



the big bad's

TEMPTATION

ERIN HAVOC

BIG BAD'S TEMPTATION

CURVES AND RUINS

BOOK ONE

OceanofPDF.com

ERIN HAVOC

OceanofPDF.com

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EVANNA

This has to be the worst way to start a new job. I try to be positive and tell myself I'm exaggerating, but as another wave of nausea rolls through me, I can only curse myself. Vomit splatters against the inside of the toilet bowl I'm hugging for dear life, and I keep retching even after there's nothing else to leave my stomach.

I didn't even have breakfast this morning. That's how sick I felt, but I kept repeating it was just nerves.

"You okay in there, Evanna?" Lin asks from the other side of the stall door.

I grunt, wiping more toilet paper across my chin. "Do I sound anywhere near okay?"

"You have a point." And she sighs, her heels clacking up and down the bathroom tiles.

After several deep breaths, I have it under control. I wipe my chin clean, then shoot to my feet. After wobbling on the high heels for a second—forgot I was wearing them—I open the door and make my way to the marble sink, turning the water on.

"How are you feeling?" Lin asks, stroking my back in circles as I wash my mouth.

"Like a garbage bag that's been kicked too hard."

She pauses, then chuckles. "Colorful, as expected of someone with half a dozen courses in SEO."

I shrug, the best I can do in this position. The bitter taste in my mouth makes me nauseous all over again—the loop from hell—, but I bite it back as I stretch my spine. “Sorry,” I tell my friend, looking at her through the reflection. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. And I swear I ate nothing wrong. Or at least nothing out of the ordinary.”

Lin nods, patting her blond hair even though it’s perfectly combed. “I believe in you, Evanna. There’s something else I’m worried about, though.”

“What?” I arch an eyebrow, waiting for the other shoe to drop. I knew this job was too good to be true. Maybe this is the moment Lin tells me the boss can’t keep his employees for long because he enjoys flaying people alive.

“Are you pregnant?” she asks in a whisper. Even with her voice low, it’s as if she screams at me.

“No,” I deadpan before I even think. “There’s no way I’m pregnant. I mean, who would be the father? The Holy Spirit?” And I force out a laugh, just for good measure.

It doesn’t convince Lin. She keeps staring at me as if she could see straight inside my skull. My friend reaches out and strokes a hand down my arm. “Remember your twenty-first birthday party? We went to that club, and we drank those fancy margaritas?”

“Sure.” It’s not every day a girl turns twenty-one. Finally able to drink legally, Pauline here and three other high school friends took me out on a pub crawl. I was the baby of the group, the last one to cross into legal age, and we ended our night in a much sought after nightclub. The drinks there were so expensive we were glad everyone of us was already drunk.

It was one of the best nights ever. My friends and I had so much fun. We laughed so hard, and the numbness of alcohol helped us share fears I didn’t know they amassed. We grew even closer together after that night.

The hottest stranger ever also popped my cherry, but that doesn’t matter.

“You said you hooked up with a guy.”

“Mm, yeah. So?” I remember telling them. They had been teasing me about getting it on already, and then I went to the bathroom, met a handsome man who seemed interested, and he... Set my nerves on fire with every kiss we exchanged.

There’s not much I remember from that night. It would be hard to remember everything after how much we drank. But I remember his face, and the way his hands made me feel. I remember how he made me come undone several times, his eyes darkening as he watched me, and then he took me to a bathroom. It was a nice bathroom, and my mind was so numb by pleasure I didn’t even mind my cherry being popped in a place like that.

Lin grips my shoulders and shakes me. “Evanna. We weren’t sure then, and we never asked, but did you go all the way with this guy?”

I arch an eyebrow. “Yeah, I thought I made that clear.”

“We were filthy drunk, nothing was clear.”

“Fair enough.” I shrug again. “It doesn’t matter, Lin. He didn’t, you know, finish inside me.” And he even cleaned up after himself.

Lin’s lids drop in annoyance. “Let’s not even start about sleeping with strangers without a condom.”

“I was drunk.”

“Not an excuse. Second, just because he didn’t finish inside you, it doesn’t mean you can’t get pregnant.”

“Of course it does.”

“No, it doesn’t.” And she’s so fierce in her response, my throat clenches in worry.

Oh, no. Am I pregnant? No way. I can’t be, not at twenty-one, not from a man I haven’t learned the name. How am I going to raise a child by myself? What are my parents going to say? They’ll slap me, then never speak to me again. Can I keep this job being pregnant? Will the boss fire me once he discovers it?

The thoughts make me dizzy, whirling around in my head like a hurricane, faster by the second, ready to end me. It can't be. I shake my head, swallowing hard. "Wait," I say, trying to hide the defeat in my voice. "Okay, so maybe I can get pregnant without the guy finishing inside, but it's been two months now. Wouldn't I have noticed before?"

Lin twists her lips, then fishes her phone. After a minute thumbing across her screen, she clucks her tongue. "It says here that nausea starts in the second month. The date is right."

No, I refuse. This can't happen. "But it was my first time."

"Did you have sex with anyone else?"

"No."

Lin releases a sigh, stroking my arms. "Listen," she says, showing me her phone screen. We're five minutes away from being late. "We have to go. We'll discuss this at lunch." And she grabs my hand and tugs me out of the bathroom.

There's no way I'm pregnant. I'm sure I'll find out I ate something past due, and Lin and I will laugh at it by the end of the week. She drags me down the hall, then into the large room we work. The investment management business takes the entire floor, with kitchen and bathroom behind us, head of departments with their own offices to the left, and the CEO office to the very back. The hall is one immense open area with floor-to-ceiling windows and dozens of desks. We pass the mirrored surface of the elevator doors and I catch a sight of myself.

With all the commotion, I didn't have the time to adjust my hair. My black strands fall in a slick curtain, the best I could manage this morning to appear presentable. It's a bit of a mess now, and I let go of Lin's hand to run my fingers through the mess. Lin leads the way in her black heels and the dark blue dress, hugging her skinny form. Her blond hair is pulled back in a French bun. Maybe I should have put mine up in one of those. At least it would be out of my face.

I brush my palms down the pencil skirt and the button-down shirt, both a bit too tight around me. They were

borrowed. I'm buying my own with my first payment. Lin strides to her desk, the last one before the CEO's door, and she picks something up from her purse.

She turns to me with a packet of gum. "Here. The boss will be coming in at any moment now, and you want to look your best. After he goes into his office, I'll give you the okay and you can go brush your teeth."

I thank her and throw a piece of gum between my teeth as I make my way to my desk. The computer is already on, my stuff packed away. I take a seat and wait for the Ice King.

The name made me chuckle at first. It sounds like something out of a cartoon. Lin didn't find it funny, though. Employees call him that way because he lacks a heart. The man built this company from the ground up, learning how to deal with investments before anyone else thought of it. And he keeps his empire going with a tight leash. He doesn't give days off easily, and he often visits sick employees to make sure they're truly ill. Lin said he pays well, but he expects a lot, too, and even the sight of employees going to the bathroom annoys him.

A true jerk, that's what it looks like. He wants his employees to have no life, probably because he doesn't have one himself. He's bitter, and he wants everyone to be bitter, too.

I chew on the gum, the minty taste making me wince. I was never a big fan of gum, but it's making me even more nauseous now. Maybe all I need is some water. I shoot a glance at the way back to the kitchen, but the elevator doors hiss open, and everyone freezes.

The man walking out of the elevator is so tall I'm sure the top of his head brushes the door jamb. He's big, broad shoulders making his suit work for it, the fabric struggling to maintain a unit around him. He strides out of the elevator with his phone in hand, and if there's such a thing like a power walk, it's the way he strides. A sharp jaw that could cut glass, his black hair in a perfect cut, short around his head. He has

eyes the color of whisky, or amber, and they comb the crowd as a hawk would, looking for prey.

His gaze fastens on mine, and my stomach plummets.

Oh, no. Oh no, oh no, oh no...

“Good morning, Mr. Storm,” says Lin, getting to her feet and tilting her head down in greeting. “May I go through your morning appointments?”

Nicholas Storm halts, his eyes still on me. Shit. Does he recognize me? Or do I have vomit on my shirt? Why are both hypotheses equally probable?

He ignores Lin and slowly makes his way to me. It’s a prowl now, his eyes narrowing as they pinpoint at me. “Who are you?” he asks. Does this mean he doesn’t recognize me? Blessed be. He’s just finding it odd to see a new face here.

“This is the new social media manager, sir,” Lin says, stepping closer to us. She has a warning on her face, begging me to be polite, to treat the man as if he’s the king he thinks he is.

On my best days, I could ignore how arrogant that sounds and lick his expensive shoes because I need this job desperately. Today, I’m physiologically unable of doing that. I’ll just say my name and get back to my shell. He won’t remember me in five minutes, and everything will be better for that. I get to my feet and step around the desk, offering my hand.

“Evanna Pearce, s—” I start, but the words choke on my throat. The smell of him. The scent of musk and pines and darkness. He smells just like that night in the club, and I remember how hard I wanted to bury my face in his neck and just live there.

His fragrance is a punch to the guts. Just as he steps close enough, my stomach revolts at the scent, making me buck and retch. And I don’t know where that much acid came from, but it lands squarely on his shoes.

Right. There was a worse way to start my first day at the new job. Puking all over my boss’ shoes.

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NICHOLAS

Several times everyday I wish I could clone myself. Another one of me would make things so much easier. If I were the one scheduling meetings, I'd never miss the time, or write the name of an important client wrong. If I had a double, I'd have time to study marketing, so I wouldn't have to deal with the ludicrous choices my marketing team does sometimes.

Alas. A man can dream.

“What is this *thing* you sent me?” I hiss at the phone while I gape at the image on my computer screen. So much quality on a screen, so many pixels, for me to waste looking at this piece of crap.

“Mm, the new Facebook banner, sir?” replies the person on the other side. I stopped worrying about learning names with the marketing team. They come and go too often.

“The size is all wrong. The colors are not the colors of our branding.” How could he get the size wrong? A simple template would do. Don't tell me I'll have to teach this person how to use the damned templates.

“I thought some yellow would help catch the eye.”

“You thought?” I roar at the phone, gripping it in my fist. A tiny crack warns me against it and I let go. I've broken more phones than I can count talking to stupid. “You're not supposed to think, you're supposed to read the memo I send and follow it. How hard can it fucking be?”

“Mm, is that a question, sir?”

I hang up, then read the name of the person in the email as I open a blank one to my HR manager. I need this guy gone. *Where the fuck did you find this clown? At a circus?* I write, then delete it. Pretty sure people at a circus are less stupid than this. All he needed to do was follow a fucking template and obey the directions.

A new email beeps in my inbox. *Evanna Pearce*, replying to the banner. My heart squeezes in my chest for a moment, but I ignore it, clicking on the email. She points out the date for the event in the banner will be hidden behind our page’s picture. I hadn’t noticed it at first, but the picture will be on the lower left side.

At least there’s someone rational in this business.

A knock on the door makes me stop and look up. “Yes?”

My personal assistant walks in, a clipboard in hand. She has the awful habit of mixing up names and dates here and there, so I make her double-check everything every time. I’m sure I come out as annoying to her, but you don’t get to be loved by your employees when you own a business as thriving as mine. This company deals with investments, sometimes the money a person made in a lifetime, and I can’t afford mistakes.

“Mr. White called,” she says, standing at the very threshold. She offers a fascinating study in contrasts. Pauline Shoaf has been working for me for the past year, and though she stands by the door as if she’s ready to bolt, she also keeps her ground and never backs down. The girl has got a spine. “He cancelled the meeting.”

“He what?” I roar back, taken by surprise. “We scheduled this two months ago. And re-scheduled because of his agenda.”

“I’m aware, sir. He said he had family matters to deal with.”

“Family matters, my ass. What a prick of a man.” And he thinks *this* is how he proves himself a worthy business

partner? I can't count on a man like this. It's even worse when his "family matters" involve some trip out of town to take his new wife to some expensive restaurant.

That woman has him in the palm of her hand. She could tell him to burn the world, and he wouldn't even question it. An immense liability when in business, in my opinion, and the exact reason I don't mind a good fuck, but I won't ever let a woman get past my walls.

I have too much to lose. There's no way I'm becoming a fool for some girl. I'm too old for this, but so I assumed was Mr. White. I'm forty-five to his fifty-two. He shouldn't be at that age when one's head is on the gutter twenty-four-seven.

Shoving a hand through my dark hair, I scratch at my scalp in impatience. "Alright. That shall give me an hour for lunch, right?"

"An hour and a half, Mr. Storm. Should I order food?"

"Yes. The salmon."

She nods and whirls around to leave, pulling the door behind her. As it's about to close, I realize I should have told her to bring in the HR manager. We have to have a chat about the next marketing specialist we hire. I call out to Pauline, but the door shuts, and she doesn't come back. Guess I'll have to go after her myself.

I get to my feet and leave the office. It's when I do so that the memory of *her* comes crashing. My gaze searches for her even when I shouldn't. Evanna Pearce sits behind her computer, typing furiously at the keyboard. She's been working harder than all her colleagues combined. Not only she does everything I ask, but more. She's always keeping an eye on ways to help, ways to improve every task. I would be already impressed if she was anyone else.

She's also the woman from the club. The curvy goddess who disappeared as fast as she showed up. She came up looking gorgeous and vivacious, with that huge smile and those glinting eyes. At the club, where nobody knows you and you have no worries, I let her easy behavior take the lead. I

savored her humored way of telling stories and allowed myself to be enchanted by her.

The taste of her lips is ingrained in the back of my mind, and her soft curves beneath my fingers is a fiery memory that comes up every time I go to sleep. She was clearly much younger, but she wanted me. I don't know the reason, and I don't care, and I let myself get lost in her body in what I now know was the fuck of a lifetime.

Then she disappeared. I wanted her name and her phone number because I was drunk and foolish. She gave me no choice. She left without a trace to follow. The only thing I had for the past two months was the memory of her. It's a poor comparison to jerk off thinking of her lips around my cock, but it's the only thing that satisfies me.

Now I have her within reach, and I cannot act. She's recognized me, but she hasn't made a move. A part of me regrets it. The stupid part of me who wanted her number, who wanted more of her, every night. It's for the best. She wanted a onetime thing, and that's all I can give her.

Evanna looks up from her screen, her gaze locking with mine. Something sets off in my stomach, but I don't let myself dwell on it. I can't. I just can't. Whirling around, I stride back into my office, forgetting to go after my HR manager. The fierceness of Evanna's gaze on me blanks my mind, and I can't have that. It's too dangerous in my line of business.

That was a one-night stand—the best one-night stand—but it can't repeat itself. I will not allow it.

3

EVANNA

No matter how hard and for how long I gape at the white plastic piece in my hand, the small sign doesn't change. I blink and blink, unable to trust my eyes. Pulling the paper box closer, I re-read the instructions and check the result for the hundredth time.

This is the fourth pregnancy test. The fourth *positive* pregnancy test. It still makes my head swim either way.

I shoot a glance up at Lin, but she's too focused on typing something into her computer. As should I. I sit back and glimpse at my screen, but for a moment, there's this gaping emptiness inside me, my heart beating in my ears, doubt whirling around in my head.

I have no idea what to do next. Lin will call me an idiot for having sex bareback, and she's right. How could I be this stupid?

The door behind Lin flings open. She shoots to her feet, reaching out for her clipboard as the CEO walks out. He still has that same power walk from the first day, as if he's stomping on his enemies with every step of his. He halts so Lin can fill him in on his afternoon activities, hands on his hips, looking oh, so yummy. I'm lost gaping at him for a while, those broad shoulders I ran my hands across, the hard pecs. My mouth fills with water at the memory of his taste, my tongue racing across the stubble on his chin, prickling deliciously.

And nausea rolls through me again. Because my mouth's watering? That's new. That first day, it was Nicholas Storm's musky fragrance hitting my nose. I also had the opportunity to puke over the scent of coffee, and chilli, and the sight of a tuna sandwich. Things are chaotic, to say the least.

But my mouth watering at the sight of Nicholas? How am I going to avoid that? I work for him; how am I supposed to not see him?

As if summoned by my filthy memories, his gaze pivots in my direction and lands on my face. For a man with the fame of an Ice King, he's been very okay with me. Not nice, not friendly, but he ignores me apart from replying to my emails with new orders or a soulless "okay". Miles better than the way he screams at the HR manager about his lousy choices with design hires.

I don't doubt he's a tyrant—he's just not been a tyrant to me. Yet.

Lin keeps talking, but Nicholas doesn't look like he's paying attention. He cocks his head, still looking at me. Does he recognize me now? Or is he wondering the reason I'm not working? I dart my gaze away, back to the computer, then type nonsense so he thinks I'm working. His heavy steps thunder near, and I close the drawer with the pregnancy tests as an afterthought.

What would he do if he found out? If he learned I'm pregnant, he could kick me out. Say I've been dishonest by hiding the fact when they hired me. Fear eats up at my insides, making my fingers tremble on the keyboard. What if he demands a blood test and finds out I've been pregnant for two months? If he recognizes me, he can do the math, then react as if I'm only here to get close to him and use this child to steal his money.

My head spins so hard I'm blind and deaf for a second. Acid climbs my throat. I should have bought more meds this morning. I'm already out, and it's barely past noon.

Nicholas stops next to my desk. I'm forced to look up. Dang it, he's so handsome. My knees go a little weak at the

sight of his amber eyes on me. His mouth moves. I'm so lightheaded I miss the sound of his words.

"What?" I ask, blinking fast. Get a grip, Evanna. Get a grip. Even if all these pregnancy tests are right and you're carrying his child, you have to keep this job. Give him a reason to keep you.

"You alright?" he asks, that velvet voice smoother than I've heard in the past days. "You look pale." He takes a beat. "Actually, you're turning a little green, Ms. Pearce."

Vomit fills my mouth. The disgusting taste of it has become all too usual. I clench my jaw and swallow it, revulsion crossing my face. I can't puke on his shoes again. He would fire me on the spot. I still don't know how he kept such a clear head that day, only stepping away to clean himself without even mentioning it again.

Nicholas leans closer, narrowing his eyes at me. His musky aftershave hits like a bomb, both delicious and unnerving. It's also the last drop. Acid shoots up my throat with renewed energy and I clamp both hands over my mouth before shooting out of the chair and running down the corridor at full speed toward the bathroom. I find a toilet before throwing myself to my knees and letting it all go.

I heave all the acid in my stomach, with zero dignity. There's just something about vomiting several times in the same week that makes you lose any shred of self-respect. I've just given up. A hand lands on my back, between my shoulder blades, and strokes soothing circles. I try to thank Lin for coming after me, but another wave of nausea slams into me and I go speechless for another minute. Hands reach for my slick hair, pulling it back and away from my face.

I promise myself I'm wearing braids from now on.

Once I'm done, I reach for the toilet paper, but there's a hand already offering me some. I take it, murmur a "thanks", then wipe my chin clean. Only then I notice the hand offering me more paper is too big and too rough to be Lin's.

Snapping my head back, I gape at Nicholas, kneeling right behind me. He's so close I feel the warmth coming off him in waves. I was so lost in feeling like poo for the tenth time this week, I missed it completely.

My eyes almost pop off their sockets. What is he doing here? "Mm..." Come on, Evanna. Say something.

"Better?" he asks, and his voice has gone a tone even lower this time. I nod and he offers a hand. "Come on."

I take his hand and he helps me to my feet. After wobbling for a moment, he catches me and walks me to the sink. Without having to be asked, Nicholas turns the water on. I gape at it in confusion. What is this man doing?

He wets toilet paper under the water and cleans my chin, his hand still holding mine. It's an onslaught of overwhelming sensations. I blink and blink, and finally, my brain starts to work again.

"What are you doing?" I ask in a trembling voice.

He pauses. "Cleaning you up. You're a bit roughened up and took too long to reach for the water."

"Oh." I step sideways, moving around him to reach the water. "Thanks." I wash my mouth as well as I can, but there's only so much water can do against the taste of vomit. After drying my lips and chin, I straighten my spine to find him still there, still watching me. "Thanks for coming after me. You didn't have to."

"I know, but I wanted to." And his eyelids grow heavy in a way that sends me back to that night at the club. There's a fire in his pupils, and it makes me feel seen for the first time in my life. Something tells me he's recognized me, maybe from the moment we met. He's just been keeping quiet about it all, the same way I have. "Do you need to see a doctor? This is not the first time."

"No!" I shoot out because, God, this man might look at me with these burning eyes, but he won't forgive a sick leave on my first month. "No, I'm fine. Just... Just got a bad stomach. I should have brought more meds. That's all."

The door into the bathroom slams open. Lin steps inside, then halts. Her gaze flickers between the two of us, then to his hand, still gripping mine. “You alright, Evanna?”

“Good timing, Ms. Shoaf,” Nicholas says, his voice changing to the commanding one. “Go downstairs and grab some nausea meds for Ms. Pearce. Some lemonade, too. I’ve used it to fight nausea myself.” He turns his burning gaze at me. “Do you have toiletries? Toothpaste?”

“Mm, yeah...”

“Where? I’ll go grab them.” And he makes to move to the door.

But my toiletries are in the same drawer as the pregnancy tests, and that realization shoots panic to my chest. “I’ll get them myself, Mr. Storm. Thank you so much.” And I dart to Lin, grabbing her by the arm to ground me as we leave the bathroom.

She leans closer to me. “What happened in there?”

I shoot a glance over my shoulder in time to see him leaving the bathroom. There’s something like longing in his gaze... But it can’t be for me, right? We had one night only, and Nicholas is so much older than me it couldn’t have been his best laid ever, like it was for me.

There’s no way he wants seconds.

Licking my lips, I meet my friend’s gaze with my eyebrows drawn. “No idea.”

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4

NICHOLAS

Evanna escaped me so fast the other day I'm still trying to understand why. Or rather, I'm trying to convince myself of the reason. She raced out of the bathroom, clinging to Pauline Shoaf so hard that I can only discern she's afraid of me. Why wouldn't she be? I've been screaming at her friend ever since she started here. I was mentally congratulating Pauline on being persistent just the other day.

Is it a good thing to be persistent in the face of someone with a temper like mine?

Never thought about it, but the sight of Evanna running away changed things for me. When we met at the club, we were immediately drawn to each other—I still don't know what she saw in me, but her desire was unmistakable. Maybe a result of alcohol consumption. Undecided. But she wanted me, and now that she's seen me in the day-to-day, she's running from me while she clings to her friend's arm.

That's how fucked up my personality is, it seems.

Leaving my office for what feels is the hundredth time today, I open the door and make small talk with Pauline. The girl seems two steps away from a panic attack, unsure why I'm chatting with her when I never do it. All I want is for Evanna to see I'm not so bad, though *bad* doesn't even begin to cover my temper. Back in my office for another half an hour and I find a mistake in Pauline's notes. My impulse is to yell her name, then bark at her, asking if she was born stupid or if that's a personal goal she strives for.

Instead, I take deep breaths, get to my feet, then go after her. At her desk, I ask her to fix her mistake in a clear, calm voice—or the calmest voice I can manage, anyway. Anyone would congratulate me on the attempt, I'm sure. Before I step into my office again, I shoot a glance at Evanna to make sure she's seen me.

Why?, is the real question here. Why am I trying so hard? And why do I want her, of all people in the world, to think better of me? I don't know, and I don't want to think much about it. She already occupies my mind way more than I like it.

After some more work, I slide a glance at the clock on the screen. It's almost four. My tastebuds beg for some caffeine. It's that time in the afternoon when all you need is one last thrust to end your daily tasks. There's more to do at home—I hit the gym, watch conferences, and I read books and blog posts on the fluctuations of the market. But the day-to-day tasks, the business duties, they're done in the office, during my commercial hours.

I open my mouth, Pauline's last name about to spill from my lips. Usually, I'd call her in, tell her the word "coffee", and she'd know what I want, how I want it. Today, I want to give Evanna a better impression of me. I get to my feet, open the door, and find Pauline swamped in paperwork. She gapes at me with mad eyes, and a part of me knows she'll spit in my coffee if I send her downstairs today. Without another word, I pick up my wallet and phone and take the elevator down.

I'm halfway across the building's fancy hall when I see Evanna walking in my direction. She holds two cup holders stacked on top of each other, and a plastic bag hanging from the crook of her elbow. The sight is so appalling it freezes me mid-step. What is she doing?

She slows down when she sees me, her cheeks pink from the exercise. The look is undeniably hot—it reminds me of her panting when I fucked her in the club's bathroom—, but I still have a hard time understanding what she's doing with so many coffee cups in her power.

“What’s that?” I ask, like a freaking troglodyte, like someone who hasn’t learned the letters. Shit, I have to do better. “I mean, what’s happening? What’s all that coffee for?”

She clears her throat, looking away as if she’s doing something wrong. “Lin was super busy, and I had already finished my tasks and extra tasks for today, so I offered to pick coffee up for everyone.”

Heat spreads over my face, locking my jaw. “It’s not your job to do that,” I spit, angry at Pauline for having sent Evanna by herself to do something like this. Evanna is the best social media manager we’ve had in forever, and the effects of her work are already clear. We’ve had a ridiculous increase in mailing list sign-ups, as well as followers and engagement. And she’s wasting her time picking up coffee? Hell no.

Evanna flutters her lashes at me. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Storm. I know it’s not my job, but she looked so busy.”

“That’s not your problem,” I say, and she winces. Shit, I’m making this sound like it’s her fault. I clear my throat and pick the cup holders from her hands. “Ms. Pearce. Evanna. I’m sorry. This isn’t about you. I’m mad at Pauline for letting you come by yourself, that’s all.”

She swallows hard, but her shoulders relax. “Please, don’t scream at her, Mr. Storm. She’s having a rough day.”

Oh, fuck, it’s the *please* that does it for me. It was all professional until this point, and the little word coming from these plump lips sends blood straight to my cock. The member rises and salutes her, her pouty mouth, how fucking hot she is without even trying.

Whirling around so she won’t see the tent in my trousers, I start back to the elevators. “Let’s go back up,” I say between my teeth, hitting the elevator button and motioning for her to get in first.

Silence is a thick blanket over us as we ride the first five floors. It’s on the sixth that the lights blink. Evanna makes a sound in her throat, a choked gasp, and the elevator keeps

moving. Two floors later, it jerks to a halt, and the lights go down.

“Of course it has to happen with me inside,” she hisses, then a forced chuckle escapes her lips as the emergency lights come on.

I put the cup holders down and hit the emergency button. In a couple of minutes, it’s clear there was a power failure, and the building management is doing its best to get it all back up as soon as possible. A rescue team will reach us in twenty minutes, tops.

“Twenty minutes,” she says with a sigh when I hang up. I glance over my shoulder to check if she’s faring well, but Evanna looks nothing other than annoyed. She crosses her arms and leans against the cold metal wall. “At least I’m done with my tasks.”

A laugh escapes my lips. She gapes at me in surprise. I can’t hide I’m surprised either. After a moment, I school my features. “You’re more worried about your daily tasks than I am. And I’m the workaholic here.”

She shrugs. “I’m trying to show my worth in the business, that’s all. The spot is the best one I’ve ever had.”

“Really?” I arch an eyebrow, then force my memory to bring back her resume. Yeah, I remember that. She had a bunch of specializations on the matter, but no experience. HR mentioned the new social media manager had plenty of knowledge, and she put it to use. “You don’t need to try too hard, Evanna. You’ve already shown your worth. The work you do is light years away from our competitors. We’re lucky to have you.”

She looks up at me, eyes glinting. “You mean it?”

“Of course.” And I take a step closer, the gravity of her presence in such a tight space impossible to escape. “I would not have kept a previous partner otherwise. You’re exceptional in what you do.”

Her eyes go round and she presses herself to the wall as if she wants it to eat her up. “You remember me?”

“I do.” And a small smile stretches my lips. “How could I ever forget someone like you?”

She sinks her teeth into her lower lip. Oh, fuck, don't do that... “Someone like me? What do you mean?” And she looks down at herself. Can't she see it? Doesn't she see what I do? Doesn't she know she's fucking perfection walking on two legs?

The sheer irony of this. The one woman I've ever desired, the one who ever spun my head around. She's twenty years my junior, my employee, completely out of reach. And she has no idea what she's doing to me.

I spread a hand to the wall next to her. She doesn't even flinch, gazing at me in doubt. I lean closer, looking into her eyes. “Are you joking, Evanna? Do you think I could forget someone as beautiful, as bright as you? Fuck, the moment you came up to me at the club, all flustered and fierce, I knew I would never forget your face.”

A shiver shakes her body. “I thought you hadn't recognized me.”

“That would be impossible.”

“But that was, like, two months ago,” she murmurs, and it's then I notice how close our bodies are. Her eyes pull me in, and I could drown in them for all I care. I let my gaze roam her pretty features, the arch of her upper lip, and the way her nose turns up at the end. She's so gorgeous I am thoroughly impressed at holding back this long.

“You haven't left my mind a single moment after that day.” And I kiss her.

Against my better judgment, against everything I believe, I kiss her. Those pretty lips beckon to me, and I can't help but let go. I lick along the seam of her lips, delighting at the soft whimper she releases when I fist her hair. Evanna melts against me, hands clinging to my shirt, my palm racing down her arm to grip her waist. Her kiss is still the sweetest thing I've ever tasted.

In that bubble, nothing else matters. My mind blanks, and all I feel is her. Her body against mine, her hands delineating my chest, her warm breath coasting my lips. Evanna stands on the tips of her toes, slinging her arms around my neck, letting me deepen the kiss. I devour her, long swipes of my tongue exploring every inch of her mouth. She moans against me, her body growing warm as her hips circle my hardness.

Does she know she's driving me mad?

Evanna has power over me—she's desire, and she's beauty. I understand why men fight over love now. I would burn the world for this woman, and we know so little of each other. And maybe it's knowing so little that leaves me aghast, that makes me want to see and learn everything about her.

When she breaks the kiss to catch her breath, I can only gape in awe at her. She's done what no woman has ever managed. She's captured me entirely.

The elevator jerks back into motion. Evanna settles on her feet, her hands quivering. The metal box glides up to our floor, and a firefighter waits for us when the doors open.

The woman standing there in her uniform opens a reassuring smile. "Everyone alright?"

I shoot a glance at Evanna's shaky form. "How are you feeling?" And I offer her a hand.

Her glassed-over eyes burn in awareness. What was she thinking about? "I'm fine." And she ignores my hand in favor of going for the cup holders and the plastic bag. "I hope the coffee hasn't gone too cold."

At the mention of the coffee, that old rage burns inside me again. I take the holders from her hands and step out of the elevator to find Pauline, twisting her fingers in her hands.

"Ms. Shoaf," I roar at her, catching her attention. "Did you really send the social media manager to buy coffee?"

Pauline's face pales. "Sir, I'm so sorry, but I was so—"

"The media manager is *not* supposed to buy coffee, Pauline," I bark back at her, slamming the holder and the bag

onto her desk. Some cups sway, but none drop. I grind my teeth together, glaring at her. “That’s your fucking job. One of your duties is getting coffee *for* me. Not for the entire building. Has everyone been using you for it all this time?”

She opens and closes her mouth like a fish. “Sir, since I was already doing the trip downstairs, I thought—”

“Fucking hell, Ms. Shoaf, I’ve told you time and time again, don’t think. Just do what you’re told.” As I finish, I notice how thick the silence has become. I glance around me to find the other employees with their heads down, gaping at their computers, pretending it’s not their fault. The firefighter clears her throat, grabs her stuff, and moves back into the elevator. None of those reactions matter, though.

The one that hits me harder is Evanna’s. She gawks, eyes wide, her cheeks pale. I know she told me she offered to buy the coffee, but it doesn’t change the facts. Evanna rushes to her desk, plopping down without another word, without a look at me.

And then I remember why I was taking it easier with Pauline. I wanted Evanna to think I wasn’t as shitty as people thought I was. Turns out I am. It is who I am. And now that she saw it, she might not want me at all.

5

EVANNA

Lin waits for me by the elevator doors, her lunch box in hand. I smile at her and hook our elbows together as we join the others in the elevator. The second the doors close, lively chatter starts inside the metal box. For the past week, one subject has taken everyone's attention: how Mr. Nicholas Storm, the Ice King, has started to melt.

"He asked me about my children," says a guy in finances. "How did he know I have children? When he stopped next to me, coffee in hand, I thought he was going to throw it on my face."

"That was nothing," a girl in marketing says, her blue eyes round with shock. "He stopped me on the way out yesterday to congratulate my SEO choice. He complimented me! I've never seen him do that!" Everyone agrees.

"I had no idea he knew how to," says Lin, and the others chuckle. We leave the elevator together, but Lin guides me to an isolated spot in the garden that wraps around the building and we share a bench. She opens her lunch box, but her eyes are studying me. "How are you hanging, Evanna? You seem much better."

"I am. Today is the first day I woke up with zero morning sickness."

"Amen. It's been a rough month."

"Yeah. I read that's expected. Some women go their entire pregnancy with it, and I was hoping I wasn't one of them."

“It must be awful,” she adds, taking a bite out of her tuna sandwich. The mere sight of it used to make me sick. It’s such a blessing to leave that part of pregnancy behind. “So, now that you’re over the shock, what’s the plan?”

My shoulders droop. “No plan yet. I mean, there’s not much to do. Let’s just hope Mr. Storm keeps his good humor once I can’t hide the pregnancy anymore.” Brushing a hand down the front of my loose shirt, I stare at my stomach. I’ve been wearing bigger blouses to hide the bump, but soon it’ll be impossible to keep up with this facade. “If he doesn’t fire me, I think I can work it out fine. There’s a daycare a couple of blocks from here. It’s expensive, but this way I can go back to work as soon as I give birth.”

Lin nods, then reaches out to grip my fingers and squeeze them. “We’re your friends for good and for bad. Not only for parties but for the hard times, too. We’ll help you with buying stuff for the baby, and we can babysit on the weekends so you can sleep.”

I squeeze her fingers back. Tears threaten to overflow, and I know that’s part of the pregnancy, but I feel like a fool either way. “Thanks, Lin.”

We eat in silence, then Lin clears her throat as soon as she finishes her sandwich. “Unrelated, but what do you think of Mr. Storm?”

The question makes me jerk. “What do I think of him? Why would I think anything of him? He’s nice, I guess.” Oh God, that wasn’t suspicious at all. I cough, tug my hair behind my ears, and try again, ignoring the way Lin’s narrowing her eyes at me. “You told me all these horror stories about him, but he always treats me okay. I have nothing to complain about.”

“That’s what I wanted to discuss.” She brushes the breadcrumbs off her fingertips and turns to face me. “I think he has a crush on you.”

My face explodes in heat. “What? No way. He’s... He’s not my type. Too old. Yeah.” And I put a chuckle in the end to make a point.

It doesn't work. Lin blinks at me, and I know she's reading me like an open book with extra big font. "Evanna. Tell me what's going on."

"What do you mean?"

"I've known you for years. Tell me what's up between the two of you. I noticed him staring at you like you were an angel who had dropped from the skies, and it's obvious he only acts nice to catch your eye, but I thought it was one-sided. Do you like him back?"

"He doesn't like me."

"Oh, my God, you like him." Lin giggles, grabbing my hands and squealing. Just like that, we're back to school. "Tell me everything. Did you guys kiss in the elevator? That's why?"

I sway my head from side to side. Heat blooms across my cheeks, and down my neck. There's no way I can hide the truth from her. Not for long. "We kissed in the elevator, yeah, but we met earlier."

"Earlier? When?"

I stare at her. She stares back. It dawns slowly on Lin, and I watch shock, then horror, then sheer happiness cross her face.

"Evanna!" And she lowers her voice to a whisper. "Is he the father?"

I nod, my eyes stinging with tears again. "God, I know I was a fool to do it bareback, but it was so... Intense when we met." I shake my head, but memories of that night take over. The way he kissed me like he needed me to survive, and how his hands clung to me like I was his lifeline. "I didn't know I'd meet him again. Worse. That he'd be my boss."

"This is so romantic it hurts," Lin says with a grin. Her smile melts off. "Why didn't you tell him?"

I release an enormous sigh that reveals just how tired I am. And the pregnancy has only begun. "He's one of those rich men who'll think I only want his money. And I don't want him

feeling forced, you know? I'd rather raise this child alone if the other option is a father who's only present because he *has* to."

Lin strokes the back of my hand. "I see where you're coming from, but don't you think it's fair to give him a choice? He should know. He deserves to know."

I press my lips together. Of course she's right. What if Nicholas wants to raise the child? What if he'd be a loving father, and I'm keeping both him and the child away from that experience? No, I have to tell him. Now that I'm aware he remembers me, I have to be open with him.

Nodding once, I get to my feet. "Okay. I'll tell him after work hours. Let's go back up to finish the tasks."

Lin makes a face but hooks her elbow with mine. "You like this work too much." When I turn to look at her, she's smiling. "Girl night today. You have to tell this to the others."

I nod. "Promise."

The afternoon passes in a flurry of me trying to ignore what's coming my way, and so much work I almost forget it. People bid me goodbye once the room goes orange with the sunset, and I can't stop my heart from going haywire when I notice the time has come.

Lin shoots me a thumbs-up before she takes the elevator, leaving Mr. Nicholas Storm and me by ourselves in the office. I try to work for a couple more minutes, but my mind drifts. Turning my computer off, I grab my things and make my way in wobbly steps to his door.

He calls me in with a voice much softer than the first time I heard it. Nicholas sits behind his desk, eyes on his computer screen as he smashes at the keyboard. I wonder what the object has done to him to be treated this way.

"Mr. Storm?" I call, and he halts, turning to me. He doesn't only flick his eyes in my direction, but his entire body moves to face me.

"Everything alright?" he asks, shooting to his feet before I step inside the room.

“Yeah, but there’s something I needed to tell you…” And the words get harder and harder to come up, tangling themselves into knots in my throat. My heart thunders so loud in my ears it’s all I hear, the pump-pump deafening.

“Come here,” he says, hands on my elbows guiding me to his desk. He props me on the edge, and I let my purse rest on the dark surface. “Do you need some water?”

I shake my head. “No, I’m fine.”

“Why is it that every time we’re together you don’t look exactly fine?” he asks, the phantom of a smile crossing his lips.

I chuckle. “Obviously, it’s your fault.”

“My fault? How so?” He places both hands on his hips beneath his open suit, watching me. He looks so sexy in this position, and he’s not even trying.

This man hypnotizes me. The mere presence of him, so close to me, makes me go stupid. I forget what I was supposed to say, how to be coy, how to be cute. The only thing I can do is gape at him. My lips are parched, so I lick them, and his gaze follows the trail of my tongue like lasers.

“You make me nervous,” I blurt.

His brows rise on his forehead. “That was not my intention, I—Do you mean because I’m rude? I’m honestly trying to work on that.”

“I know. Everyone’s been talking about it.”

“Really? So they noticed?”

“How couldn’t they?” And I smile at him. “The change was quite… Glaring.”

He chuckles. The sound of his laughter is so rare I want to cling to it every time I hear it. “Well, they can thank you for that.”

“Me? Why?”

He looks at me in silence, a softness I almost don’t recognize in his eyes. “You make me want to become a better

man, Evanna. I told you I can't stop thinking about you. It's the truth. And I want to deserve you one day. I want you to want me, too."

The shock of his words makes my jaw go slack. "You think you don't deserve me? Is that a joke?"

Another chuckle, that sexy curl to his lip that makes me go weak in the knees. "No joke, baby girl. You're too good for someone so full of sharp edges like I am. There's a lot of work to be done before I deserve someone like—"

It's impossible to keep my hands away from him another second. Gripping the collar of his shirt, I pull him flush against me, my lips parting for him. Even mid-speech, Nicholas knows what I want, how I want it. He collides our lips together, deepening the kiss even before I can take a breath. His thick arms curl around my form, tightening the hold on me. I part my legs, my dress riding up my thighs, and he steps in, our bodies molding together.

His rough hands scrape up my arms to fist at my hair. I moan, my head falling back, and he explores my throat in languid, ardent kisses that make my panties sodden. Every touch of his mouth to my skin sets me on fire, pleasure coiling inside me with every touch of his.

"Mr. Storm," I plead, not sure for what.

He roars against my throat. "Call me *Nicholas*, baby girl. It's about time you called me by my name."

I hum in agreement, but my mind has gone blank. He tightens a possessive hold around my hips, his fingertips digging into the soft flesh. Nicholas pulls my body against his, my core hitting the hardness behind his zipper. I still remember how much he stretched me, how he filled me to the brim. I gasp at the heat of his kisses, hands exploring my breasts. His thumbs flick over my nipples, teasing, caressing until the knots are hard and sensitive. I arch my back, begging for more of his touch, begging to feel him everywhere.

"So willing," he roars into the hollow of my throat, his tongue coming out to lick at me. "So fucking ready to take my

cock.”

Ooh, I had forgotten about the dirty talk. I always thought dirty talk was something vulgar, that a man who wanted me would never say bad things about me in such an intimate moment... Yet, the more Nicholas grunts against me, his hoarse voice dripping with lust, the more heat coils in the apex of my thighs.

I run my hands down his chest, searching blindly for the buttons of his shirt. Nicholas feasts on my mouth, drawing more moans out of me. He spreads a hand between my shoulder blades and forces me back on his desk. I hear the clattering of stuff to the ground, but my head is too foggy to care. He kisses me again, then pushes my dress up and buries his face between my legs.

The sheer pleasure makes me scream. I lock my knees around his head, but Nicholas pries my legs open, sucking on my wet panties as if it's the last drop of humidity in the world.

“Oh, God!” I cry out, digging my nails into his scalp.

“Not quite,” he breathes against my wetness, making hot shivers shake through me.

“Someone could walk in,” I plead, but the fear of getting caught just makes me want it even more.

“They would have quite the sight,” he says, pulling my panties down. He takes his time fisting the fabric, then takes a deep sniff of it. My legs threaten to close again, but he keeps them parted for his viewing delight. Nicholas roars at the sight of my wetness. “Of course, I'd have to kill them after it.”

And he attacks my lower lips, lashing out his tongue, up and down and in circles, a mess of saliva and grunts, teeth teasing at the sensitive skin. His stubble scrapes deliciously along my inner thighs, making me squirm and whimper. My nerves are on fire, buzzing with need, and I climb an orgasm with such ease it's like he has a manual of my body.

I come apart with his lips latched onto my clit. Nicholas doesn't stop, French kissing me there until I'm over-

stimulated, until I'm begging and tears race down the sides of my face. Until I come crashing down all over again.

He comes up for air with his stubble glistening with my arousal. I can only imagine what his desk looks like right now. A smile takes my face as his body hovers over mine, and he kisses me hard, my taste on his lips.

My phone buzzes. I try to ignore it and, blissfully, the ringing stops. I hook my ankles behind his back, moving my hips against his member, pleasure zoning into my clit every time I brush his bulge.

My phone buzzes again. Nicholas breaks the kiss, chuckling to himself as he reaches for my purse. "Go on. It might be important," he says.

I'm shaking my head as he picks up the phone and gives it to me. Only when I read Lin's name on the screen do I remember I'm supposed to meet her for dinner.

"Shoot," I hiss, sitting up. Nicholas lets me, stepping away with his amber eyes burning with desire. "Two seconds," I ask him, then pick up the call. Lin and the girls are already waiting for me. I could ditch them, but that would be so cruel, worse after everything Lin told me today. With a sigh, I promise her I'll be there in ten and hang up. "I have to go."

He helps me down from the desk, adjusts my dress, and runs his fingers through my hair. The sweetness of it almost makes me blurt my secret, but this is so not the time. I should have told him before we made out on his desk. Before I was about to surrender to him all over again.

"It's okay," he says, pressing a kiss to my temple. "We'll talk later."

"Okay, let me give you my number."

He clucks his tongue. "I already have it." And he opens a knowing smile. "I couldn't have you walking away again."

Heat takes my cheeks, but I chuckle at him. I start to the door when I notice an extra breeze brushing against the wet insides of my thighs. "Mm. I'm missing something."

He leans against the desk, crossing his arms as he watches me with hooded eyes. “Yeah? What?”

“My... Um, my panties.”

He pats his pocket. “I have them.”

I walk back to him, opening a hand to accept the panties. He doesn't even move to retrieve them. “Can I have them back, please?”

His eyes darken for a moment, but he shakes his head. “No. I have a use for them after you leave.”

“A use...?” The thought of him touching himself using my panties makes heat erupt across my face. My mouth goes desert dry as I imagine it, and it should be wrong, it should be forbidden and dirty, but... Oh God, I'm two seconds away from begging him to film it. My pussy clenches, clamping around nothing, wishing it was him. I open and close my mouth several times before I find the ability to speak again. “Okay.”

“Okay.” He nods once, that knowing smile on his face.

This man. He will ruin me. “I'll see you tomorrow,” I say, striding to the door because, if I stay here another second, I will send it all to hell and climb him like a tree.

“You definitely will.”

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6

EVANNA

If there's one thing I wish people had warned me about, it was baby brain. Morning sickness is gone, but brain fog is here to stay. I can only think of one thing at a time, and never with too much focus. Today, it's baby names. I can't believe I'm almost twenty weeks in, and I haven't begun thinking of baby names.

There's something about *Elizabeth* that calls to me, but I've also read *Avery* on several sites, and it's stuck with me. I should have told Nicholas about it. He could help me out, bring some ideas, and balance them out. Is Avery a good name? Will the other kids make fun of it? I'm always worried about a potential bully since I was the target of every one back in school—because I was fat, because my name was funny, because I only found out about shaving when I was fourteen... Kids are cruel.

I make my way into the building, daydreaming about telling Nicholas the truth. How is he going to react? A part of me still fears he's going to bail on me. That like so many other fathers out there, he won't want to stay. He's not the one carrying the child, so he doesn't need to be around for the kid to be born. And someone with as much money as he has? Maybe he throws a bone my way, pays me child support, then tells his lawyers I'm never to speak to him again.

A knot tightens in my throat as I climb the building inside the elevator. That would be so much worse than never telling him... But is it fair? Is it fair to keep both him and my son-

slash-daughter from each other's presence just because I'm afraid?

No. Definitely not. If I knew my Mom had kept my father from raising me just because she feared rejection, I'd be upset. That's it. That's all I need to know. I can't allow fear to put a wedge in this relationship. Nicholas has the right to learn about it, and I'm telling him today.

The elevator doors open and I comb the space ahead of me. It's a good thing I've come this early before anyone else is here. Nicholas comes in at nine on the dot, so I'll have time to gather my surroundings, ready myself...

My gaze lands on someone standing by my desk. The broad shoulders are the first thing I recognize. Nicholas is in a sky-grey suit that hugs his bulky shape, stretching across his body, making him painfully sexy. From this position, I can gape at his ass, and wow, how couldn't I have noticed his sexy ass before?

I shake myself back to reality. Wait. What is he doing here so early?

My heels clack in his direction and he slowly turns to me. There's a daze on his face, confusion etched in the deep marks between his brows. His eyes grow focused as he lifts his head to gape at me. There's something on his hand, fisted between his big fingers.

"Morning," I greet him, my cheery voice sounding strange in the quiet, deserted space. It falls flat on him, and Nicholas doesn't smile my way. The look on his face makes me falter and stop, several feet from him. "Is everything alright?"

His lips move, but no sound comes. He blinks, his gaze pinpointing at me. Is there an accusation on his face? Doubt written across the lines around his mouth? Fear curls in my stomach, becoming a solid thing. I swallow, trying to keep the panic at bay. Why is he looking at me like this?

"Nicholas?" I whisper, and the sound of his name makes him wince.

His Adam's apple bobs. "Evanna. You... Are you..." He shakes his head as if he can't believe what he's about to say. "Are you pregnant?" And his gaze lands on my lower stomach.

My hands shoot out in front of me as if to protect the child. From the look on his face, I don't need to say anything else. I just told him without a word. Trying to fix it, I intertwine my fingers together, pretending my reflex meant nothing. "What?" And I force out a chuckle, a chuckle so fake it's plastic and weird to my ears. "How could you...?"

He opens his hand, several of my pregnancy tests on his palm. I shoot a gaze at my desk, and the drawer I kept them in is open. Was he going through my things? God, is that how he's going to learn about it?

Nicholas says nothing. He stands there like a statue, his open palm revealing the tests I hid from him. My heart hammers my ribcage, begging for release through my chest. What am I going to say? How am I going to tell him? I could say I'm pregnant, but it's not his—and this would break us, possibly forever.

"Why did you go through my things?" I mutter, jerking into action and grabbing the tests from his hand, then shoving them back into the drawer. Heat spreads through my cheeks. This is not how I wanted things to go. I didn't want him to find out by himself.

He motions for a red box over my desk. It wasn't there yesterday. "Bought you chocolates. I was going to put it into your things so you found it later." There's an empty quality to his voice that squeezes my heart, making me grind my teeth. Nicholas shakes his head, then steps closer to me. "Evanna. Tell me the truth. Are you pregnant?"

Tears sting the back of my eyes. He's going to end things between us. I can already feel it. "Yes," I blurt out.

His jaw sets, his teeth clenching so hard I see a muscle fluttering. Nicholas pins me to the spot with his hard gaze. His hands curl around my shoulders as he dips his head, gazing at me. "Is it mine?" he asks in a voice devoid of emotions.

That's how he is, isn't it? Devoid of emotions. We're having fun sneaking around and making out, but that's all I am to him. Fun. Good times. Nothing serious, nothing for real, nothing that's going to last.

He's going to end things with me, I know it. Tears gather on my lower lashes, and it's impossible to keep them at bay when I know how it's going to end. My heart aches inside my chest because this budding love that's been growing inside me is about to be squashed.

It hurts more because I don't have a crush—no, it's far worse than a crush now. This pain shattering my chest is because of love. I'm in love with him, with the memory of him and the idea of him, with the person he is and the person he can become. And that might make me a fool, but I can't help but love this man.

This man who's about to break up with me. It was all fun and games until I got pregnant. That's where he'll draw the line.

A tear races down my cheek. I gape back at him, and I remember it's not fair to maintain a lie. He deserves to know, even if he breaks my heart.

“Yes,” I whisper at him. “Yes, it's yours.” And I peek at his face to see confusion crossing it, settling, his gaze unfocused as he thinks of... What? Of me as a gold digger? Of me as someone who only wanted his money all this time?

I can't take this. No, I can't take this another second.

Tears stream down my face as I free myself of his hold, whirling around and rushing to the door. I can't stay in his presence another second. Even if he accepted to raise this child, I don't want his pity. I don't want to come to work and see him pitying me for carrying a child I never expected.

I have to leave. My heart shatters to pieces in my chest as I go for the elevator, my arm outstretched. I almost make it.

His fingers wrap around my wrist and he whirls me back around. Nicholas' arm folds around my waist and he slams me

to his chest. I gasp for air between sobs, but he keeps me tight in his hold.

His lips brush my ear. “Thank you.”

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7

NICHOLAS

Happiness is a feeling so intense it almost doesn't fit inside me. It swells in my chest, and I open a smile so big it stretches my lips into an uncomfortable, unusual position. When was the last time I smiled this hard? When I was a kid? Perhaps when the worries of the world didn't weigh so hard on my shoulders?

Now, Evanna has given me the single biggest reason I could have to smile.

I can barely believe what I heard. Could it be true? The evidence piles up, her admittance on the tip of her tongue, the tests I saw... But how could a man like me be this lucky?

Evanna captured my attention from the moment our eyes locked. The more I tried to keep my distance, the more her gravity pulled me in. Soon, she was all I thought about, and her presence consumed my waking thoughts and my dreams. It would be foolish of me to reject her pull any longer.

"I've dreamed of this," I whisper against her hair.

"Of what?" she utters, her voice broken with tears.

"Of you being mine." Pulling back, I bury my hands into her hair, angling her face so she looks up at me. My thumbs wipe away her tears as I press our bodies together, rejecting any distance between us. "I dreamed of you wanting me, too, and I'd put a ring on your finger, and, one day, you'd make me the happiest of men by gifting me with children."

Her eyes shimmer with tears, but they tremble at the edge of her lashes without escaping. “You mean it? You’re not mad I’m pregnant?”

“Mad? How could I be mad?”

Evanna cocks her head, studying my face. Does she doubt me? “Some men don’t like the idea of a pregnant girlfriend, and...” Her cheeks burn with a pretty pink color as she looks away. “I mean, I’m not even that...”

Wiping the last of her tears off, I cradle her face between my hands and kiss her eyes. “Evanna. You’re so much more than that. You’re the first person who’s ever made me feel alive. You’re the *only* person who’s ever made me feel like this life is worth living.”

She blinks at me, her lips parting. “Nicholas, I... I don’t understand.”

We haven’t had time enough together, and I’ve wasted too long trying to keep a safe distance. Fool. I should have known it was impossible. There’s only one way for her to understand. I have to open up—completely, even if I’ve never done this before.

Stepping away, I take her hands in mine and drop on one knee. Evanna watches with doubt on her face. I kiss her wrists and her palms, then press her hands to my cheeks.

“Evanna Pearce. From the second I put my eyes on you, I knew you’d be special. I knew you’d forever mark my life. You were never supposed to be a one-night stand. I wanted you, and I still want you, and I will forever want you. You’re intelligent and resourceful and brave, and you make me feel things I never thought possible.”

Her face softens. She grips my fingers back. “Oh, Nicholas...”

I press a kiss to the inside of her wrist. “My sweet Evanna. Let me say it, and I hope you believe me. I love you. I love you more than words can describe, and I love you more than I thought a man could love anyone.”

Her jaw drops. “I love you, too, but I don’t want you to stay just because of the child.” And her eyes brim with tears again.

I drop my hands to her hips. “Evanna. I want you because of you. The child is the crowning of dreams I never dared hope for, but I want *you*. I love you so much, I know this is the right path. Evanna, will you marry me?”

This time, she gasps with such surprise I crack up. I press my forehead to her stomach, laughing at her reaction. This easiness, this vulnerability, I never felt with anyone else. That’s how I know it’s her.

“You serious?” she asks, cupping my jaw.

“Of course I’m serious. I would have proposed to you at the club if you hadn’t run away from me.”

She laughs, then her arms wrap around my head and she kisses me. “Oh, Nicholas. Of course I will. Marry you, have your children, whatever you want.”

I get to my feet, hands still around her hips. “Whatever I want? You’re sure about that?” And it’s meant to be only a tease, a joke, but the look on Evanna’s face changes and becomes something both beautiful and lustful. “Hell, baby girl,” I groan at her, the expression on her face making my cock go hard in one second flat. I reach between us to adjust my growing length. “If you keep looking at me like that...”

She molds her body to mine, her eyelids fluttering with a coy expression. “Are you honestly happy about being a father?”

“From the bottom of my heart. And I regret not being there for you from the start.”

“I was afraid you wouldn’t want to stay.”

“I want to. More than anything.”

Evanna traces circles on my shirt with her forefinger, then she looks up with those glittering eyes. “So, there’s this thing, you know, with the hormones and all...”

“What is it?” God, she looks positively glorious with these plump lips and those pleading eyes.

“I’m kind of horny. All the time. And I really missed you.”

Holy shit. This woman is perfection. I grunt, my balls heavy with need for her. My fingertips sinking into her fleshy hips, I bring her body so close to mine I smell her everywhere. “Shall we go into my office?”

She shoots a glance around us, then shakes her head. “I have another idea.” And she takes my hand, leading me down the corridor, away from the central area of the office. “We have some twenty minutes before everyone is here. I think there’s enough time.”

Not enough time to do everything I want to do to her, but we have the rest of our lives for that. Evanna slams a hand on the female bathroom door and we stumble inside. She reaches around me to lock the door.

“The bathroom?” I ask, chuckling. “Is this a throwback to our first time?”

“Of course. It’s almost poetic.”

I fold my fingers around her waist, pulling her body to mine. “God, woman. You deserve so much more than this, but I can’t wait another second to take you.”

She tilts her chin up, cheeks flushed, eyes glinting. “Then take me. I’m yours.”

My lips come down on hers and I kiss the hell out of that pretty mouth. Evanna flings her arms around my neck, and our bodies collide like stars. She’s perfection, her whimpers and moans setting my blood on fire. Fuck, how could I survive this long away from her? I part her lips with my tongue and dip it into her mouth, drinking from her, sipping her taste, exploring every inch of her. My hands travel down her delicious curves, searching, touching, adoring the length of her body. She’s round and soft, perfect smoothness against me. I would spend the rest of my days learning how she likes it, and how she wants me to touch her.

Gripping her around her hips, I haul her up above the sink. Just like the first time, she goes for my shirt, unbuttoning it in record time. Her small fingers trace my pecs and stomach, and I shrug the shirt off before I rip it to shreds. My hands find her hair, burying into the strands, tugging it sideways so I can nibble on her pulse. The taste of her skin on my tongue drives me mad and makes every nerve in my body buzz.

“I love this,” she moans as I bite down harder, so I keep doing that. Every couple of kisses, I bite down on her neck, sucking on the skin until I will leave some hickeys. The idea of her walking around covered in hickeys—made by *me*—makes my cock tighten my pants so much I’m sure it’ll burst the zipper open.

Covering her breasts in my hands, I fondle and knead them, test the weight, and marvel at the softness. The nipples turn tight and hard upon my exploration, becoming two diamonds against my thumbs. I circle and tease them until my sweet Evanna is bucking off the sink and against my bulge, aching for more. I strip her shirt, unhook her bra, and take one good look at her perfect tits.

“Baby girl,” I roar, gaping at her flushed skin, awing at her parted lips and the way she blushes. “I’m speechless.”

She presses her arms to the sides of her breasts, making them bounce. “In a good way?”

Burying my face between the mounds, I take a deep breath. “In the best way,” I grunt, then lap at her nipples and suck on them, willing them even harder. Evanna grips my hair, pulling me in, pushing me away, her moans escalating.

When she said she’s horny, I had no idea she was *this* horny. Something tells me she’s about to go, even when I’m just beginning. Reaching for her skirt, I part her knees and stroke up her thighs. Once I reach her panties, I feel the warmth of her core, her wetness staining the insides of her legs. And I waste no time. Pulling her panties away, I cover my fingers in her juices and flick her clit.

Evanna comes apart in a heartbeat, hips moving, nails digging into my scalp. Pleasure buzzes around me like a

current, like pressure rising with a storm. I unzip and unbuckle my pants, shove my boxers down and fist my cock. The tension building up inside me is so great it's almost painful. My member twitches, the purple head leaking precome. I tighten my fist, willing myself to gather some control.

"Oh, God," she breathes, and I look up to find her gaze pinpointed on me. Her eyes are on fire, two embers lit in the darkness. "Put it in me," she asks, her chest rising and falling.

I curse because that's the only thing I can do. Shit, I wanted to do so much more. I want to suck her, watch her come on my face. Then I want to tease her, make her beg... There's so much I want to try, and so little time. But she's looking at me with those eyes, and it would be cruel to keep us from each other for another moment.

Gripping her hips, I pull her from the sink and zip her skirt down. Evanna shimmies her hips, then shoves the skirt down her legs when it doesn't slide down promptly. I let my gaze roam over her curves, her exposed breasts, the white lace panties.

The bump on her stomach I don't fucking know how I missed.

She notices me watching, then curls her fingers around the base of her belly. "I'm sorry I hid it from you. I was so afraid I started wearing baggy clothes to hide it."

"Shh." I brush our lips together. "Don't apologize. Let me make up for the lost time now."

We kiss again, and though I start it gentle and loving, it grows heated in one second. I devour her lips, my hands exploring her plump ass, and the curve of her hips. She's not shy, tracing down my back, gripping my ass. We make out for another couple of minutes, then I hold her around the hips and flip her around. Her back hits my chest as she faces her reflection in the mirror.

Evanna opens a naughty smile. "What are you doing?"

Spreading a hand between her shoulder blades, I make her bend forward. "I want you to see what I see." With a hand, I

push her hair away from her shoulder so I can nibble on it. “I want you to see how fucking beautiful you are.”

I bury a hand into the front of her panties, fingers playing with her clit. Evanna lets go of what she was about to say, head dropping, eyelids fluttering closed. She moans, surrendering to my hold, hands propping on the sink as she tilts her hips up. I push her panties down and bury my cock between her thighs. Her warmth and wetness cradle me, welcome me in. I almost come apart at how amazing she feels.

Covering the bump of our baby with a hand, I meet her eyes in the reflection. “Is this alright?” I ask her in a strained voice.

She nods, then moves her hips in a sensual circle. “Please, Nicholas. Please. I need you so bad.”

“Let me take care of you, baby girl.” I position my cockhead with her entrance and find my way inside. She shakes with pleasure, and the second I’m hilt-deep, I skate my fingers over her clit and watch her come apart again.

It must be time for my employees to arrive, but I don’t give a shit. I don’t stop my soon-to-be bride from crying out orgasm after orgasm as I pound into her. My cock slides out, then slams back home with every thrust, her wetness making the glide easy and mind-blowing. My girl moves back against me at the first two orgasms, but then her body grows pliable and heavy, and I have to keep a hold around her waist to keep her balance.

“More, more,” she pleads, her mouth open in the most erotic sight I’ve ever seen.

I grip both her elbows, bringing them behind her back and keeping a hold as I thrust even harder. Pleasure shoots down my spine, and her inner walls clamp down around me with another climax as I reach my own. I burst inside her, painting her walls white, but I keep moving, grinding my teeth together to bring her into another wave of pleasure.

My body weighs me down by the end. I slide out of her, kiss her shoulder, then clean her up. God, I wish we could

spend the rest of the morning in bed, with her head propped on my chest. I would get up in an hour, make her breakfast, eat her pussy up...

Evanna starts getting dressed, her face flushed, her hair a mess, and a glorious smile on her face. She meets my eyes, then stands on tiptoes to kiss me. "That was a good way to start the day," she says, then chuckles.

I laugh with her, and there's a lightness to my chest. As if a weight has lifted off. "That's the understatement of the century. I will never start a day any other way." Just as I will never start a day with another woman.

I'm here to stay. With her. For her. Forever.

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EPILOGUE

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EVANNA

Five Years Later

The soft breeze blows through the open doors, dancing along the hall and wafting closer to a cornucopia of scents. There's popcorn and cake, the fragrance of the roses decorating the tables, fizzling soda, and sweet lemonade. Small triangle-shaped sandwiches filled with tuna, finger food covered in cucumber paste, and coffee in dainty cups in the hands of the parents.

So many smells. A smile stretches across my face, impossible to contain. I press a hand to my stomach. Not even one twirl, one churn, nothing out of the ordinary. The third time is the charm, they say, and it's worked right for my third pregnancy. No nausea, no baby brain, nothing, and I'm already fifteen weeks in. Everything flawless and easy, a walk in the park.

A body presses to my arm. The flowery scent of Lin's fragrance announces her before I turn to find her eyes on me.

"Hey, mama!" she coos to the kid in her arms. "Look who was looking for you!"

She puts Avery in my arms, and he drops his head to my shoulder. I hum, hugging him close to my chest. "Are you tired, baby?" I ask him, caressing his dark locks against the back of his ears. He nods with heavy lids, tucking his thumb between his lips. "Okay. Maybe it's time for a nap. Have you seen the nanny?"

Lin glances around us, looking for our nanny. “No, but I’ll go after her. He was asking for you, so I brought him before he got upset.”

“Thanks, Lin,” I tell her with a smile, laying my head on top of my son’s. Avery is four now, but I still feel like he’s my baby. Something tells me this won’t change anytime soon. “Are you having a good time? Nicholas put together such a pretty party.”

“He did.” She nods, her brows raking up her forehead as she looks around us. “Unbelievable for a man with his patience. Besides, he never had much of an eye for design. I’m surprised with how strong his color theory actually is.”

I scoff. She has no idea how hard he studied for Elizabeth’s first birthday party. He’s been planning this ever since she was born. With Avery, we hired a business that specialized in children’s birthdays, but so many things went wrong that day. We still refer to it as the Birthday Scandal among my friends and me. The promoter had insisted on an open bar, even though the party was happening in the daytime, and we found out, halfway through the event, that a new bartender had mistakenly spiked the lemonade that was being served to the children.

The girls and I like to laugh about it, but Nicholas doesn’t have the same fondness for the memory. I’ve never seen him so irate, neither before, nor after the event. Even when I asked him to drop the subject and consider it a mistake, something tells me he sued the company until they had nothing left to give.

My husband has become a man much better than he ever expected he could be, but he still has his edges. Still, he’s perfect in my eyes.

“When are you going to tell him?” Lin asks, jutting with her chin to my lower belly. She insists some heartache could have been avoided if I had been upfront from the beginning, and she still dislikes the idea of me keeping it a secret now.

I hum, pretending to think on the matter. “Honestly, I can’t keep it forever. The belly will grow, and my period hasn’t

come in a while. He'll notice if he hasn't noticed yet." I've only been keeping it from him because I want to be one-hundred percent sure. After Elizabeth, I gained a bit weight, and I don't think I have much of a bump yet. Besides, we suffered through that spontaneous abortion, and it was so painful I thought we wouldn't manage a pregnancy soon... The Universe had other plans, thankfully.

Lin opens a secretive smile, her gaze traveling over my shoulder to some point behind me. "Well, Evanna, something tells me he watches you too closely not to notice the smallest changes." She looks back at me. "He's always been a bit obsessed, hasn't he?"

I smile back, because, yeah, my husband has always been a bit obsessed with me. It's the best kind of obsession. Lin leaves and Avery gets more comfortable in my lap, playing with the giant diamond on my left ring finger. It's then that my husband's presence grows behind me, a warmth unlike any other, a love that embraces me even before his fingers graze my skin.

Nicholas folds his arm around me. I turn around to face him, and we stay there, the five of us—Avery in my arms, Elizabeth in her pretty dress in her father's arm, the baby in my belly. Elizabeth isn't as sleepy as her older brother, but she's been going from lap to lap the entire afternoon. Avery, on the other hand, has been running up and down with his friends. She buries her tiny hands in Avery's hair, laying on top of his head in that cute way that tells me the two are going to be inseparable.

"How are you feeling?" my husband asks me, his voice merely a whisper against my hair.

"Happy as ever." As every other day since we got together. His presence is a balm, a solid rock keeping me steady through all obstacles. It's easy when he's with me. I can be myself and he'll love me either way.

The nanny appears next to us, a bit out of breath. "Oh, sir, I'm so sorry. The children got me in circles."

Nicholas makes a face, and the woman winces. I open a smile, offering her Avery's sleeping form. "It's alright. Do you mind putting him to sleep?"

"Of course not, madam." She picks my baby up with all the care a mother would. I'm so lucky that even the nanny is a fantastic person.

"No need for madam," I start, but Lin steps up and takes Elizabeth from Nicholas' arms.

"Come with auntie," she coos, and Elizabeth giggles at her. Lin would never act this way with Nicholas if it wasn't about our kids. She loves the children too much not to act brash with him. "You look like you need some chocolate cake," she says to my youngest child, turning around.

"No chocolate, Pauline," my husband scolds, but Lin only listens to him in the office. He rolls his eyes, but we're left by ourselves, so he soon relaxes. I fold my arms around his waist, lifting myself on tiptoes to peck him on the lips. "Let's find some fresh air."

He walks me into the wrap-around porch of the cabin we're hosting the birthday party. There are some members of his family and mine, some business partners, but mainly friends. It's incredible how many Mom friends you make in a neighborhood. The sounds of the party stay behind us, and the soft breeze plays with my hair as Nicholas hugs me from behind, propping his head on top of mine.

We stay in this quiet heaven for some minutes. He squeezes me against his enormous body, and it feels like home. Especially when his hardness finds this spot between my ass-cheeks.

I chuckle under my breath, moving just slightly against him.

"You're such a tease, baby girl," he grunts against my hair.

"Me? A tease? Why?"

He brushes his lips against my ear, sending shivers down my body. "Your existence is a constant reminder I can't have

you at all times. Fuck, how I wish I could walk around with your pretty cunt tight around my cock.”

Five years later, he’s still getting better and better at his dirty talking. Wetness coats my panties, and I press my lips together to keep myself centered. “You’re the one teasing me,” I say without looking back. “Saying things you can’t make come true.”

“You’d like that? To walk around the entire day with your delicious legs,” and he wraps his meaty fingers around my upper thighs, “wrapped around my waist as I bury myself inside you?”

“I would like that very much,” I reply with a shaky, honeyed voice.

“Wouldn’t that be nice? I’d get you pregnant again in no time.” His hands slide to the front of my body, over my womb. “Or have I already done that?”

A peal of laughter escapes me. “Well. You ruined the surprise.”

He flips me around to look at me. Nicholas’ scruff is even whiter than years ago, and he now has silver strands growing on his temple. He looks even more handsome than when we met, even more so now with his eyes glinting with happiness. “Baby girl. You shouldn’t hide these things from me! Knowing you’re pregnant again makes me the happiest man alive.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I just wanted to find the perfect way to tell you.”

Nicholas hugs me close, pressing a firm kiss to my lips. “The news is perfect, so it doesn’t matter how you tell me. I’ll always be elated.”

“Then,” and I pull back to look at the face of the person I love the most in the world, “I’m pregnant!”

He laughs, then hugs me and he would whirl me around in his arms if he wasn’t so careful. Third pregnancy, but Nicholas is still going to be extremely cautious about the way he treats

me. He drops a kiss on my temple, then kneels in front of me to kiss my belly.

“How far are you?” he asks, his eyes shining.

“Fifteen weeks,” I reply between my teeth, regret coating my words.

He opens his mouth to complain I’ve kept him from the news for almost four months when Lin bursts into the porch, Elizabeth giggling like mad in her arms. “So, did you?” she asks, looking between us. Our other friends pop up behind her, and I can’t help but laugh at their antics.

“Yeah, I did.”

They invade the porch, celebrating and cheering. The girls hug and kiss me again, congratulating me once more and making promises on helping with the children even though I don’t need the help anymore. They distract themselves by starting a bet on names, and I turn to my husband and kiss him with all the love in my heart.

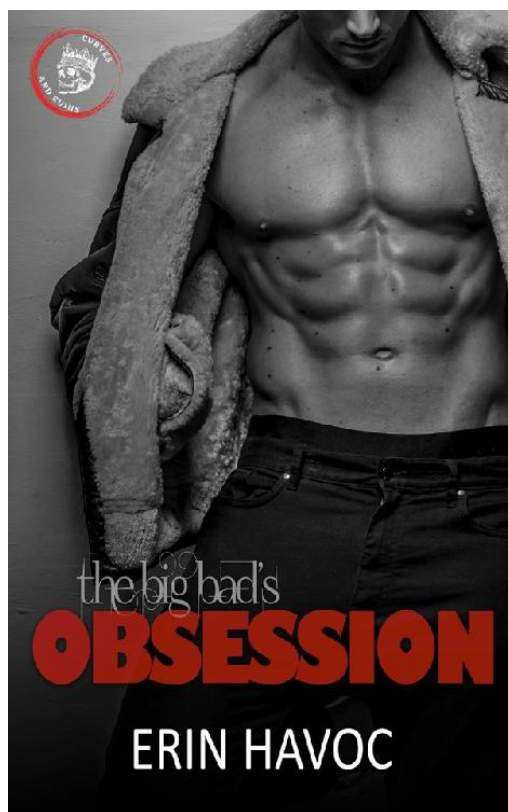
He hugs me close, and I take my friends’ distraction to rub myself against him once more. Nicholas chuckles, burying his face in my neck and lowering his voice.

“You’re still my greatest temptation,” he whispers before he kisses me and, just like that, I know everything is going to be alright.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Havoc writes steamy romance with curvy heroines. Her heroes might look tough, but they have a soft spot for their girls. No matter if they are mountain men, CEOs, or wolf shifters, there's always a happy ending. Check out her Amazon page for more books, and a link to a free story.



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