bria to Gem, and then me.

I shrugged.

Bria took a long look at Gem, and then at me before saying, "Sure, I'll be right there."

I stood, letting Gem up so Bria could slide out of the booth. The next thing I knew Gem and I were the only two left.

"I guess we're on drink watch," she said with a sigh.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That means I make sure everybody's drinks are safe while they go play their games."

Bria suddenly appeared at the side of the table and reached forward. "Sorry, forgot my beer." She grabbed two of the drinks that were left on the table and left as quickly as she had appeared.

"I guess there are no more drinks for you to watch," I said. "What are you going to do now?"

Gem shifted away from me in the booth. "I'm going to pretend that I'm not overly attracted to you and that your hand isn't sliding up my thigh right now."

I sat pressed next to her as if we were still crowded into the booth. Her thigh was soft and warm. She squirmed under my fingers.

"Mr. Campbell, this is a work event," she said as my hand continued under her skirt.

"Everyone from work is on the other side of the bar," I said.

"Chase," she scolded me.

"Come on, Gem. It's only us right now." I leaned toward her so that I could caress her ear with my lips.

"I know. And that's a problem." She leaned toward me and lifted her hips so that my fingers brushed over the fabric of her panties, between her legs.

"Why? Don't you like this?"

Her breathing grew rapid. “Because at any moment, it won’t be just us. And people from work will be here. That would be embarrassing.”

“Are you embarrassed to be seen with me?” I asked.

“No, but I shouldn’t flaunt that I’m dating the boss.”

“Oh, are you dating the boss? Is that what’s happening?”

My fingers found the edge of her underwear and skimmed over the flesh on the other side.

I couldn’t read her expression. And then I started laughing.

“We’re dating. I’m not seeing anybody else. And I know you aren’t.” I slid my fingers between her folds, she was slick. I smirked, satisfied that she was turned on.

“Is this our mutually exclusive conversation?” she asked around gasps.

I leaned my mouth to her ear again. “Absolutely. I don’t want you to think I finger fuck just anyone in public.”

I slid my hand away from her. She whimpered. I looked into her eyes as I licked her juices off my finger. “Imagine what I’d do to you if this wasn’t a work event, and we were alone.”

She leaned her head back against the booth with a groan.

“Come home with me tonight,” I demanded.

“I can’t.”

“Why can’t I get you alone Gem?”

“There’s a good reason for that Chase. Come on,” she pleaded.

“I know I’ve met her. She’s adorable. What can we do to change things up? How do I get to have you in my arms all night? I’ll buy a crib so she can spend the night too. She can have her own room.”

“You were ready to stop seeing me altogether because I had a daughter and now, you’re buying baby furniture?”

“Unless you’re willing to invite me over to your place, which I know you’re not. You live with your mother, right? How do I get a sleepover with my two favorite girls?”



She shifted and opened her eyes, looking at me. “Have you thought about maybe taking a weekend trip somewhere together?”



## GEMMA

“I don’t understand why you don’t invite him up to Orchard View for the weekend,” Mom said as she sat on my bed and played with Amelia.

“Because he invited Amelia and me to his beach house,” I answered.

“His beach house in the middle of the winter?”

“It’s not the middle of winter. It’s early spring.”

“No difference as far as the weather is concerned. It’s still cold outside. You’re going to be wet and miserable. Who likes a wet and miserable beach?”

“I like the beach; it doesn’t matter what the weather is. It will be nice, the waves, the water. It will be fine.” I didn’t mention that I was looking forward to cuddling together in front of a fireplace. Cold weather meant warm romantic gestures.

“Amelia will be so disappointed when she can’t play in the water. Won’t you sweetie?” Mom asked Amelia.

Amelia wasn’t paying any attention to our conversation, too wrapped up in playing with her baby doll.

“Maybe she will. Maybe she won’t know the difference. The point is, he invited us to go for the weekend.”

“It’s all rather last minute.”

“That’s why it’s so exciting. You know, spur of the moment invitation. No time to think, just pack our bags and go.”

“You did say Amelia likes him,” Mom said with a sigh.

“She adores him.”

“Then why are you trying to hide him from me?”

I rolled my eyes, glad that she couldn't see my face. “I'm not trying to hide him so much as I want to make sure of everything before I spring you and John on him.”

“I know your brother can be a lot,” she said.

“A lot?” I laughed. John would have disowned me if he could, but he was legally obligated to me because of the properties we owned in partnership per our father's will.

“Are you worried John wouldn't approve of your friend?”

“John would totally approve of him. He has what John would consider”— I turned and added finger quotes as I spoke— “a proper background. He's pedigreed and from money. And that's all-John cares about.”

“You know, I don't care about the same things John does,” Mom said.

“I know. You want him to be nice. You want him to be kind. You want him to love and take care of me and Amelia.”

“I want him to be somebody you can fall in love with and who will love you in return.” She climbed off the bed and hugged me.

I hugged her back. “I think he's somebody who could do that. Until I know that this is really going to be something, I don't want to risk that fallout. You understood why I didn't come home for over three years. Do you think you can try to understand this?”

“I try to understand you every day. Some days are more trying than others.” She left with a laugh.

I knew in my heart that Chase would love and take care of us. He had been kind when he didn't need to be when I was an annoying little girl. I just hoped he could handle everything I was about to throw at him.

I sighed and pulled out another outfit of yoga pants with an oversized tunic. I looked at my clothes. I needed to tell Chase.

It had been weeks since we were together. This baby was only going to get bigger and push me along in front of it. Even though I was pretty sure I wasn't exactly showing, I was already curvy and round and getting rounder. My style and clothes had changed. Somebody was bound to notice sooner than later. He needed to know before other people figured it out.

If everything went well this weekend, I would tell him. I should tell him anyway, even if things didn't work out.

My phone buzzed with a text. I couldn't help myself but smile when I noticed it was from Chase.

“Pack a swimsuit.”

What? Oh, he must have had an indoor pool or his condo's facility had an indoor pool. That made sense. I pulled open the drawer that held my swimsuits. I sorted through a few and figured the two-piece would fit. The top was supportive, and the bottoms covered a multitude of sins.

“He said we need swimsuits,” I said to Amelia. She ignored me, perfectly engrossed in her play.

My phone pinged again with another text from Chase. I flopped on the bed in front of her with the phone in my hands.

She pushed it away and made eye contact.

“Hi baby,” I said. “We're going to go on a trip with Chase. Do you remember him?”

“Tace,” she said.

My heart zinged with pride. “Yes baby, Chase.”

“Pay Tace.”

“You want to play with Chase? Me too, me too.”

I pulled her into my lap and snapped a selfie of the two of us and sent it to Chase.

“I think Amelia misses you,” I texted.

My phone rang. I answered the video call and Chase's face filled my phone screen.

Amelia touched the phone, reaching out for Chase's image.  
"Tace."

"Hi beautiful girls," he said. "Are you almost ready?"

"I'm frantically packing. I got your text, swimsuits? Really? Do I need towels?"

"Everything you will need is already there, except for swimsuits."

"What about pajamas?" I teased.

"I was hoping we wouldn't need those," he said with a smirk.

I covered Amelia's ears.

"There are children present," I said with mock indignity.

"Send over your address so I can come to pick you up."

I shook my head.

"I'll have a car drop us off. That way you don't have to rush."

He sighed. "You don't want me to know where you live, do you?"

"Think of it as me protecting you from my family. If you pull up tonight, they will bombard you with a million questions and we will never leave," I said.

"Fine. I'll text over the address for your driver."

"Thanks. I should probably get back to packing."

"Gem," he said, "I look forward to seeing you."

I kissed my finger and placed it against his image before the screen went black as the call ended. A moment later a text with an address that I didn't recognize came through.

I returned to my frenzied packing. I was packed, next was Amelia's stuff. I had to be prepared for every eventuality with her. There was a bag for diapers and another one with toys. I thought I had packed a lot of clothes. It was only a weekend away. But I had to pack even more for Amelia. I never could guess how many clothes she would go through. Sometimes she went through as many as three or four outfits in a day.

Sometimes it seemed like more food made it onto her clothing than in her mouth. She was a toddler and she made messes.

“Ready for an adventure?” I asked her as we gathered our bags in the foyer waiting for our driver. She smiled and nodded as I gathered her up. “Pay Tace,” she said again.

Every time she said it, my heart swelled.

I installed the car seat as our driver loaded bags into the back. Once in the car, I didn’t pay attention to where we were headed until I didn’t recognize our surroundings. We were nowhere near Chase’s downtown loft.

“Are you sure this is the right way?”

“Yes, ma’am. This is the address you gave me.”

I had to trust that he knew where he was going. I leaned back in my seat and played with Amelia’s toys trying to keep her occupied.

I looked up when the car stopped. We were at a gated entry to what looked like an airfield. The gates slid open, and the driver pulled through. Stopping when we reached a hangar.

Chase opened my door. I looked up at him before I got out.

He held his hand out to me. “Come on, it’s a surprise.”

“Are we going to Nantucket?” I asked. “You didn’t mention you’re a pilot.”

“Oh, I’m not. I don’t fly planes. I pay people to fly planes,” he said.

I sighed with relief. Too many rich men thinking they knew how the world worked ended up crashing their own planes. Lots of famous people too. I wasn’t ready to be included in that statistic.

“I hope you packed for the beach,” he said as he leaned into the car to unbuckle Amelia from her car seat.

My driver pulled our bags out of the trunk and handed them to a uniformed man, who looked like a pilot.

“How’s my girl?” he asked Amelia. He wiggled a finger into her ribs, and she squirmed with a giggle.

I had hoped she would say his name, so he could be as proud of her as I was. But she was quiet around him.

“So, you really aren’t going to tell me where we’re going?”

Chase shook his head. “What did you expect?”

“Well, honestly I thought we would be driving out to the Hamptons for the weekend.”

“Why the Hamptons? And if you say because all the best families—”

“No,” I cut him off. “My family happens to have a property out there. So, I automatically assume everybody means the Hamptons when they say they have a beach house.”

“Well, my parents used to. So, you aren’t too far wrong. But we are not going to the Hamptons.”

I followed Chase up the stairs into the small jet. Amelia’s car seat was already installed into one of the chairs. But Chase insisted on holding Amelia in his lap.

My stomach did an extra flip as the airplane took off. I watched nervously for Amelia’s reaction. Chase had her full attention. She was happy and giggling. Insisting he meet her had been the right thing to do.





## CHASE

**G**em was righteously furious with me when she realized we weren't going to Nantucket.

"Where are we going, Chase?" she asked for what felt like the hundredth time.

"I told you it's a surprise."

"Fine. It's a surprise but we've been on this plane for hours already. We're not going to Nantucket; we'd be there by now. Is it Florida?"

"We're not going to Florida," I answered.

"Wherever we're going, you could have warned me better than telling me to pack a swimsuit. I packed for winter weather. I packed for rain and being outside in the cold," she ranted, pacing up and down the cabin of the private jet.

Amelia had fallen asleep in my arms, and I was tempted to tell the pilot to keep going as long as I held that little girl. I never knew that I could fall in love with a child. What I wouldn't give for her to be my own.

"At this rate, we're going to be in the Bahamas."

"Not the Bahamas," I said. "But close."

I looked at her and shrugged.

"Damn it. We're going to the Bahamas."

"Not the Bahamas," I said again.

“Okay, but somewhere in the Caribbean. I... You...I’m going to...” she sputtered with indignation. “Did you bring sunscreen for me? I didn’t pack sunscreen. I didn’t think I was going to need it.”

“You’ll have everything you need at the house.”

“Everything but a swimsuit?” She stopped pacing and stood with her hands on her hips.

“That’s all you’re going to need.”

“Chase.” She sat in defeat.

She wasn’t mad at me. I could tell, there was a happy lilt to her voice.

“How about a sunbonnet for Amelia? She’s gonna need something to protect her head. Her hair is so fine she’s practically bald.”

“Once we arrive, I’ll arrange for anything you need,” I said. “Summer bonnets, dresses, anything. She’s not going to need much.”

“I could have packed something,” Gem said.

I raised my eyebrows. “Really? You have a full summer wardrobe for her already?”

“No. Fine. Be that way.” She crossed her arms and swiveled her chair away from me. “Rich men all think they can get away with everything.”

“We can,” I laughed.

It was dark when the plane touched down. Waves made a soft sound in the distance. Gem still didn’t know where we were. I surrendered a sleeping Amelia to the safety of her car seat. Gem was half asleep by the time the car reached my house.

“Oh Chase,” Gem said with a stretch and a yawn. “Is this your house?”

The house wasn’t overly large in comparison to what Gem’s family probably had in the Hamptons. Its clean straight edges and modern style gave nothing away as to our location beyond we were in the islands, somewhere.

“It’s the only house I have. I have investment properties, but for me it’s this and the loft.”

“It’s lovely.”

We made a bed for Amelia by turning the loveseat in the main bedroom against the wall, creating an impromptu crib. Gem came to me, and I finally had her in my arms in my bed. We were both asleep as our heads hit the pillows.

I woke to an empty bed. Gem was already up and about with Amelia. The weather was warm, and the sun was bright.

I found my phone and texted Tanner before I was even out of bed. “Replace the mattress before I return. Get rid of any old sheets if you already haven’t.”

I found a pair of shorts and padded out to find my girls.

Outside of the kitchen was a walled-in patio. I found Gem, in a bikini top and sarong, playing with a barely dressed Amelia.

“Good morning my beauties,” I said.

I slid an arm around Gem’s waist and kissed her lips when she turned to smile at me.

“Hi,” she said.

Amelia held up her arms, and I obliged by picking her up. I kissed her soft cheek and she giggled.

I admired Gem’s cleavage and smirked. “I told you, all you would need was a bathing suit. That is a fetching one, I must say.”

“Are you going to tell me where we are now that we’re here?” Gem asked.

I set Amelia down and she tottered back over to where she had been playing. I wrapped myself around Gem again.

“Does it matter? I am providing you with a stunning ocean view, a roof over your head.” I made broad sweeping gestures to show off my offerings.

“Does all of this include meals?”

“We are on our own for breakfast. A cook will be in for our lunches and dinners.”

“Chase, you are too much.”

“I’m trying to be enough for you, Gem.”

“You are more than enough as long as you stick around.”

Her kiss at that moment cemented any crazy thoughts I had. I wasn’t going anywhere without her.

We had breakfast. We played with Amelia. I made certain that a selection of sunbonnets and dresses would arrive at the house before lunchtime. Gem wanted nothing for herself, as long as Amelia was taken care of.

“You’re good to her,” Gem cooed as she unwrapped the items once they were delivered.

“She’s easy to adore,” I said.

“Not all adults take to caring for children the way you have. You’re a natural.”

I smirked. “She brings out my maternal instincts.”

Gem wadded up some of the packing tissue and threw it at me.

“I never really thought being a family man was my thing,” I confessed. “I didn’t know I could like a small person as much as I like her.”

Later I leaned back in my beach chair, hands behind my head. This was perfect. I had my toes in the sand and where the waves crashed to shore, Gem and Amelia played in the surf. I felt warmth throughout my body that had nothing to do with the weather but had everything to do with how I felt about Gem and Amelia, and being a family. I knew one thing that would make it even more perfect. As if she could read my thoughts, Gem took Amelia’s hand and they walked back to me under the umbrella.

I sat up and grabbed the sunscreen.

“Time for another coating?” I said, lathering up my hands.

Gem handed Amelia over to me. “That couldn’t hurt.”

She held out her arms in front of herself and gazed at her skin. "I don't think I'm going to get a tan this way, which is fine, as long as I don't burn."

"What about all those beach vacations in Greece?" I asked.

Gem sat in the chair next to me. "I was a teenager, and I had to get a raging burn before I would tan. I'm not willing to go through that agony again. And I don't want Amelia to burn."

"Agreed," I said. I found Amelia's ticklish spot on her ribs and made her giggle. "Mommy's turn," I announced.

Amelia sat by my feet playing in the sand with some of the beach toys I had delivered along with her new clothes.

I held my hand out to Gem. With a sigh, she took it and stood.

I positioned her in front of me and filled my hands with lotion. Sunscreen was the perfect excuse to touch her. I took my time running my lotioned fingers across her shoulders and down her arms. I lingered over her breasts, dipping my hands under the edge of her bathing suit.

"Chase," Gem scolded.

"There's no one here to see anything," I said calmly, seeking out a nipple to tease.

Gem darted her eyes down to where Amelia was by our feet.

"I'm not doing anything more than putting sunscreen on your skin." I dipped my hand fully into Gem's top, cupping her breast.

She hissed in and clutched at my arms.

"See, nothing wrong here," I purred as I kneaded her warm breast in my palm.

She gently tugged at my wrist. I obliged. As sad as it was to abandon her breast with their erect nipples, there was more of her to touch. I rubbed lotion into her midriff and ample hips. I sat down so that I could adequately reach her legs from her delicate ankles back up to her ass.

My hands slipped under the edge of her bikini bottoms. She backed toward me, clearly enjoying the extra lotion placement.

When I skimmed my hands around the front and found that place between her thighs I loved to toy with, she jumped out of my reach.

She turned to face me and gave me a scolding look while nodding in Amelia's direction.

I took the hint. No hanky-panky while the kid was nearby.

"My turn," I announced.

I squirted a glob of lotion into Gem's hand and turned around, giving her my back. I suppressed moans as she ran her hands over my back and around my sides. I turned so that she could touch my chest.

"You should get some tan, you don't really need this, do you?" she asked.

"I need you," I managed to say. It was hard to think while her hands caressed my skin.

I took her hand and ran it down my abs and past the waistband of my shorts.

"Oh," she said, her mouth forming a perfect O.

I kissed those lips.

Her fingers tightened around my cock. I resisted the urge to thrust against her hand. I wanted to shove my shorts down and tell her to get on her knees.

She stroked me.

"Gem," my voice was thick with want.

I brushed a stray hair back behind her ear and cupped her cheek. Her eyes were greener than I had ever seen. I wanted her in a way I had never wanted a woman. She was in my heart. If I started kissing her again, I wouldn't be able to stop, or control myself.

She stopped stroking, but her fingers stayed.

"Damn it. Bedtime is a long time away, isn't it?" she asked.

I had never felt so abandoned as when she released me and removed her hand from my shorts.





## GEMMA

**T**ogether we stood and watched Amelia sleep in her make-shift crib. Chase wrapped his arms around me and rested his head on my shoulder.

“She’s so beautiful,” he whispered. “Just like her mother.”

I turned my face to try to look at him, difficult with him being so close. He shifted and his lips brushed mine.

I closed my eyes and let myself sink into his kiss. His eyes were dark and heavy-lidded when he broke away. I pressed a finger to his lips and slid my other hand into his, before leading him out of the room.

“The bed is back there,” he said.

“So is the baby,” I said. “You have other bedrooms.”

“I also have couches, counters, and bathtubs,” he teased.

“You’re missing the point.”

“I get your point. I can make love to you on every surface of this house, as long as your baby isn’t in the room.” He stopped walking and pulled me back against him, sliding his hands down my back.

“I guess you get the point,” I conceded. “Where then?”

“Tonight, I want you under the stars.”

“Outside?” I gulped.

“No one will see us. The beach is private, and the courtyard has walls,” he said as he pulled his shirt off.

“Okay.” I didn’t need convincing.

The night air was comfortably warm. I slid into Chase’s arms, and he pressed his lips down to mine. I had been hot and bothered and in need of his touch for days. He held me close, crushing me to his chest. Our tongues danced, and I no longer cared where we were, if we were together.

He untied the sarong I wore around my hips. He guided my hand into the front of his shorts.

“I thought we would pick up where we left off earlier,” he said against my mouth.

I stroked him longer and harder.

“I wanted my cock in your mouth,” he commanded.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.” I wanted to taste him.

He smiled as I sank to my knees in the soft sand, pulling his shorts down with me. He made guttural sounds of pleasure as I licked the length of his cock before taking it in.

He tasted of fresh air and salt, and Chase. He grabbed a fistful of my hair and arched his hips.

I slid my lips over him, sucking him in. Scraping my teeth against skin as I eased back before doing it all again. I grabbed onto his muscular ass. I wanted all of him. He sank his fingers into my hair, holding my head close, guiding me to the right rhythm.

“Fuck, Gem. Stop.” He pushed my shoulders back and pulled his hips away.

I looked up at him and blinked. I felt like he had taken my favorite toy away, I wanted to cry.

“Was it bad?” I asked.

“Fuck, no, that was fantastic. I want to do more with you tonight than have you suck me off.”

“But you’ll let me do that later sometime?” I really liked the idea of bringing him to orgasm with my lips and tongue.

“Later. Right now, it’s my turn.”

He held out his hand to help me up. Once I stood, he lifted my t-shirt over my head and reached around me to unhook my bra. Instinctively I wrapped an arm around to cover myself. Chase gently pulled my arm down.

“You don’t have to hide or be shy around me. You are my beautiful sparkling Gem. I want to feel your eyes on me. Look at me, touch me.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. He was always so handsome to me, even when he was a teenager. I ran my fingers over his shoulders and down his chest. He was roped with thick hard muscles that he worked hard for.

As his chest hairs tickled my fingertips, Chase tickled my skin, touching me in a similar fashion, exploring, seeing, memorizing. He guided me backward until he lay on a lounge. Pausing only to remove my panties, he guided me across his lap, until I was straddling him.

“I left the condoms inside,” he said in a low voice.

“It’s okay, I can’t get pregnant,” I almost slipped and said ‘again.’

“Good thing for birth control,” he said.

I smirked. Right, I hadn’t been paying attention the first time, and it had failed me once. And here I was pregnant again with Chase’s second child. I loved him, and I would have all the children he gave me.

I lowered myself onto his length. He filled me, completed me.

He sighed. “You look like a goddess framed by stars.”

I looked up, and he was right, the sky was full of more stars than I could ever remember seeing. I looked back at Chase. This would be the perfect time to tell him. I needed to say, ‘I love you,’ and ‘we are having another baby,’ but I couldn’t form the words.

He rolled his hips, and slid his hand between us, flicking across my clit. All thoughts left my brain as driving want and need replaced cohesive function. I ground into him. He grabbed my hips and thrust up.

“Oh, Chase,” I cried out. Each thrust reduced me further into goo.

When he sat up and clamped a mouth to one of my nipples, it was all I could do to hold on. I rode him, but he was clearly in control. No longer able to form words, I let out moans and squeaks of pleasure. I wanted to scream, but my breath got stuck in my throat as my lungs barely worked.

He rolled, and our momentum took us off the lounge. I landed on my back with a woof of air escaping. I fought to catch my breath as I started laughing.

Chase let go of my breast long enough to kiss me again.

“Yes, yes, please don’t stop now,” I begged against his mouth

I didn’t notice paving stones and sand digging into my back. All I knew was Chase above me, Chase thrusting into me. I pushed my hips up to meet him at a frenetic pace. I needed all of him. He gave himself to me harder, faster.

I screamed when wave after wave of orgasm crashed into my body. I could no longer meet Chase’s pounding thrust for thrust. When he came, he filled me with heat and the slickness renewed my orgasm. This time I could feel the pull of my muscles milking him, sucking him in.

“Fuck, oh, damn.” He collapsed across my chest. “What have you done to me, woman?”

I cradled him to my body. Not wanting this moment to end. But it did eventually. Chase sat up. He grimaced and touched his knee. I rolled into a position on my hip.

“It looks like you scraped your knee in the fall,” I said.

Chase looked from me to the lounge, and back. “I don’t remember falling off, do you?”

“Only because I landed on my back, we were occupied.”

Chase leaned in and captured my lips with his. The kiss was lingering and full of desire.

“I’d like to be occupied with you again,” he said with a lustful groan.

“Yes, please, but in a bed, and maybe after a shower. I have sand in delicate places.”

Chase helped me to wash the sand away. I found out that all that working out in a gym and drinking protein shakes wasn't for looks. The man had strength. He held me up against the tiled wall of the shower while we were occupied with each other's bodies again.

“We are sleeping in the same bed or is that not allowed around Amelia?” he asked. His fingers slid back and forth across my breasts where the towel I had wrapped around me gave way to skin.

“There's nothing wrong with sleeping together,” I said. “Besides, I like sleeping next to you. Thank you for inviting us to your home.”

He slid his arm around me. “I love”—my heart leaped to my throat— “having you here. The house seems ridiculously large when it's just me.”

I hoped my smile hid my disappointment. He wasn't ready to tell me he loved me yet. I hadn't said anything either.

We spent another glorious morning at the beach before we flew home. I hadn't managed to tell him anything important like I was completely in love with him, or that we had a child together and another one on the way.

New York felt bleaker than ever. Especially when Mom announced that John had called Orchard View looking for me.

“He has my cell number, he could call me directly,” I complained.

“I think he does it so that he can order other people about and not do the work himself,” Mom said.

I called him. He wanted me to be available so he could discuss something regarding the properties if he drove up on the weekend.

“I'm in the City for some appointments,” I lied. “Why don't we meet for dinner?”

He agreed, and the following evening we met. I could have taken the elevator up to his office after work hours, but he still didn't know I worked for him.

"You should be careful with tanning beds," he said as soon as he saw me. No hello or greeting of any kind. He went straight to what I was doing wrong.

"Excuse me?"

He waved his fingers at his face, and then at mine, indicating the sunburn I had across my cheeks. "They put new bulbs in those things and don't say anything, and then you get burned like you did. My business partner got a sunburn too, only his is natural."

"Your business partner? You know I know who Chase Campbell is, our fathers..." I shook my head. John would never think I knew anything. "How do you know his isn't from a tanning bed too?"

"Oh, he has a house on St. Maarten. He's down there whenever the weather gets like this."



## CHASE

“Are you ever going to learn to never challenge me?” I said as I strode into John’s office. He was hard at work not working, his feet up on his desk, tossing a ball into the air and catching it.

He sat up. “What are you talking about, man?”

“Get your coat. Come with me and I’ll tell you,” I said with a smirk.

He started to protest but I cut him off. “We both know you aren’t doing anything but waiting for the phone to ring.”

I tapped on his assistant’s desk as we left. “Forward any calls for John to his cell.”

“Sure thing,” she said.

“What do you have up your sleeve today, Chase?” he asked as he shrugged into his trench coat.

The car my assistant had called for was waiting by the time we were out of the building.

“You once bet me that you would be married with kids before me,” I said, settling into the back of the car.

“I’m going to win that bet. At this point, it’s not even a contest.”

“I wouldn’t be so certain if I were you,” I smirked.

“You old dog, what the hell are you telling me? Did you get engaged?” John grinned like some idiot like he was the one who was going out ring shopping.



“Not yet, I need to pick up a ring. That’s where we’re headed,” I said.

“Aren’t you supposed to take your betrothed ring shopping, not your best friend?”

I laughed. “That would spoil the surprise. I figured you might have some pointers having already done this.”

“Where are we headed? You aren’t going old school Tiffany, are you?”

I nodded.

John groaned. “No, man, you need to find out who her favorite designer is and start there.”

“Like you did?”

“Exactly, like I did.”

The car stopped in front of our destination, and we climbed out of the car and straight into the classic wood paneling and glass-topped jewelry counters of Tiffany and Co. We were greeted and then led to a specific counter, where another salesman asked what I was looking for.

John leaned on the counter, purposefully positioning himself to announce he was not interested in the contents of the case.

“A Tiffany solitaire is a classic choice,” the salesman said.

“It’s the boring choice. Chase, we should go to Theda Wu’s shop, that’s the designer Jennifer loves. I got Jennifer a customized one-of-a-kind ring. I had them size the rock up because they didn’t have the carats I wanted.”

“I know about the ring.”

Between John bragging about it at every turn, and the now-infamous fight he and Jennifer had, everyone at CP Manhattan knew about the ring. He had to get it customized because she wanted something oversized to flash around. I knew Gem, she was understated. She would want something classic.

“I think a classic solitaire would be perfect,” I said.

“Sir, you can enhance the engagement ring with a combination wedding band and wrap. The engagement ring can be upgraded at any time.”

“You aren’t going to buy that right now, are you? You should at least shop around. I took my time picking out Jennifer’s ring.”

What John meant was Jennifer took her time picking out the ring she wanted him to buy for her. And even then, it hadn’t been good enough. Gem had been clear that to her good enough came through actions, not through items.

“Sir, you can’t go wrong with a classic round stone in a gold or platinum band.”

The salesman placed a velvet panel on the counter and placed a single perfect ring in the middle.

John swept in, picking the ring up and reaching for a jeweler’s loop from the counter. He brought the two pieces up close to his eye. “What’s the diamond quality rating on this?”

The salesman flinched ever so slightly at John’s quick movements.

“The stone will depend on Sir’s desires. In addition to colorless diamonds, we carry a variety of colored diamonds.”

“He’ll want colorless, and don’t try to pass off any stone that’s near-colorless,” John said with authority.

I looked from him to the salesman. “Quality is important, but would you explain colorless and near-colorless?”

“Didn’t you do your research, man?” John tossed the ring and the jeweler’s loop onto the velvet pad.

The ring John so casually discarded was snatched up by the salesman to be safely sequestered away.

“No, I didn’t. I was too busy falling in love with this woman.” I turned back to the salesman. “What’s the best quality, budget is no issue.”

This time, the salesman handed me a delicate ring. The stone was round and refracted light like a disco globe under a

spotlight. The band was simple and pale. It wouldn't overwhelm Gem's delicate hand, and it wouldn't look constricting against her soft flesh.

"Four point five carats, round, brilliant-cut, near-colorless grade E, flawless clarification, platinum band. If Sir holds the loop to his eye and brings the ring in close, he will see the quality of the stone for himself."

I looked at the stone as directed. It was pretty. I didn't know what I was looking for. I handed the ring to John. I didn't expect him to know either, but maybe he did know something about rings after all the time Jennifer led him from store to store.

"So who is this woman anyway? I didn't know you were dating," he said as he examined the ring. "This one isn't bad."

I took the ring from him before he could toss it onto the counter like it was from a bubble gum machine.

"We haven't been seeing each other for very long. I took her to the beach house this weekend, and I knew she was the one for me. She's this fantastic woman in the marketing department. She's sweet and beautiful. Did I mention I'll beat you to having kids?"

"You don't have to waste a Tiffany on some woman you knocked up."

"Don't be crass John." I placed the ring down. "How do I know if it's the right size?" I asked the salesman.

"There are many ways to find out. If Sir could sneak away one of the lady's rings, we can use that to determine size. It's not uncommon to purchase an engagement ring and then return to the store with your betrothed to get a properly sized band."

"So is she pregnant or not?"

I glared at John. "She's already got a kid."

John grabbed my upper arm. He dragged me away from the counter.

"Are you stupid, man? You're thinking of asking a single mother to marry you? She's only in it to get her baby a daddy."

He threw his arms up and gestured around. “Is she some fucking gold digger too?”

“Watch your mouth, John. Gem is not some gold digger. She comes from money. And she isn’t shopping for a father for her child. She said as much.”

He stopped raging and stared at me. “What did you say her name was?”

“Gem. Gem Lafayette. She’s our Social Media Manager. Doing a great job with the marketing team. And she’s bea—”

“Gem Lafayette?” he laughed. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“You know her?” I asked.

“You have got to be the biggest fucking idiot I have ever met. I can’t believe I’ve been saddled in business with you. This is the last straw; I can’t work with you if you follow through with this. Gem Lafayette, that little bitch.”

I grabbed his lapel and pulled him to me. We used to fight the way friends always did. Back then we were well matched. Now I was all-around bigger, taller, more muscles. I worked out, he didn’t. His nostrils flared, and we breathed at each other like a couple of bulls squaring off in a pasture. I released his coat and he stumbled backward.

He stormed out of the store. I let him go. I didn’t know what he was going on about, but he would pay for calling Gem a bitch. I considered chasing him down just to deck him but starting a brawl in a jewelry store was an even worse idea than John’s reaction.

I brushed down the front of my coat and returned to the counter. “I’m sorry, I’ll have to come back. What was your name?”

“Gerald, Sir.”

“Thank you, Gerald. I will be sure to ask for you when I return. I think you’re right; a classic solitaire will be perfect.”

I left, grabbed a cab, and headed straight back to the office. I wouldn’t deck John in Tiffany’s but I sure as hell would take

him down in the privacy of his own office.



## GEMMA

**M**y office phone rang. I hit the speaker button, assuming it was Maggie or Bria. “Yeah?”

“Miss Lafayette?” a sharp voice asked.

“Yes, sorry. This is Gem Lafayette; how can I help you?”

“Mr. Peters would like to see you in his office immediately. He said you would know what this was regarding.”

My stomach dropped. I knew exactly what this was regarding. The jig was up. Somehow, I had been found out.

“I will be there shortly,” I sighed.

I wasn't going into John's office without being prepared. Analytics showed that our outreach campaign was positively impacting client relations. I needed the latest reports. I printed a few spreadsheets and scurried to Maggie's office.

“No time to explain, but shit is about to hit the fan. I need the latest numbers on the campaign.”

“Gem, what's going on?”

I cringed. “Long story short, John Peters is my brother and he just found out I work here. I need the numbers to prove to him that I'm not wasting my time ‘playing on the internet,’ as he likes to call it.”

She gave me a stern Mom-quality look. I hadn't fucked up, and I was scrambling to prove it.

Maggie slowly nodded. “I think I probably wouldn't have told everyone I was the owner's sister either.”

“I promise I’ll give you the whole story.”

She handed me a stack of papers. I flipped through them.

“These are exactly what I need. Thank you,” I gushed.

“Good luck up there,” she said.

“Thanks, I’m going to need it.”

My nerves flipped and buzzed the entire elevator ride up to the executive floor. I had to remember to breathe. I couldn’t decide if I wanted Chase there for backup or not. On a professional level, I knew he would have my back. He saw the value that the marketing department had brought to expanding the company’s client base and improving client satisfaction.

But how would he react to finding out who I was this way? I should have told him.

“What the fuck are you playing at?” John practically screamed as his assistant opened the door for me and I stepped into his office.

Her eyes went wide, and she closed the door with a loud bang behind me. I didn’t blame her, I wanted her out of there too.

“I’m not playing,” I dug in my heels and held out the sheets with the graphs. “I’m a professional and I’m doing my job. I’m doing a damned good job too. The latest campaign’s numbers—”

He batted the papers from my hand, scattering them on the floor.

“Get the fuck out of my company, Gemma. Father left it to me, not you. This isn’t a playground.”

“I’m not playing. I know what I’m doing,” I tried to explain.

“I’m calling security to have you escorted off the premises. If you ever come back here Gemma—”

The door slammed open. “John, you have some serious explaining to do before I knock out your teeth.” Chase stormed in; his voice raised.

He stopped and looked at me. “Gem?”



He looked back and forth between me and John. His shoulders slumped as he finally recognized me. John and I both looked very much like our mother with curly strawberry blonde hair and green eyes. John's features were sharper, his hair was a shade or two darker, and with his hair being short, the curls weren't as noticeable. Seeing us together, it was obvious we were related.

"Gemma," Chase said with a sigh.

"I'm sorry, I..."

"Gemma, you always fuck things up don't you?" John sneered.

"No, I don't. If you would only look at the numbers."

"Gemma." Chase looked stunned. He shook his head and lifted a finger to me.

"You are nothing but a spoiled brat. You manipulate and twist everything until you get your way." Spittle gathered in the corners of John's mouth.

"Don't talk to her like that," Chase bit out. "The marketing numbers are good."

"Don't you even," John turned on Chase. "You've been fucking my sister and didn't even have the courtesy to tell me." He turned on me. "How many times did I tell you to stay away from my friends?"

"I was just a little kid," I yelled.

"I meant forever," John yelled back.

"Chase." I reached out toward him. "I can explain."

"There's nothing to explain, Gemm," John held the M sound, emphasizing the nickname I had chosen to use. He threw one of the office chairs to the side so he could rush at me. "You are a fucking liar. You ruin everything you know that? That's what you do."

He stopped short and pointed his finger in my face. "I would have thought that Dad raised you to have a little humility."

"Our father had nothing to do with raising me. My mom—"

“Such bull shits. You weren’t sent away to boarding school. Dad kept you around to spoil. Daddy’s little girl.”

I shook my head. John’s words felt like a punch in the gut. “Our father barely had anything to do with me. I wasn’t taught anything about the family business, and he never took me out on his stupid boats. You were always his pride. I am not the evil person you and Dad always seemed to think I was.”

“No, you’re just some slut who I happen to share a parent with.”

“Parents, John, parents. I am your full sister.” The other comment I couldn’t say anything about, it felt too close to reality.

I swiped at the stupid anger response tears that ran down my face.

“How dare you use the Lafayette family name? Go away Gemma, I’m tired of you taking everything I’ve ever had away from me, father’s love, my mother, my home. You can’t have Chase. I forbid you from seeing him again.”

“John, this isn’t some competition between the two of you. The choice to see Gem, Gemma, is mine. Not yours,” Chase barked.

John sneered and shook his head. “Why did you have to sleep with her? She’s, my sister. You could do so much better, man. I can’t believe you didn’t even recognize her. You don’t get a say in this.”

He turned on me again. “Why him? Why my best friend? Why couldn’t you stay away? Go back to Europe and find the loser who knocked you up. Unless...”

He stopped ranting and looked from me to Chase. His gaze stayed on me, and I watched as realization crossed his face.

“Unless that loser is right here. Why couldn’t you leave him alone? Leave me one person,” John sounded like he lost all energy to fight anymore.

My heart wanted to collapse in on itself. John had figured out that Chase was Amelia’s father. This wasn’t how I wanted

Chase to find out.

“You fucking whore!” John charged me. Chase stepped in the way and held him back.

John pushed away from Chase and straightened his tie. “Get your fucking hands off me. You knocked my sister up? Just perfect.”

“What the fuck? John, you’re delusional. I would have had to have been with Gemma years ago. That never happened.”

Chase looked to me for confirmation.

I couldn’t say anything. What had been my dream come true, Chase Campbell wanting to touch me... I gave him my virginity and he didn’t even remember any of it. I bit my lower lip. “I didn’t know how to tell you. I wanted to this weekend. But I chickened out. I never meant for you to find out like this. It’s why I wanted you to meet Amelia. Chase...”

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Chase?” I willed him to look back at me. I needed him to show me in any small way that I hadn’t destroyed everything between us.

I stood there as more tears, this time tears of grief and pain, blurred my vision.

“Get the fuck out Gemma. You can’t cry and get your way with me.” John’s words cut, and I felt like I was bleeding.

“I’ve been fighting and trying to prove myself to you for as long as I can remember. I wasn’t trying to take anything from you, I just wanted you to acknowledge me. I guess I got what I wanted, but not in the way I wanted it. All I ever wanted from you was a big brother who loved me.”

I struggled to breathe as I left his office. I couldn’t face anyone. Avoiding the elevators, I stumbled through the door to the emergency stairwell. I sat on the stairs before I collapsed from misery. With my head against the wall, I held onto the railing to keep from evaporating. I had never cried so hard in my life. It felt like my very soul was being ripped from my body.

My brother was as dead to me as my father was, as the mother who gave birth to me was. I wanted to fade away into nothing. Chase was lost to me.



## CHASE

“**W**hat the fuck is wrong with you? That’s your sister!” The shock of watching Gemma run from John’s office in tears left me full of rage. I grabbed a fist full of his tie and part of his shirt and shook as if I could shake sense into him.

He tried to push me away. I had mass and strength on my side.

“Get off me. You’re just as bad as she is.” He spit in my face.

I still didn’t budge.

“You don’t get it, do you? Is her pussy so good you can’t think straight?”

I breathed through my need to bury my fists in his face. I threw him away from me. He crashed over the chair he knocked over earlier. I took two long strides and adjusted my coat as I towered over him.

“You’ve treated her like dirt her entire life,” I snarled.

“And you were too nice to her when you should have ignored her. Look at what a mess that’s made.” John started to stand up. He brushed at his trousers. “She’s never been good for anything.”

I knocked him back on his ass. “What the fuck did she ever do to you?”

“Some friend you turned into. How could you forget? She killed my mother.”

I closed my eyes and turned away from him. He had been treating her like a murderer. As if she killed their mother on purpose. It made a sick and twisted kind of sense. “How the fuck can you still believe that? For fuck’s sake John your mother died in childbirth. You’re blaming Gemma for something she had no control over.”

“If she didn’t exist my mother would be here now!”

“You have no way of knowing that. Your mom could have been on the yacht with our fathers, and you could have lost her then. She could have gotten sick, there could have been a car accident.”

“And she could still be here. Instead, I’m stuck with Gemma, her bastard child, ha!” he laughed bitterly, “your bastard child, and that conniving woman my father married.”

“I can’t believe how fucking wrong you are. Have been for years. She’s your sister.” I knew John acted as if he did not like Gemma. I had always thought it was a combination of being tough for his friends paired with typical sibling rivalry. We were teenagers and young adults; we didn’t want some four or five-year-old hanging around while we made dick jokes and talked about getting laid. I never realized he hated her.

“Are you serious right now? Are you going to defend her after she tricked you into thinking she was someone else? Of course, you would. You’ve been fucking her. She’s probably done irreparable damage to CP Manhattan’s reputation with her internet shit. And don’t tell me you think marketing is doing a good job. They should stick to what they know.” He slowly got to his feet, moving like an old man.

“Postcards?” I asked. He couldn’t see past his own limiting beliefs of who his sister was or what this business needed to survive.

“Yeah, fucking postcards. You might be good with an accounts payable sheet, but you don’t know shit when it comes to running a business.” He rubbed his jaw like I had knocked him one. I hadn’t but I took that as a target location for when I did pop him one.

“You never wanted to run CP Manhattan. You’ve said it more than once. I think now is a good time for you to leave. If you don’t submit your resignation to the board—”

“Is that a threat? Do you honestly think I’m going to let you take our fathers’ business and run it headfirst into the ground?” I looked at the papers scattered about on the floor. “You went to a shit business school. You probably can’t even analyze the graphs she gave you. Your sister is a smart woman.”

“I went to a better school than you did, dickhead. She’s manipulative, Chase. Open your fucking eyes. She spread her legs for you, and you are acting like a starved puppy. The sex cannot be that good. She probably sucked your dick to get the job.”

“I doubt it. You weren’t the one who interviewed her,” I growled. “That explains how Jennifer got her job here.”

John crossed the office and the sucker punched me in the kidney. My knees buckled, and I started to go down. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw John pull back to punch me in the side of my head. I made sure his fist got nothing but air. I let my knees continue to fold and I followed them down, rolling through the fall and onto my feet in a continuous motion. Back on my feet, I managed to get out of my coat in time to push his arm out of the way as he swung for another punch. With a twist, I had his arms clamped between my ribs and my arms, pinning him.

He managed to pull free, and I elbowed him in the ribs and shoved him into the shelving lining the back wall of his office. He stumbled, knocked books from one shelf, and knocked another off its brackets, dumping its contents to the floor.

“You don’t know the last thing about running a business. You seem to think it’s all cocktails and banging the secretary. Your sexist ideals belong to television shows and outdated movies. They were outdated in our fathers’ time.” My breathing came heavy with the exertion of the fight. I wasn’t only fighting John; I was fighting years of pent-up frustration. I didn’t want to be CFO when I was twenty-eight. But damn if I didn’t try to



do my best work. I wanted to continue my father's legacy, make him proud as if he had been around these past ten years to see what had happened with his company. It seemed like John was doing his best to sully the Peters' name.

"You just wish you had figured it out like me. What did you do Chase? Get jealous I was engaged, so you found the first slut who would sleep with you? And surprise it's my deceitful little sister." Every word against Gemma made my blood boil at a higher temperature.

"You're delusional. You know what? You can have the fucking company, buy me out. I'll sit back and watch as the whole thing falls apart."

John scoffed. "You mean it becomes bigger, better. I've been carrying your dead weight for ten years."

"Deadweight?" I laughed. "You don't even know what the fuck is going on in the business right now, do you? Who is going to run things for you? Jennifer? You're nothing but a figurehead and a devoted lap dog to some nagging gold digger." I spit the words out. "She says jump and you ask how high."

"And you're just a dickhead. Pussy whipped by my fucking sister."

That's when my fist slammed into the side of his jaw.

His eyes went out of focus, and he staggered around finding his balance. He braced himself against his desk, sucking in heavy breaths.

"Get the fuck out of my office. Get out of my company."

I grabbed my coat and left.

As I strode out of John's office, I realized I should have done this moments ago. I shouldn't have tried to make sense of what had happened. I should have followed Gemma. I was in love with her, and I knew with sudden clarity that I had to marry her. Amelia was my daughter. We belonged together.

"Which way did she go?" I barked.

John's assistant pointed toward the elevators.

I went straight to Gemma's office. She wasn't there. I couldn't tell if she had come back or not. I felt my chest constrict. I couldn't lose her or Amelia.

"Have you seen her?" I asked, barging into Maggie's office.

"I haven't seen Gem since she went to Mr. Peter's office."

"Fuck." I ran out of her office and out of the building.

The rain soaked my shirt before I managed to pull my overcoat on. I looked up and down the street without any idea of how to find her. I pulled out my phone and called her. It rang and ended up in voicemail. I called again to no avail.

Frantically I texted her. "Gemma, we need to talk. Where did you go?"

I paced back and forth in front of the building, hoping to catch her coming out. Praying she would answer her phone.



## GEMMA

I don't remember how I got home. I was soaked and shivering when Mom opened the front door. I had left everything in my office, all I had with me was my phone. I barely remember functioning. I spent the evening sobbing on Mom's lap while she kept stroking my hair.

It must have been Yana who made the hot soup, and who took care of Amelia that evening, because Mom stayed by my side as I died. There was no other description I could use. I died. If it weren't for Amelia and the baby inside of me, I saw no reason to carry on.

When I woke in the morning, I felt like I had been hit by a truck. My eyes were swollen, and my throat was sore. I remembered thinking I was dying the night before, so clearly, this feeling was what people meant when they said, 'felt like death warmed over.'

But I had a reason and purpose for living. I was a marketing professional, I had children. I also had an asshole brother who wanted me out of my properties so he could give them to his fiancée.

I texted Bria and Maggie at work, "I feel like crap, I'll update you on the numbers with Peters later. Can one of you send my coat and purse to my address? Thanks."

With my phone in my hand, I barely glanced at all the voicemails and text messages from Chase. I saw enough to know that John had even sent something. I deleted every last one of them and then blocked both numbers. Blocking the

owners of the company I worked for might not have been a wise career move, but I didn't know how much longer I would have that job.

I slogged my way downstairs to the kitchen. Mom was feeding Amelia.

"Momma, mom-mom," Amelia said and reached out for me with grabby hand motions.

I picked her up and snuggled into her belly. She giggled. I was glad Amelia was happy. I would be happy for her. She didn't need to know that I was broken more than I ever thought I could survive.

"Pay Tace. Mia pay Tace."

I stared at her. Her speech seemed to have improved overnight.

"The paediatrician said she knew her words, she simply isn't using them. I guess she's decided to start using her words," Mom said. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Can we go home?" I asked.

"Isn't this your home?"

"I mean Orchard View. Home-home. This has always been the townhouse, that's always been home. You know?"

She nodded. "I know what you mean. What about work?"

"I'm taking time off before John can have me fired. He found out last night."

"Oh, honey," Mom cooed.

"Yeah, it didn't go well. On top of everything, I broke up with that man I was seeing."

"Gemma," Mom looked like she was at a loss for words. "I had feared it was something like that."

I nodded. "Yeah, I want to go home."

We packed that day. It broke my heart all over again every time Amelia asked for Chase to play with her. I should have been more careful with her heart as well. It hadn't occurred to me that she would develop an attachment to him so quickly. I

swallowed down my tears as I remembered how perfect they were together. He was a natural father figure to her without realizing he was her father.

It had taken no time at all to be back in the habits that made Orchard View home. I was up early to take Haha, the old mare, out for morning rides. The Spanish tandem saddle I ordered before moving to the city had arrived, and I was able to take Amelia out for rides on Haha.

I was used to this life. Caring for the horses, and not many other obligations. Father had made sure we were all taken care of in his will. Mom would never have to worry about having a place to live, neither would I, nor John for that matter.

As my horse, Haha, ambled along the path, I was able to think over what I had learned the past few days. My meeting with Mr. Lawson, the family's lawyer, had helped me to understand my position in regard to the properties. If John wanted full ownership, he would have to buy me out at current market value. That got me thinking. Orchard View was non-negotiable as far as I was concerned.

This was my mother's home for as long as she wanted it. Even ten years after my father's death, she hadn't remarried. I didn't know if it was because she loved my father that much, or if she was afraid to lose her home. It was in the will; Orchard View would be her home until her death. Ownership was split between John and me, and we were not allowed to dissolve the property while Mom was alive. I realized now how much that must have bothered John. He blamed me for the death of our mother. I'm sure he blamed me for my father marrying my nanny, my mom, too. No wonder he thought my mom, and I, by extension, had taken his home from him.

I hadn't been to the Hamptons house since that fateful night when I finally caught Chase's attention. Even then, I hadn't been staying at the house. Before that, Mom didn't like going there since my father died, so I didn't go. By the time Haha was back in her stable I knew which properties I was willing to sell. John could have the Hamptons property, but I wasn't going to give up the townhouse, or the ski lodge in Aspen.

I kicked off my muck boots at the back door and stepped into the kitchen. This morning's ride helped me to sort through the one issue with John. What to do about the properties. I still didn't know what to do about work. I wanted to go back; I liked the team I worked with. I believed in the campaign we had developed. I liked my job, even if it was considered playing on the internet.

The ringtone I used for work went off.

"Hey, it's Bria," she said as soon as I said hello.

"Maggie is going to call you to make it all official, but I wanted to call you, friend-to-friend."

"Crap, what's wrong?" I sat in one of the spindle-back kitchen chairs.

"Don't get mad at Maggie, she really went to bat for you, but... I don't know what went down when you saw Peters last week, but HR said you're fired and not allowed on the premises. And Peters demanded that all social media be shut down before it makes everything worse."

I sighed heavily. "What a fucking idiot. He never even looked at the numbers. I'm sorry Bria. I've made a mess of things."

"What did you do Gem?"

"John Peters is my brother. My last name is really Lafayette-Peters, same as his. He found out I was there and pitched a fit. I didn't think he would really go so far as to tear everything down just because I was involved. I wanted to do something good for my dad's legacy. I wanted to show John I could be an asset to CP Manhattan." I had wanted to prove my brother wrong, that I was a person of value if only in a professional capacity.

"Fuck," she dragged the word out long, into multiple syllables that each expressed a different meaning to the word.

"That explains a lot. I mean a lot. You haven't heard from Chase, have you?"

"No." I didn't want to hear from Chase. I didn't want to hear about him either.

“I was hoping he ran away with you,” she laughed.

“I didn’t run away. I really wasn’t feeling well,” I whined a little. She was right, I had run away. I didn’t like the fact that I had any more than I liked the reason for doing so.

“You aren’t even in the city, are you?”

“I’m not,” I said with a shake of my head.

“Well, Chase is missing.”

“What?”

“No one has heard from or seen him since the same day you left. He’s not at work stopping Peters from destroying everything. Rumor has it that HR is slogging through paperwork in preparation for massive layoffs.”

“Oh shit,” I said. “How are you holding up?”

She gave a bitter laugh. “It’s like living under the sword of Damocles. I’m sure he’s going to axe the entire marketing department. He’s gone off the rails. If he’s your brother, can’t you talk to him?”

I shook my head. “He’s not talking to me, and even if he were, he never listens to the things I say. He’s always been short-tempered. I can’t believe he’s lashing out at the company.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you did a phenomenal job here. And I liked working with you.”

“Thanks, you too. Keep in touch,” I said.

“Maybe we’ll find ourselves working together at another company. I’ll put in a good word for you if you put in a good word for me,” she suggested.

“You know I will.”

After the call ended, I sat and stared at the kitchen walls. How had I managed to screw up so badly that I put other people’s jobs at risk? I had a light-bulb moment, a sudden flash of a brilliant idea. John could do what he wanted with CP Manhattan.





## CHASE

I dug my feet into the sand. The last time I was here everything was perfect. Now it was all falling apart. Waves crashed against the sand, but there was no Gemma, no Amelia to giggle and dance at the water's edge as it tickled her toes. Instead, light refracted off the waves and blurred my vision.

I rubbed the tightness I felt in my chest. I lifted my elbows back, stretching the muscles. The tightness wasn't in my pecs, but underneath. My heart, my lungs, the tools I needed to breathe and pump blood didn't want to work because of some emotions.

They weren't stupid emotions. They were, however, inconvenient now that I didn't need or want them any longer. That wasn't true. I wanted them, I wanted Gemma. I wanted my family.

I took a pull from the beer in my hand, emptying it. I dropped it in the sand next to other empty cans. I found a fresh can and popped it open and took another long drink. I thought about covering up, or at last slathering up in sunscreen.

Damn it. Everything made me think about those two. How my daughter— my god, I had a little girl and I didn't even know it — would giggle and squirm as I rubbed sunscreen into her skin. I wanted to be her protector when I didn't even know who her father was. I hadn't cared because I wanted to fill that role for her.

My heart pounded as if to say it wasn't willing to give up just yet. Unfortunately, the rest of me was at a loss. I had no idea how to find Gemma. I couldn't ask John, who was being a complete dickhead. I swear he was running CP Manhattan into the ground so that it wouldn't be worth anything when I demanded he buy me out.

Under momentum that didn't feel like my own, I stood up and began walking. The balmy ocean breeze mitigated the feel of the sun's heat. I had nothing but questions, and Gemma was the only person with answers. I don't know how far I walked, but getting back to the house, now that I wanted my phone, seemed to take a long time. The sun was setting by the time I walked into the courtyard.

The cook had come and gone. Grilled fish, fresh caught that day, stank up the kitchen. Funny, the fresh fish was one of the things I loved about this place. Now everything I looked at was tainted by memories of Gemma.

I threw the food into the bin and pulled another beer out of the fridge. The can popped open with a satisfying snap and release. The liquid was cool and refreshing going down my throat into my empty stomach. When was the last time I ate? I rummaged in the fridge, settling on frying up some eggs. I ate them straight from the pan.

The smell of the fish was overpowering, so I carried the garbage out. I was an adult man, I could fend for myself. So why did I feel like a lost little boy? How had I gotten to this barely functional state?

I sank onto the couch and tried to call Gemma. My number was blocked, had been for a week. I pressed call on another number. By the time the phone was ringing, I had forgotten who I was calling.

"My God, Chase, where the hell have you been?"

"Tanner?" I couldn't remember why I called him.

"People have been calling me all week frantic about you. You haven't returned a single call, text, or email from me."

“Did Gemma call? Was she one of the frantic people?” I wanted her to be worried.

“No, but your admin at CP Manhattan has been beside herself with worry. And Mr. Peters’s assistant checks in several times a day seeing if you have shown up.”

“She doesn’t care,” I said.

“Who? Oh, shit, the girlfriend.”

“Did you know that asshole John Peters has a little sister? No, of course, you don’t. I still think of her as a little girl running after us, wanting to play, to be included. Whenever John talked about his sister, I always pictured her that way,” I rambled on.

“What way?” Tanner asked. He really should have known better than to encourage me. Maybe he was glad I was talking.

My thoughts got fuzzy, and I think my speech did too. “A pudgy little girl with long strawberry blonde braids, freckles on her nose, and a big gaping hole where her front teeth should be. She picked flowers by the stables and gave them to me.”

“Chase...” Tanner started.

“But she’s not five or six anymore. She’s not even seven, or eight. She’s hot, smoking sexy hot. With an ass like—”

“Chase!” Tanner interrupted. “Do you need me to call her for you?”

“She won’t talk to me.”

“Okay, so no phone call. Do you need me to find her for you?”

“You’d do that?”

“You’re too drunk to think clearly. When was the last time you had food? Real food, chips don’t count. And do not try to tell me about monks who made thick beer to survive in medieval Europe. You are neither a monk nor is the local beer that substantial.”

“I had eggs.”

“When?”

“Dinner, tonight. I’m a functional adult.”

“You’re a drunk adult. Look, Chase, I am glad you are alive. I’d hate to try to find a new job. You need to go sleep this bender off.” He ended the call with promises of calling me in the morning to remind me of all the embarrassing things I said to him that I wouldn’t remember.

Okay, I needed to sleep. But didn’t Tanner realize that not even beer kept me from thinking about Gemma? Little Gemma with her braces and awkward inability to talk to me at the funeral. Grown-up Gemma whose body was perfect in every way, with round hips and breasts that could bring me to my knees. And at some point, we made a baby together.

I did the math. That would have been the summer after I broke up with Nicole. I didn’t remember every woman I slept with, not something I was exactly proud of. After Nicole, I went a little overboard on my libertine ways, a different woman every weekend. Sometimes more than one.

Closing my eyes I tried to force my brain to focus. I wasn’t going to remember names, but I should be able to remember faces. I’d known Gemma for years; how could I have missed recognizing her features and her hair?

John’s house party. Fuck. She was that redhead, in a red dress. Her hair was shorter. I should have remembered that ass the next time I saw her. Of course, the next time, she was in a sassy business skirt and had long strawberry blonde hair again.

She should have told me about the baby. John was pissed off when she stopped coming home. Said she had abandoned him. Funny words coming from him, he had never given her a second thought when she was around, only to blame her for choosing to stay away.

Damn, he was such a dick to her when she was little. All she wanted was his attention, to be included when his friends were over. I wasn’t much better. Never once told him to stop until he’d gone too far. Like the time he splashed her so hard in the pool she slipped out of her inner tube. I fished her out of the pool and carried her back to the house. She was crying and coughing the whole way, and John and the guys laughed about it.

I would have protected her from John's vitriol like I always had. I would have been there for her. She wouldn't have had to go through the pregnancy alone and scared.

But she kept it from her family. From me. Gemma hid my daughter from me, only to tease me with her. Did Gemma want me to bond with my own kid without ever telling me? She kept the birth of my child from me. I missed out on her round pregnant belly and telling her to breathe during labor.

"Fuck!" I threw the beer in my hand. It hit the television, knocking it askew in its mount, and fracturing the screen.

I wasn't going to let her keep Amelia from me. And damn it, I wasn't going to let her keep herself from me. We were a family and we belonged together. I picked up my phone and dialed.

"Chase?" Tanner asked.

"Find out where John Peters' estate is located upstate. That's where she'll be. Have my plane ready first thing in the morning. No change that, I'm drunk. Tomorrow morning is going to be a bitch. Late morning, ten am."

"Consider it done. Good to have you back boss."



## GEMMA

“If I’m not going back to CP Manhattan, do I even want to go back to the city?” I asked.

Mom prompted the conversation by asking what I was planning now that I had been let go from my job. It felt like the question had come out of left field. An unexpected topic while I was spreading mayonnaise on slices of bread to make grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch.

“That was very rude the way that John had you fired. If your father was alive,” Mom started. She danced around the kitchen a bit to soothe Amelia. She was fussy with hunger, and I wasn’t cooking fast enough.

“If he was alive, John wouldn’t be in a position to fire me.” I shrugged. There was always the possibility that he could have passed the corporate baton on to John, making him COO. Had my father done that, even then John wouldn’t have been able to fire me. I wouldn’t have been in a situation to have to sneak around behind John’s back to prove myself.

“What’s in the City if you go back?” It was a good question.

Chase was there, I needed to avoid him for my sanity. I didn’t have any friends, other than Bria. All my other friends were scattered across the globe. In a few years, I’d have to find a spot and stay put for Amelia’s schooling. Until then, I needed a good baby doctor otherwise my choices were wide open.

“Do you want to go back to work?” Mom asked. “The toddler years are special. Amelia is growing so fast. Blink and you’ll miss them.” She fastened Amelia into her seat.



I sighed. I was getting my career off the ground. The opportunity at CP Manhattan gave me a strong taste for Social Media Management. I didn't realize how much I enjoyed that aspect of marketing. But the upcoming months of pregnancy were going to be exhausting. Mom was right, I would miss out on Amelia growing up before my eyes.

I would miss the moments like this where Amelia fought against the restraints that prevented her from falling out of her highchair. I would also miss the moments when she mastered words and smiled. Work meant not being with my child during the good times, and the bad times.

"I don't know. Part of me wants to stay at home and be the trust fund baby that I am. But it was so satisfying to have people listen to my ideas and to see tangible results from my work. You know?"

Mom chuckled. "You were my tangible result."

She removed a carton of organic tomato basil soup from the cupboard and pulled a pan down from the rack.

"Did you ever want to do something other than being a nanny?"

"I loved being a nanny. I love babies. I specialized in cases like yours. I typically stayed with my families until the children were four or five, ready for school. Sometimes I stayed less, especially if there was a nanny for the older children. I did not expect to stay and watch you grow into the wonderful woman you are now. But I am so grateful to be able to help you raise Amelia."

I pulled the first sandwich off the grill and hugged Mom. I knew the story of her and Dad. It was never one of those torrid affairs with the nanny. She always claimed he didn't even know she had a first name until I was almost three. They didn't get married until John was in college. That didn't stop him from being a resentful jerk. Whatever their romance had been like, I was glad to have been raised by a mother, biological or not, who loved me.

I put a second sandwich on the grill and cut the first one up into small squares, better to help it cool faster, and better for small fingers to grab.

“Here this is barely warm,” Mom said as she poured some of the soup into a cup. “I’ll finish the sandwiches, you help Amelia.”

I grabbed one of the soft-edged spoons from the utensil drawer and sat down with my daughter. She couldn’t cram a bite of sandwich into her mouth fast enough. I was glad I cut the pieces up small, I don’t think she paused to chew to the first bite.

“You need to chew, baby,” I said.

I lifted a spoon full of soup to my lips to blow on before presenting the spoon to Amelia. She blew on the soup before opening her mouth wide like a little bird desperate to be fed.

“We could always go back to Europe,” I said.

Mom paused in her cooking and turned to face me. “Please don’t run away again. Those years with you gone were harder than I care to admit. If you want to work, that’s fine. I’m here to help. If not, that’s okay too. Your father made sure you were taken care of.”

I knew money wasn’t the issue. My self-worth was. And I was a jerk for hurting Mom when I stayed away for so long.

“You could come with us,” I said.

“Oh, I don’t know. Vacationing in Europe is one thing. I don’t know what I would do if we moved there. Who would take care of the horses?”

She placed a plate with several sandwiches and two bowls of soup onto the table. She handed me a spoon.

“They have stables in Europe. We could fly the horses over.”

“I couldn’t imagine Best Boy or Haha liking that very much.”

I shrugged. She was right.

“I understand why you want to leave; I really do. Between your young man breaking up with you, and John having you

fired, it can't feel very good to be reminded of all of that. Why don't we stay here, take a break from the city, for a while before deciding if Europe is the best move?"

I scoffed at 'young man.' Chase wasn't what anyone would consider young. He was a full-fledged adult, in his prime.

"Give yourself some time to get over him. You might find that there are other men out there you like better."

I nodded. I wanted to tell her there was no one better, there would never be anyone better. I would never get over Chase Campbell, not when I could see him in Amelia, not when I was carrying his second child.

Amelia ground grilled cheese into her face, trying to rub her tired eyes with a handful of sandwiches. She started crying. I didn't blame her. Today was hard.

I wiped the bits of food from her face and then peeled her little fists open to remove the remaining sandwich pieces before she did that again.

Mom was up with her arms out. "I'll take her."

"I'll clean up," I said.

"Leave it, it's not going anywhere. I can practically hear the gears in your brain grinding away at what you're processing. Why don't you go for a walk, or take a ride? I'll be around when you want to talk it out."

I nodded and kissed Amelia on the cheek, and then kissed Mom on the cheek.

"Thanks, you're right. I do have so many thoughts just swirling around."

I found my riding boots where I left them the day before, in the muck room off the kitchen. I pulled my jacket from a hook and headed out to the stable.

Spring was in the air, even though the temperature was still cool. Haha snickered as I led her out of her stall and saddled her up. She was a good-natured mount. Perfect for long leisurely rides. The kind of ride where I could really get some thinking done. We had a trail through the backwoods that

Haha would follow automatically. I guided her in the proper direction, and she knew what to do next.

As the horse walked on, I made a list of all the things that were weighing heavy on my mind. The baby was first and foremost. I hid the supplements I started taking from Mom, but she was going to notice my size, as I continued to grow. I needed a baby doctor. But before I could settle on a doctor I needed to know where I was going to be living. I set aside the list labeled 'Baby,' and started on the mental gymnastics for the next list.

This one was harder. This one was Chase. How was I supposed to get over someone I'd been in love with since I could remember?

I was angry that John had figured out Amelia was Chase's before I had gotten the nerves to tell him about her. I rested my hand on my belly. I couldn't really tell I was pregnant other than the occasional morning sickness. I had no flutters of movement yet; the baby was too small for that.

"Do I tell your daddy or not? He already knows about your sister."

I didn't want him to take Amelia from me, but custody was a very real issue now that he knew about her. I figured as soon as his lawyers tracked me down, that a DNA test would be requested to prove paternity.

I wiped at the tears that blurred my vision. "Good girl, Haha," I said, leaning forward to stroke her neck. I couldn't see, yet she kept following the trail.

Would Chase listen if I told him I would never sue him for child support? Would he care? If he sued for visitation, he would eventually see me pregnant, and then with another baby. Would he sue me over the one in my belly now?

Maybe Europe was the solution. He would never need to know I was pregnant. I didn't know and answers were not readily coming to me. I wouldn't fight him over visitation rights or financial support. The only thing I ever wanted from him was his love.

The trees cleared and Haha started crossing the backfield toward the stables. I must have been stuck on my thoughts of Chase for a lot longer than I realized.

“Okay, we can go home now,” I said. I kicked Haha into a canter, giving her a chance to stretch her legs a little. She whinnied and shied as the thud-thud-thud of a helicopter grew louder. She twisted and her eyes went wide.

“It’s okay, girl,” I talked to her in hushed tones, attempting to reign her in.

The helicopter sound grew louder. Haha fought me. She threw her neck around. I was prepared for her to spook and run, but she balked. Suddenly from over the trees, swooping over us, a white helicopter appeared. I lost control as she reared up. I scrambled, trying to reach for her neck.

I felt myself slip.



## CHASE

Orchard View came into view as the helicopter flew low over the trees. It was a grand estate. It had been years since I was back. I practically spent every summer here as a kid.

Mr. Peters and my father had been best friends and business partners. I remembered a few grand Christmas parties from when I was a kid. It wasn't until I was a teenager that it seemed like I stayed here more than I did at my parents' townhouse in the city. I think my mother wanted me to have a chance to run wild and be out of her socialite hair.

"Damn," I said with a sigh as I realized, I had been sent here to be a distraction for John after his mother died. That explained why we had been tucked away at the same boarding school in Vermont. Even through the years we were at separate colleges, I returned here every summer. Orchard View meant summer vacation, swimming, horseback riding, sleeping under the stars if we wanted. And now it meant Gemma.

We approached from the east, over the stables toward the backfield. A solo rider struggled with their horse. As we flew in closer, I recognized the mop of blonde sticking out of the back of her riding helmet.

"Get control of that horse," I muttered.

The horse reared and Gem fell.

"Get up," I said. "Get up. Get up!" Suddenly I was yelling. "Get this bird on the ground now!"

My seat belt was off and I threw open the door before the helicopter had even settled on the ground. I jumped out and ran.

The horse stayed next to her, but I didn't pay any attention to the animal beyond pushing it out of my way.

"Gem? Gemma?" She lay on her side, not moving.

I ducked my face close to hers. I felt her breath on my face. "Good girl, you keep breathing."

I ran my hands over her body, checking to ensure that her limbs were not broken.

"Gemma, darling, can you hear me?"

I was rewarded with a groan. I unfastened her helmet and eased it from her head.

"Can you open your eyes for me?"

She was quiet. She didn't even groan this time. I had her in my arms and rushed to the house. Mrs. Peters opened the door as I approached.

"Oh my God, Gemma! What happened?" she asked.

"Call a doctor now. Where can I put her?"

She rushed in front of me, leading me to a bedroom off the back pantry. Everything smelled slightly musty from lack of use. I held Gemma and watched her face for any flicker of eye movement as her mother pulled the covers off the bed and pulled the sheets back so I could place Gemma down. I didn't want to, she needed to be safe, and she was safest in my arms.

I tended to Gemma, easing her boots off, and opening her jacket. As I unfastened buttons she mumbled and moved her arms as if she wanted to push me away.

Someone came into the room behind us. "How can I help?"

"I need you to call Dr. Williams. Tell him there's been an accident. I'll go get George to take care of the horse." Mrs. Peters directed.

I looked up at her when I felt her hand on my shoulder.



“When I get back, you’ll explain to me what happened, and why you’re here, Chase.”

I nodded in agreement.

I sat staring at Gemma. Her hand clasped in my own. I willed her to open her eyes and smile at me or frown at me even. Anything, I wanted her to react and know I was there.

“Oh good, you made some coffee. Bring the doctor back as soon as he arrives. Thank you, Yana.”

I could hear Mrs. Peters giving directions.

Moments later a steaming cup of hot coffee was handed to me.

“Thanks.” I took a sip. I hadn’t had coffee in months, the flavor was stronger than I remembered.

She sat on the far side of the bed, across Gemma from where I sat.

“Would you care to explain what’s going on Chase? I haven’t seen you in years. It’s always a bit of a shock to recognize the children you knew as an adult.”

“It has been a while,” I admitted. “Since right after the funerals.”

“That’s about when John stopped coming home too,” she said with a nod. “It got very quiet around here without you boys. Why the helicopter, why not just drive up like a normal person?”

“I was in a hurry. I take it Gem, Gemma, didn’t tell you about us?”

“Us as in CP Manhattan, or us as in you’re the man she went away with?”

I took a long drink of coffee. The warmth helped soothe my frayed nerves.

Gemma groaned. I was on my feet. Mrs. Peters leaned in. Just as quickly, Gemma was unconscious again.

I ran my hands through my hair and began to pace at the end of the bed. The room was small, so I didn’t manage to go very

far before I turned around again.

“Yes, you’re right. I am the one she went away with. I took her to my home in St. Maarten.”

“She said you broke up with her.” Mrs. Peters’ voice was stern, disapproving.

“That’s not exactly what—”

“Dr. Williams,” the woman Mrs. Peters had been directing said.

An elderly man followed behind her and into the room.

“Everyone out, this room is too crowded,” he ordered. “What happened?”

“She fell from her horse,” I said.

“Was she wearing a helmet?”

“Yes, she was.”

“Good, has she been unconscious the entire time?”

“She’s in and out,” Mrs. Peters said.

“Out, out,” he shoved us away.

A tinny crying sound came from Mrs. Peters’ backside.

“Amelia,” she said as she pulled a white baby monitor from her pocket.

“Can I help?” I asked. I needed to see my daughter.

“I’m not sure if I should let you. Gemma said you broke up.”

“That’s why I’m here. I’ve been looking for Gemma for a week. It took me that long to figure out that if she was still in the states that she’d be here.”

I followed her up the back flight of stairs to the bedroom hallway.

“How did you know she was thinking about leaving?”

“She stayed away once. It was only logical. Especially after the crap John said to her. After what I didn’t say.”

She opened a door and paused. “What didn’t you say to her, Chase?”

The crying stopped, and Amelia’s little voice asked, “Tace pay Mia?”

The smile on my face was happy and genuine. I swept Amelia up into my arms.

“Hi, princess. I’ve missed you.” I kissed her on the cheek, and she gave me a sloppy open mouth version of a return kiss on my cheek.

“Let me change her.” Mrs. Peters swooped Amelia out of my arms. I felt a sudden urge to fight to keep her. But the instant panic immediately subsided.

“Pay Tace,” Amelia complained.

“You can play with Chase in a minute,” her grandmother soothed.

I hovered in the background, my hands shoved in my pockets, looking at Amelia’s room. Someone had painted rainbow clouds full of magical creatures. Bunnies with butterfly wings hopped over clouds that blue whales with unicorn horns swam under. It was a magical room with twinkle lights hanging from the ceiling, and stuffed animals piled high in the corner. It was the kind of room I would have insisted she have.

Mrs. Peters handed Amelia back to me, and I felt at peace. A feeling of being complete I hadn’t felt since Gemma was with me in St. Maarten.

I couldn’t take my eyes off Amelia. Her eyes were dark like mine, but her hair was her mother’s. Her nose was straight like mine, but so little it looked like Gemma’s, and she had Gemma’s pointy chin. There was a healthy mix of both of us in the tiny, beautiful face.

“You really have taken to Amelia. She’s been asking for you all week.”

“Did Gemma tell you?”

Mrs. Peters raised her eyebrows and shook her head. “Tell me what? Gemma didn’t even tell me it was you she was seeing.”

“We should go downstairs, see if the doctor is done. I think you’ll want a cup of coffee for this.”

I carried Amelia and we returned down the back stairs into the kitchen.

With coffee in front of her and seated at a long table Mrs. Peters looked at me.

“Gemma never told you who Amelia’s father is, did she?”

Mrs. Peters shook her head.

“Did she tell you about the big blow-up in John’s office?”

“What are you getting at Chase? Gemma told me that John blew his top when he discovered her in his marketing department, and he had her fired. And that the man she was seeing broke up with her. She hasn’t told anyone who Amelia’s father is.”

I sighed. “I’m the father. Now that I look at her, I can see all the similarities. But I didn’t have a clue.”

Gemma’s mother covered her mouth with her hand. Her gaze bounced back and forth between Amelia and me. And then she began nodding.

“John figured it out before Gemma had a chance to tell me. Instead of running after her like I should have, I confronted John, defended her honor.” I swallowed and looked away. “I couldn’t stand hearing him talk about Gemma like that any longer. When I ran out to find her, she was gone.”

“When you didn’t follow her out, she must have interpreted that as you are choosing sides.”

“Yeah, I figured it must have looked like I was choosing John and the company over her and Amelia.” I tickled Amelia just to hear her giggle. “I was in shock. But I already knew that Gemma and Amelia were my family. I needed a second to adjust to exactly how much that was true.”

“So you admit to getting Gemma pregnant?”

“I admit to vaguely remembering a woman I think was Gemma at a party a few years back. I trust Gemma to

remember who she slept with. I hope she can forgive me for not being as circumspect.”

“Are you going to insist on a paternity test? What will you do if Amelia isn’t yours?”

“For legal reasons, I’m sure a paternity test will happen. But know this Mrs. Peters, I fell in love with Gemma and her daughter thinking that, no, knowing that I wanted to be Amelia’s father. It’s simply more beautiful that I already am.”

Amelia awkwardly wiped a tear from my cheek. “Tace cry.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, princess, but that’s a happy tear.”

The doctor stepped into the kitchen and cleared his throat.

“Is she conscious? Is she going to be okay?” Mrs. Peters asked.

“She is a bit concussed. She is sitting up but resting. Gemma will be fine, and the baby has a good strong heartbeat so there’s nothing to worry about.”



## GEMMA

**T**he doctor helped to prop up the pillows for me. “Do you plan on staying conscious for me?” he asked with a chuckle.

I was sleepy and having a hard time staying awake.

“I’ll try,” I said. My mouth felt like cotton. “Can I have something to drink?”

“Of course.” He patted my hand. “I’ll let them know you’re up.”

I have no idea what he said, but seconds later Chase, with Amelia in his arms, came crashing into the room with Mom hot on his heels.

I tried to smile, but everything made my head hurt.

“I thought I dreamed your voice,” I managed to say.

Chase set Amelia down on the bed, and she crawled against me. He sat on the bed and held my hand. I wanted to be happy he was there. I wanted that so much.

If Chase was there, then it was his helicopter that scared Haha so badly.

“It’s your fault I fell off of Haha. Your stupid helicopter freaked her out. Why the fuck are you here Chase?”

“Language,” Mom said. She didn’t like cussing around Amelia. Normally I agreed with her, but at this moment that seemed so unimportant. What was important was why Chase was looking at me with so much concern.

I tried to sit up a bit more and struggled with my support pillows. He leaned in close, and I could smell him. He smelled like he had come straight from the beach. Fresh ocean air, sand, sunscreen. He smelled like all of my hopes and dreams.

“I’ve got you,” he said softly.

I was afraid to touch him, not certain if that was something that was still allowed. I wanted him to have me, but I didn’t know. Not after the way he couldn’t look at me in John’s office.

“Did someone check on Haha? Is she okay?”

“The horse is fine,” Mom said. “George got her into the stables. I’ll go check on her and give her a good brushing down after I know you are all right. You gave us quite a scare.”

“Gemma, is what the doctor said true?” Chase asked as he engulfed my hand in his.

I didn’t know what he was talking about. If the doctor told him I had a raging headache, then yes, it was true.

“Are we having another child?”

Oh, that. I forced my eyes to focus on the handsome face I loved so much. He didn’t look angry. He looked concerned, hopeful.

“You aren’t mad, are you?” I reached up to cup his face.

He leaned against my palm before turning his face into my hand and kissing it.

“I was. Forgive me.”

“I thought you chose John over me.” I wanted to cry, but my head throbbed. Tears would be a very bad idea on top of my concussion.

“It was a lot all at once. I did not choose John or CP Manhattan over you. I’m sorry if you thought I had. I needed time to process. As soon as I figured out that I should have left with you, it was too late.”

“And when was that? How many days did it take?”



“Gemma, I was on the street looking for you almost immediately. John and I had a falling out over you, and then I couldn’t find you. I thought I had lost you forever.”

He leaned in and placed his lips against mine. I was in too much pain to lean in and deepen the kiss properly, to take the confirmation that I wanted from him. Pain lanced through my head, and I winced.

He eased back. “Sorry, are you okay?”

“I will be.” I closed my eyes and let gravity pull me a little deeper into the pillows.

I could hear Mom and Chase muttering something, and Amelia snuggled in close to my side. This felt better, softer, more comfortable. I don’t know how long I lay there, resting. I must have drifted off, because I was horseback riding on the beach, with Chase on another horse running by my side.

When I opened my eyes again, I realized I had been dreaming, but the dream wasn’t that Chase was there. Chase was real. He smiled and I felt like I was left out of a big secret.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re going to make me a father again. That’s...”

“Shocking?” I suggested.

“Yes, in a good way. I was getting used to the thought of being Amelia’s father, and now I’m going to have two children.”

I groaned.

“Are you okay?” Chase jumped.

“I’m fine. It’s just, well, someone else told you first.”

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

I could tell by the tone he wasn’t sure if I actually had planned on telling him or not. I had gotten scared at his beach house, and I hadn’t told him anything when I should have bared everything to him, not just my body.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I was messed up, Chase. I thought I had messed everything up with you.”

“You never messed anything up.” He adjusted his position, so he was more comfortable. He ran a hand over Amelia’s head, she had fallen asleep at some point while I rested and was still out.

He looked over his shoulder. We were alone.

“I had time to think, to remember you. You had short red hair, that’s when I got you pregnant, isn’t it?”

I started to nod but thought better of it. “You remembered me?”

“I remember a woman, who could only have been you. Gemma, I wasn’t a decent man that night. I didn’t treat you the way you deserved.”

“And how did I deserve to be treated? I was a party girl looking for a fun time,” I said.

“No, you weren’t. I’ve paid attention to the words you’ve said to me. You’ve only ever been with one man, me. Right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That means I should have treated you with care, and not as a party fuck on the beach. You were a virgin. You deserved a man who at least asked your name.” He ran his hands through his hair.

I caught them in mine before he could do it again.

“I got the man I always wanted. I only ever wanted you. I knew what I was doing. Well, sort of,” I laughed. I stopped laughing and gazed deep into his eyes. “Chase, I’ve been in love with you since I can remember. I’m still in love with you, and always will be. You being the father of my children is all I’ve ever wanted.”

“That’s the best news I’ve heard in a long time.” He twisted his wrists until he was holding my hands. He lifted them to his lips and kissed my knuckles. “I love you, Gemma. I want us to be together. To be a family.”

I wanted to throw my arms around his neck and kiss him fiercely, but sudden motions made me queasy. My head still throbbed.

“John’s going to be mad that you picked me over him,” I said.

“John can pull his head out of his ass. And when he does, maybe he’ll discover that he’s had an amazing family all this time. He’s an idiot to think that he must lose it all. But that’s his choice. My choice is to be with you.”

“What about the business? What about CP Manhattan?”

He shrugged. “I’ve decided to let John buy me out if that’s what he wants. If he wants me to stick around, that will be different. As it stands, he wants me out, and I’m not in the frame of mind to fight him over it.”

“What will you do?” I asked.

Another shrug. “I don’t have to do anything, really. I can always start another company. I’m a finance guy, I’ll figure it out.”

“You could marry for money,” I teased.

“I could. But I’d rather marry for love.”

Chase let go of my hands and leaned back so he could put his hand into his pocket. He pulled a small distinct turquoise blue bag from his pocket.

My jaw dropped open as he slid a small box of the same color from the bag. My hands were shaking. Tiffany and Company. I could barely breathe around the lump forming in my throat.

Chase slid from the bed and onto one knee as he opened and presented the box to me.

“I thought I could wait for a special moment. But I realized when the person is already perfect, all moments are special. Will you marry me? Let me be the father of our children?”

The ring he offered as a token of his love and affection was perfect. Round cut, classic, diamond solitaire.

“Oh Chase, I’ve dreamed of this my whole life. Yes, yes!” I held my finger out as he slid the ring on. It fit perfectly.

He stood and pressed a chaste kiss against my forehead. “Don’t get too excited, you’re still concussed.”

I held him tight when he hugged me.

“You could have waited until I recovered,” I teased more than I chastised.

“No, I couldn’t. I’ve wanted to slip that ring on your finger since before I bought it. If I waited something else might have gotten in my way. I love you Gemma, we belong together.”

Amelia began squirming and making sounds indicating that she would be up soon.

“Daddy and I are going to get married,” I said when Amelia woke up and looked around at us a little bleary-eyed.

“Tace daddy?”

“Yes, baby, Chase is your daddy.”



## EPILOGUE

## CHASE

Six months later...

**M**y phone rang. I knew the ring tone. I wasn't in the mood. I picked it up.

"Fuck off," I said before ending the call. I should block his number but telling John to fuck off at random was more fun.

I relaxed on the couch, Gemma was almost asleep as she rested against my chest, a movie on the big screen television. It was one of those moments I wanted branded in my memory forever. My woman in my arms, my hand resting on her pregnant belly, our first daughter tucked up in her crib. Everyone was happy and comfortable.

Gemma squirmed against my chest. "Was that John again?"

"I didn't mean to wake you," I mumbled against her hair.

The phone rang again. She reached for it. I'd let her deal with him, he was her estranged brother after all.

"John?" She paused. She fumbled with the remote in her other hand, freezing the movie on the screen. "If you want to talk to him John, you're going to have to figure out how to talk to me first. I know Chase has told you that."

I was too relaxed to be surprised when she started making affirmative humming sounds and nodding her head.

I took the phone from Gemma. She only lightly protested with an indignant, "Hey!"

“I’ve told you before, you have to figure out how to be nice to my betrothed, and act like a real brother before I will even entertain discussing business with you. You have a buy-out offer I will accept. It’s in your court now.” I ended the call before I let him say anything.

Gemma took the phone from me and texted something.

“What was that?” I asked.

“I told him to meet us for dinner tomorrow at the townhouse. If he’s going to be making amends, he starts with Mom.”

I kissed her long and slow. “Have I ever told you how smart and beautiful you are?”

She smiled. “Yes, but you can always tell me again.” She picked up the remote and started the movie again.

The second I saw John when he walked in the door of the townhouse for dinner the next evening, I told him he looked like shit. He was thinner, had bags under his eyes, and hadn’t shaved in days.

He grunted.

Katherine was the epitome of a gracious lady and host.

“John, welcome back,” she greeted him with both arms held out to him. She took both of his hands in hers and squeezed.

He looked at her confused and beaten. I had seen John after many weekend benders. I knew what the man looked like after a smackdown. This time he looked like he had been pummeled and stayed down.

“Katherine,” he started. His voice was groggy and broken. He cleared his throat and started again. “Katherine, thank you. I fear I owe you an apology many years past due.”

“Hush, you loved your mother greatly and were scared and lost. And as much as I loved your father, as we both did, he failed you in this regard. But you are here now, and so am I. It’s never too late to mend fences when it’s family. And...” She blinked away a few tears.



John pulled her into a hug. “I’m sorry. You never once tried to take over from my mother, I know that now. I’m so sorry.”

Gemma leaned against my arm, her hand against her chest. I reached over and wiped away an escaped tear from her cheek. She looked up at me, a weak, yet hopeful smile on her face. She took my hand and pulled me away from John’s moment with Katherine.

“That’s a hopeful start,” she said. “Now play nice when he comes in here.”

“But I like torturing your brother,” I teased.

Gemma left us alone when John entered the drawing-room. That’s the evening we learned that John’s life had scraped along rock bottom. After our altercation, he had a series of reality checks, the first one from Jennifer. He had done everything for her, and yet it had never been enough. Jennifer threw a fit when he came home with bruises on his face, angrier at his appearance than concerned for his well-being. As John told the story, she had no sympathy as he explained how his day went from bad to worse. It was another few weeks before he finally realized it never would be enough for her.

It had taken him almost a month to see that the damage to CP Manhattan’s social media reputation was from him shutting everything down, not the existence and building of those platforms. That’s when he started to call me. That’s when I would answer the phone telling him to fuck off before I hung up on him.

He would be forever grateful that Gemma had the capacity to have hope when it came to him, and that she had invited him over for dinner.

“You cook?” John looked at Gemma with his fork halfway to his mouth. The chicken cordon-bleu on his plate already half gone.

Gemma smiled and laughed. It was good to see her not wince and flinch around him, something she had done entirely too much in her past, enough so that I remembered.

“From the look on your face, I’m not too bad at it either,” she giggled.

“I had no idea. Jennifer couldn’t cook, not even the simplest of things. Even I know how to fry an egg.”

“You should know a touch more than that. I did arrange for cooking lessons for you boys at least two summers in a row,” Katherine said.

“You did,” I said. “It’s the only reason he knows how to fry an egg, grill a steak, bake a cake—”

“Box mix, man,” John cut me off.

“Cake is cake,” Gemma said. “And box mix is better than nothing. You know if you are interested, there are so many cooking classes in the city. You can even have them bring all the stuff and come to your house.”

“Is that what you did?” John asked.

“No, I used cookbooks and videos. And I made a lot of mistakes. But it’s a skill worth learning. Everyone should be able to feed themselves.”

“Well, Jennifer’s idea of feeding herself was ordering in.” John got very quiet and very thoughtful. “I thought I knew what she wanted. I thought I knew what I was doing. In my personal life and in business. She officially ended things with me when she found out I went to Tiffany and Company with Chase to look at rings. It didn’t matter that I had a customized Theda Wu engagement made for her. It didn’t come in the little blue box. I hadn’t gotten her a ring from Tiffany’s. No blue box and our future together was ruined.” He shook his head and took another bite of the dinner Gemma had cooked. He locked eyes with me.

“The board wants me out unless I can convince you to come back. I fu- messed up. I messed everything up.”

I agreed, he had screwed everything. The first thing he needed to do was admit it. Done.

He pulled several pages from his back pocket. They had clearly been folded and wrinkled and refolded many times. He

opened the pages and flattened them with his hands before handing them the Gemma.

“The marketing department really helped to position CP Manhattan so that when I lost my business sense, I didn’t do nearly as much damage as I could have.”

“These are the numbers I tried to show you,” Gemma stared open mouthed at the sheets in front of her.

“Yeah, that data shows strong growth and positioning in a short amount of time. I had no idea the power a good marketing department had. I need to find those people and get them back. It starts with you.”

Gemma shook her head. “I only do consultations these days.”

“Well, CP Manhattan needs to consult with you.”

“You can talk business, but you can’t do business at the table,” Katherine cut in.

“Sorry Mom,” Gemma said as she folded up the papers.

“Stop by my office any time this week. Seriously any time.” He turned to me, “You too, the door is open.”

That had been the start of a year of making amends, fixing bridges, rebuilding the company, and moving forward.

Today, almost a year after he humbled himself to apologize and seek forgiveness, six months after the birth of my second daughter, the day of my wedding, he sat there as if there hadn’t been a major rift in the fabric of our friendship and business partnership.

I swung Delilah gently in my arms. She was a healthy cherub of a baby with her mother’s green eyes and my dark hair. I had baby duty so that Gemma could get ready. Her mother, Katherine, was helping her, and Amelia.

John and I were already dressed. Classic tuxedos with white vests and black ties. All I needed was to straighten my tie and put on my jacket.

John sat in the side chair, his jacket on the hanger next to mine. With his feet crossed at the ankle and propped on a

suitcase, he looked like he didn't have a care in the world. There was nothing in his attitude to indicate that had things gone differently a year ago he wouldn't have been here.

I didn't know who would be sitting there, who would I have asked to stand with me at my wedding if John hadn't gotten his head out of his ass and come around. I didn't want to imagine my wedding without him there as my best man.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"Not right now, but if you keep asking me that." I gave John a glare, and he laughed at me.

Our relationship was as close as ever. He felt comfortable razzing me, and I had no qualms about protecting the mother of my children.

"What are you gonna do about it?" He talked a big game, but there was no threat behind his words.

We were interrupted by a soft knock on the open door frame.

"I'm here to pick up the baby," Yana said. She held out her arms and reached for my daughter.

"She's asleep," I said.

"She's an angel today. This means she'll be awake when it's time to take photos. The guests are all ready."

Tanner swept in behind Yana and shooed her out. "I've got something for you" Tanner stood holding a small cake box. "Make sure you do not leave for the honeymoon without this box."

He eased the cover back.

"They are perfect," I said as I looked at the chocolate covered strawberries.

"Now get moving, it's go-time." Tanner hustled us out of the back bedroom where as the groom, I was exiled to prepare.

"Looks like I beat you to the kids and getting married, after all," I said as we took our posting under an archway of flowers in the entry near the grand stairs.

“You know it’s supposed to be married and then kids.” John bumped my shoulder. “I can’t believe you’re going to be my brother-in-law after all this time.”

“I can’t believe you almost fucked it up,” I smirked.

The music grew louder, and we turned to face the stairs. Once Gemma had told me she had dreamed of getting married here and making her entrance down those stairs, there was no other location we even considered for the ceremony.

First, I saw Amelia. She clutched tightly to Bria’s hand. They made their way down the stairs slowly. At the bottom, Amelia forgot that she needed to continue walking slowly and ran straight to me.

I picked her up and turned to see Gemma at the top of the stairs.

“Look at mommy,” I managed to say around a hard lump in my throat.

Gemma, my bride, mother of my children was a vision. Her dress was a cloud of white and lace. She was perfect.



EXCERPT: CLAIMING WHAT'S MINE



**S**taying away from him shouldn't have been this hard.

Killian was everything I didn't want but was *dying* to have.

Killian "The Killer" Doyle

An underground fighter

Bad boy

## Heartbreaker

There's no wonder my parents warned me about him.  
I constantly heard these two words – Stay away.  
But the three words I feel for him give me sleepless nights.  
I love him.  
I have since the first night we spent together.  
He tried to resist me, but there was no going back.

I had to pull myself away, for my own sanity.  
Trusting Killian was tough.  
And keeping my pregnancy a secret from him was tougher.

But the time has come.  
I'll have to go back and tell him.  
*And I can only imagine what would happen next...*

## **Aubrey**

Mondays have never been my favorite day, but little do I know that today is going to be the day that changes the entire course of my life. Because today I will meet Killian Doyle.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. Which is really no surprise because when it comes to Killian, it's all I've ever done. I run straight to him, don't think anything through and wonder how I end up in trouble.

I'm working from home today and my eyes feel blurry after staring at a computer screen for the past eight hours. I close my laptop and stretch. I'm done for the day and it feels good. I don't love my job, but as a marketing manager, I get paid pretty well. Technically, I don't even like my job a little, but



I'm on a good track, carefully laid out by my parents, and I'll be able to save enough money to retire and live comfortably.

I'm only 28 and I guess I still have time before I need to worry about retiring, but my parents always taught me to be prepared. Thomas and Theresa Reed are practical and straight-laced and instilled those same qualities in me. It's not always fun being the responsible one, but that's me. To a tee. I can always be counted on to get the job done. Good 'ol reliable Aubrey.

With a sigh, I run a hand through my shoulder-length, golden blonde hair and it occurs to me that everything I've ever done has been for someone else. My parents, my friends, my teachers, my employer. Lately, I've been thinking a lot about doing something for myself. I'm not exactly sure what that even means, though. Maybe take a vacation? Problem is there's nowhere that I really want to go and, other than my best friend Tori, I have no one to go with me.

What a safe, boring, predictable life I lead.

It's never bothered me before, but over the last few months something changed. Deep down, a part of me that I suppressed and ignored began to rise to the surface and now that part of me wants to be acknowledged. I'm craving something new and exciting. An adventure maybe?

I honestly can't quite place my finger on what's missing from my life. I just know that I want...*need*...a big change. I've considered quitting my job and I've always yearned to do something more creative. But, I can already hear my parents: "You need a reliable source of income and we didn't pay for four years of business school for you to suddenly decide to be a flake and quit a job full of security."

As much as I dislike my job, they'd rip me a new one if I walked away from it. Especially without some sort of plan in place.

I feel like I'm caught between a rock and a hard place. Do I choose my happiness or continue to follow the path that my parents have laid out for me? I don't like confrontation and I'm a people-pleaser so the idea of going against them makes

my stomach hurt. No, I guess the best decision is to suck it up and stay where I am.

Am I being ungrateful? A brat? Should I be more appreciative? Probably. But, at what point should my happiness trump theirs? Maybe I am just being whiny and I'll get over this slump if I give it more time. Possibly take that vacation by myself.

It's more than being miserable and unsatisfied with my job, though. Lately, my parents have been putting pressure on me to get married and start a family. Let's face it— I have zero prospects when it comes to a husband. Unfortunately, they believe that they know exactly who should put a ring on my finger and that is my ex-boyfriend, Benjamin Styles.

Technically, there's nothing wrong with Ben. On paper, he's perfect— a successful private asset manager who makes millions of dollars a year and a pillar of society. We met after I graduated college when my parents introduced us and I thought he was nice and fairly attractive. He asked me out and we dated for a couple of years. It was easy, comfortable and completely blah.

To be honest, Ben always felt more like a friend and dating him was almost like having another job. He expected me to always be on his arm, the perfect trophy girlfriend, and attend an endless array of social functions with him. I had an image to maintain and it became exhausting. I wanted more. We lacked passion and intimacy. It wasn't a true relationship and I ended up feeling more like his possession than his girlfriend. He never really took the time to get to know me or ask me questions about what I loved, what my future plans included and what I needed and wanted out of us and out of life.

For two years, I ignored the protests and misgivings of my heart and stayed by his side. I kept telling myself that things would get better. But, of course, they never did. It got to be too much and when I broke it off, he couldn't understand why and my parents were devastated. Me, not so much. It was a damn relief.

In my book, an ex is an ex for a reason and Ben is a perfect example. I can't imagine he's changed all that much so why in the world would I want to get back together with him? My parents say it's time to get married and they think he's the perfect catch. But, I want so much more. Unfortunately, I don't think that kind of magic and insta-spark actually exists. At least if it does, it has eluded me my entire life.

Just once, I'd love to look out over a crowded room, connect gazes with a man hot as sin and feel an electric chemistry that consumes us both.

Unfortunately, that doesn't exist in the real world and instead of Prince Charming sweeping me off my feet, I need to decide whether or not to settle down for the rest of my life with a total frog.

I suppose that's not completely fair. Ben isn't ugly or unfortunate-looking. He's just...Ben. Brown hair, brown eyes, brown suit.

A part of me wonders if I should give it another go with him or if I'm completely crazy for even considering it. If I don't, I might end up alone and if I don't ever have a family of my own, my parents would freak out. This is why I need Tori in my life. *My best friend is the complete opposite of me*, I think, as I head into the kitchen and grab a bottle of water. She's daring, adventurous and doesn't listen to anyone.

It's June, my favorite month, and I walk outside on my front porch and enjoy the early evening. I live in a nice suburb just North of Chicago where it's safe, I know my neighbors and it's far enough away from the city that the air is clean and the traffic is non-existent.

A breeze rustles my hair and I sit down on my white wicker couch and take a sip of water. The striped cushion beneath me is comfortable and clean. Just like my life. I curl my feet up beneath me and gaze out at the quiet street. And, it suddenly hits me like a bolt of lightning—I'd give all of this up for an ounce of excitement.

Maybe the Universe hears me because from that moment on, it's like a whirlwind blasts into my life and launches me on an

entirely different path. One that I was never prepared to take, but one that changed my life completely with the sweetest highs and the most heartbreaking lows.

“Hi, Aubrey!”

Jimmy Lahey, the little 10-year old boy who lives next door to me with his mom, heads up the walkway and waves. He’s small for his age, but feisty, and he always makes me laugh.

“Hi, Jimmy. How’s your summer break going?”

He steps up onto the porch and shrugs a narrow shoulder. “It’s okay. Way better than being in school, but kinda boring. I wish something exciting would happen.”

*You and me both, kid*, I think. “Well, what did you do today? It’s beautiful out.”

“That’s just it!” he exclaims and throws his hands up. “My mom wants me to hang around here while she’s at work all day so I can’t go down to the lake and fish or meet my friends at the park.”

“I understand her wanting you to stay close to home, but that probably does get a little boring.”

“So freaking boring!”

I chuckle at his theatrics.

“At least I have karate tonight.”

“You’re taking a karate class?” I ask and he nods, eyes bright with excitement. “That’s so cool. What color is your belt?”

“Yellow, but I’m just starting out. I have a really good teacher, though, so I bet I’ll have a black belt by the end of summer.”

I hide my smile. “That’s very ambitious, Jimmy.”

“My teacher is ‘The Killer’ and he used to fight people in cages.”

I raise a brow. “Killer?” Good Lord, what kind of karate school was Mrs. Lahey taking her kid to?

“Well, his name is Killian, but when he was an MMA fighter, they called him ‘The Killer.’ Isn’t that so freakin’ cool?”

“Hmm, if you say so.” I don’t know anything about MMA fighting or whatever it’s called, but I can’t imagine getting any enjoyment out of watching two grown men beating the crap out of each other in a cage. Sounds like a sadist’s sport.

Some Pixar tune fills the air and Jimmy grabs his cell phone out of his back pocket. I can’t help but smirk because he’s so cute. “It’s my mom,” he says and answers the call.

He plops down on the porch step and I listen to their conversation. “But, Mom, I can’t miss karate! I’ll get too far behind and then I’ll never get my black belt.” He swipes a frustrated hand through his messy brown hair and frowns. “But, why can’t you leave work? It was the one thing I was looking forward to all day.”

When I see his eyes tear up, my heart constricts. “Jimmy? Can I talk to your mom?”

He looks up at me. “Mom, Aubrey wants to talk to you.” He swipes at the snot that threatens to run down his nose. “Because I’m sitting on her porch.”

When he hands me the phone, I clear my throat and toss him a wink. “Hi, Mrs. Lahey. Oh, no, he’s fine,” I say. “If you have to stay late, I’d be more than happy to run Jimmy over to his karate lesson.”

“Oh, Aubrey, I’d appreciate that so much,” Mrs. Lahey says. “Are you sure? I can give you gas money.”

“That’s not necessary and I don’t mind at all.” I know Mr. Lahey took off a few years ago and it’s been tough on Jimmy and his mom. I like to help people out, especially someone who could use a break. Besides, I’m a people-pleaser so this is right up my alley. “Just let me know where to take him.”

“Thank you so much, Aubrey! I’ll text you the address and then I’ll pick him up at 8pm. You’re a lifesaver.”

“No problem,” I say and hand the phone back over to Jimmy who grins from ear to ear. While he finishes up talking to his mom, I wonder if I should change out of my t-shirt and little comfy boxer shorts? But, why would I? I’m not even going to get out of the car.

A half an hour later, I pull up to a gym that looks like it has seen better days. It's in an okay section of town, not the greatest, but certainly not the worst, I suppose. Jimmy unbuckles his seat belt and grabs his little gym bag. "Have fun," I tell him.

"You need to walk me in and sign the book," he says.

I glance down at my outfit which is one step away from pajamas and sigh, wishing I had taken the time to change. "I do?"

"Yep." He hops out of my Honda Civic and tosses his bag over a shoulder.

With a sigh, I turn the car off and grab my purse. I guess it doesn't matter that I'm practically in my pajamas. Who am I going to see? A bunch of ten year olds and some old karate master? Big deal.

I follow Jimmy across the street and he pulls the door open and runs ahead, leaving me on my own. *Thanks a lot*, I think, wondering what book I'm supposed to sign. I head up the hallway and walk into the large gym. Jimmy is already on a huge mat that faces a wall of floor-to-ceiling mirrors and chatting with other kids in his class.

Feeling a little unsure, I glance around, looking for this mysterious book, when I hear a deep voice behind me.

"You lost?"

I turn around and suddenly find myself looking up into the brightest pair of blue eyes that I have ever seen. They're a deep, dark blue and remind me of that spot where the ocean drops off and, for a moment, my words get caught in my throat as I stare at a man who takes me completely off-guard. Who quite literally takes my breath away.

It's an unfamiliar sensation, but one that I can't deny. "Um, a little," I admit, finally forcing myself to speak. A crooked grin lifts the edge of his mouth and he's so good-looking that my eyes burn. His lower jaw is covered in a light scruff and he is the very definition of unrefined masculinity. That stunning combination of blue eyes and dark brown hair makes my

stomach do a little flip. He has a lean, fit build that's apparent beneath his snug t-shirt and loose shorts and I can't help but stare at all the tattoos that cover his muscular forearms and then disappear beneath the edge of his sleeves.

It's wildly attractive.

"I'm supposed to sign a book or something." I pry my eyes off his tattoos and dare to meet his baby blues. "I dropped Jimmy off."

"Right. It's over here," he says and motions for me to follow him over to a counter where a ratty-looking ledger lays.

I walk over and pick up the pen which hangs from a string attached to the side. While I scribble my name, I can feel him watching me.

"Normally Mrs. Lahey drops Jimmy off. Are you a friend?"

I place the pen in the book's crease and turn to look up at him. He's well over six feet tall and my heart skips a beat. I've always had a thing for tall men so the fact that Benjamin is 5'9" on a good day and when he's wearing his lifts always left me a little envious of women who had to stand up on their tippy-toes to circle their arms around their man's neck.

"Neighbor," I clarify. "She's working late and he seemed pretty upset about missing class so I offered to bring him over. He ditched me right away," I say with a nod in Jimmy's direction.

His deep chuckle causes a tingle to run through my entire body. "That was nice of you. Will you be staying?"

"Ah, no. Mrs. Lahey is picking him up at 8."

"That's too bad," he says. "I have a seat right up front for you."

I'm not sure if he's teasing or serious. "Maybe next time," I say, trying to keep my voice light. I swear I see something flash in those blue eyes of his, but I can't be certain because he's got me all in a dither.

He nods, gaze gliding down my t-shirt and boxer shorts. I feel my cheeks burn and that crooked smile lifts the corner of his

mouth again. “Well, it was nice meeting you...I don’t even know your name.”

My mouth opens and instead of saying my name, I lick my lips. I don’t even mean to do it, but his gaze drops and darkens. “Um, Aubrey,” I finally manage to say.

“That’s a pretty name.”

“Thanks.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around, Aubrey,” he says and begins to turn away.

“Wait!” *Oh, crap.* I didn’t mean to say that, but now he’s looking back over his shoulder and I’m dying to know what his name is and how I can make sure Mrs. Lahey works late again so I can drive Jimmy over here and see Mr. Tattooed Badass. “You didn’t tell me your name,” I say, sounding so lame I want to crawl under a rock.

Those blue eyes of his sparkle. “Killian,” he says slowly, pronouncing each syllable in that deep, sexy voice of his. Then, he moves off to teach his class and I can’t help but check out his tight ass in those long shorts.

*God Almighty, the man is sex on a stick,* I think, forcing myself to look away.

So, I guess I just met ‘The Killer’ and I’m not going to lie. I feel like he just slayed me.

**[Read the complete story here!](#)**



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