



The
Billionaire
Pact

JUSTINA WILD

The Billionaire Pact
An Enemies to Lovers
Grumpy Boss Romance

Justina Wild

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Chapter 1:

Scarlett

My stomach flip-flopped as I waited for the model to come out from behind the burgundy curtains. All the fashion houses came together for this particular event in Paris, France. This was my big debut in the most important celebration for the world of fashion. My spring/summer collection was destined to be a winner. I could already see my name in lights as I sat on the edge of my seat, waiting impatiently. I absentmindedly twirled a tendril of my long, blond hair around my perfectly manicured finger.

Hello? Are they asleep back there? I tapped the buckles of my heels together loudly underneath my chair and smiled sweetly at the woman who peered over at me, obviously annoyed by my childish behavior. She shook her head and shifted in her seat to try and distance herself from me. *I'm sure that half an inch to the left will do you wonders.*

Scanning the crowd for well-known fashion district celebrities, I spotted Ella Cantrell, the woman who held the most fashion awards—a woman I was secretly envious of. Inwardly, I swooned and couldn't wait to see the look on her face when she saw my artwork. I pictured Ella begging me to work on her next collection. *That's right, Ella, eat your heart out.*

What is taking so looooooong? I fidgeted with the snap on my black, sparkly purse. I'd bought it on Canal Street in New York City for a fraction of the cost of most Rudy Harper bags.

Snap. Snap. Snap. Snap. Miss Persnickety beside me looked at me again, raising her eyebrow as if to say, "Do you really have to behave like a two-year-old?"

Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. It calms my nerves.

Becoming the biggest sensation in the fashion world took more time than I thought. I huffed, my eyes glued to the still curtain. I'm sure anyone looking at me would see the steam

coming out of my ears. I wanted to go behind the curtain myself but figured I'd likely be arrested and taken to fashion prison. However, Miss Persnickety would be happy about my sudden departure. The seconds ticked by, and I tried to get rid of the ants in my pants, squirming around in my seat.

Lara would soon walk out wearing my latest and most creative work of art. I saw the curtain swish back and forth and took in a deep breath, filling with anticipation.

My big moment had finally arrived.

The curtain parted as the tall, graceful model strutted out with my outfit on—but wait. *What? Something's wrong! Where's Lara? Who's this wearing my design?*

“This wonderful creation is from the very lovely designer, Charlotte Weaver, with the Rudy Harper Fashion House. Now, this is a daring creation of delicate rose silk and lacy curves that dazzle, sparkle, and shine. Charlotte Weaver has been crafting her designs for Rudy Harper Fashion House for an impressive ten years. She's won several awards and is working toward becoming the Designer of the Year,” the announcer said, his words sounding out over the speakers for everyone to hear.

I saw all my dreams blow up into a cloud of smoke in that one awful, embarrassing moment.

Cameras clicked and flashed as the audience fought to take pictures of the sexy goddess walking up and down the runway. Somewhere deep inside me, I hoped she tripped.

Designer of the Year, my ass! I made my way over to the announcer, waving my arms to get his attention—and the attention of every other person in the place. “Mr. Johnson, I think you've made a mistake on the name of the designer.”

He jerked his head to look at me, staring down his much too pointy nose. He looked at the card. “Nope. It says right here,” he pointed to her name, “Charlotte Weaver.”

I snatched the card from him and found her name glaring back at me. *How can this be?* “No, this is my creation. There's been an error,” I informed him.

“Sorry, ma’am. That’s the designer’s name. Rudy Harper himself wrote it on the card. I’m sure he didn’t make an error.” He gave a look that told me he’d had enough of me and turned away.

I was appalled by his lack of concern for my career. “Excuse me, but this needs to be addressed immediately,” I told him, hands on my hips.

“You have two choices, ma’am. You can go back and sit in your seat, or I can call security to remove you. Your choice.” He adjusted his ear pierce and returned to watching the show as if I’d just vanished from his side.

I looked to the left and saw security eying me curiously. The officer squinted at me and straightened up. I guessed that was supposed to make me feel afraid of him and behave. Instead, it made me want to go over and report Miss Persnickety. I saw her god-awful pink beret pointing in my direction. *She’s certainly keeping an eye on me.*

I went back to my seat and winked at her. Her lips became a thin line as she crossed her arms in front of her, trying hard not to look at me. I wanted so badly to tickle her or blow in her ear, but some level of maturity gripped me, warning me to refrain from my mischievous ways.

Another one of my designs would be coming out soon, and I wanted to see if the announcer read the correct name this time. *It better be my name.*

“This is another creation from the lovely Charlotte Weaver—”

This is preposterous!

I stood up and barreled my way through the crowd to the outside curtain, thinking I would just slip into the back, but an officer grabbed my arm. “Miss, you can’t go back there.”

I whirled around. “I’m one of the designers. I am needed in the back before my next design walks onto the stage.”

He looked down, and I followed his gaze. My hand clutched at my neck. *Dammit!* I had forgotten to wear my backstage pass. I smiled sweetly. “I forgot my pass. I’m

Scarlett West. Surely you must have heard of me? I'm a designer with Rudy Harper Fashion House. My designs have been on stage." Of course, he wouldn't know that because the announcer kept reading the wrong name.

"I'm sorry, Miss. You'll have to go back to your seat and wait until the show's over."

"It will be too late then." I could feel anger rising in my throat. "I *need* to get back there immediately," I insisted.

"She's with me, officer," a voice behind me said. I froze. I recognized that nasal voice. It was my coworker, Charlotte Weaver, who was working undercover as my new nemesis. And the woman who I guessed was sleeping with Rudy to climb up the *fashion* ladder.

I whirled around to face the two-timing weasel. She grabbed my arm and ushered me into the back room. Charlotte towered over me in her five-foot-ten frame, her short, blond hair framing her angular face. She also had silver stilettos on, which gave her even more height over me, as I had chosen one-inch heels. Stilettos made me feel like I was going down a steep flight of stairs in a drunken stupor.

"What is going on with my designs?"

She tilted her head and drew her lips into a thin straight line. "I have no idea what you're referring to." She managed to keep her voice steady.

I raised my eyebrows as my mouth formed a perfect "O."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, Charlotte."

She put one hand in front of her and pretended to look at her perfectly manicured nails, clearly avoiding my glare. "I'm afraid you don't have anything to accuse me of."

"Why are my designs being introduced under *your* name?"

"Scarlett, my dear. The designs on the runway tonight are my own."

"They're mine, and you know it."

“Unfortunately for you, Rudy himself knows those designs are mine. That’s why he put my name on the card and gave it to the announcer.” She steadied her gaze with mine.

“You’ve been after my job since you were hired. Admit it.” I clenched my jaw.

“Oh, don’t flatter yourself. It doesn’t look good on you. You’re too far out of your league at Rudy Harper Fashion House.”

I took a deep breath and counted to three, just like my brother, Sterling, had taught me. I wished he was here right now because I would instruct him to throttle her.

“Ladies!” I heard Rudy’s monotonous voice call out. He walked up to us and gave a dismissive look to Charlotte. She looked at me from eyes of pure evil and turned on her stilettos, sauntering off.

Rudy, my boss and also the owner of Rudy Harper Fashion House, nodded at me. “Scarlett, please follow me.” I suddenly felt like I was being sent to the principal’s office. I watched his short, pudgy body waddle to an office down the hallway. I tried not to stare at the huge mole on the back of his bald head.

Once we went into the office, the smell hit me as it wafted into my unsuspecting nostrils. I looked at his fading yellow dress shirt and noted the sweat stains under his arms. I was about to enlighten him on the benefits of wearing deodorant when he told me to sit down. I tried to imagine how Charlotte could have sex with this horrid man and shivered with disgust.

“I’ll stand. Why was Charlotte’s name introduced as the designer of *my* fashions.” I stared into his dark beady eyes while trying to hold my breath.

He ignored my question and opened his notebook. As he did so, papers slid out onto the floor. I didn’t know how he managed to run a successful business when he was a complete slob. I wanted to smack him up the side of his head and tell him to “get it together.” Instead, I crossed my arms and leaned

on the door. I figured it was the furthest point I could stand as I tried not to catch a whiff of him again.

He looked up at me, clearing his throat. "I'm afraid I'll have to let you go, Scarlett."

My eyes popped out of their sockets as my jaw slid open. "What?" I could feel my heart pumping blood at an alarming rate.

He handed me an envelope. "We truly appreciate everything you've done here at Rudy Harper Fashion House, but it's time for you to move on to a brighter future somewhere else." He said it so nonchalantly, as if he was telling me to have a good weekend, not as if he was ruining my life.

I snatched the envelope out of his hands. "You've got to be kidding me!"

"I truly wish I was. You've been a great asset here. However, we are downsizing, and you're a junior in your field."

"A junior?" I huffed. "I've been here a year longer than Charlotte. And those designs you put under her name were mine! How dare you." I was sure my face was redder than the stripes on the American flag.

"I urge you to take your final paycheck and walk out of this building before I have to call someone to remove you."

That was the second time today I had been threatened to be removed. I might as well try for strike three.

"Of all the lousy, no-good assholes, Rudy Harper. You've no right to treat me like this."

He stood up, knocking his chair to the floor as sweat beaded on top of his shiny head.

"Scarlett, if you value your place in the fashion district, you'd best leave now. Be happy you got your final pay, which I can just as easily cancel the check." It was an order, but coming from him, it was a pathetic attempt to save his own ass.

I opened the door, walked out, and slammed it in his face as tears threatened to spill down my cheeks.

Charlotte was standing right in front of me, a smug smile on her face.

“You’re an awful person, Charlotte Weaver. I wish you nothing but failure.”

“Always the sore loser, aren’t you?” I heard her laughing as I walked away from her.

I walked. I kept walking. I had no idea where I was walking to. I just knew that I had to get somewhere private so I could have a good cry. I went down the hallway and turned left, which opened into a large room. Across the open space, there were four doors. I hoped one of them was open. As luck would finally have it, door number two opened.

It went to the main foyer. It was dimly lit and empty. I walked over to the little garden and leaned on the wrought iron railing.

Rudy and Charlotte’s words swarmed in my head like angry bees, making me more furious. I slammed my hand down on the railing as I lifted my foot and made the motion to kick it. Unfortunately, I missed, and my foot lodged itself between the spindles, capturing it as a hostage when I tried to retract it.

“Dammit!” I yelled to the marble walls as pain seared through my ankle.

“Hey, no need to swear. What have you done to yourself?” The voice was sultry and sexy.

I looked up and saw the hottest man I had ever laid my eyes on. Forgetting my foot was locked in a wrought iron vice, I accidentally tried to pull it back through again. The pain spliced through my ankle and traveled all the way up my leg, causing me to bite my lip and bend over.

He rushed over to me instantly and bent down to take a look at the damage. My breath caught in my throat when he looked up at me with those light gray-blue eyes that contrasted his thick, almost-black, short, wavy hair. There was a hint of

stubble on his face which caused my insides to plead with me to take him to bed immediately.

I willed my insides to settle down and closed my eyes to shut out the eye candy. It didn't help.

I felt his rough, hot hand close around my foot, and it shocked me, which caused a knee-jerk reaction as my foot jumped up and struck his forehead so hard it knocked him over.

Whatever he did, freed my foot from its metal prison and allowed me to hobble to the front door as quickly as possible. I couldn't risk looking at him again, or a wild passionate night would follow, and I just wasn't in the mood.

I was much too angry, hurt, and embarrassed to have hot sex with a viciously handsome stranger. I paused before I opened the front door just long enough to hear him say, "You're welcome, Little Miss Ungrateful." He muttered something else about being a spoiled brat, but I didn't trust myself to respond. Instead, I opened the door and wobbled to the sidewalk to hail a taxi, leaving the handsome stranger to presumably glare after me in bewildered shock.

Chapter 2:

David

I stood for several minutes, floored. *Did that really just happen?* I looked around the room as if to find someone who witnessed the interaction and assure me I wasn't going crazy. Unfortunately, no such person existed. I gave a high-pitched laugh and said, "Well, I'll be." I shook my head in disillusionment as I got up off the hi-gloss floor, brushing my ass with my hands to get the dirt off.

I knew I should go after her and force her to realize how rude she'd just been to me, and after I helped her out of a sticky situation, no less, but I was tired and wanted to go to my hotel room. I thought about the jam she had gotten herself into and wondered how it happened. She'd looked so distraught and adorable with her foot between the iron spindles. If I'd known how wretched she was, I would've just left her there and merely waved to her on my way out. But I was always a sucker for a beautiful face, and hers was one that would be embedded in my memory for a very long time.

I made my way outside, unable to get the image of her out of my mind, and waited for my driver, Jax, to pull up in the limousine. Even with the gnarly grimace that had been on her face, she was simply radiant. I'd watched her walk—no, hobble—to the door, and those legs were something else. And her long, thick, wavy, blond hair swishing side to side was sexy as hell. She had an air of sophistication that I hadn't come across in a long time. Oh, sure, all the models and socialites I'd been subjected to over the years were hot, but this lady... this lady put their looks to shame.

Jax pulled up, and I slid in the back. "Jax." I nodded at my driver. His salt and pepper hair, beard, and mustache, and his Spanish good looks made him look ultra debonair. I trusted him with my life and knew he would keep my personal business to himself. I paid him handsomely for his discretion.

"To the hotel, Mr. Moore?" He knew me well, but tonight I was restless. It could have been the unfavorable exchange

between the mystery woman and myself, spending several hours with my controlling mother (something that would put anyone in a bad mood), or simply the fact that I didn't feel like returning to an empty hotel room. I instructed Jax to take me to the nearest classy bar instead.

I'd find a willing female (they usually came in swarms) and bring her back to my hotel for a passionate romp, then send her on her way before the sun came up. It seemed to be my new routine when I was away from home. I hated being alone. Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed my own company, but on the road, I needed female companionship to pass the time.

Jax found a nice bar named *On the Rum*. I chuckled at the play on words and got out of the limousine. Taking off my tie, I strolled up to the entrance and disappeared inside to begin trolling for a playmate for the evening.

Taking a seat at the bar, I ordered my usual spiced rum and root beer and started surveying the room for my lucky target. However, I wasn't looking for Mrs. Right. I was looking for Mrs. Right *Now*. Relationships resulted in nothing but pain in the past. Most women were only after two things: my money and social position. I'd yet to find someone worth bringing home to my critical mother, Sharon. As far as she was concerned, I was a man who never dated. There had even been some rumors that I liked men and hid it. Completely untrue, although I didn't care what people thought of me, but my mother certainly did.

I took a sip of my drink and scanned the room. I clenched my jaw when every female I saw transformed into the nasty woman who kicked my forehead. I had to get her out of my mind and fast. I spotted a beautiful brunette on the other side of the room and stood up. I was thinking about my pickup line and was about to make my way over to her when out of nowhere, someone started hitting me from behind.

"You asshole! How dare you show up here after what you did to me. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Go the hell!" As I turned toward her, I saw flashes of red hair and long, pointy nails as her big, black purse crashed into my head

several times. I reached up and grabbed her weapon, wrapping my hands around her wrists to subdue her next attack.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I asked, irritation lacing my words.

Stunned, she looked at me. I saw her beautiful facial features change as she realized she didn’t know me. I didn’t release my hold on her for fear she would resume her assault.

“Well, that’s embarrassing,” she said as her devil horns retracted and humanity returned to her mossy green eyes. She squinted at me. “I swore you were my ex-fiancé. From behind, you look like him. I’m sure you’ve cheated on someone in your life, so you probably deserved it anyway.”

I tightened my grip on her wrists. “How dare you make assumptions about me,” I growled back.

She sighed and pulled her wrists out of my hands. “Please unhand me, or I’ll call the cops.” She put one hand on the other wrist and rubbed it, glaring at me. “That hurt.”

“Pardon me, Miss, but I think it’s me who should be calling the police due to your unprovoked and very violent attack.” I towered over her, and I may have puffed out my chest a little to let her know she wouldn’t win if she tried it again.

An even more horrifying thing happened. She squished up her face and made an awful squeaky sound as tears flooded her cheeks like an army being sent into battle. I eyed the exit, trying to plan my escape before I got roped into consoling this evil vixen. I turned, slapping a \$20 bill down on the bar and tried to walk away, but she grabbed onto my arm and pulled me back.

Shit! I’m doomed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asked, wiping her tears.

I didn’t want to be rude, but I had no intention of talking to her. I smiled and said, “I’ve got to go now. Nice meeting you.” I started to walk away again, but she grabbed my arm

and whisked me off to a table in the corner. I had no choice but to sit down.

“Let me buy you a drink. After all, I did beat you up, so I owe you one.” She smiled sweetly as if that would be enough of an apology for what she’d put me through.

I studied her while she babbled on. Her red hair was the color of salmon, parted in the middle and hung in smooth, loose curls all the way down past her breasts. My eyes may have stopped for an extra few seconds on her breasts, which were practically peeking out of her V-neck black top. When my eyes came back up to her face, pausing on her full luscious lips, up her sleek long nose, and resting on her mossy green eyes, she was watching me.

She was definitely worthy of the Moore sex-special. I was getting hard just thinking about it. But then something incredible happened; she just kept talking, and her sing-song voice resonated in my eardrums in such a delightful manner that I started listening to her actual words. Mind you, I had Little Miss Ungrateful on my brain, still unable to get her out of my head, so this was a nice way to deter my thoughts away from her.

“I’m Arianna Novak.” She held out her hand, and I took it, shaking it lightly. She had a dynamite smile, and I began thinking about asking her if she’d like to go to my room and get better acquainted, but she continued talking. She told me all about her ex-fiancé, Todd, whom I found out had cheated and broken up with her that morning, hours before their wedding.

Sucks to be you, Todd. I found out more about this woman, and I was impressed. She was a good person who was unfortunate enough to be engaged to Todd Wakefield. “I’m David Moore. I am the complete opposite of Todd.”

“Aw, so you would never cheat on a woman.” She batted her long eyelashes at me.

I took a swig of my drink and corrected her. “No, I would never ask a woman to marry me.”

Arianna and I had a good laugh. We kept talking and drinking, and although Little Miss Ungrateful haunted my thoughts every now and again, I was able to focus on what she was saying and found I enjoyed it very much. It seemed sleeping with me, or the fact that I was David Moore, was something she couldn't care less about. I wasn't used to this. Women usually sought me out with visions of snagging me and my fortune. I found myself asking her questions and caring what her answers were.

It taught me a valuable lesson. Not all women wanted my money. Some were content just talking to me. It was refreshing and my mood improved. I was laughing at her stories, despite myself. I looked at my watch and was surprised to see that it was nearing 2:00 a.m.

Around 5:00 a.m., I was having trouble keeping my eyes open. "I'm going to have to call it a night or morning. It's been lovely talking to you." I was sad to see it end. I felt like I had known her forever, and we'd shared so much about ourselves. It was odd just to say goodbye and never see her again. "Here's my phone number. Feel free to call me."

She smiled, and my heart warmed. She took my card and gave me hers. "Call me anytime, and thank you for talking me off the ledge, so to speak."

I gave her a hug, then kissed her on the lips. She smelled of roses. She kissed me on the cheek. As I watched her walk to the cab, I felt melancholy. She turned and waved as the car drove off, and I was left staring after yet another woman in shock.

Twice in one day, David. That's a record.

The next day was a rough start, as I was hungover from my night with Arianna. I'd never spent all night with a woman without getting naked. I hadn't even tried to come on to her. *What's wrong with me? I'm losing my touch.* It felt good to connect with a human being on a deeper level than just sex.

Jax drove me to the sprawling villa, that I owned, where I'd be staying for the balance of my vacation. I reflected on the previous evening. Why couldn't my wonderful encounter with Arianna have been with Little Miss Ungrateful instead? Now, that was a woman I really wanted to get to know. Had she not wobbled off as she did, I would have had her underneath me, begging for more. I felt my manhood jump to life with the vivid pictures flashing through my head.

I sucked a breath in and scolded myself for my unholy thoughts. I wasn't religious, but the things I was imagining were definitely X-rated and devilish.

Can I find her? I shook my head and tried to convince myself that it was a bad idea to try and track her down, but I couldn't get the image of her to stop pestering me. *Why didn't I chase after her?*

Jax stopped at a farmers market, and I got out to stretch my legs. Jax took the limousine to get some gas while I went into the store to get a snack. I got a bottle of iced tea and some salt and vinegar chips for Jax and was picking out my chip flavor when a strange man came in to pay for his gas. He seemed like a bit of a countryman in his overalls. I brought my purchase up to the front when the cashier ran out the front door, yelling, "Hey, you forgot your dog!"

I watched as the cashier came back in, shaking his head. He started to ring up my items. "The man left without his dog?"

The cashier looked at me and shook his head. "Happens all the time around these parts. It's too much trouble, so they leave them here and drive off on purpose. Guess I'll have to take it out back and shoot it like the one a few months ago."

My heart slammed into my chest at the mere thought, and I looked at the cashier with anger. "You're going to kill his dog?" My eyebrow shot up as he nodded. "I'll take him."

The cashier shrugged and said, "Sure. Saves me a bullet."

I was shocked. "Did you really just say that?" I was appalled.

The cashier just stared at me with a dumb look on his face. Clearly, he wasn't a decent human being.

I walked out and looked at the furry creature. I knew instantly that the puppy was a husky. I let it sniff me, and he wagged his tail, then licked me. My heart melted, and I figured he might be a good gift for my five-year-old daughter, Mia. She was always asking me to get a pet, so this would make her happy and give the poor puppy a safe and wonderful life.

Am I really going to do this?

Jax came up beside me. "You should do it." I untied the dog's leash and led him to the limousine. When we got inside, the dog curled up beside me, laying his head on my lap, and fell asleep.

"Looks like you've got a new friend. Mia will be ecstatic," Jax said, looking at me through the rearview mirror.

"I agree."

I sat back and rested my hand on the puppy's back. It had been an interesting day, and I was sad to be going to another town and further away from Little Miss Ungrateful.

Chapter 3: Scarlett

Still seething, feeling hurt and embarrassed, I stood at the door to my apartment in New York, fumbling with my keys. I was tired, hungry, and in shock. *Dammit!* My keys flew out of my hand and down the steps. Mumbling obscenities, I retrieved them, still swearing under my breath as I made my way back to the door. *Let's try this again.*

Finally, I got the door open and came face-to-face with four sets of eyeballs. Three of them belonged to my furry friends, and one of them belonged to my older brother, Sterling, who was looking after my pets while I was gone. I'd almost forgotten that he would be there and mentally cursed to the walls of my exhausted mind.

He eyed me curiously. "What happened?"

I tossed my keys onto the oversized chair in front of the large bay window. It was my favorite spot in the house, and I often curled up there to read or gaze out the window if there was a storm or if I just felt nosey and wanted to spy on the neighbors as a source of entertainment.

I picked up Callie, my black and tan miniature pinscher. She was squirming so bad I thought she was going to wiggle right out of my hands. I held her close to my face so she could give me lots of kisses as she let out a bunch of high-pitched squealing noises letting me know she was not impressed that I left her.

"That little rascal ran up and down your chair every five minutes looking for you," Sterling informed me as he took my bags from me. He picked up my keys off the chair and hung them on the hook by the front door. "Honestly, sis. No wonder you lose your keys most of the time. That's why I put that hook by the door, you know."

I hung my sweater over the back of the chair and turned around to hug him. "I know, and I thank you for that, but every time I put them on the hook, I can't find them because I'm

looking in the chair where I always fling them when I come in.”

Sterling shook his head and laughed. “You make absolutely no sense to me. How was your trip to France? You look exhausted... and bitchy.” He sidestepped the arm that I flung out to hit him.

“I *am* bitchy, so beware. The trip itself was great. I love Paris. But...” I stopped. I really didn’t feel like reliving it all, but Sterling was looking at me expectantly, so I continued, “I got fired.”

There. I said it out loud. Oh no! I lost my job! It all came crashing down on me, and my bottom lip started to quiver as I tried to hold back the tears.

Sterling crossed over to me in two long strides and pulled me into his chest, wrapping his arms around me, and resting his chin on the top of my head. He let me cry for a few minutes. “What happened? You were so excited about this. You said you ‘had it in the bag’ if I recall your exact words when you left here last week.”

We sat down on my white leather sectional, and he draped his arm around me, pulling me over to cuddle up against his chest. I blew my nose loudly and began telling him the sordid story. “And then Rudy had the nerve to tell me I was being let go. After his slutty Charlotte stole all my creations.” I broke down into another fit of tears.

“Wow. That’s quite the story. I’m sorry you had to go through that. I’ll drive over there tomorrow and put Rudy in his place. Charlotte too.” His jaw clenched as he handed me more tissue.

“Would you? Oh, what am I going to do?” I looked around me. “How am I going to be able to pay for this place now?” My heart started to pound in my chest at the thought of it.

“Relax. You’ll figure it out. You always do. I’m sure there are other fashion houses that would be honored to take you on.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Who would want to hire me after I got fired?”

He leaned forward. “You sell yourself short all the time. You’re a bright and talented woman, and you’ll find another job. I guarantee it. You’re too feisty to let this keep you down. Maybe this is a sign that you need a change.”

I shook my head and blew my nose again. “No. I love what I do. I mean, Rudy Harper is a jerk, and Charlotte had it in for me since she started, but other than that, I really enjoyed my job.” I took in a deep breath and held it, letting it out slowly. I felt so defeated. I couldn’t believe I was no longer working at Rudy Harper Fashion House. I’d worked there since I finished college nine years ago. “I worked so damn hard for him. That place was my life.”

“What was his reasoning? Did he say?”

“He told me they were downsizing. They are not downsizing.” I stood up. “I’m hungry. Is there anything left in the fridge, or did you eat everything I left for you?” I went into my beautiful white kitchen and opened the fridge door.

Sterling was right behind me. So was Callie.

“I think I ate almost everything that was in there.” He grinned sheepishly. “Sorry, I forgot to go shopping. I’ll leave you some money. Let’s order pizza.”

“Pizza? I could get into that. No cooking or cleanup? Sounds perfect. You’re buying.”

Sterling called the pizza place to put in our order while I went over and gave my kittens, Willow and Luna, some loving. They walked up and down me, their tiny claws digging into my skin. “Ouch. You guys need your claws cut.” As if they knew what I’d just said, they both jumped down on the floor and proceeded to chase each other up the stairs. I could hear their claws scratch the hardwood floors, and I cringed. They went through each room, and then they booted it back down the stairs and onto the couch, wrestling and growling.

“It’s especially fun when they do that at two-thirty in the morning, *every* morning.” He handed me an ice-cold beer. “I

figure you could use this. Sit down and take a load off.”

I grabbed it from him and took a long pull. The cold liquid slid down my throat, smoothing away all my worries for the moment.

“So, anything else happen? You were gone for a week. That can’t be the only detail you’re going to share with me.”

I took another drink of my beer. “I did some sightseeing. It was beautiful, and the food was amazing. I ate so much French onion soup and crème brûlée. Something else happened too.”

“Oh really? What?”

“After Rudy fired me, I went out into the foyer, thinking I was alone and cried it all out. I proceeded to kick the wrought iron fence that was on the little bridge and got my foot stuck.”

That sent Sterling into a fit of laughter. “Oh, I wish I could have been there to see that.”

“Shut up. It’s not funny.” I pouted.

“It most certainly is. How did you get your foot unstuck?”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, this guy came by and wrenched it free, I think.”

“You think?” He leaned back and grinned.

“I might have kicked him in the forehead while he was trying to free my foot. Knocked him right on his ass. Sterling, I was so embarrassed I couldn’t even stick around to thank him. I wobbled out of there as fast as I could because I was mortified.”

Sterling laughed again, choking on his spit. “That’s classic, sis. You really know how to show a guy a good time. Was he cute?”

I blushed. “Yes, he was hot. Really hot.” I tried to recall his face, but it was all a blur.

“Seems you duped yourself out of a night of good sex.”

“Sterling!” I laughed.

“Just saying.” Just then, the doorbell rang.

“Oh, shut up and get me some pizza.” I went into the kitchen to get plates and napkins, strangely hearing a couple of female voices, but I couldn’t hear what they were saying. *Leave it to Sterling to invite some girls over thinking I wouldn’t be home yet.* I made my way back to the living room.

Sterling looked at me, and so did the two women. “Seems these ladies want to talk to you.”

I froze. The woman with the long, black hair was Christina Moore with Moore Fashions. Only one of the most famous fashion designers in the world. I couldn’t believe she was standing in my house and that she wanted to talk to *me*. The other lady had an afro that she had smoothed down into a ponytail. They were both fashionably dressed and smiling warmly.

I walked over to them. “Can I help you?” I barely squeaked the words out, still staring at Christina in awe.

“My name is Christina Moore, and this is my assistant, Kelly Jackson. We’re so sorry to bother you, but we’re from Moore Fashion, and we’d like to talk to you for a few minutes if you don’t mind.” She extended her hand, and I took it.

Mind? Is she kidding me? She’s Christina Moore, and she’s asking me if I mind that she’s standing a few feet away from me? Come in. Move in if you want. I nearly thought I was going to pass out.

“I know who you are from TV and social media. Please come in and sit down.” As they were taking their coats off, Sterling looked at me questioningly. I shrugged my shoulders, still beaming.

Sterling and I sat down with them. “What was it you wanted to talk to me about?” I was waiting with eagerness. Having Christina Moore in my living room was like being crowned a princess.

“We heard that Rudy Harper had to let you go due to downsizing and wondered if you would consider coming to

work for us at Moore Fashion.”

My eyes bulged, and I almost choked on my own spit.
What?

Kelly smiled. “It seems our top designer, Chen Li, fell off her horse and broke some limbs. She won’t be able to return to work until the fall, but we need to get the fall/winter fashions ready for the big show in Ireland. Would you please help us out?”

I was floored. Moore Fashion was one of the biggest fashion houses around. I could feel giddiness rising in my throat as all the hurt and anger dissipated. I couldn’t believe my good luck. Not that I was happy about Chen Li hurting herself, but this was big!

I smiled. “I’m flattered. How did you know I was let go?”

“I went to fashion school with your friend, Tyler, from Rudy Harper Fashion House. I ran into him at the Paris show, and he told me all about it,” Kelly informed me.

“Oh, really? Small world.” I wasn’t sure how happy I was that Tyler was airing out all my dirty laundry to other people in the business, but based on where this was going, I’d forgive him. “Will this be a permanent position or just a contract?”

“Permanent,” Christina said, smiling warmly. “We asked around about you and did some research. You have a creative flair that we need badly. I’m sure you will bring wonderful fresh ideas to our business. How early can you start?”

“As soon as you want me,” I told her, excitement coating my words.

“Perfect. Oh. You do realize that we operate out of Los Angeles?”

My heart dropped into my stomach at the thought of moving. I looked over at Sterling. He nodded vigorously.

Christina sensed my hesitation and continued, “We’ll incur all the moving expenses. We actually have a beautiful house that you could rent. I promise you it will be a move up from this adorable apartment.”

I was overwhelmed, ecstatic, and *terrified* all at once.

“I can see you’re hesitating. I’ll sweeten the deal. Moore Fashion will supply you with a company car and benefits as well as a \$2,000 shopping spree in our fashion house, and we’ll give you six weeks’ vacation as I’m sure you have family and friends here that you’ll want to visit from time to time.”

Sterling was giving me the “why aren’t you jumping at this?” glare.

“Deal,” I found myself saying.

Kelly and Christina stood up. “Oh, we’re so glad. We’re sorry for the urgency, but we need to get you started as soon as it’s feasible for you. We’ll make all the moving arrangements and send you the contract with all the details. It was so lovely to meet you and your furry little friends and your handsome brother,” Christina said with a wink directed to Sterling.

They left almost as quickly as they’d come, and our pizza arrived before we shut the door. Sterling paid the driver and brought it inside. “So, I’m guessing you must be brimming with excitement.”

“Put the pizza down right now,” I demanded.

Sterling furrowed his brows. “Okay.”

He wasn’t prepared for me to leap into his arms, and we ended up on the floor in a heap, laughing hysterically.

“I guess that answers my question!”

Chapter 4:

David

I loved my house in France, nestled on the Mediterranean side. It was probably my favorite place to be. Set on a hill, secluded by a forest of trees, and only a five-minute walk down the hill to my private beach; it was my safe haven. I always came here when I needed a break from life, and I needed that right now.

I wasn't alone, as several staff members resided with me, and that was company enough. Spending several weeks here by myself was a common thing. I had my horses, my indoor and outdoor pool, my beach, my vineyards, and the picturesque countryside to keep me busy.

That was until I got the call.

"David. When are you coming home?" Christina asked, and I noted the trepidation in her voice.

"Well, I told Claudia I would be back in a few weeks. Why?" I sat down on the lounge chair beside my pool and laid back. The warm breeze blew over me as the sun's rays beat down on my exposed body. It felt so wonderful to relax. *I needed this.*

"How are things with her?"

"She's as needy as ever. She never did get over the fact that I ended our relationship. I swear she thought tricking me into having a baby would make me marry her. She was dead wrong. Don't get me wrong, Mia is the best thing in my life, but Claudia's dishonesty ended our relationship immediately. Relationships can't exist without trust and honesty. She showed me her true colors and lost me because of it."

"Why does she keep trying to get you back? You were pretty clear when you ended things."

"She got used to the things I could provide her. Material things and societal standing. She's resentful that I took all of that away from her by ending our relationship. She'll just have

to deal with it. Now, why are you calling me while I'm vacationing?" I slipped my sunglasses on.

There was a pause. "What is it, sis?"

"Well, it's funny you should talk about honesty in relationships. I have something to confess, but before I tell you, you have to promise you're not going to get angry."

I didn't like the sound of that. "What is it?" My stomach flinched.

"Chen Li fell off her horse and broke both legs and one arm, so she's not going to be able to complete her fall/winter collection this year. I was in a panic and didn't want to bother you while you were away on vacation, so—"

"Spit it out, Christina." There was more anger in my voice than I intended.

"I will. Give me a second. I'm trying to explain everything. Kelly knows this guy at Rudy Harper Fashion House in New York, his name is Tyler. She was talking with him after the Paris show, and he was telling her that Rudy Harper had to let one of their designers go. Apparently, he was downsizing. Kelly and I talked to some people and did some digging into her past work, and David, she's amazing. Her creativity is exactly what Moore Fashion needs."

"What are you trying to get at, Christina?" I was edging on deep frustration now. I loved my sister, but she had this way of skirting around the issue until you went bonkers.

"Kelly and I went to her home and offered her a job at Moore Fashion." She said this sentence ultra-fast, almost like she was hoping I didn't hear her words.

"*You what?*" I yelled into my phone as I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the lounge, knocking my drink to the ground. It shattered instantly. "Shit, Christina! What did you do that for?"

"Did I just hear glass shattering?"

"You sure did. I'm fine. Dammit, Christina. You know not to make any major decisions without consulting me first."

Whatever were you thinking?"

Silence on the other end.

"Christina?"

Her voice was quiet when she answered. "I know. I'm sorry, David. I was only thinking of getting someone on board quickly. It was a chaotic moment, and I thought I was doing you a favor by not disturbing you. You have to admit that you are unapproachable when you're at your French villa. You're going to love her, I promise."

"That's not the point, Christina. The point is that we're a *team* at Moore Fashion, and you should have consulted me before offering her the job."

"I'm sorry," Christina squeaked out.

I could almost feel her apology in my heart. She had a way of making you feel so guilty for being upset with her. I sighed deeply. "Well, it's done now." I clenched my jaw and shook my head, standing up to go inside the house. "I'll make arrangements to come home tomorrow."

"No! Please, you don't have to come home. I can handle it. There's no need for you to come home. Stay. Enjoy yourself. I'll get her oriented and show her the ropes."

"I'll be home tomorrow."

"David, seriously. You don't need to come home. I am capable of handling this." She was pleading with me, but she should know me better by now.

"Goodbye, Christina." I hung up the phone before she could respond. Ten seconds later, I felt my phone vibrate.

Christina: I can't believe you hung up on me!

I chuckled and wrote:

Me: I was just saving you from my next comment.

I called my pilot to arrange a flight to leave at midnight.
So much for my vacation!

Whoever it was that Christina hired wasn't going to like me very much. She already had it going against her that I wasn't happy about her being brought on without my approval. I knew myself well and wished her luck dealing with me.

"Looks like you've got company," Jax said as he drove up the long driveway to my house in Los Angeles the next morning.

I peered out the front window and saw Claudia and Mia sitting on the swing on the front veranda. Claudia did not look happy.

Mia jumped off the swing and flew into my arms. "Daddy! Daddy!"

There simply was nothing else in the world that felt so good than to feel her in my arms and see the smile on her face when she saw me. I made a note to take her to Paris the next time I went. She'd never seen my place there before, and I knew she would love it. Spending two weeks there by ourselves would make me a happy man.

"Hi, love of my life." I lifted her up so I could blow a raspberry on her tummy, which caused her to laugh hysterically.

"Daddy, stop! It tickles." I stopped and hugged her to my chest. "I missed you."

"Stop going away." She jutted her bottom lip out for full effect.

"I have to. But maybe I'll take you with me next time." I looked over her shoulder at Claudia, who was glaring at me. I put her down.

"I brought someone home who might make you incredibly happy," I said and pointed to the husky puppy that Jax was bringing over to her.

Mia's eyes bulged and the biggest smile ran across her face as she looked at me questioningly. "Puppy?"

“That’s right. Your puppy.” I loved seeing her so happy and was thankful I rescued the poor creature.

“Oh, Daddy. I love him. Or is it a her?” She had no fear in petting the puppy and let her lick her whole face while she laughed.

“It’s a her. She’s female. You’ll have to think of a name for her. Now, run along and go inside. I need to talk to your mother.” She planted a juicy kiss on my cheek and skipped up the front porch steps, disappearing inside.

I took a deep breath as I approached Claudia.

“Why did you tell her you’re going to take her with you next time? I never agreed to that. Don’t promise her things until you’ve talked to me first. And a puppy? Really?”

I fixed my eyes on her. She had her long, wavy, blond hair in a ponytail, and she was wearing a bright blue minidress that matched her eyes perfectly. It always amazed me how dainty she was and undeniably beautiful.

“Because I intend to take her, Claudia. I’m sure you love your daughter enough to let her have the time of her life in Paris, France, with her father. And a puppy is a great thing for a five-year-old.”

“You can’t buy her love, you know.” Claudia crossed her arms and continued to glare at me.

“I don’t need to. It’s not about where I can take her, it’s about bringing new experiences into her life. It’s good for her, so stop fighting it. Why are you here?”

“After Mia talked to you on the phone last night, she told me you were coming home today, so I figured you’d want to see your daughter.” The tone in her voice was snarky, and it irked me that she talked so condescendingly to me.

“Of course I do. But perhaps you could have given me a day or two to settle.”

“Well, I’ve got plans now. My sisters and I are going to the spa.”

I whirled around to stand face-to-face with her. “You’re staying there?”

She nodded, letting her arms drop to her side. “Yes. You’re not the only person who gets to go and relax, David.”

“Fine. Great. I’d love to spend some quality time with Mia. How long will you be gone?”

“A few days,” she informed me.

“Ok. Have a good time,” I said as she walked over to her car. She waved goodbye and drove away. As I watched her disappear down the long drive, I felt so relieved she was gone.

“Thanks for picking me up,” Christina said as she got into my black sports car. I revved the engine and darted back into traffic.

“Where’s your car?”

“I’m having it cleaned inside and out. Full treatment. I have to pick up Scarlett at the airport tomorrow, and I want it to be clean.” She wouldn’t look at me when she said it.

“That’s her name? Scarlett?” I snickered. “Is she a stripper on the weekends?”

“David! No. She’s a very respectable woman.” Christina turned the knob on the radio to drown out the sound of my voice.

I turned the knob, so the sound was low. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

Christina turned to face me. “Why do you feel I can’t make any decisions?”

I glanced at her quickly. “I know you’re capable, but sometimes you don’t see the bigger picture as I do. Hiring this Scarlett person is only a temporary solution.”

Christina gulped. “Well, see, about that,” she started, then looked at me with guilt written all over her gorgeous features.

“What did you do?” I was about to explode.

“That was her first question when I offered her the job. She wanted to know if it was just a contract position or a permanent one. I told her it was permanent.” Christina squished her face up, knowing I was going to be livid.

“*Christina!*” I growled. “You’ve got to be kidding me!” I pulled into my mother, Sharon’s, driveway and put the car into park, turning to my sister. “Why did you tell her that? What if she’s awful at the job?”

“David, see, this is what I mean. Don’t be mad at me. Kelly and I did the research. I met her and talked to her. She’ll be great. When you meet her, you’ll understand.” She didn’t wait for my reply and got out of the vehicle and walked up to my mother’s mansion without waiting for me.

I finally caught up to her as we were walking into the front foyer. “We’ll talk more about this later,” I warned her.

She stuck her tongue out at me and replied, “I’m finished talking about this.”

“Christina, David. You’re late. Dinner’s already being served.”

The servers came and poured wine and finished bringing the plates of food to the table. I often wondered why she needed the big entourage of staff when it was only her living in the house. She hated being alone, but with so many staff, it kept her busy telling them all what to do. God knew my mom loved telling people what to do, and it didn’t stop with her staff.

“David, when are you going to ask Claudia to marry you?” She fixed her eyes on me expectantly. Her dyed blond hair was perfectly coiffed by our in-house hairdresser (this was a daily service and required her to live on-site), and she had on a very expensive dress laced with jewels. Our mother did everything lavishly like she was a queen or something.

I grunted my response. “Never.” I spooned a heavy portion of mashed potatoes on my plate and reached for a rare piece of steak, skipping the vegetables.

Sharon's expression turned to disgust. "How can you let a beautiful, socially accepted woman like Claudia Smith slip out of your hands? That woman loves you, and she's the mother of your child."

"Mother, I've told you a million times. I'm not in love with Claudia, so why would I marry her?"

"Have you heard the new rumor that's going around?" Her drawn-on eyebrows raised halfway up her long forehead like they were trying to escape her face.

I tilted my head toward her and cast her a glance that said, "I don't care."

"It's being reported that you like men, of all things," she told me, her voice going up a few pitches on the word *men*.

"Mom, you know that's not true," Christina spoke up in my defense. I shot her a look of thanks.

"Well, when your brother passes up one of the most beautiful women in Los Angeles, it makes me wonder. Claudia is perfect for you, David. Ask her to marry you, and people will stop guessing why you never show up anywhere with a woman on your arm."

I shrugged and said, "Let them guess. I don't care what they think." I put another bit of steak in my mouth and let the peppery, buttery flavor grace my taste buds with amazing flavor.

"Why haven't I seen you with any women? Aren't you dating?" Under the questioning glare of Sharon Moore, I was at a loss for what to say. I hadn't really dissected my feelings on that subject.

"I guess I'm tired of women only wanting two things from me. My money and social status." It was all I could come up with for this episode of Sharon Moore's Interrogation.

"Claudia is Mia's mother and from a prominent family herself. I'm sure she's not after that. She just wants to be with the man she loves, and she wants Mia to be with her father."

I glared at her. “And how do you know this, Mother? Been chatting it up with Claudia, have you?”

She shook her head and stabbed a piece of steak. She put it in her mouth and chewed while staring at me. I knew she was trying to come up with an appropriate (or inappropriate—whichever way you looked at it) comeback. She finally swallowed and said, “No, I just know Claudia. She’s been in our lives for over thirty-five years, ever since you were four years old. Don’t you remember when her mother used to bring her over when she was a baby, and you’d change her diapers?”

“Sheesh, Mother. I never did that. That doesn’t make me feel very romantic for her when you remind me of that.” I took a long drink of my red wine, hoping it would help me get through this horrible conversation. I contemplated drinking the rest of the contents right from the bottle but knew that Mother would be appalled, and I’d get another lecture.

“Well, you’d better get a woman on your arm and fast because Moore Fashion’s reputation depends on it.” It was a direct order, and I knew it. Her black eyes held my own, and in that instant, I wondered if I was adopted. I loved my mother, but sometimes I wondered if she even knew how to love someone.

“Honestly, I wonder if you care more about your precious social circle than your own son’s happiness. I’m going home. Thanks for the dinner. Love you, sis.” I kissed Christina on her cheek and went to the front door, meal unfinished.

I ignored the fact that my mother followed me to the door. I heard her call my name, but I was faster than her and was already in my car when she appeared in the doorway with her hands on her hips.

As I drove away, I realized I was Christina’s ride, so I pulled over and texted her an apology, telling her that Jax was on his way to get her.

I just needed to get out of there. I was so tired of my mother’s demands that I marry someone I wasn’t in love with. I didn’t think I would ever marry. How could I trust a woman enough with my heart, let alone my legacy?

Chapter 5: Scarlett

Waking up was easy because thoughts of moving to Los Angeles and working for Moore Fashion were rolling around in my head, and I couldn't lay still. I stretched my arms out wide and grinned as I sat up. As if the sun was celebrating my good fortune with me, its rays shone through my white lace curtains with beams of light that danced on my walls.

The full realization of my new opportunity dawned on me, and I shrieked as I jumped out of bed. I switched my radio on and found a great tune, taking my mascara tube and using it as a microphone. I danced around and sang. Callie stood on my bed barking and twirling around. Willow and Luna raced out of the room in search of sanctuary.

I laughed and picked Callie up, holding her to dance with me. She kissed my face and barked a few more times to let me know she was as excited as I was. I plopped her down on the bed and turned the music down so my neighbors wouldn't be offended by the noise.

I'd done the rest of my packing the night before and well into the morning because I couldn't sleep. I had mixed emotions about moving. I was truly excited about my new job, and it was fun and thrilling to think I'd be living in Los Angeles, but I would miss my life here. My best friend, Macie Carruthers, lived a few doors down from me, and I would miss our daily get-togethers. *How am I going to survive without her right beside me to hold my hand?* Tears threatened to spill the more I thought about it.

I picked up Willow and cuddled her to my chest until she started purring. "You're going to have a bigger place to chase Luna in," I told her. She pressed her paw against my chin and pushed as she twisted her head to eye me curiously. She was so adorable. Luna got jealous and started climbing my leg, digging her little claws into the fabric of my pants. I reached down and grabbed her. "You little cutie." I kissed the top of her head. She mewed her appreciation.

I put them down on my bed so they could curl up with Callie and moved to my closet. I looked at the outfit I'd left myself: a black pencil skirt, a white and black striped blouse, and a matching blazer. I wanted to look my best when Christina picked me up at the airport.

I looked in the mirror and smiled. *I can't believe I'm doing this!*

Just then, the doorbell rang, and I went down the stairs to let Macie in. I'd been dreading this moment. She was already pouting as she entered. She was shorter than me by several inches, her smooth brown hair falling to her creamy brown shoulders. Her big brown eyes stared at me as a few tears escaped onto her high cheekbones.

"I can't believe you're abandoning me." She wrapped her arms around me and held me tight.

"I'm sorry. I wish you could come with me," I told her, feeling melancholic.

She took my hands in hers, then looked me in the eye. "No matter how far away you live, we'll always be together in our hearts. You'll come to visit me, and I'll come to visit you. There are phone calls, texting, and video chat."

"Maybe we'll have to resort to writing letters to each other." We laughed until we cried.

I was wiping the last barrage of tears when my phone beeped. My heart sank. It was my alarm telling me it was time to pack up the animals and leave for the airport.

"You'll be fine," Macie assured me, noticing the sadness in my expression.

"I know. It's just a lot. I didn't have enough time to prepare for such a big move. I'm feeling a little overwhelmed," I admitted.

She rubbed my back. "It's going to be an exciting adventure for you. Be happy. This is your dream job. And Los Angeles? Wow. Lucky you!"

The thrill of what I'd be doing surged through me once again, and my grin returned. "I can't believe I'm going to be working with *Christina Moore*."

"There you go. I'm glad to see you're smiling again. Let's pack up the animals and get you to the airport."

The flight went smoothly, and I was happy to be getting off the plane. I was so anxious to see my new place and neighborhood. Enthusiasm raced through my veins as I spotted Christina waiting for me.

I retrieved my luggage and walked over to her, my heart pounding in my chest. I tried to calm myself by breathing in and out slowly, but my legs threatened to buckle. I couldn't contain my smile as I approached her.

Christina smiled and held out her hand. "It's so nice to see you again." She looked radiant and glamorous in a dusty rose silk sundress. Her makeup looked professionally done, and her fingernails and toenails were perfectly manicured. She looked like she had just stepped out of a catalog. I was in awe.

"Thank you so much for everything you have done for me. I really appreciate the opportunity." I stopped there when I realized I was gushing. I followed her out to the waiting limousine. Once we got inside, Christina made a call to Kelly, informing her that we would meet her at the house.

Excitement soared through me as I wondered where I would be living. I looked out the tinted windows as the palm trees whipped by on the open highway. It was so lush and beautiful.

"You're going to love your new house. Kelly hired someone to give it a deep cleaning, so it should be all ready for you when we arrive. Your belongings are already inside, waiting for you. It's fully furnished, but if you don't like how it's decorated, feel free to alter it as you choose, and I can put whatever you don't like in storage." Christina's voice was sultry, and she spoke with such eloquence. I couldn't get over the fact that I was hanging out with Christina Moore.

I turned to her and said, “You’re too kind.”

“No worries. It’s the least I could do after uprooting you from your life so urgently. Any time you’re feeling homesick and need a little visit home, just let me know, and I can have it arranged for you at our cost.”

“Really? That would be amazing.”

When we reached the house, I was shocked. I was expecting a small little cottage, so I wasn’t prepared for the size of the place. I hoped she didn’t notice my eyes pop out of my head.

Kelly was waiting for us inside. I almost screamed when I saw the kitchen. It was massive and done in white cupboards. The pantry alone was bigger than my entire kitchen in New York. They took me through the rest of the house, and every room was like a dream. It was very modern yet cozy and beachy. I wasn’t prepared for the backyard. There was a salt-water pool with patio furniture, a barbecue, and lots of flower bushes and palm trees. It was a taste of heaven.

“Do you like it?” Kelly asked.

It took me a minute to find my voice and respond. “It’s amazing,” I breathed out excitedly.

“A step up from that adorable apartment you had in New York, isn’t it?” Christina pointed out.

“I have to wonder what the monthly bills are at this place, though. I’m not sure I can afford something like this.” Reality started to settle in, waking up the butterflies in my stomach.

“Oh, goodness. We will be forever in debt to you for joining our team and helping us out. Don’t worry about any of the bills here, seriously. It’s one of David’s properties, and it just sits there unused. Feel free to settle in and make it your own. Decorate as you please. Paint the walls, whatever you like,” Christina said. “There’s one more thing I want to show you before we get out of your hair and let you settle in.”

I followed Christina and Kelly into the garage. A beautiful white sports car with tinted windows was in there. I looked at them, my mouth gaping open.

“This will be your company car. Here are the keys and ownership in your name,” Kelly said as she handed everything to me.

I blinked my eyes several times, fearing I was in a dream and would wake up back in my New York apartment, jobless.

“Let’s go back inside and talk about tomorrow,” Christina said, gesturing me to the door that led to the house.

Once we were in the beautiful kitchen again, Kelly walked over to the refrigerator. “I wasn’t sure what kind of foods you eat, so I bought pretty much everything.” She opened it up, and she wasn’t kidding. It was stuffed with all the necessities and so much more. She handed me a credit card. “Use this for all of your food and fuel. Tomorrow, I’ll show you the expense sheet you’ll need to fill out weekly. Please keep all your receipts and hand them in with the expense sheet so that the accountant can pay your credit card off each week.”

Kelly then opened the cupboards to the pantry, where there was a lot more food, and she showed me where all my dishes, pots and pans, and everything else you could ever need in a kitchen were.

“You are too kind,” I told Christina. “This is too much, really.”

“No, no. Just make yourself at home, and I hope that you will be happy living here. The highway is only a five-minute drive from here, and there is a plaza down the main street where you’ll find the grocery store, drugstore, bank, gas station, restaurants, hardware store, a pet store for your furry friends, and various other stores. Tomorrow, after you’ve been oriented at the office, Kelly will take you around the neighborhood and show you where everything is.

“The beach is also only a ten-minute drive away. There are some great bike paths in this neighborhood, if you’re into that type of thing. There are two bikes in your basement that you can use.” She paused and looked at Kelly. “Am I forgetting anything?”

“Her new phone.” Kelly handed a cell phone to me. “This will be your work phone.” She looked at Christina. “I think that’s it for now.” She turned back to me and smiled warmly. “If there is anything that you need, please don’t hesitate to contact me. I’ve added all the contact numbers that you’ll need. My last name is under ‘J’ for Jackson. I’m up until about midnight and my mornings start at 7 a.m.”

“Wonderful, thank you, Kelly. I might have to take you up on that.”

“Please do. I’m single and only live about five minutes away, so I can be here at the drop of a hat if need be.”

The doorbell rang just then, and I looked at Christina and Kelly since I didn’t know anyone who would be visiting me.

“Oh, that must be your pets,” Kelly informed me.

We all went to the front door, and the delivery man smiled. “Your pooch and kitties, ma’am.”

I saw their three little scared faces and almost broke out into tears. “Oh. I’m sorry. This must be so frightening for you guys.” I took the cages, brought them into the wide-open foyer, and set them down. I’d have to take my time in releasing them after Christina and Kelly left.

Sensing I needed to tend to my animals, Christina spoke, “I’ll have the limousine come by tomorrow at 10 a.m. to bring you to the office. Kelly will drive you home later. Have a great night and enjoy this place.”

“I will. Thank you so much, ladies.”

After they were gone, I stood there for a moment, unable to believe this house was going to be home. It was a dream house. I opened the doors to each cage, and the three of them ventured out very slowly, sniffing everything in sight. It was funny to watch and took my mind off the nerves that were slowly invading my stomach at the thought of my first day on the job.

“Welcome to your new home,” I told them and grinned.

Chapter 6:

David

It never ceases to amaze me that when you're already in a bad mood, everything seems to go wrong. Somehow, I had forgotten to set the alarm on my phone and was running an hour late. I always made a point of getting to work before my employees.

Mia was more interested in playing with Lucy than getting ready for school, and Lucy was having issues with me leaving her for the first time. I had a dog crate in my basement from when my mother had a dog and would have me look after him, but Lucy wasn't having it. My heart caved, and I brought her with me. I figured it was my company, so if I wanted to bring my dog to work, I had a right. I'd figure it out on the fly.

In all the confusion with Lucy, I'd forgotten to put my coffee on, which made me even more on edge. After I dropped Mia off at my mom's, I managed to stop and get some at the local coffee shop, but it just didn't taste as good as mine. Traffic was heavy; it seemed every school bus was in front of me, and the train that I never had to worry about when I left at my usual time decided to cross the tracks and stop! I gripped the steering wheel, seething.

I was almost at work and was taking a sip of my sub-par coffee when a biker who was weaving in and out of traffic cut me off, which made me spill my coffee down the front of my new dress shirt. "Shit! You asshole!" I yelled as I reached for the tissue in the backseat, almost crashing my car into a delivery truck that was parked on the side of the road.

That was when Lucy began whining. My head started to pound with the beginnings of a headache, and I remembered I hadn't eaten breakfast. By the time I got to the office, I was a mess of nerves.

Our receptionist, Fiona O'Dwyer, a lovely young Irish girl, looked up at me when I walked in with Lucy, a look of exasperation all over my face, and rushed over to me. "Mr.

Moore, can I help you with anything?” She bent down and patted Lucy on the head, which caused the pup to piddle on the ceramic floor. “I’ll clean that up, sir. What a gorgeous creature. Where did you get her?”

Fiona quickly cleaned up the mess while I explained the rescue situation. “Would you mind calling Lisa and asking her to look after the front desk for you? I have some things I need you to do since my personal assistant is out running errands for Christina.”

Fiona’s eyes widened, and she seemed thrilled that I asked her to help me. I made a mental note to discuss promoting her with Christina. She’d worked with us for several years, and I felt that her service to the company was stellar. I found a smile (which was hard to do in my current mental state) and said, “Would you mind looking after Lucy today?”

She paged Lisa and then grinned. “Would I ever! I love dogs, Mr. Moore. I’ll take good care of her.” She reached for the leash and bag of food, treats, and toys. “Oh, Lucy, we’re going to have so much fun together.” She took Lucy out the back door into the courtyard.

Things were looking up. I hung around until Lisa showed up, then went up to my office, which was on the eighth floor. I’d barely gotten settled when Christina walked in, without knocking, I might add, something that drove me nuts.

“You had the same mother as I did, correct?” I sat down and stared at her.

She plopped herself in the chair on the other side of the desk and crossed her long, slim legs. “Unfortunately, yes.” Christina and our mother never saw eye to eye, and it was a rocky relationship at the best of times. There was no love lost between the two of them due to the condescending manner in which our mother always talked to her. I intervened when I could, but Mother couldn’t see the error of her ways.

“Then how is it that you seem to have forgotten her numerous lectures about manners?”

Christina looked at me, shocked. “What are you talking about, David?” She straightened up in her seat, knowing I was about to give her such a lesson.

“When you come upon a door that is closed, do not simply enter, as that is rude. Knock. If someone calls out to tell you to come in, then proceed. If you hear nothing, walk away and do not open the door. Does any of this ring a bell?” I tilted my head, awaiting her answer.

She made a face. “Very funny. I’ve been waiting forever for you to show up. It’s not like you to be late.” She was wearing a gorgeous outfit from our summer collection: a soft-pink silk dress with sheer sleeves, a V-neck, a thick banded waistline, and a short multi-ruffled loose skirt. She looked radiant as usual, but her expression was sour.

“Well, I’ve had an interesting morning, so cut me some slack. What’s got you so worried about when I show up?”

Christina’s face brightened, and she uncrossed her legs, leaning on my desk. “Our new fashion designer is here. I’ve been dying for you to meet her.” She was so excited that I thought she was going to piddle on the floor like Lucy had earlier.

“Must we do this now? I have a lot to do to start my day, which has already been destroyed by various events.” I looked at the time on my computer. “How about you give me an hour before adding more stress to my awful day?”

She stood up and paused. “You need a vacation.” As soon as she said it, her eyes doubled in size. “I’m sorry. That popped out by mistake.”

“Clearly, you’ve already forgotten where I was when you broke your news about the new designer.” I fixed my eyes on her gorgeous features and decided to let it go. “I’ll meet you in the boardroom in one hour. Now use that door and kindly exit from my office so I can get to work.”

She put her hand up beside her forehead. “Aye aye, sir!” She giggled and left, *finally*.

I managed to get through my emails before I saw an hour had passed. Cursing under my breath at the meeting that loomed on my schedule, I reached my arms out and stretched. Reluctantly, I stood, went to the kitchen to fix myself a coffee, and walked down the corridor to the meeting room.

Nothing could have prepared me for the sight I saw when I entered the boardroom. I froze and stood there with a stunned expression on my face. *Could this day get any worse?* Apparently, it could.

It's her! How is that even possible? My heart started pounding, and suddenly, I couldn't feel my legs as they threatened to buckle underneath me. I saw her through the glass walls, and she looked incredible. Long, wavy blond hair spilled down her back, covering the exposed skin that her spaghetti straps neglected to conceal. My eyes trailed down her trim, lithe body, resting on the sexy long legs that nestled in silver heels, matching the polka dots on her dark gray dress. I could feel myself responding to her stunning looks. I knew I was gawking, but I couldn't stop myself. I was floored that the woman who'd kicked my forehead was in my boardroom. And she was sexy as hell.

Wait! Did that mean—No! No! No! Is this Scarlett? Anger and confusion welled up inside me as I walked into the room.

“David! Please meet Scarlett West, our newest designer. She's the one I've been telling you all about.” Christina seemed so pleased with herself. It was going to break her heart when I told her Scarlett could not work at Moore Fashion.

Scarlett turned around, and our eyes met. Her full, sexy lips smoothed into a warm smile (I lost the ability to breathe), and she extended her hand to me like she had no idea who I was. “So nice to meet you, Mr. Moore.” Her voice was like liquid honey, and I had to fight with my desire to take her right there on the boardroom table.

I took her hand and squeezed a little too firmly because I saw her wince. Serves her right for kicking me in the forehead and then wobbling away without so much as a “thank you.”

Anger reared, and I narrowed my eyes at her. “Nice to, uh, meet you.”

Either she was a good actress, or she truly didn’t remember meeting me in Paris at the fashion show. I decided not to bring it to light in front of Christina. I’d confront her about it when we were alone, and I was hoping that was going to be soon because I wanted to tear her clothes off and ravish her right then and there, which would likely be inappropriate.

As if in answer to my wish, Christina’s phone rang, and she left the room to talk to the person calling in private. I whirled around to face Scarlett, clenching my jaw as I did so.

“Alright, you can cut the act. You know exactly who I am,” I accused her.

Confusion swarmed over her lovely face, and her mouth parted in shock. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about. I know you’re David Moore.” She looked so helpless, and I wondered if perhaps I was wrong, and she really didn’t know who I was. I doubted that because *every* woman in the fashion industry knew who I was.

“Yes, I am, but does the Paris Fashion show ring any bells? The front foyer, to be exact.” Her brilliant green eyes looked up at the ceiling, and I could almost hear the wheels churning around. I was getting impatient. “You kicked me in the forehead when I was freeing your foot from the iron spindles of the small fence.”

I watched as it suddenly dawned on her. Her eyes widened as her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “That was *you?*”

I couldn’t read her expression, but she seemed oblivious to the fact that it was me who rescued her. *Am I dreaming, or does she seem unaffected by my identity?* I was not used to that. Women usually swooned over me. *What’s wrong with her?* “Yes, that was me. I was there on behalf of Moore Fashion.”

Scarlett pushed a strand of hair behind her delicate ears and smiled sweetly. “That was an awful moment for me, and

I'm afraid I've been trying everything in my power to forget the events of that evening."

Is she kidding? "You don't remember kicking me in the forehead?" I could hear the tone of my voice raise a few octaves from the mere ridiculousness of it all.

"I do recall that. I'm just having trouble picturing you as the man helping me."

Christina returned to the room and noted the change in our positions, the redness in Scarlett's face from embarrassment and mine from anger. She paused, looking at both of us. "Is everything alright?"

"It seems everything is in order, but may I speak to you for a moment?" I glanced at Scarlett, who had sat down and was checking her phone messages. She was so elegant and sophisticated, something I hadn't seen the night I met her, with her makeup smudged all over her face.

I followed my sister out of the room and didn't waste any time letting her know what I was thinking. "It's not going to work. Let her go. I'll find a replacement for her." My words were final, and the glare in my eyes threatened her to challenge me.

It was Christina's turn to get red in the face. "Oh, no, you don't. I know you're mad that I didn't include you in the decision-making of this hire, but I will not let you embarrass me this way. I stand by my decision, and you're not going to stand here and threaten me with those stormy eyes of yours. I know what you're thinking, David, and I'm telling you you're wrong. She is perfect for the position, and she stays."

I stood there staring at my little sister. She had never sounded so cross with me before and usually didn't stand up for herself. I had to hand it to her, she was finally getting some backbone, but that didn't change the fact that I couldn't work with this woman when everything in me wanted to get her into my bed. "I'm afraid you'll have to let her know. I hope she didn't get rid of her apartment in New York."

“No! I’m not doing it. You’re not going to do this to me. To *her*. Let’s compromise. Give her the three-month trial that all employees are graced with, and if by the end of those three months she doesn’t wow you, then we’ll let her go.”

I thought about her proposal. *Three months? Can I handle three months of that sexy goddess at Moore Fashion without going utterly insane?* I never backed down from a challenge. I glared at her with contempt.

“Fine. Three months. That’s it, then she goes.” I couldn’t believe I was agreeing to this absurdity, but Christina had a way of pulling at my heartstrings. *Dammit!*

Christina shrieked and leaped at me, wrapping her arms around my waist. “Thank you. You won’t regret this, I promise. You’ll see. She’s the perfect woman for the job, and you’re going to love her.”

As I made my way back to my office, I thought about Christina’s words. I wasn’t sure about *love*, but I was convinced I was going to be in *lust* three months from now because I already felt that way, and the more I saw her, the more I worried those feelings would intensify. I supposed I could finish that vacation, but I had a feeling it was going to be a lot more fun in Los Angeles.

Chapter 7: Scarlett

The horrible tone of my alarm woke me from my wonderful dreams, only to be startled as my eyes shot open at the unfamiliar sight before me. Then I realized I was in my new amazing home. I sat up and grinned. My heart started pumping with joy, and excitement welled up inside me as I thought about my new life.

I looked at Callie sleeping beside me, snoring up a storm, and wondered how such a little thing could produce such a big noise and laughed. As if she knew I was having those thoughts, one of Callie's eyes popped open, which made me giggle. I began to rub her back, and she rolled over so I could give her a belly rub. "You're so spoiled." I looked at the other side of the room where Willow and Luna were passed out, curled up together on the loveseat under the big window, soaking up the sun's rays.

I'd taken the car out for a spin the night before and loved it, so I couldn't wait to drive it to work. Breakfast consisted of scrambled eggs, avocado, and tea. I walked around the whole house to make sure everything was as it should be, but also because I just wanted to see it again. The gardens in the yard were beautiful, and I was looking forward to a swim when I got home later.

I wasn't prepared for how much traffic there would be driving to work. Luckily, I had left half an hour early. It was more than enough time to go over my initial meeting of David Moore in the boardroom the previous day. *Why had he been so mean to me?* I didn't think I deserved his accusations. I hoped my explanation was enough for him to understand why I didn't recognize him. I tried to remember the face of the man that night in Paris, but it was all a blur.

Between the drinks I'd had, my anger, and emotional state, it was no wonder the event in the foyer was a little hazy. Then it hit me. *His voice.* When he spoke to me in the boardroom, I knew his voice, or rather that *tone* in his voice. I

just remembered him saying, “You’re welcome, Little Miss Ungrateful.” *Shit!* I should have turned and thanked him, but all I’d wanted was to get away from the embarrassing moment. *He must think I’m a bitch.* Maybe he was right.

It took me about 25 minutes to get to the tall office building of Moore Fashion. I wondered if the whole building was for them or if other companies rented space. The front foyer was magical. There were mannequins all over wearing the spring and summer collections. They were on platforms that gradually went up over the front desk and then back down again, an upside-down “U” being created. Long swooping pieces of fabric were hung here and there, and jewels were used to add elegance to the outfits. I couldn’t stop staring at it all. I went to the front desk and waited for the receptionist to get off the phone.

She smiled warmly, then said, “You must be Scarlett West?” She was young with short, blond hair smoothed down over her ears. There were a few purple stripes in her hair, which I thought was awesome. Her eyes almost looked purple as well, and I wondered if she was wearing colored contact lenses. Her outfit was one of the summer pieces I’d seen on the runway in Paris. I wondered if I would be able to wear any of the Moore fashions.

I nodded and flashed my signature grin. “I certainly am.”

“My name is Fiona O’Dwyer. I’ll ring David for you.”

My heart plummeted. *David Moore.* Anxiety rolled in on a wave in my stomach, and I could feel embarrassment creep in ever so slowly like a cat stalking its prey. The feeling intensified when I saw him get out of the elevator to the right. His stride was long and smooth, almost like he was gliding across the shiny glass flooring. He wasn’t just handsome, he was *hot*. There was no smile on his face, but his sexy gray-blue eyes stared over my shoulder. I turned around to see another woman behind me, and she was not happy. I watched as David walked past me to talk to her.

“What are you doing here?” he asked the radiantly stylish and beautiful woman. She was so dainty-looking. Long blond

tendrils draped over her delicate shoulders, and bright blue eyes looked at him with a coldness I did not understand.

She crossed her thin arms over her almost nonexistent chest. "I work here."

"I know that, but aren't you supposed to be at the *spa* with your sisters?" David said with sarcasm dripping off his words.

"We went, but Selena got a call from her work, and we had to come back early, so here I am."

David turned toward me and said, "Claudia Smith, meet Scarlett West, our new designer. She will be replacing Chen until she returns," he told her.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. What did he mean *until Chen returns*? That wasn't what Christina had told me. She clearly stated that it was a permanent position. My nerves began to twitch with fear.

Claudia turned her ice-blue eyes to me and looked me up and down like I was a vagrant. It was condescending and wait... was that jealousy I saw?

"I spoke with Chen yesterday, and she said she'd be back in about three months. Why, you'll barely have started to settle in when you'll have to pack it up and move on. *I* couldn't flit from job to job like that, but to each their own as they say." She added lots of vinegar to her words, making sure it stung me right where she wanted it to.

And it worked. *Three months? Why is everyone treating me like I've already left?* I needed to talk to Christina. Then I remembered that I had signed a contract. Surely, I would have seen those terms when I'd read it over before I signed. Fury was brewing underneath the surface. "I assure you I'll be here much longer than that." I cast a glance at David, who was staring out the window.

Claudia huffed and said, "I'm sure you're hoping Moore Fashion will keep you on, but don't wait around for that to happen. We have more than enough permanent staff here. You should likely start sending out your resume now. Regardless,

so nice to meet you, Scarlett. What an interesting name. It reminds me of something a stripper might name herself.” She smiled sweetly and turned her attention back to David. “I’ll see *you* in my office in thirty minutes as we have *lots* to discuss.” She walked off, her stilettos clicking on the glass floor.

I watched the awful woman leave, and I couldn’t get past the shock of how she had talked to me. I looked to David, and my knees went weak. He was what my girlfriends and I would say was “drop-dead gorgeous.” My heart rate accelerated to a dangerous pace when our eyes locked. I swear his sexy gray-blue eyes would haunt me for the rest of my life and not in the scary “horror” sort of way. More like the “I want to rip your clothes off sort of way.” *Scarlett! Shame on you!* But it wasn’t my fault that he was so dreamy.

It took me a moment to find my voice. “Do you know where Christina is? I need to speak with her.” There was an edge to my voice that I knew he heard.

“I believe she’s in her office, but you can speak to me about anything,” he informed me. The only thing I wanted to talk to him about was “your place or mine.” I chastised myself for thinking such lusty thoughts. *You don’t even know him!*

“That’s okay. I will speak to her.” I walked off, leaving him to stare after me in confused shock. I was amazed I didn’t trip and fall during my exit. I was well aware that he was watching me because I could feel two holes burning into my back. I added an extra few wiggles of my hips for his viewing pleasure.

I found Christina in her office on the phone. She waved me in, and I could hear she was trying to say goodbye to whoever was on the phone. “Yes, of course. Yes, sounds good. Yes, thank you.” She put her phone on the desk and smiled wide. “Did David show you around? Isn’t it beautiful? I love it here since we renovated it last year. The decor is like a slice of heaven.”

“It’s lovely, Christina. We didn’t actually get to the grand tour yet. David and Claudia were mentioning that I would only

be here for three months when Chen comes back. I know in the contract it said it was a permanent position. I'm a little confused. I wouldn't have let my apartment go in New York if this was only going to be a three-month contract." I hoped my voice didn't sound like it was accusing her of lying to me.

She wrinkled her eyebrows and shook her head. "No, no. That brother of mine is quite something. I told him yesterday that I hired you for a permanent position. His brain must still be in vacation mode. Yes, you're correct. The contract you signed was for a permanent position here at Moore Fashion. Don't worry. My brother's bark is much stronger than his bite. You have nothing to worry about," she assured me.

My shoulders relaxed, and I breathed out a sigh of relief. "Okay, I thought so."

"You met Claudia?" Christina asked, raising her eyebrow and looking into my eyes. "That must have been traumatic for your second day here and in the first half an hour, no less. My condolences."

I laughed. "Let's just say it deflated my happy bubble quite quickly."

Christina smiled widely. "I'll bet. I'm so sorry you had to see her this morning. You'll be happy to know that I gave you the office beside David, so she'll be across the room, and you'll have less of a chance of seeing her as often. Her office is beside mine, over there." Christina pointed. "Although, she usually makes multiple visits to David's office each day. Heaven knows why. She doesn't need his opinion on anything. You'll be working closely with him, though. Sorry about that, but it can't be avoided, as he's heading the fall/winter collection while I work on some ideas for next year's spring/summer collection. Kelly will be joining you a lot as well. She'll become a close ally. David's a genius at design so just watch and learn."

"Thank you for your kindness, Christina. You're a really wonderful person." I smiled faintly. *Too bad Claudia couldn't follow her example.*

Someone knocked on the door, and I turned around, praying it wasn't Claudia. It was the next worse thing. *David*. I looked at his forehead and noticed there was still a bruise there. I replayed the moment in my mind again and was still shocked that I hadn't recognized him as *the* David Moore. I must have really been having a moment to have missed that!

"Mom's here. She wants to meet Scarlett. Immediately." There was a look in his eyes that I couldn't quite pinpoint. *Is that fear?*

My guess was confirmed when I looked at Christina and saw trepidation transform her beautiful features into a mask of worry. Her brow furrowed, a slight redness crept up her neck, and the ever-present smile vanished.

Uh-oh. What am I walking into? I followed them across the room to an office behind the elevator. This office was twice the size as Christina's, and a woman was standing at the far side with her back facing us. The woman turned at the sound of our footsteps, and her beautiful older features held an expression that I translated into disdain. She eyed me up and down much like Claudia had done, her small black eyes resting on mine. There was no smile on her face. Not even a fake one.

"Hmm, Scarlett West, I presume," she said slowly, never taking her eyes off me. Her blond hair was perfectly coiffed, and her makeup was much too thick. She was elegantly dressed like she was going to a fine dining restaurant. Her facial features were pleasant but harsh. She squinted as if trying to get a better look at me. "I'm Sharon Moore, the owner. You come to us from Rudy Harper Fashion House, correct?"

I nodded because I couldn't seem to find my voice.

"Do you not know how to speak?"

I was shocked at her rudeness and finally found my words. "Yes, that is where I worked until recently." I cringed when I heard the tone in my voice, which had a hard edge to it.

“I heard you were let go. Hopefully, you can show your worth while you’re here. Competition is tough, so you’d better be on your toes at all times.” She turned her attention to David and put her hand on his arm. “When will you be proposing to Claudia?”

David stared back at his mother, and I could see irritation spread across his face. I didn’t understand the reason why, but I was learning that was his “frustrated” look.

“Mother, we can discuss that in private. Come to my office.” David looked at me and said, “Follow us, and you can get settled into your office.”

Sharon brought her gaze to me and huffed. “Your *temporary* office,” she corrected her son.

I looked back at Christina on my way out, and she shook her head and mouthed the words, “Don’t worry.”

As I followed them across the room, I noted the hostile glare from Claudia as we passed her office. Perhaps working at Moore Fashion was going to be a bit more of a challenge than I originally thought.

Chapter 8:

David

Monday mornings were always disastrous for me. There was so much to do and if it wasn't for Kelly Jackson, my personal assistant, I'd be lost. Like right now.

"Here's your dress shirt from the other day. I had it dry-cleaned for you," Kelly told me, smiling faintly. I knew she didn't appreciate doing these kinds of things for me. On many occasions, she'd reminded me that she was not my keeper. That applied to buying gifts for people in my life as well. I found that out the hard way when I had asked her to get something for my mother's birthday years ago. She'd glared at me and said, "If you want someone to do that sort of thing for you, get a wife." I never asked her again.

Unfortunately, a wife was the last thing on my mind. I couldn't even get a worthy girlfriend to save my life. The women I met were either gold diggers or nasty gossip hounds who only sniffed around me to get the next "story." Much to my mother's dismay, I was done with dating. Period. Now, I was not a monk or anything, so casual sex was in, but meaningful relationships were out.

I heard two females talking in the hallway, and I flinched when I recognized one of them to be Scarlett. I considered moving my office to the top floor of the building and getting a camera installed that I could monitor. That way, if I saw her coming, I could jump off the building and be done with it. Constantly seeing her walk past my office wasn't just irritating the hell out of me. It was torturing my manhood. I mean, how many times can a man get an erection in one day? I made a tally sheet beside my phone one day last week and arrived at a whopping 37. That was impressive but painful.

I also considered grabbing her when she walked by and bringing her into my office to seduce her, but I knew that was just asking for trouble.

Trouble.

That's what she is. Trouble.

Lots of it. I was trying hard to steer clear of her kind of trouble, but the more I tried not to look at her, the more I wanted to. It was wreaking havoc with my senses and my work. Having her there was too much of a distraction for me, so I decided to try and do something about it.

“Kelly, please ask Christina to come to my office when she has a break.” I hung up the receiver just in time to catch sight of Little Miss Ungrateful walking, *yet again*, past my office in her tight-fitting, white, knit dress that was doing naughty things to my mind and body. The stark white contrasted with the creaminess of her tanned skin and was driving me wild with curiosity. It covered everything, but that was the problem. It left too much to my imagination. I almost wished she would just show some cleavage, so I could stop wondering what glorious things were underneath.

I was still thinking about this when Christina came to my door. She broke my daydream, *thankfully*, with her tall, lithe body. My sister is beautiful. Not just pretty, but an equal comparison to a goddess. I was surprised she had so much trouble getting a boyfriend, but I think men were intimidated by her high social position.

“You rang?” She sauntered in and took a seat, eying me suspiciously. She had every right to look at me that way. It was common knowledge that being called into my office was never good.

“She’s got to go,” I told her as I leaned back in my chair and placed my hands behind my head.

Her brows raised quickly, and I knew what was coming next. “Oh, no, she’s not going anywhere. Is that why you called me in here? We’ve already discussed this and came to an agreement to give her at least three months. It’s only been three days.”

“That’s three days too long, in my opinion. I need her gone. Immediately.” I made my tone of voice harsh to show her I meant what I was saying. Christina was the only person

alive who wasn't afraid of me. Even my mother had the good sense to realize that a sting from my tail was poisonous.

"Not going to happen, David." She stood up and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I'm not having this conversation with you again. Got it?" Her bright blue eyes challenged mine while her black eyebrows arched high up on her forehead with determination.

"Dammit, Christina. Why do you protect this girl so much?" I stood up, hoping my height would intimidate her.

No such luck.

"Because I'm a human being with a heart. Perhaps you should make a visit to 'The Wizard' and get one." With that, she disappeared across the room to her office.

I chuckled. Unfortunately, Christina knew me well enough that she didn't bother to stick around for me to try and convince her to see things my way. She knew I'd win if I really tried.

Scarlett was in the drawing room when I got there, several rolls of drawing paper sprawled out in front of her. I stood in the doorway for a few minutes studying her. She was deep in thought, the tip of her tongue stuck out of the side of her mouth. It was a nerdy kind of thing, but somehow, she made it seem sexy. Everything about her was sexy. Even the way she hummed out of tune while she studied the drawings.

I shook my head and cleared my throat, disturbing her from what she was doing. She jumped and spun around, her face falling when she saw it was me. "You scared me half to death," Scarlett said, heaving out a big sigh. She turned back to her drawings, seeming to forget I was even there. I took off my suit jacket and rolled up my sleeves. I knew it was going to be a long night.

The silence between us was uncomfortable for me. I was in shock that she didn't even seem to care that I was in the same room with her. The unfortunate thing about that was it turned me on. It made me want her more. How could I

concentrate on the task at hand with her in the room, exuding all that sex appeal and not being able to reap the rewards in my bed later?

I stood beside her, and as my arm grazed hers, we both jumped back and looked at each other. She felt it, I was sure of that. Our eyes met, and I could see that she was in the middle of dismissing her reaction to me being that close to her. And she did react. I attempted to smile, hoping that would ease the tension. She ignored it and went to the other side of the table, spreading another drawing out.

“I’m thinking this would be a great showstopper to the fall/winter fashion show.” She pushed the drawing in front of me. “It’s something I worked on all weekend. It seems the trend is to have an excessively short skirt with a billowy style of top. I figure if we put a slit in the arm, it would allow the skin to be seen, sexy, and alluring. I think the sleeves should be sheer and perhaps a different color or even just a lighter shade than the bodice to bring attention to it. Thoughts?” She didn’t look up. In my mind, it was because she was afraid if she caught my eye again, she wouldn’t be able to contain herself.

I went to answer her question but realized I had no idea what she’d said. I hadn’t been listening to her words, just the syrupy delivery. That voice would haunt my dreams.

“David?” She was staring at me now, and the look on her face wasn’t one of lust but rather irritation.

“Uh, yes. I agree.” I might have agreed to commit mass murder. I had no idea because I had no clue what she’d said, only the fact that we were alone, and I wanted her in my arms.

“I’m so sorry we’re late,” Kelly said as she rushed into the room, breaking up my thoughts. Ezekiel, our trend specialist, followed her, carrying far too many papers. I went over to him and took some, preventing a possible mess from happening.

“Thank you, David.” He walked over to Scarlett, hand extended. “You must be Scarlett. Christina has been raving about you. So nice to make your acquaintance.” I noted the

gleam in his eye as he took in her beauty. I didn't like the way he was looking at her. Scarlett was about to speak, but I cut her off.

"Ezekiel, what is your color forecast for the fall/winter collection?" I hoped my question would make him take his eyes off Scarlett. For his sake, it did. He was smart enough to know that when I asked him a question, he'd damn well better look at me and answer right away. It was the respect that I demanded from all of my employees.

"Oddly enough, orange will be the favorite. Burnt orange, to be more exact, with compliments of chestnut brown. Hints of yellow and red as accents." He leaned forward, and his dreadlocks became the focus of Scarlett's view.

"I'm so glad to meet you, Ezekiel," Scarlett said, raising her voice slightly, sending me a silent message that she didn't appreciate me cutting in. "I just love your hair." Her eyes danced, and the smile that smoothed her lips was enchanting, showing straight, white teeth. I felt my breath lock in my chest and had to cough to release it.

The next few hours were excruciating. Scarlett and Ezekiel seemed to hit it off, leaving Kelly and me out in the cold. I didn't understand it. Women usually couldn't stop fawning over me, yet this one acted like I was nothing short of uninteresting. Jealousy erupted deep within, and I couldn't do anything about it.

Scarlett's ideas for the fall/winter collection were creative and inspiring. She certainly had a deep understanding of what would be desired months from now, and I couldn't disagree with anything she said.

Several hours later, I heard Kelly say, "Should we call it? It's ten-thirty, and I'm hungry." She turned to Scarlett and said, "We always go to the local bar after one of these creative sessions for something to eat. Please say you'll join us."

Scarlett hesitated, but Ezekiel spoke up, "We simply won't take no for an answer."

“Well, I would love to, but I’m afraid my dog, Callie, will have something to say if I don’t go home and let her out. Thank you so much for the invite. I will try to come to the next one.”

“We’ll see you over there?” Kelly said to me, so I nodded. Kelly and Ezekiel were the first to leave. Scarlett smiled and said good night, packed up her things, and brushed past me.

“You’re not even going to say good night?” I couldn’t believe her rudeness.

She stopped and looked at me with those dismissive eyes. “I’m sorry?”

This girl is unreal! “You were about to leave without saying goodbye,” I repeated.

“Oh, yes. Have a good night, sir.” She said this and walked to the door.

“I’ll walk you to your car,” I said, hoping to chat with her for a moment.

Her smile was forced but at least present. “That’s not necessary. I’ll be fine, thank you.”

“So you *do* know how to say thank you.” I caught her off guard.

Tension hung in the air between us like a rising, sinister fog weaving its way through a graveyard late on a cool night.

“I apologize for kicking you in the forehead that evening. It certainly wasn’t my intention. And thank you for rescuing my foot from the fence. Is that what you’re looking for?” She fixed her eyes on mine with unwavering firmness.

“Yes. Over a week late, but I’ll take it.” Somehow it didn’t even begin to abate my bitter feelings about that night.

“It’s not a night I care to remember.”

“So you’ve said.”

“Good night, sir,” she said but made no move to leave.

“The ‘sir’ is unnecessary. Please call me David.” I was hoping this meant we could start over.

“Good night, *David*.” She said this with a sarcastic edge, and I appreciated her spunk. But she was finally smiling, which made my heat stop.

“Good night, Scarlett. Please be careful walking to your car.” I said it as an afterthought, but I meant it. With a face and body like hers, it was a siren call to every hot-blooded male.

“I’ll be fine. See you tomorrow.” She left, and I could hear her heels clicking on the ceramic floors. I wanted to follow her, just to be sure, but I couldn’t seem to get my feet to move. She unnerved me, and I wasn’t sure if it was in a good way or the worst possible way, the way that would lead me into a world of hurt.

Chapter 9: Scarlett

It had been an exceptionally long day in the trenches, with David only a foot away from me at any given moment. Between trying to hide my attraction for him (by ignoring him whenever possible) and trying to focus on work, I was exhausted. Diving into the pool was the only thing on my mind when I was packing up my briefcase at the end of the day.

A gentle knock on my door startled me, and I turned to see Christina at my door. “I was wondering if you had plans for dinner tonight.” She looked radiant in a turquoise sundress.

Oh, no! I want to go home. I hid my disappointment and said, “No plans. Just a date with my pets and the pool.” I hoped she’d get the hint and just say good night.

“Say you’ll come to my mother’s for dinner. She asked me to invite you.” She smiled warmly and looked just as tired as I felt.

“Would you mind if I go home to change and freshen up?” If I was quick, I could still get in a quick swim and shower. “I also have to let Callie out.”

“Of course. I’ll let my mother know that you’re coming. Is seven too early?”

“No, I think I can be there by then. Text me her address,” I asked.

“I believe Kelly programmed it into your phone. See you then.” We walked to our cars together. “How are you liking it here so far?”

I didn’t want to tell her about my mixed feelings, so I went with the positive. “It’s truly amazing to be surrounded by so much talent. I can see that I’m going to learn a lot from being here. Thank you so much for the opportunity.”

She grinned as we reached our cars. “Don’t mention it. We’re happy to have you. You’re doing a great job. Kelly and

Ezekiel were raving about the work you brought to the table last night.”

I smiled back, feeling happy with their comments. “I’m so glad. I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will, and that’s why I hired you. See you in a few hours.”

Feeling refreshed and ready for whatever life threw at me that evening, I drove over to Sharon Moore’s house. It wasn’t a house; it was an estate. I was astonished by its enormity. I wondered if this was the place that Christina and David grew up in.

I had only barely knocked when David opened the door. I was taken aback by how handsome he was, standing there in jeans and a casual shirt. It was much different than the three-piece suit he wore to the office. This outfit showed off the lines of his body more clearly, and I could see that he was muscular. I wasn’t sure if my knees started knocking because of his sexy physique or the fact that it was getting a bit chilly out.

“Come in, and good luck to you,” he said as I followed him into the grand foyer. Two sweeping staircases greeted me, and I wondered if I had just stepped into a castle. The ceiling was so high and vaulted in thick wooden beams. Enormous chandeliers hung, casting their fractured light, and the marbled floors mirrored the light beaming through the bay windows. It was magnificent. I couldn’t hide my awe. “We’re in the family room over here.” He gestured to the right, and I followed him hesitantly.

Sharon and Christina were in the middle of what seemed to be a heated discussion when Christina saw me and jumped up out of the oversized chair she was sitting in. “I’m so glad you could make it, Scarlett. Come, sit.” She patted the spot beside her, and I sat down, feeling awkward and shy.

Sharon was eyeing me the entire time with her small, black eyes that looked like beetle shells. I usually had no problem

reading people, but her expression held no evidence of emotion. Maybe that was it. She was emotionless. Her eyes left my face and trailed over to her son. “Claudia called. She’ll be here later to drop Mia off.”

My heart sank. *Why did I come here? Why didn’t I just graciously decline Christina’s offer and hide in the solitude of my beautiful new house?* What was I thinking? That’s when I saw it. The look on Sharon’s face. It was smug, and she was smiling at me in such a way that made me feel like she invited me over for dinner so that Claudia and I would be in the same room. But why? Why would she go to that kind of trouble? I could be wrong, but Sharon’s eyes hadn’t left my face ever since she informed David that Claudia was coming over.

Stop it, Scarlett. You’re reading way too much into this. She couldn’t possibly be doing that. Could she?

Sharon stood up abruptly. “Let’s go into the dining room, shall we?”

David and Christina waited for her to walk before they followed. It was deliberate, almost as if they’d been trained to follow her single file. It was the oddest thing. It made me feel like Sharon thought she was the queen, and her children were to tread behind her like servants. It gave me an awful feeling in the pit of my stomach.

David sat at the head of the table with Sharon to his left and Christina to his right. I was seated beside Christina, thankfully. The table was spectacular. It was beautifully decorated with various flowers and candles. The dishes looked like they were ancient. There was so much silverware that I suddenly worried I wouldn’t know which utensil to use for what.

The servers came out, bringing several dishes covered in silver domes. I’d only ever seen something like that on television. I truly felt like I was at the royal table. I watched Christina to find out what silverware I should use for the soup and salad. There were plates of cheese and crackers, fruit, vegetables, pickles, and several different spreads.

When the dome lids were removed, the choices were ham, salmon, steak, and chicken. Next was mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, beans, asparagus, and Brussels sprouts. I couldn't get over how much food was on the table. I filled my plate with small amounts of several things but wanted to taste everything. It looked simply delicious.

"How are you finding Moore Fashion so far?" Sharon asked me. I was surprised she was interested.

"It's a wonderful atmosphere to work in. I'm enjoying it very much." It was all I could think to say. I cast a glance at David, who was watching me intently. I could feel heat flood into my cheeks and bent my head down, praying he wouldn't see my reaction to him looking at me.

When I looked up again, Christina was looking at me and smiling. It was a knowing look. *Shit!* She'd seen David looking at me and me blushing back. She reached over and squeezed my hand. *She knew.*

Just then, the doorbell rang, and Sharon was out of her seat instantly, rushing to the door like she'd been waiting all night for this moment. It confirmed my suspicions.

I heard muffled voices then they became clearer. "Mia, honey. Why don't you run along to the dinner table? I had the chef prepare your favorite dessert."

"Chocolate! Chocolate is my favorite dessert. Thanks, Grammy." I heard little footsteps running our way and looked over my shoulder to see the most adorable five-year-old that I'd ever seen. There was a flash of color as she bounded over to David, who was waiting with open arms to lift her into his lap. Her long brown hair was in high ponytails, and she was carrying the cutest doll.

What caught my eye the most was the look on David's face. It warmed my heart. His eyes lit up and actually twinkled as a grin spread over his lips. "Mia, sweetheart. I've missed you."

Mia put her hands on either side of his face and squished it, making his face resemble a fish. I stifled a giggle. "Daddy.

It's only been a day. How can you miss me in a day?" Her voice was bubbly and delightful.

"That's an awfully long time to be without my sweet girl." Mia wrapped her little arms around his neck and squeezed hard. It was something I wasn't prepared to see, and it pulled on my heartstrings with brute force. Little butterflies swarmed into my stomach as I realized there was much more to David Moore than I had realized.

"Please, Claudia. Sit and have dessert." Sharon looked right at me when she said this, and the look on her face screamed triumph. I didn't understand. She turned to David and said, "Here, darling. You can have my seat right next to David and your daughter." Again, she looked right at me as she said it.

I felt so uncomfortable and wondered if I should leave. Sharon obviously didn't want me there. And, of course, David should sit beside his soon-to-be bride. I hung my head and didn't dare look at any of them. I found a fascination with the tassels on the edges of the tablecloth, playing with them nervously. I felt invisible and wished I was so that I could make my exit unnoticed.

"Scarlett is a wonderful addition to Moore Fashion, and her designs are going to bring us a lot of much-needed recognition. You should see what she's come up with in less than a week," Christina said, smiling widely. I silently thanked her.

Claudia's baby blue eyes caught my own, and there was no mistaking the jealousy behind them. *If only I hadn't come here.* I regretted it in the most profound way.

After dessert (which I didn't eat much of), I excused myself to go to the bathroom. Finally alone, I looked at myself in the mirror, and a very confused face looked back at me. I could feel it within. I was experiencing the weirdest sensation whenever David was around. *It isn't weird.* I'd felt it before. A few times. It was unmistakably a feeling of lust. *No! No! No! I can't be lusting after my boss!*

I was making my way back to the table when I heard David and Claudia talking. I froze. I didn't want them to see me there as if I'd been listening to what they'd been talking about. I didn't move a muscle for fear that I would make a sound. I had no choice but to hear what they were saying.

"I don't want her anywhere near Mia," Claudia said, her voice laced with anger.

"Relax, Claudia. She's a wonderful lady." I heard exasperation in David's words.

"I don't care. We don't know who she is. We've only known her, what, like, less than a week? No. I want her nowhere near my daughter, do you hear me?"

"The choice isn't just up to you, you know. I'm her father, Claudia, and I'm comfortable with Mia being around Scarlett. Ultimately, I have a say, even if you don't like it."

I couldn't believe David was sticking up for me. I was learning a lot about David tonight.

"Bye, Mommy," Mia said, and the conversation between David and Claudia ended, but the pounding in my chest grew exponentially. *How can she be so mean?*

As soon as the door closed, I walked out into the foyer. "I'm going to get going. I'm exhausted," I told David, biting back tears.

"Would you like me to drive you home?" He offered it with a genuine look of concern on his handsome face.

"No, that's okay. I'll be fine." *Can he tell that I heard what they were saying? Can he see that I'm about to cry?*

"I was wondering if I could talk to you for a minute. Perhaps you are missing New York? Your friends and family? It would be understandable if you wanted to move back home and find a job closer to them. We would understand."

My mouth dropped. *Seriously? Is he trying to get me to quit Moore Fashion? Why doesn't he want me to stay? What does he have against me?* It was something I wasn't going to get an answer to. I had to get out of there.

“Tell your mom thank you for dinner and say goodbye to Christina for me,” I said as I rushed out the door, practically running.

I heard Christina speak, “What did you say to her, David?” but I kept going. I got into the car and drove off, not looking back.

On the drive back home, all I could think about was maybe I should move back to New York. I could stay with Sterling or Macie until I figured it out. I missed them so much. My heart ached for them, for the comfort they would give me in this awful moment. Tears spilled down my cheeks.

When I reached the house (because it really wasn't home), I changed for bed and curled up with Callie, who licked my tears away. I'm not sure how I was able to fall asleep. It was likely just sheer exhaustion and anger, but my eyes closed the world out and took me far, far away.

Chapter 10: David

It was a shock to me when I saw Scarlett already in the boardroom when I got there. I swore under my breath when I walked through the doors, but Scarlett must have heard me because she looked up instantly.

“Rough morning?” she asked.

It was the first time she seemed at all interested in anything about me. I pounced on it immediately. “All mornings are bad until the weekend hits.”

“You don’t enjoy being the CEO of your own multi-million-dollar company?” She raised her eyebrows as she said it.

“It’s never about the company. It’s about two hours before I get here. I got Mia a puppy, and she loves her, but Mia never wants to say goodbye to her in the mornings. And Lucy, that’s the puppy, never wants to say goodbye to me in the mornings.”

“Sounds like you need to take Lucy to obedience school, and I would recommend that you take Mia along with you. Make her a part of it so Lucy and Mia both learn that *you* are the Alpha.”

It was good, sound advice—and I’d probably take her up on it—but the way she said “alpha” rocked my world. I wanted to be *her* Alpha... in the bedroom.

And there it is. The reason why I can’t work with this woman! How am I supposed to get any work done when all I can think about is a romp in the hay with Little Miss Ungrateful? I wanted to turn her into Little Miss Yes Please. I took a sip of my coffee, then another gulp. Breathe in, breathe out.

We settled into work, and after about five minutes, she stood back and said, “Why do you dislike me so much?” She steadied her gaze on mine and crossed her arms.

I had to hand it to her. Not many women exercised the direct approach when solving a problem with the opposite sex, especially their boss. I was impressed—and mortified. How could I explain to her that I wanted her out of my business so that I could take her into my bed?

I decided to follow her lead and go with the direct approach as well. “I can’t focus on what needs to be done with you in the room with me.”

There. It was out. Now, let’s see how you handle that one.

She didn’t miss a beat. “Surely you’ve worked with beautiful women before?”

Shit! What a comeback. She was good, real good.

“Of course I have, but you unnerve me.” *I am really wearing my heart out on my sleeve today.*

“You’re afraid I’m going to kick you in the head again.” She put both of her arms behind her onto the drawing board.

I wasn’t sure if it was a deliberate move because it made her chest stick out, and I nearly dropped on the spot. She was wearing a thin, slightly see-through blouse, and the movement made her erect nipples press against the fabric in such a way that I could clearly see them. There was an instant reaction below, and she looked down just in time to witness the bulge in my pants growing.

With any other woman, we’d already be in each other’s arms, ripping clothes off, but with Scarlett, there was only silence and embarrassment. No woman on the face of this planet had ever caused me to be embarrassed, but I was in a lose-lose situation. I moved behind the desk and told him to calm down as he wouldn’t be getting any attention from this lady.

My pride took a beating, but I said, “I’d welcome that over your cool behavior toward me.”

Her mouth dropped. “*My cool behavior?* You’ve been nothing but short with me since I got here. Do you not remember telling me last night that I should quit my job here and go home?”

She had a point, but it certainly wasn't because I never wanted to see her again. It was because I wanted to see *all* of her. I had a strict "don't play where you work" rule, which meant no relationships between coworkers. I was fond of the "out of sight, out of mind" motto. If Scarlett didn't work there, I could take her into my bed and then say goodbye forever.

"Let's just get this work done and call it a day," I told her, not wanting to hash it out anymore. I had a feeling I wasn't going to win this one. She was a lot like Christina that way, which scared the shit out of me.

"Agreed," she said and continued sketching a new design. I watched her draw the lines on her sketch pad and noted how her tongue hung out of the side of her mouth when she was concentrating. It was oddly sexy and made me want to take her lips with mine and thrust my tongue inside until she begged me to ravish her on the boardroom table. It was something I vowed I would do at some point, and there would be nothing she could do about it when the time came. And it would.

About 20 minutes later, when I was in pain from my constant erection, Claudia waltzed in with a sweet look on her face. *Uh oh, here comes a disaster.*

"What time were you planning on dropping Mia off tonight?" Claudia asked me, though her eyes were on Scarlett.

"After dinner," I replied, wondering why she was here asking me such a ridiculous question. I had been dropping Mia off after dinner for the past three years without fail. Why would today be any different?

"I was thinking that you should come for dinner instead. It's been a while since the three of us had dinner together. It would make Mia so happy."

"Sure, fine. That's fine. What time should I be there?" I couldn't believe I was agreeing to this.

"Six would be perfect. I can't wait. It's going to be so much fun. Maybe we could play hide-and-seek after. Mia loves when we play that with her." Claudia smiled and looked over at Scarlett, who was watching us. Scarlett looked back

down at her sketch quickly when we caught her watching us. When I looked back at Claudia, she was grinning, and I figured out why she was putting on this domestic show. It was to make Scarlett jealous. Little did Claudia know Scarlett had no designs on me, so her charade was a wasted effort.

When I got to my mother's to pick up Mia, she was waiting for me with a loaded gun. Mia was tidying up her toys when I arrived, and my mother cornered me in the hallway. I should have just stayed in the car and honked the horn to let her know of my arrival. *Dammit!*

"You're having dinner with Claudia tonight, aren't you? Are you going to propose?" She eyed me with those beady little black eyes of hers, and I felt like swatting her.

"No, Mother. I'm not going to propose to Claudia, so stop asking me about it." I clenched my teeth.

"Well, I don't know why not. She has always been the perfect girl for you, and when she finds someone else, you'll regret not making her yours."

"I'm okay with her finding someone else. Hell, I hope she does because then you'll get off my back. Tell Mia I'll be waiting in the car." I went out the front door, slamming it in hopes that my mother would finally take the hint.

Dinner was painful. Claudia must have come on to me at least a dozen times, and each time I averted her advances. I knew her well, and her flirting wasn't lost on me. I had considered sleeping with her a few times before, usually in a weak moment where alcohol was involved, but I was sober, and my daughter was in the room.

I was at the door, about to leave, when Claudia put her hand around me and cupped my ass with her hand. She then worked her hand in between my legs, succeeding in stroking my cock. My eyes popped out of my sockets at her blatant attempt to get me to stay. I knew what she wanted, and I could really use a sexual encounter to take the edge off.

The last time we did it, however, led to a few weeks of uncomfortable situations where Claudia thought we were back together because we were having sex again. I had no desire to go down that road again, so I quickly said goodbye and retreated to the safety of my car. Unfortunately, I was hard and had to sit there for a few minutes. I looked up and saw Claudia looking out the front window. She had her hands on her breasts, and the look on her face would make any man jump at the chance to bury themselves deep inside her. But that wasn't going to be me.

My heart was pumping wildly, but I managed to drive out onto the road. I wasn't driving to my house. I was driving to the property that we owned. The property where Scarlett was staying.

Am I insane? Driving to Scarlett's with a cock as hard as a rock was the most dangerous thing to do, and it would surely end up in disaster. But sleeping with Scarlett wasn't my intention. Well, it was, one day, but *not* tonight, so help me God. My intention was far more mischievous than that.

I had collected myself on the drive and felt sure that Mr. Friendly wasn't going to make another appearance for a while. At least, I hoped he was sleeping it off. I knocked on her door. I waited a few minutes before knocking again. *Where is she?* I had half a mind to use my key, but Scarlett would lose her mind if I did that, so I knocked louder.

I peeked through the window and saw her come inside the house from the back door. I froze. She was wearing a bikini, and she was headed for the front door. I took a step back, wondering if I ran to my car would I be able to drive away before she opened the door? Deciding it an impossible feat, I stood still, awaiting my torture. It was in the form of a red bikini with white stripes.

When she opened the door, I felt dizzy. Her hair was wet, and so was her body. I could see droplets of water on her trim, athletic figure. Well, I now knew what was underneath that white knit dress from a few days ago, and I wasn't sure which was worse.

Scarlett looked really surprised to see me and even more surprised when I pushed past her into the house. When I turned around to look at her, I reminded myself not to look at anything but her face. It didn't help. Her hair was pinned loosely on top of her head with a few tendrils escaping, giving her a disheveled look, much like it would look after I was done with her if she were in my bed. *This has to stop!*

"What are you doing here, David?" She reached for the white bikini wrap that was hanging off the kitchen chair and put it around her waist. I almost think that it looked sexier than the bikini itself. I was going mad.

"I have to talk to you. I know this is going to sound insane, but I'm grasping at anything that will stop the nonsense between Claudia and my mother." I sounded exasperated, but I couldn't help it.

"David, what are you talking about?" Scarlett asked, confusion all over her beautiful features.

"Can we sit down?" I slid my shoes off and went into the kitchen.

"What's got you so upset?" She seemed concerned, which might help my case once she knew why I was there.

"I have a rather large favor to ask of you. I know your first instinct will be to say 'no,' but I'm practically going to beg you to help me out with this." I put both my hands down on the counter and looked up into her green eyes.

"I'm listening," she said cautiously, eyeing me like I was about to kidnap her.

I told her about everything going on with my mother, how she was trying to get me to marry Claudia, and how Claudia was trying to get me to marry her. I put my head in my hands, frustration gripping me.

"What's the big favor you want to ask me?" The question hung between us like a kite that was stuck in a tree. We both wanted to grab hold of it and pull, but neither of us could reach it.

Here goes. “I need you to pretend to be my fiancée.” I regretted it as soon as I said it, but I felt it was the only thing that would get my mother and Claudia off my back.

“What?” Scarlett’s voice went up a few octaves and her eyes widened to twice their size.

“I know, I know. It sounds crazy, but I really think it will work. If my mother and Claudia believe that we are going to be married, they will both back off. Please say you’ll help me out.” I sounded desperate, but I was.

“I am not going to pretend to be your fiancée. Of all the absurd—”

“I think you’ve forgotten that I have the power to send you packing tonight.” I hated myself for threatening her with her job, but I firmly believed she was going to say “no,” and I needed this from her.

“Excuse me? I signed a contract that says otherwise.” She looked me square in the eyes, and I knew she wasn’t going to back down.

“Do you happen to have a copy of that contract?” I wasn’t going to back down either.

She faltered, and I saw defeat wash over her face as soon as she realized what I would say next.

“No, but Christina has it, and I know she’ll back me up on this.”

“Except that contract is now in my office. It hasn’t been filed yet, so if I were to shred it, no one would ever know it existed.” I was playing dirty, and I knew it. I was also bluffing because I had no idea where Christina kept it, and if I knew her, it was filed the day Scarlett signed it, but she didn’t need to know that.

Scarlett’s chest fell, and I knew I’d won. I waited for her to say something. It was that moment where the first person to speak would be the loser. It wasn’t going to be me.

“Are you saying if I don’t do this for you, I’m fired?”

I hesitated. It was low, even for me, but I had to make her believe it. I nodded.

“I’ll think about it, but I’m not making any promises. I’ll let you know tomorrow what my decision is.”

I stood up. “Thank you. I promise if you do this for me, I will be forever in your debt. I’ll let you know that I am a damn good person to have in your corner.”

“You can go now,” she said through tight lips.

She made no move to walk me out. I left and drove home, regretting what I had done but praying she would take me up on my offer. It was the only thing that would get those women off my back and give me some peace and quiet.

Chapter 11:

Scarlett

Fiancée? Is he out of his mind? I picked Willow up and plopped down on the sofa with her on my lap. I could feel the vibration of her purring, and it comforted me. Luna was jealous and clawed her way up my leg. Luckily, I had thick track pants on. She sat on my leg and put her paws on Willow's head, kneading back and forth. Before long, they were curled up in a ball, and the only way I could tell who was who was by their different fur color, gray against black and white. I found myself being soothed by their contentment and allowed myself a few minutes of solitude.

I woke up about an hour later, and they were still on my lap. They were making quite a little hot spot there, but I couldn't be mean and move them. I picked up my tablet and video-called my friend Macie from New York. I checked the time and noted that it would be 11 p.m. at her place. Plenty of time as she didn't usually go to bed until midnight. I realized I needed to talk to her about David's proposition.

A smile about a mile long stretched across my face at the sight of her. She was wearing a white sweater with a large scoop neck that she pulled down over her shoulder, exposing her upper chest. Her lips smoothed into a smile when she saw me. "It's been so long since we've talked."

"It's been over a week since I left. We talked on the weekend." I knew what she meant. It was the longest we'd gone without seeing each other in years. When we traveled, we traveled together.

She frowned and played with her hair. "I know. I don't like this arrangement. When are you coming back for a visit?"

I laughed. "I doubt I could visit you every week, silly. I will talk to Christina and find out when the earliest would be that I could take a few days off, okay?"

She nodded her approval. "How's the weather there? What does your place look like?" She put her feet up on her

desk and pulled a blanket over herself.

“Better than there. It’s gorgeous here. I have a swimming pool, and I’m in it every day.”

“I’m so jealous. How’s it going at Moore Fashion? Are you loving it?”

“Well, it’s a beautiful office, and some of the people are amazing, like Christina. But her brother, David, is a bit of a meanie. I could do without him being in my face every minute of the day. I work closely with him, and it’s... not going well.”

Macie raised her eyebrow. “Working beside David Moore isn’t fun? But he’s dreamy. Don’t you just want to look at him all day?”

“Ugh, no! That’s never going to happen. We don’t get along,” I told her.

Her eyes grew to twice their size. “You aren’t the woman that used to live down the street from me. Where is my friend?”

“Very funny. I have gotten myself into a bit of a situation, and I need your advice.” I was finally getting past the small talk and into the nitty-gritty.

“What happened?” She leaned forward on her elbows, focusing intently on me.

I told her about the whole situation with David and his mother and Claudia, then I told her about his proposal.

“He wants you to be his fake fiancée? You’ve got to be kidding me!” I had her full attention now.

I nodded. “It’s preposterous, right?”

“It’s a little dramatic and over-the-top for sure. What are you going to do?”

I brought my legs up, so I could cross them underneath me. “I was hoping you’d help me with that one. I don’t know what to do.” I sounded like a whiny five-year-old.

“You do it. That’s what you do.”

I was shocked. “Really? You think I should say ‘yes’?” I honestly thought she was going to try hard to convince me to turn him down. “What is your reasoning?”

“Well, he’s your boss, and as you say, things aren’t so good with him. What better way to get on his good side than to help him out of his jam?”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“Just because you’re engaged doesn’t mean you have to marry him. Give him what he wants until the absolute last possible moment. Even if it means walking down the aisle with him. You can always back out at the last second.”

I considered what she was saying. “But that will mean I have to spend extra time with him.” I moaned.

“Are you nuts? There isn’t a woman on this planet who wouldn’t trade places with you in a heartbeat, including yours truly. Well, except you, but you beat to an entirely different drum than the rest of us.” She winked.

“Hey! Be nice. Don’t kick me when I’m down. So I should do it then?” I needed to hear her say it again.

“Absolutely. And just for fun, get right into the role and be extra lovey-dovey with him. Make him squirm.”

“Thanks, Macie. I needed to hear that. Okay, well, I guess I’d better let you get some sleep.”

“At least it’s Friday tomorrow. Although, I don’t have anyone to hang out with on the weekends anymore.” She pouted again.

“What about Bethany or Tracy?”

Macie stuck her tongue out. “No thanks. All they want to do is troll the bars. I’m a little past that scene now. I’d rather hang in and watch a movie or read a book.”

“I hear you. Well, try to enjoy your weekend. Hot chocolate, a movie, and a big, soft blanket, and you’ll be good to go.”

“I’ll just hold onto a pillow and pretend it’s David Moore.”

“Gross. He’s all yours.” We laughed hysterically.

“You should get your eyes checked because he is drop-dead gorgeous.”

“And a tyrant,” I added.

“Wow. That’s a harsh word.”

“It’s fitting, trust me.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Tyrant.” I could still hear her giggling after I hung up.

I knew what I had to do.

I didn’t go to work the next day. I didn’t want to face David or Claudia. Instead, I laid outside on the lounge and soaked up some rays, throwing in the occasional swim to cool off. I read an entire book and even managed to nap. I was feeling better.

I looked at my phone. There had to be half a dozen calls from David and just as many text messages. I read them all and listened to his messages, each one getting more insistent that I call him right away. The last message told me he was at his mother’s house, and he was waiting for my answer. He went on to say that if I knew what was best for me, I’d show up at her house as soon as humanly possible.

I showered. I took my time and rolled my eyes when two more phone calls and another message came through.

I looked in the mirror at my tanned reflection. *Am I really going to do this?*

“Showtime,” I told Callie, who was watching me intently. Willow and Luna were still curled up on the sofa where I had lifted them to. I shook my head. “If only I were a cat.”

David opened the door before I could even knock and grabbed my arm. “Where have you been? Why didn’t you come into the office today? I’ve been going out of my mind

waiting for your answer.” His tone of voice alluded to the fact that he was quite upset with me.

Serves you right, David.

“I needed a personal day,” I told him. He ushered me into an elaborate office and sat me down.

“Well?”

“Give me a minute to catch up with myself. I believe half of me is still at the door.”

Apparently, he wasn't in the mood for my jokes as I got a stern glare. “What's your answer?”

I looked into his piercing gray-blue eyes and said, “I'll do it.”

He stood up quickly, walked over to the far wall, and pulled out a small, velvet jewelry box. My heart hammered in my chest. Getting engaged wasn't supposed to feel like this. He could at least have thought up a grand and creative proposal, but somehow, I didn't think that was quite his style.

He sat down in front of me and opened the box. I couldn't help myself. My jaw dropped, and I was certain I started shaking. It was enormous.

“It's a Moore Fashion engagement ring. Twelve carat oval-cut solitaire diamond set in an eighteen-carat rose gold set with micro pave diamonds.” He slid it on my finger. “Don't lose it, it's worth two million dollars.”

I almost fell off my chair. “I can't wear *this!*”

“Of course, you can. It fits you perfectly.”

“Get it off. Just get me a \$2,000 ring or something. I would lose my mind if I lost this.”

“Then don't lose it.” He said it matter-of-factly.

My heart was racing, and I suddenly felt light-headed.

“Let's go announce it, shall we?” He was already standing.

My knees were so weak, I wasn't sure I could even get out of my seat. He reached down and took my hand. "You can kick me in the forehead later."

I looked at him and laughed. It was a high-pitched "oh my God, what am I doing?" kind of laugh. "That was fun, and I just might."

I looked down and had to admit it was beautiful and surprisingly light. I would have to guard it with my life. He whisked me into the living room, still holding onto my hand. I felt like I was floating on air.

My heart fell when I locked eyes with Claudia. *Why is she here?*

"I have an announcement to make." As he said it, I hid the ring behind my back, clenching my hand, so it didn't slide off, though it felt snug. He turned to me and kissed my cheek. "Scarlett has agreed to become my wife."

The silence that fell over the room was deafening. Mia jumped off Sharon's lap and ran over to us. "Daddy. Why can't you put that ring on Mommy's hand so we can be a family?"

Her words tugged at my heartstrings, and I wasn't sure I could go on with this charade any longer. I tried to pull my hand out of his grip, but he only tightened his hold on me. "Honey, we'll always be a family, and we'll always love you more than anything, but Scarlett and I are in love, so we'll marry."

I couldn't will myself to look anyone in the eyes.

"I had no idea. Wow, this is sudden," Christina said as she walked over to us. "I'm so happy for the two of you." She hugged David and then me, then admired the ring. "Wow." She looked at David. "You sure know how to pick a good piece of jewelry."

"Nothing is too good for my lovely Scarlett," he said, making sure he coated his words with loads of honey.

I looked over Sharon's shoulder until my eyes came to Claudia's. Her face was getting redder by the minute. If

nothing else, it was satisfying to watch her seethe in jealousy.
Shame on me!

Sharon finally made her way over to us and looked at her son, scowling. “We need to have a little talk.”

Chapter 12:

David

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?” came my mother’s harsh question.

I wasn’t surprised. What I was doing was mainly meant to piss her off for never caring who I wanted for a relationship. So it looked good on her. Unfortunately, it was me that still had to deal with her nastiness. If I could sum up my mother in one word, it would be “selfish.” But I was used to it.

“I’m marrying the woman that I love,” I responded with a tone that reminded me of when I was a child and had to justify everything that I did.

Her chapped lips pursed indignantly, and she turned those beady little eyes of hers on me with a wrath like no other. “You will take that ring off her finger and put it on Claudia’s.” If fire could shoot from her eyes, it would. Comparing my mother to a villainous character made me feel better.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. I’m not your puppet.”

“David Jonathan Moore, how dare you disgrace this family like this. Scarlett is not worthy of our name.”

I locked my eyes with hers. “How would you know? You haven’t even taken any time to really get to know her.”

“I don’t need to. It’s clear from her name, her background, and the fact that Rudy Harper Fashion House *fired* her. I’m sure you’re smart enough to realize you don’t get fired for doing a good job.”

“I’ve seen her work. She’s a designing genius. She puts my work to shame. Her background? I’m sure I don’t care about that. And her name is beautiful, just like her.”

“It sounds like a lady of the night. Disgraceful.” She shook her head, jaw clenched.

“Well, she’s going to be the lady of *all* my nights.” With that, I turned away and joined Scarlett, Christina, Mia, and

Claudia. I made sure I stood right beside Scarlett and put my arm around her waist.

Scarlett turned and gave me a faint smile. I knew she wanted to get out of there. “Christina, why don’t you find a date and meet us at that new nightclub tonight? I can’t seem to remember the name of it at the moment.”

“The Emperor’s Cloak?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“Sure, sounds fun. What time?”

“Nine-thirty will do fine. See you then.” I turned to Scarlett and said, “Let’s go.”

We stood beside my car moments later, and I couldn’t speak for a few minutes. “I’ll pick you up at nine-fifteen, and then we’ll pick up my sister and her date. Wear something sexy.”

Nine-fifteen sharp, I was parked out front of Scarlett’s place—or should I say my house? I wasn’t sure if she was ready or not, so I went up to the door and knocked. She must have been watching for me because she opened the door immediately. I wished she had some patio furniture on her front step because I needed to sit down. She took my breath away. She was wearing a tight, black dress with two cut-outs on the long-sleeved arms, one circle on the upper arm, and one on the lower arm. There were two cut-outs around the waist and a cut-out between her breasts so that the underside of her breasts were showing. It was cut high above her knees, showing off those long, sexy legs of hers.

My soon-to-be-wife was a knockout, and I planned on reaping the rewards. I took her hand and led her down the stairs. I had to protect my investment. “You look ravishing. Good outfit choice.”

“Just because you put a ring on my finger, doesn’t mean you get access to the merchandise.” She certainly was a feisty one. I grinned.

“We’ll see about that,” I told her, opening the door for her.

Christina was already waiting on her doorstep with Roy Harris, the guy she called when she didn’t have a boyfriend. They had what I thought to be the perfect arrangement. When they weren’t seeing someone else, they hooked up for a night out and a session between the sheets. I had a woman like that, too. Her name was Claudia. Fortunately, one of those sessions between the sheets gave us Mia. But it did make me twice as careful going forward.

Claudia had always been trying to get me to marry her, and I half wondered if she’d stopped taking her birth control without telling me, hoping that if we had a child together, I’d reconsider my relationship position with her and ask her to be my wife. It didn’t work out the way I knew she’d hoped. I often wondered if my mother gave her the idea. Sometimes I felt sorry for Claudia, knowing how hard it could be when you wanted more from someone and never got it.

Back to my beautiful date. Her hair was piled up in a loose bun, wisps dangling here and there, showing off her sexy neck. I thought about what I would do to that neck later and shivered with delight. Christina took Scarlett’s hand and said, “I’ve never seen you look more stunning. That dress is a showstopper.”

“I designed it myself. It was one of my fall/winter outfits from last year.”

“You’re very talented. Scarlett, this is my date, Roy Harris. Roy, meet Scarlett, and you already know my brother, David.”

Roy was a nice-looking man but too sweet, in my opinion. Christina needed a stronger man.

We went inside, and the lights illuminated a huge room with several balconies and couples gyrating against each other in time to the music that was pumping out a popular rock tune. I could feel the thud vibrate inside my body, getting me in the mood.

“What’s your drink of choice?” As I asked the question, I realized there was so much that I didn’t know about this woman by my side. Getting to know someone was never a priority for me—except buyers for our fashion merchandise—but for some reason, I wanted to know everything there was to know about Little Miss Ungrateful.

“I’ll take a piña colada, please.” She was casually looking around the room, engrossed in people-watching.

“I wouldn’t have thought that would be your first choice. I pegged you more for a chocolate martini.”

Scarlett took a step back to avoid being bumped into, and my instinct reaction was to stand in front of her, putting me between her and the crowd, to make sure she didn’t get hurt by flailing body parts. She noticed the maneuver, and her eyes said “thank you” even if her mouth didn’t, not that I’d hear her over the noise anyway.

I handed the drink to her, and she took a sip. It must have been good because she smiled and took another drink. I’d ordered a sour beer, one of my favorites, and we looked around for a table. Christina spotted one and dashed over to it, the three of us in tow.

“Are the clubs like this in New York, Scarlett?” Christina asked, taking a sip of her mojito.

“Yes, of course, but I was never one to go clubbing. I was more of a dinner and movie kind of girl.”

“That surprises me.” *What a shame to waste a sexy woman like her in a dark theater.*

“How so?” She looked at me curiously with those gorgeous green eyes of hers, and I almost lost the ability to speak.

“A woman like you could have your choice of any man in every bar,” I clarified.

She blushed and looked down at her drink, taking the straw and swishing it around to avoid my eyes. She looked up again and said, “I’m sure you’d have your choice of any woman as well.”

“Was that a compliment? Did you just admit that I’m hot?”

She seemed stunned by my words. “I did no such thing. I mean, you’re attractive, but I’m not sure I’d use the word ‘hot.’” Her lips curled upward at the corners until they grew into a smile. She was trying not to laugh. She was teasing me, and I couldn’t be happier.

“On that note, will you do me the honor?” I stood up and held out my hand to her. It was a slow song, and I wanted her body against mine.

She hesitated until Christina stood and said, “C’mon, let’s dance.” She followed Roy to the dance floor, and Scarlett followed. I had the good fortune to walk behind her, so I slowed my pace down so I could catch a glimpse of her sexy ass. It was well worth it. I could feel myself react immediately.

I took her in my arms and held her tight against me, shocking her. I could feel her delicate lines on my body, and it created a bulge in my pants that I was sure she could feel just above her bikini line. She looked up at me, and there was a fire in her eyes. I slowly moved my hands down her spine to her lower back and extended a few fingers down even further. She noted my move and her mouth parted. She didn’t protest, so I moved my hand down to rest on her ass, pulling her in tighter, hoping she could feel me through her thin dress.

We moved to the music like water flowing in one motion, the rhythm of our bodies melding together perfectly. I rubbed my hands over the mound of her ass, pulling her in even tighter. I tipped my head down so that my hot breath was on her neck and lowered my lips onto her smooth skin. She arched to the side so that I could feather kisses down her jugular. She shivered as I took one hand and put it high up on her waist, stretching my thumb to graze the side of her breast. I felt her breathe in deeply in reaction to the caress. I was breaking down her defenses.

“You’re ravishing tonight,” I breathed in her ear. I felt her breathing quicken and knew I was getting to her.

I was disappointed when the song ended, and she excused herself to go to the ladies' room. I followed, making sure she was safe.

The rest of the evening was full of conversation with Christina and Roy and the occasional person walking up to me, wanting to talk about Moore Fashion.

When we got out to the parking lot later, I was in pain from having a constant erection for several hours. It seemed my *fiancée* was able to bring that reaction out of me merely by being within eyesight. I loved how she and Christina got along so well. Roy and I were a different matter. I had nothing in common with the chiropractor, though he tried to talk to me a handful of times.

It amazed me that I wasn't trolling the mass of people for a sexy lady to ogle. With Scarlett by my side, it wasn't necessary. *How odd.*

After I dropped Christina and Roy off, I drove Scarlett home. We talked mostly about the music and Christina and Roy on the way. "I've decided we should tell Christina the truth," she said.

I glanced over at her as I turned down her street. "Why would we do that?"

"I consider her a close friend, and I feel awful lying to her."

Anger ignited deep within as I said, "We need her to believe our story in order for Claudia and Mother to. Christina has an issue with keeping a secret, and I'm afraid she will blurt it out without realizing she's doing it."

"David, it doesn't feel right. I'm going to tell her tomorrow." She moved to open the car door, but I grabbed her arm, stopping her.

"You'll do no such thing." She wrenched her arm free and glared at me.

"You don't tell me what I can and can't do. You're my boss, yes, but you are not my master. It doesn't feel right keeping a secret from Christina, and I won't do something I

don't feel comfortable with." She got out of the car and slammed the door, walking quickly to her front door. I was behind her in seconds.

When she reached her door, she quickly unlocked it, but I spun her around and placed both arms on either side of her head, blocking her in.

"David, I—" I didn't give her a chance to finish her sentence before I cupped her face and claimed her lips with mine. I'd meant it to be a hard, authoritarian kiss, but once I felt her velvety lips under my own, I deepened it, sliding my arms around her waist to hold her tight against my body. For the millionth time, my cock pushed against my pants, wanting her just as much as I did.

She circled her arms around my neck and kissed me back. It was a moment in history when I finally broke through her hard shell and got her to react to me. I quickly took it to the next level and pushed my tongue into her mouth, sucking on hers while I lifted her dress at the front and slid my hand underneath her panties, pushing my fingers into her hot center. They slid inside her creamy warmth, and I saw stars.

I'd gone too far. She pulled her body away from me and fumbled for the doorknob. I took a step back. "You'll submit to me, Scarlett. I promise you that." I was left on the front step alone, my heart thundering in my chest, and my senses bruised. I needed her in my bed and made a vow not to stop until I got her there.

Chapter 13: Scarlett

Sunday rolled into Monday far too quickly, and I wasn't looking forward to seeing David after Friday night's events. As luck would have it, David was out for meetings all day Monday, and I wasn't sure if that was orchestrated by him to avoid me or just my lucky day. However, my wonderful day plummeted when Kelly came into my office in the late afternoon.

"David was wondering if you would mind working late tonight? You, Ezekiel, David, and I can go over some designs and bounce ideas off each other. We need to have it done for tomorrow as he has a meeting with our production team." Kelly looked beautiful in a soft, yellow sundress with small white flowers on it. Her thick black hair was braided tightly against her scalp, giving her a tropical look. Her kind brown eyes looked back at me, hopeful.

"I would need to go home and feed my animals if that's alright."

"Actually, I have to go home and do the same. Why don't we leave together, and make the rounds to our places? I'd love to get to know you better." She smiled sweetly, and I felt happy about her invitation. It would be nice to have someone to do things with other than David.

"I'm in. Let's do it." I gave her a wide smile and got back to work. Now that I had some plans, I needed to hunker down and focus.

Kelly and I had a wonderful time and learned a lot about each other in our two-hour break for pet feeding; after which, we headed back to the office. Kelly was driving as she said, "You're so easy to get along with. Everyone I know is so uptight and, I hate to say it, snobby. It's hard to find someone down-to-earth in the fashion district."

“I was thinking the same thing. Do you want to come to my place for dinner sometime this week after work?”

Kelly’s face brightened. “I would seriously love that. I’ve got obedience school with my dog, Barney, tomorrow night, so how about Wednesday?” I met Barney at her place, and he was a big brown Labrador.

“Perfect. How old is Barney? I should get Callie in obedience school. She thinks she’s the boss and doesn’t let me win, ever.”

“He’s only eleven months, but I need some order in my house. He’s taken over, and I’m in need of some assistance. I’ll see if they have another spot for Callie when I go tomorrow and let you know.”

“Thank you. I’m sure Callie would bite you if she knew you were helping me, though, so I won’t tell her.” We had a good laugh at that.

We went to the boardroom, and David was already there with Ezekiel. Kelly and I looked at each other and smiled.

“You’re both late,” David said, glaring at us.

“Chillax, boss. Scarlett and I had to travel home to feed our pets. We’re all yours now.”

I couldn’t decipher the look he gave us. It was almost like he disapproved that Kelly and I were getting chummy. Which made me want to get even chummier with her. David Moore was a conundrum.

He moved over and stood right beside me. I could feel the heat emanating from him, and it was wreaking havoc with my blood flow. And my brain. I kept looking at the same drawing over and over without being able to make any progress. It would be better if I went to work in my office, but I didn’t think David would go for that.

After we finished, Christina came by and asked us if we wanted to go to dinner. We all agreed.

It was a classy restaurant. Roy met us there. I wondered if Christina was now dating him. I felt I couldn’t look her in the

eye and felt a distance between us now. I felt awful for lying to her. I had tried to get David to change his mind, but he wasn't having it.

I drank a few glasses of wine to relax my nerves as David sat right beside me. And he had no qualms about flirting with me, either. He put his hand on my knee, and I felt like it was burning a hole in my pants. "We'll be spending the night at my mom's tonight. Mia's there overnight, and I don't like leaving my mom alone with her as she's getting older."

"I figured I would just be going home tonight as usual," I told him. My stomach started to cramp at the thought.

"No. We'll be changing that soon. You'll be moving in with me. Likely by the end of the week."

He said it so matter-of-factly, and I stared at him. "What did you say?"

"Don't worry. I'll send someone over to collect all your things, but you should start bringing your stuff over every time you come this week.

I wasn't aware I was going to his house at all this week. "What are you talking about?"

"We're getting married, so you'll live with me as a wife should. Let's talk about this later, at my mom's place."

I was overheating inside, wondering why he thought I was moving in with him. I drank a lot more wine to calm my nerves. By the time we left the restaurant, I was pretty tipsy. David helped me to his car and said, "I'll call Jax to come pick up your car."

"I'm not coming to your place," I told him while I wobbled out the front door. Even as I said it, I knew if I was honest with myself that I really did want to go to his place. I wanted nothing more than to be with him, even if it was against my better judgment.

He ignored me and helped me into his car. "I'd feel happier knowing you were with me and safe." I couldn't disagree with that. Once we got to his mother's, David took

me to his room, which was in a separate wing from his mother's bedroom.

"I'll be back in a few minutes with some coffee and water." He disappeared down the hallway. I looked around the room and felt special that he brought me here, and I wondered if this was the room he grew up in.

When David returned, I asked, "Where's your mother?"

"She's retiring for the evening. She's just getting into the bathtub now, then she'll watch TV in her bedroom until she falls asleep. It's her nightly ritual."

He put our coffee on the side table. I picked mine up, took a few sips, and sat down.

I was about to put the mug back on the table when I spilled it all down my top. I laughed hysterically, and David shook his head. "Let me help you with that." He helped me to my feet and proceeded to take my blouse off, throwing it on the floor. He was obviously shocked when he saw that I wasn't wearing a bra. His eyes lingered on them, and I saw him gulp.

He flung my blouse onto the floor and came over to me, wrapping his arms around me. I took his lips hungrily as he unzipped my skirt at the back, letting it drop on the floor. "Shit!" he said when he saw that I also wasn't wearing any panties. "You were going commando all day?" He seemed flabbergasted by the very thought.

"I hate undergarments. They're so uncomfortable." I looked down and gasped once I realized I was completely naked. I looked back up at him, but his eyes were trailing down my body. I wanted him to touch me, make love to me. I wanted it more than anything.

He shook his head. "You're going to kill me with that body of yours." He closed the distance and ran his hands along my spine down to my ass. He pulled me close to him, and I could feel his bulge harden above my panty line. Heat shot down between my legs and rested there, waiting for his touch.

He didn't disappoint. He lifted me onto the high bed and took off his shirt, then his pants. His cock sprung forward and

fell through the hole of his loose briefs. It was sexy as hell, and he was so hard. He took a step toward me, and I reached out to take him in my hands, squeezing. He threw his head back and put one hand behind my head, linking his fingers through my hair, and pulling me forward. He took hold of himself and fed it to me. I could feel myself get wetter in response. I rolled my tongue around the tip, then took him in deep. He moaned.

“Dammit, Scarlett.”

He pulled himself out of my mouth and eased me back further on the bed, laying down beside me. He trailed his finger between my breasts, then down my tummy, and stopped just before he put his fingers inside. “You don’t get it that easily.” He leaned down and used his arms to spread my legs. I could feel his hot breath before his tongue slid inside my wet folds. He thrust in as far as he could go, taking one of his hands and cupping my breast.

“David, please,” I breathed and arched my back when he flicked my clit with his tongue at the same time he flicked my nipples with his fingers. It was more than I could bear. “Please, I want you now.”

He drew himself up on all fours and straddled me, taking both of his hands to fondle my breasts. He bent down and licked one of them, flicking the other with his fingers. All the while, I could feel his cock on my inner thigh, *so close*.

I writhed to the side, trying to get him in position to go inside, but he moved away from me. “Oh, no, you don’t. I decide when you get him deep.”

“You’re teasing me, David,” I said breathlessly. Another shot of hot liquid flew down to my pussy when I felt him put two fingers inside while he massaged my clit with his thumb. I nearly thought I would go insane.

“You’re so wet for me, Scarlett. Tell me how much you want me.” He took his fingers out and positioned his cock at my opening, waiting for me to beg him to enter.

“Please, now!” It was all he needed. He grabbed himself and thrust in deep and hard until I cried, “David!”

“Is that what you wanted?”

I nodded, but I couldn't speak. Slipping in and out, he found a rhythm where I could join in by arching my hips up when he withdrew, trying to get in deep again. He took my hands and positioned them up by my head, lacing his fingers with mine, and putting more weight on me, making himself go deeper. Using his knees, he spread my legs wider, lodging himself even deeper. I moaned in response.

He held himself still, and I could feel him throbbing against the walls of my pussy. I was aching for his release and gushed some more.

“I can feel it. You're so wet on my cock. I want you to come before me. Let me know when you're going to come, so I can fill you up with my hot juice.”

Hearing him say those words sent me over the edge, and I gripped his hands. He pulled himself almost all the way out, froze, then thrust in deep and fast. He kept doing it until I was begging him to come. I trembled and shivered right before I released. “I can feel you clench down on my cock when you come. Come for me, Scarlett. Show me how good I'm making you feel.”

“Now, David! Please, now.” He slid his hands underneath my ass and pulled me in so tight as he reared up to slam into me again with a force that made me see stars.

He pulled out, froze, then thrust inside, again and again, until I grabbed the sheets and swore. “David, I'm coming again. David?”

“I'm so close, baby. I'm going to come, too.” He rocked me back and forth until the sweat streamed down between my breasts. He licked my nipples, and we rode out the wave together, shivering and quaking until the wave crashed into the shore, and we were left with nothing left to give. David lay on top of me, allowing his full weight to rest on me, still deep

inside. I could still feel him throbbing in the aftermath of our lovemaking, and I never wanted him to leave.

I clutched my hands on his back and held him close. He smelled of sweat and spicy cologne. I wanted to remember that smell forever. Our chests rose and fell in unison until our heartbeats returned to normal. He finally rolled off me. I thought he was going to kick me out and tell me to go home, but instead, he pulled me in and spooned me.

“Stay with me.”

There was nowhere else I'd rather be.

Chapter 14:

David

“Lucy, get off of me. You’re so heavy,” I said out loud, feeling like my chest was going to cave in. I put my hands on her and pushed her aside. My eyes popped open, and I looked at the pile lying beside me. There was no fur, just hair and lots of it, sprawled all over the pillow. There was an angel lying beside me. Scarlett.

Scarlett? What is she doing here in my bed?

I put my hands on my face and rubbed my eyes, thinking I was still dreaming and when I took my hand away, she would be gone. But I didn’t want her to be gone. I wanted her to be underneath me.

I lifted the sheets. She was naked. My heart thundered in my chest as bits and pieces of the night before flashed in my brain in snippets of images—naughty, sexual images. I smiled. No, I grinned. I started to remember the night before, the pictures in my mind were still hazy, but I could see that I’d been deep inside her, and she’d wanted me to be there. She had cried my name while she came on me, and I couldn’t be happier. I picked up her hand with the sparkling ring on it. Her hands were delicate and smooth, and the ring sat there like it was meant to be there all along.

Scarlett moved so that she was facing me. “Hmm, David.”

Her eyes opened slowly, then popped open as she saw me. She was out of bed in a heartbeat, “David! We can’t do this.” She grabbed her clothes, putting them on as quickly as possible then ran out of the room.

“We’ve already done this. What’s wrong?” I sat up and pulled on my jeans, my heart thundering in my chest. *What the hell?* I bounded down the steps two at a time.

“You’re my boss! I have a rule to never sleep with my boss,” she whispered.

“Scarlett, wait. Don’t leave. Let’s talk.”

“What’s going on out here? What’s all the racket about? Scarlett? Where are you going?”

Scarlett was trying to put her shoes on, but she was so agitated she kept dropping them.

I stopped and looked at my mother. “Go back to bed, Mother. Everything’s fine. Scarlett has to be somewhere.” I tried to make light of it so my mother would leave, but she eyed me curiously.

“What kind of woman are you? Skipping out on your man when he’s trying to talk to you? I knew you were no good for my son. Why don’t you go back where you came from and leave this family in peace?” My mother’s chest was heaving in and out as anger took hold of her.

I watched as all the color drained from Scarlett’s face as she stared at my mother. “Scarlett. Come back to the room, and let’s talk.” I looked at my mother. “Mother, please give us some privacy.”

Scarlett took the moment to open the door and make a run for her car. She did it so fast that I was unable to chase her. She was driving away before I could even get my shoes on.

I whirled around to face my mother, who was still standing there with a smug look on her face. “Why can’t you mind your own business?”

“You know as well as I that woman is no good for you. She’s only out for your money, and you know it. She’ll never love you the way you deserve. Scarlett is a gold digger and not worthy of your love. You and Claudia should be together. That woman will make you happy.”

“You don’t care about anything except your own agenda. Do you even care that I don’t love Claudia and never will? You need to understand that we’re *never* going to be together.” I turned and went back to my room, collected my things, and was out the door before she could respond.

I drove aimlessly, not even sure where I was going. I ended up at Christina’s. She opened the door and knew

instantly that something had gone wrong. “What is it, David? Why do you look like you want to murder someone?”

I pushed past her and started pacing her floors. “If I do, it’s going to be our mother. I can’t believe her. She is so selfish, and I don’t even think she cares about either of us. She’s in a whole different world where we don’t belong.” I sat on the sofa and buried my head in my hands.

Christina was at my side instantly, rubbing my back. “I’m sure she cares for us in her own twisted way. Don’t let her upset you, David. You know that’s who she is, and she will never change.”

I looked at Christina from behind stony eyes. “You won’t believe what she said to Scarlett.”

“Let’s go for a walk down the beach and talk, okay? You need some fresh air.” She stood up and held her hand out to me. We went out the back door and walked down the pathway to Christina’s private beach. The waves were crashing in, which reflected how my anger was coming in waves, crushing my soul.

“What did she say?” Christina took my hand, and we walked together in silence until I felt ready to explain everything.

After I told her what happened, she said, “I can’t believe that woman. Where does she get off treating her like that? And you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Dad was the opposite of her. He supported everything we did, and he was so loving. Why did he marry her?”

“They shared some really great times, and thank God he *was* with her, or we wouldn’t be here,” Christina reminded me.

“I guess. She’s just so coldhearted. I think she scared Scarlett away forever.” I stuck my hands in my pockets and looked out over the water, hoping it would calm me.

“I’m sure Scarlett knows that Mother’s opinion doesn’t concern you. She’ll think it over, and she’ll be fine. I’m sure of it.”

I stopped walking and turned to my sister. “Christina, I have to tell you something, but you need to promise me that you won’t be angry.”

Christina stopped and stared. She furrowed her brows and asked, “What did you do, David?”

I took a deep breath, knowing she was going to be hurt by what I had to say, but Scarlett was right. She deserved to know the truth.

“First thing you need to know is that I love you very much. You’re my best friend, and I cherish you as my sister.”

“You’re scaring me. You’re never emotional. What’s going on? Spit it out.”

The wind picked up and sent her long, black hair flying about in the air. She looked beautiful. “Christina. I lied to you, and I’m so sorry.”

“Lied? What do you mean? What are you talking about, David?”

I took a deep breath and sighed. “I coerced Scarlett into marrying me. I threatened her job and begged her to pretend to be my fiancée so that Mother would leave me alone about marrying Claudia and so that Claudia would give up on me. I’m sorry. I wish I could take it back, but it’s done now. Please forgive me.”

Christina just stood there with the most awful look on her face. “You lied to me?”

I nodded.

“Wow.” She turned away from me and started walking back to her house. I followed her, catching up to her in a few long strides.

“Christina. C’mon, let’s talk about this. Please. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was just—”

“You were just thinking about yourself. I guess the apple doesn’t fall that far from the tree, does it?” She ran to the door and slipped in before I could get to her. I heard the lock engage and was left standing on the porch alone.

I turned to my car and knew that it was going to be a long day and night until I could talk to Scarlett and Christina again, hopefully tomorrow.

Chapter 15: Scarlett

The harsh sun pierced through my brain as I drove back to my house to get a shower before going in to work. I should never have gone out after work the night before. I'd had a great time up until... I woke up and realized we had crossed a line. *What is wrong with me?* I usually always knew to keep work relationships professional. Stress and anxiety must have taken over, and I'd needed to take the edge off.

Of all the stupid things you could do? Sleeping with your boss? Really, Scarlett? How would I face him again? How could I look into his eyes again? Those dreamy, gray-blue eyes that I loved looking into because I could see forever there. The only thing I was going to be seeing was my ass on the way out of Moore Fashion.

I looked down at the enormous, shiny engagement ring. I wondered if I could sell it without getting into trouble. *Two million dollars? Isn't that what David had said it was worth? Am I crazy? Did I really think I was going to marry him?* Well, I wouldn't be now. I'd pretty much screwed myself out of that one. Not that I *wanted* to marry him anyway.

I made it into the office a few hours late. I didn't think it mattered much as I was sure David would walk into my office with notice that I was fired. You didn't bone your boss and keep your job. *Of all the crazy, stupid things I've done. Why did this have to be one of them?*

I made it into my office without being noticed, or so I thought. Within minutes, there was a knock on my door. I turned around to see Claudia. *Shit! I do not need to deal with this right now.*

"May I speak with you for a few minutes?" Her eyes were icy, and her expression was not friendly. I didn't suppose if I said "no" that she'd go away.

"Come on in," I told her, even though everything inside me was screaming, "stay away."

She closed the door behind her, which was not a good sign that this was going to be a friendly visit or a professional one. "I'd like to talk to you about David."

Figures. I knew it was bound to happen sooner or later. "What did you want to talk about?"

"That ring that's on your finger." She said it plain and simple.

I looked down at it, loving the way it sparkled back up at me. "What about it?"

"I'm sure you know it doesn't mean anything to David," she said with a smug look on her dainty features.

I looked over at her, smoothing my lips into a fine line. *It's going to be like that, is it?* "What is that supposed to mean?"

"He does this every once in a while. He decides that he wants to piss Sharon off, and he goes and does something like this. This isn't the first time." Claudia remained so calm.

"What? What do you mean?" *What is she trying to say?*

"I think you're his fourth or fifth engagement. He gets tired of Sharon being at him about getting married, so he goes out and gets engaged to the first woman who crosses his tracks. It's a pattern, and you're just a pawn in his little game against his mother. Let me guess, a drunken night of passion, and you think you're in love. You think he's in love with you, and he'll be yours forever. Him and his fortune, I mean. The fact of the matter is, he'll toy with you, have sex with you, and then kick you out, without the ring, of course."

I just stared. *Is this true?* Blood thundered in my ears as I thought about her words. A drunken night of sex? Well, I knew all about that, didn't I? "I don't believe my relationship with David is any of your concern." I was proud of my mature response.

She shook her head. "See, that's where you're dead wrong. David is the father of my child, so that makes every woman he sleeps with my business. I don't want you anywhere near Mia, do you hear me? She is not to be caught in

this whirlwind affair of yours. Because that's really all it is. An affair on me. David gets cranky and needs to sew his wild oats every now and again, and I let him. But when I tell him it's over, he'll come back to me, and you'll be mere dust in the wind. Got it?

"Back off and leave him alone. You have no idea what you're involved in, but I'm telling you, it's not love. He's merely using you to piss off his mother. And me. Don't let Mia suffer, please. She wants her Daddy home with me, and ultimately, David loves Mia and will do anything and everything to please her. He'll come home to us once he's done with you." Claudia stood up. "Well, that's all I wanted to say to you. Don't be a fool. Dodge the bullet while you can and keep your heart intact. Move on." She smiled warmly, and I almost thought it was genuine.

After Claudia left, I just sat there, stunned. *Is it true?* It's not like I could ask him because his answer would be "no," wouldn't it? Would he admit it? My head was spinning when there was another knock at the door. I looked over and saw Christina. I waved her in. Finally, a friendly face.

But then I saw her eyes, and they were dark and stormy. She sat down and eyed me. "David told me that you both lied to me. Why did you do it?"

My heart sank. So much for a friendly face. "Oh, I'm so glad he told you, Christina. I begged him to tell you. It was awful lying to you, but your brother is very persuasive and didn't give me much of a choice. I'm so incredibly sorry." I hoped she knew I meant it from the bottom of my heart. I sighed in relief, but Christina wasn't done with me yet.

"I trusted you," she said, her voice soft and quiet.

"I know you did, and I'm so sorry. I hope you see he didn't leave me much of a choice." I felt her pain deep in my heart.

"You had a choice. You just picked the wrong one." She stood up and left as quietly as she'd come.

I sat there, frozen. I would have rather she yelled at me and smacked my face then be almost nice about it. I felt awful. I just wanted to go home.

Luckily, I didn't see David all day. I drove home and didn't even put the radio on my usual station. The silence would do better to clear my head. Or not.

When I got home, I was so forlorn, so I decided to video chat with Macie.

"Hey, there, stranger. Why the sad face?" It was wonderful to see her beautiful, bright face. Macie was always happy, warm, and loving. I rarely saw her upset or sad. I envied her.

I told her everything that had happened since the last time I talked to her.

"Wow. That's a lot to go through in a week. I don't know what to say, Scarlett."

"I know. I've really got myself into a mess, haven't I?" I picked up Willow and snuggled her until she purred. Luna climbed my leg, and Callie started barking her jealousy. I picked up Callie and Luna, plopping Luna in my lap with Willow. I cradled Callie in my arms and gave her a belly rub. They all seemed at peace again. I envied them too. "Oh, Macie. What am I going to do?"

"You're going to hate my answer. Quit. Move back here. It's as simple as that."

I was shocked at her solution to my problem.

"I can't do that," I told her.

"Sure, you can, but I guess I was being a little selfish with my answer. Sorry. I just miss you and want you to come home already."

"I know, but I have to stick this out. It's my job, and if I want to stay in the fashion industry, I have to make it work. I can't quit."

"Fine. Stay there. And I'll just be miserable."

We laughed. Callie glared at me from her comfortable position because my laughing disturbed her sleep. “Oh, sorry.” I scratched her under the chin, and she closed her eyes again.

“I guess I have to grin and bear it. All of it.”

“I guess you do.”

“I’ve got someone coming over to dinner tomorrow tonight.”

“Oh, sure. You’re already trying to replace me. Who is it?”

“Her name is Kelly. She’s David’s assistant. We hit it off well. I’m hoping we’ll become friends because, without her, I’m just alone.”

“Sheesh. I know how you feel. Just remember *I’m* your best friend.” Macie pouted.

“Of course you are. No one can replace you. I hope you know that.”

“Okay, well, I hope you have an awful time tomorrow tonight, that your dinner burns, and Kelly thinks you’re a big bore.” She grinned.

“Funny. I’ll tell her you said that.”

“I’m just teasing you, but at least you’re smiling now.”

“I guess I am. Thank you for making me feel better. I miss you and love you.”

“Good luck with the David and Claudia and Sharon situation. You’ll come out on top. You always do. Stay true to yourself, okay?”

“I will. Thanks.”

I felt better after chatting with Macie and just tried to relax for the rest of the evening. At least I could look forward to making a new friend tomorrow.

Chapter 16:

David

I couldn't believe the fashion show in London, England, had crept up so quickly. It had been a hellish trip because Scarlett was doing her best to completely ignore me. It wasn't for a lack of trying on my part. I had tried numerous times to get her alone so I could talk to her, but she successfully evaded every attempt. I couldn't wrap my head around why she was being so rude to me. I'd gone over the events of our last time together and was certain she'd had an amazing time in bed with me. Who wouldn't? It baffled my mind, and it angered me. She was the first woman I'd ever let sleep over.

We were all packed in the limousine that was taking us from the airport to our hotel, and I'd maneuvered it so that I was sitting beside Scarlett. As she did her best to ignore me, I did my best to make sure I was at her side as often as possible, hoping for the chance to talk to her. Kelly was on the other side of her, and I quickly became perturbed that the two of them were so friendly. I looked across at Christina, who was looking out the window. Claudia sat next to Christina, and she was engrossed in her phone, as usual. I hoped Mia didn't get that bad habit from her.

I moved my leg to touch Scarlett's, and she stopped talking to Kelly briefly to look at me. I gave her a warm smile. She repositioned herself so that we were no longer touching and turned her attention back to Kelly.

I was seething by the time we reached the hotel. Only the best for the Moore family and employees. We all went inside to get our rooms.

"You're in my room," I told Scarlett as we stood at the front desk waiting to get our keys.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "You just assumed I'd be sharing a room with you?"

"You're my fiancée. You room with me," I said. The receptionist gave me my keys, so I gave one to her. "Let's put

our luggage in *our* room and have a little talk.”

Scarlett turned to Kelly and said, “Do you mind if I room with you? It’s okay if you’d rather not. In that case, I’ll just pay for my own room.”

Kelly looked at me, and I could tell she didn’t know what to do. Scarlett was her new friend, but I was her *boss*.

Unfortunately, Christina decided to ruin my plan and spoke, “Scarlett, you can room with me. I have two king-sized beds and would love the company.” She gave me a smug look, and I had to admit I’d been defeated. This time.

After the events of the day, I was relaxing in my room, trying to figure out how to get Scarlett alone, when someone knocked on my door. I jumped up, hoping it was her finally coming to her senses. My heart fell when I saw Claudia in sexy lingerie.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” She twirled her fingers in a thick strand of blond hair seductively. I looked past her and saw Scarlett in the hall with a bucket of ice, just going into her room. She looked at me, and I pretended I didn’t see her. I could play her game too.

“Sure, come in.” Claudia took no time to wrap her arms around me and lay her lips on mine. “Oh, David. I’ve missed us. Make love to me.”

I put my hands on her sides and pushed her away from me. “Claudia, let’s not do this tonight, okay? I’m not in the mood.” I couldn’t ignore the fact that her breasts were practically peeking over the top of her nightie, and normally I would have picked her up and taken her to my bed. But not tonight. Tonight, I only had one woman on my mind, and she was likely thinking I was in bed with Claudia at this very moment.

“I’m sure I could take all your stress away. It doesn’t have to mean that we’re together again. I’m just horny, and I know I’m safe with you.”

“I can’t quench your desire tonight.”

“Well, we could order up some room service and drink our faces off.”

“That sounds wonderful, but I know the ending of that scenario, we’ll end up in bed, and before I know it, we’ll be having another baby.”

Claudia’s face clouded over. “Is that what you think I did all those years ago? Tricked you into getting me pregnant. I swear I didn’t realize I’d forgotten to take my pill that night. You’re an asshole, David Moore.” She slammed the door on her way out, and I couldn’t be happier to be alone.

The next day was exhausting. After numerous catwalk shows, designer showrooms, and presentations from other fashion houses, I was ready to go to bed. Scarlett managed to ignore me the entire time, and I was getting tired of it.

After dinner, I called her. I was surprised when she answered. “Be in my room in five minutes. Your future at Moore Fashion depends upon it.” I hung up. It was a devilish move, and I knew it, but I was finished with Scarlett’s avoidance. It ended now.

Five minutes later, Scarlett was knocking on my door. When I let her in, she was glaring at me. “That was rude and uncalled for.”

“Apparently, being rude is the only way to get you to talk to me. What’s going on?” I crossed my arms and waited.

She didn’t move a muscle. “Did you have sex with Claudia last night?”

“What are you talking about?” I was floored that was the first thing she said. *So she does care about me. She’s jealous.* It was all I needed to hear to know that she wouldn’t be leaving my hotel room that night.

“Of course not.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Scarlett, I’m not interested in having sex with Claudia. Now or ever. Besides, I’m engaged. Why did you run out on

me that morning? I thought we shared a beautiful night.”

“We did. I just have a rule not to mix business with pleasure. I don’t sleep with my bosses. I’m not Charlotte Weaver.”

“Isn’t she the designer from Rudy Harper Fashion House?” I was confused. “What does she have to do with us?”

“Charlotte slept with Rudy Harper to move up the ladder. Rudy let her take credit for my designs, and then he fired me. I don’t want to be like her.”

“Honey, when you sleep with me, it will never give you the power to move up the ladder faster. You have my word on that. So, you’re nothing like Charlotte. Besides, we’re engaged.” I walked over to her and cupped her face with my hands, kissing her intensely until she gave in and leaned into me.

We started ripping each other’s clothes off in a frenzy of passion. Clothes were flying everywhere, and I lifted her up and threw her on the bed, quickly removing my briefs. I laid beside her and rolled her over, so she was on top of me. “You’re the boss this time.”

Scarlett smiled and took me in her hands, massaging me until I was so hard, I thought I would explode. When she put me in her mouth, I clenched my jaw and grabbed the sheets, writhing in pleasure. “You really know how to work your mouth on me. Come here.”

She climbed up me until her face was an inch from mine. I couldn’t take it. I grabbed her ass with one hand and put the other behind her head, bringing her lips to claim my own. I moved our position so that she was on all fours, ass up in the air. I mounted her from behind and slid my fingers between her legs to spread her, making room for me to slip inside.

I put the tip into her creamy wetness and slowly pushed in deeper until I could go no further. I then reached around and cupped her right breast in my hand, thumbing the nipple until it became a hard nib. She moaned her pleasure. “I thought I was in charge.”

“You were for as long as I could stand it. Bring your arms off the bed and lean into me.” She did as she was told, and I grabbed both breasts, fondling them roughly while I kissed her neck and thrust myself in and out, sliding in deep, then pulling out to tease her. I slid one of my hands down her tummy to her pussy, pressing my finger to her clit. I rubbed her hard until she screamed. “David, please. I can’t stand it any longer.”

I urged her to put her hands back down on the bed so that I could grab her ass and get a good rhythm going. She arched her back while I pumped my cock deeper and faster, sweat trickling between us.

“I’m close. I’m going to come.”

“Please, now, come now.”

I grabbed her breasts hard as I ejaculated into her warm center, feeling myself throb against her walls. I pulled out and lay beside her.

“You’re not going to run out on me again, are you?” I said as I stroked her back.

She shivered. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Just then, the phone rang, and I saw it was my mother. *Perfect timing, as always.* I almost didn’t answer it but realized it could be a business matter.

When I hung up, I turned to Scarlett. “Bad news. My mother has scheduled our engagement party in a few days from now. It should be fun.”

Chapter 17: Scarlett

When I arrived at Sharon's mansion an hour before the engagement party was set to start, I was glad it was Christina who opened the door. "Come inside. I want to talk to you."

I followed her to a cozy sitting room on the second floor of the house. I'd only ever been on the main level, and even then, I'd probably only seen less than half of it.

"Honestly, I don't know why my mother doesn't sell this place and get herself a smaller, more modern place. I would never want to live in a house this size all by myself."

"It's beautiful, though. The architecture alone is classic and stunning."

"I know. I feel like she'd make a lot of money on this place. If it were me, I'd be selling it and traveling the world. I didn't get a chance to talk to you during the London Fashion Show much. I'm sorry I took so long, but I'm over the fact that you two didn't tell me what was really going on. I've talked at length about it with David, and I get that he needed me to believe it or Mother and Claudia never would. It's not how I would have handled it, but I know my brother, and he does everything elaborately. It's just who he is. Just don't ever do it again, please."

"Christina. I want you to know how hard it was for me, and I begged him several times. I'm sorry. I should have gone up against him and just told you anyway."

"Let's just forget it, okay? So, you've been spending every waking moment with each other. Is the 'fake' engagement becoming real?"

"Oh, I don't know what to think. I admit that I have strong feelings for him, but he infuriates me often. He has such a chip on his shoulder when it comes to your mother and Claudia that I honestly don't know if I can't break down his rough exterior." I sighed.

Christina took my hand in hers and gave me a warm smile. “One thing you need to know about David, and he’d kill me if he ever knew I told you this, but he’s starting to think seriously about you. That is something I never in a million years thought I’d hear my brother say. You’re breaking down his walls, Scarlett, so keep chipping away.”

My heart warmed at her words, but it didn’t take away the nerves in my stomach.

“I can hear people arriving, so we’d better get down there. I’m sure David is full of anxiety, not knowing where you are at the moment.”

“Thank you for the talk, Christina. You’re such an amazing woman, and I admire you,” I told her.

“Aw. Come here.” She pulled me in a tight hug before we went downstairs to find David.

When he saw me coming down the stairs, his face brightened. I looked to the left of him and saw Claudia, her face becoming hard as stone when she saw him react to me. He walked up the bottom steps to take my hand. We went toward the living room. “How are you doing?”

I gripped his hand. “I’m sorry, David, but I don’t know if I can go through with all of this. I’m so overwhelmed.”

He turned to face me and cupped my chin, bringing my eyes up to meet his. My heart faltered, and my breathing became shallow. My body always reacted that way to his touch. “You’ll be fine. Please remember that I need this. And I’m not opposed to becoming your husband in light of how things are going between us right now.” He leaned down and gave me a gentle, sweet kiss, and my heart melted until I saw the glare coming from Claudia.

“I’m going to mingle if you want to hang with Christina. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He kissed my cheek and went off in the direction of the kitchen.

“Scarlett!” Mia said as she ran over to me. “You look pretty. Are you going to be my new mom?” It was a bad choice of words, but Mia didn’t understand that.

Unfortunately, Claudia was close by, and she heard it. She walked over to us immediately and took Mia's hand. "Mia, honey, Scarlett will not be your new mom. She will merely be David's significant other." She glared at me and guided Mia over to another room. Mia pouted and waved goodbye to me.

"Wow, that was *not* the right way to handle that situation," Christina said, shaking her head.

"No, it was quite rude, actually, but I'm learning that's her way."

Sharon came up behind us and put her hand on Christina's back. "Might I steal Scarlett for a moment?" My stomach lurched as she said the words. I looked at Christina, hoping my eyes would tell her not to leave us alone, but she went across the room and started talking to a handsome young man.

Left with Sharon, I tried smiling at her to soften whatever blow she was going to give me. It didn't work. "I've given you plenty of time to reconsider the engagement with my son. Unfortunately, I cannot let this go on any longer. You are not a fit for his life, and I'd like you to hand over the ring immediately." She held her hand out, and the stern look on her face told me she expected me to hand it over. I looked around for David but could see no sign of him.

"Don't bother looking for him. He's with Claudia at the moment, talking with her about moving back in with her and Mia. He sent me here to ask for the ring back as he doesn't want to see you again."

My jaw slid open in shock. "How awful for you to say that to me. I don't believe David would do that to me."

No sooner did I say it when Claudia was heading right for me. "Come with me, and let's have a little chat." She didn't even stop, just kept walking until we reached the library.

Once inside, she sat down. I sat too. "I've just been talking with David, and I'm so sorry, but the day I told you

about has come. You must hand the ring over to Sharon so that he can put it on my finger.”

Rage boiled underneath the surface. “I’m tired of you and Sharon tag-teaming me. I won’t do anything until I’ve talked to David.”

“I’m afraid you would say something silly like that. Let me put it into words that I think you’ll understand. Right now, David and I share custody of Mia. He would be devastated if that arrangement ever changed. As it is, he feels he doesn’t get enough time with her. If you marry him, I will sue him for full custody, and Scarlett... I *will* win. Sharon is going to back me up one hundred percent.”

“David will get the best lawyers, and you won’t win,” I assured her with little confidence in my words.

“Oh, see. You are so naive. You have no idea the fire I have in my blood when I want to win something. Not only will I sue for full custody, but I’ll ruin his reputation for good. I have pictures in my possession that prove he is having multiple relationships with men and women simultaneously. It seems you’re not the only one dear David is sleeping with. Imagine poor Mia’s pain when she finds out what a dishonorable man her father is and also loses her time with him.”

I started to say something, but Claudia went on. “If you go and tell David this, I will call my lawyer instantly. The only way you can stop this from happening is if you walk out that front door and never come back. Are we clear?” There was pure hatred in her eyes.

I stood up, biting back my tears, and walked out of the room and straight to the bathroom, where I locked myself in to think about what she’d said.

I couldn’t let Claudia ruin his life, ruin Mia’s life. She was right. I only had one choice, and the sooner I made it, the sooner David’s life would be safe. I held back my tears and left. I went to the side door, where no one would see me, and quietly slipped out. Luckily, I had parked my car away from

the front door. Once inside the car, I drove home. But it wasn't my home anymore. It was the place of broken dreams.

I booked myself a flight for that evening and wrote a note to Christina.

Christina,

I regret to inform you that I must leave my position at Moore Fashion.

Thank you for everything you have done for me. I thank you for the opportunity.

Regards,

Scarlett

I packed up my animals and a few suitcases and drove to the airport where I waited a few hours for my flight. Tears finally came, and I did nothing to stop them. My dream was over, and it was now time to face my harsh reality—jobless, back in New York, and a broken heart.

Chapter 18:

David

“I can’t believe I’m skipping out on my own engagement party to find my fiancée,” I told Christina as we were driving to Scarlett’s house. “She better be there, and she better have a good excuse for leaving without saying goodbye.”

“Never mind, I can’t believe you have a fiancée that you’re willing to chase all over town to find,” Christina said, laughing.

“Very funny. You have no idea where she went or why she left?”

“No, I’m sorry. I do know that both your mother and Claudia spoke to her after you left her.”

“Shit. They better not have said anything to scare her off, or there’s going to be hell to pay.” Damn those two women and their schemes.

“I saw her after she talked to your mother, and she hadn’t run off by that point. I just thought she went to the bathroom or something.”

“After we go to Scarlett’s, if she’s not there, then we’ll go back to Mother’s and see what she said to her. If we aren’t any closer by then, we’ll pay a visit to Claudia. I have to find her, Christina.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll find her. Maybe she had an emergency or something, and in the chaos of it all, she forgot, or couldn’t, contact us.”

“I’m glad you’re trying to offer me possible solutions. Thank you for trying to ease my anxiety over this.”

“David, what are you going to do when you find her?”

“Scold her for worrying me half out of my mind.” After I kiss her, that is.

“I feel that she’ll be at her house. Maybe she got sick and went home.”

“I think you and I both know it won’t be that simple. And if she was sick, she would have asked one of us to drive her home.”

“I know you’re right. I’m just trying to come up with different scenarios.”

I pulled up in front of the house and was instantly let down because I didn’t see her car in the driveway.

As if reading my mind, Christina said, “It could be in the garage. I know she parks it there most of the time because she was afraid someone would steal it.”

“I hope you’re right.” We got out of the car and went to the front door. I pounded on the door hard. We waited, looked at each other, and I pounded on the door again. After another minute, I dug my keys out of my pocket.

“You’re going to use your key?”

“Of course I am. What if she’s hurt and can’t get to the door?” I inserted the key and turned it.

“I know, but isn’t that some sort of violation of her rights as a tenant? She could sue us.”

“Let her. I’d pay millions of dollars to make sure she’s alright.” I opened the door, and we walked into the house. “Scarlett, are you here?”

“Boy, you’ve got it bad, brother dear.” She gave a low whistle.

“Scarlett?” I yelled louder. “Let’s split up. I’ll look upstairs.” I climbed the staircase two steps at a time, calling out her name. I searched all three rooms and the bathroom. I searched everywhere.

“I’ve got something,” Christina yelled.

I found her in the kitchen looking at a note. I snatched it from her and began reading. I looked at Christina. “What the hell. What does she mean that she can’t maintain her position? What does that even mean?”

She put her hand on my back and rubbed it, trying to comfort me. “We’ll find her.”

“Did you look in the basement or out the backyard?”

Christina shook her head.

“You take the backyard, and I’ll look in the basement.”

We met back in the kitchen after finding nothing.

“Let’s go talk to our mother.” We jumped back in the car and made the 20-minute drive back to Mother’s. By this time, I was really worried.

“Mother?” I started calling her name as soon as I opened the front door. She came out from the kitchen.

“What is it? Did you find Scarlett?” She didn’t even seem to be worried.

“What did you say to her at the party?” I demanded.

She looked shocked. “What do you mean?”

“I know you talked to her, and now she’s gone. Let me repeat myself. What did you say to her?”

Sharon gulped and said, “She’s not good for you, David. I’ve told you that from the beginning. She’s just after your money, like the rest of them.” Her eyes doubled in size. “Did she take the ring with her? See, I told you she was just after your money. You’ll never see that ring again. I’m sure she’ll pawn it.”

“I didn’t ask you for your opinion about her. I asked you what you said to her. I will find her, and she will tell me what you said. I’ll be a whole lot angrier if I find out from Scarlett instead of you.”

“I told her to give me the ring and that she’s not right for you. It’s the same thing I told you.”

“What *else* did you say to her?” I was about to lose my mind.

She rolled her eyes. “I told her you were making plans with Claudia to move in with her and that you didn’t want to

see her again.”

“How could you ruin the one good thing I had in my life!” I screamed in her face, punched a hole in the wall, and then went to the front door, Christina right behind me.

When we got to the car, I said, “I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t have yelled at her and gotten violent, and I honestly didn’t mean to. I just saw red and couldn’t stop myself.”

“Don’t apologize to me. She deserved what she got.”

I looked at my sister. “Wow, I never knew you had that in you. I guess all these years of her treating you like shit has taught you to start fighting back. Good for you, sis.”

We went to Claudia’s. “Do you want me to stay in the car?” Christina offered.

“Hell, no. You have every right to hear anything Claudia has to say, considering you’re my business partner.”

“I don’t get it,” Christina said as we walked up to the front door.

“Depending on what she says, she may not be coming into work anymore.”

“David. You wouldn’t.”

“I will if she’s the reason Scarlett left.” I knocked on the door insistently.

The door opened, and Claudia stood there, holding Mia. “Daddy!” I took her and gave her a huge hug.

Christina took her from me. “I’ll take her to the park while you talk to Claudia.”

“Thank you,” I said as I turned around to look at my ex. I knew she was a beautiful woman, but right now, all I could see was ugliness.

“What are you doing here?” Claudia asked, looking completely innocent.

“Are you the reason Scarlett left?” I asked her point blank.

“What are you talking about?” She walked into the kitchen and stood behind the island. “Can I get you a drink? Why is Christina with you?”

“No drink, and Christina is helping me look for Scarlett. She quit Moore Fashion.”

Claudia feigned surprise. “Wow. I didn’t see that coming. I thought you two were happy with your engagement. I guess you can’t trust all those awful women out there.” There was a tone in her voice that I knew to be jealousy.

“What did you say to her, Claudia?” I slammed my fist down on the counter. It hurt pretty bad, but I wasn’t about to let her know that.

“I didn’t say anything. I’m not sure what you’re referring to.” She turned away from me, likely so I couldn’t see her face.

“Claudia, you and I will never be together again, even if Scarlett is gone forever. I need you to tell me what you said to her.”

Claudia sat down. “I wanted us to be together again, for both Mia and me. She misses you terribly, and it breaks my heart. I thought it would be best if our family was together again, so I told her that if she married you, I would sue you for full custody and leak to the media that you’ve been sleeping with both men and women.” After she said that, she burst out crying. “I’m so sorry. I just wanted you back in my life. I love you and wanted you to marry *me*.”

I stood there for a moment, unable to speak. I understood why she left now. She’d rather leave and ruin her own life than have Claudia ruin mine and Mia’s lives.

Blood cursed through my veins a million miles an hour as I realized I was in love with Scarlett West. A woman who could be so selfless, so mature, and she did it all for my happiness, despite the pain, it would cause her.

I started to walk to the front door. Claudia jumped up from her chair and raced after me. “Please don’t go. Talk to

me, David. I'm sorry." She was grabbing at my arm, trying to turn me to look at her.

I finally turned around, my bottom lip wavering. "You should not come to work on Monday. I'll have Kelly pack up your office and drop your belongings off. Do not step foot in Moore Fashion ever again. I will provide you with the necessary means to keep Mia's world intact, but the less I see of you, the better. I will be filing for joint custody. If you try to contest it, I will file for full custody, and I'm sure you know I will win. I will take Mia with me as I don't want her to see her mother in such a mess. I'll call you in a few days."

I left her house as she was crying in the front foyer.

I collected Christina and Mia and drove to Christina's.

"Do you mind if Mia and I stay the night with you?"

"Of course, David. Of course. You should go and get some rest. I'm sorry. We'll find her. We will."

I hoped so because suddenly Scarlett became everything that ever meant anything to me and more.

Chapter 19:

Scarlett & David

Scarlett

“I’m going to have to run out to the store to get more tissues,” Macie told me, handing me another box.

I sniffed and took the box. After I wiped my tears away, I shrugged. “I don’t know what to believe anymore. I thought I was really getting to know David.”

Macie sat beside me. “And you were. I really wouldn’t take anything that Claudia has to say to heart. She would stop at nothing to make sure you and David don’t get married. Don’t even give that another thought.”

I hugged my friend tight. “It was so awful there without you. I missed you so much.”

“I could barely function without you here. I sat on the couch and cried the entire time.”

I punched her arm. “You did not. Goof.”

“No, but there was definitely a hole in my heart.”

The doorbell rang, and Macie went to answer it.

I heard a familiar voice and sprung out of the chair. I walked around the corner and saw the most amazing sight. “Sterling!” I ran over to hug him. He swung me around and then plopped me on my feet. He was grinning widely. “How did you know I was here?” I looked at Macie, and she smiled.

“I couldn’t bear to keep you all to myself, now could I? That would be selfish.”

I hugged her hard. “You’re the best friend anyone could ask for.”

“At least you remembered that.” We laughed.

We all went to sit in the living room. “So, Macie tells me you’ve got fiancé, soon-to-be mother-in-law, and coworker

problems. Sheesh. You're out of my sight less than a month and look at all the trouble you got yourself into."

"Very funny."

I retold the story to Sterling. He nodded. "You know what you have to do, right?"

I shook my head. "No. If I knew that, I wouldn't be crying and so confused right now. What's your enlightening answer to all my problems?"

"You have to hop right back on that plane and knock on his door. Sit and talk with him about everything. If it doesn't solve anything, at least you'll have some answers and the closure you're going to need to get over this mess. I'll even spring for your plane ticket."

I sat there staring at him. "But I just got here."

"Do you love him?" Sterling asked.

I sat for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I do."

"I think your brother has a point. I'll look after Callie, Willow, and Luna for you until you figure it all out and come back for them. They're traumatized right now and need a stable home for a minute."

I looked from Macie to Sterling. "I'm so tired."

"Book your flight and then have a nap. I'll drive you to the airport."

"You've got to be kidding me. This is crazy." I grabbed the cushion and hugged it. "The last thing I feel like doing is getting back on a plane."

"I'll book you an early morning flight so you can get a good night's sleep. Macie, do you mind if I stay the night, too, so I don't oversleep?"

"Go right ahead. I'll ride to the airport with you, so you'll have some company on the drive back."

"Sounds good." He looked at his phone for a bit while Macie and I hugged each other tightly. He finally looked up and said, "Your flight is tomorrow morning at 9 a.m."

I stood up and went over to hug him. “I think I will get some sleep. I’m exhausted. Thank you. I love you both.”

David

When I got to Macie's, I was exhausted. No sleep in almost two days will do that to a person.

I knocked on her door, and she opened it. "You must be David." She smiled. "Come in."

I walked in and saw Callie right away. She barked at me, and I figured she was telling me off for being such a jerk. "I know. I get it. You're right. I *am* a jerk."

I followed Macie to her living room. "I love your loft."

"Me too. Sit down."

I sat. "Is she sleeping?"

Macie shook her head.

"She's up? Can I talk to her, please?" My heart started to pound at the thought of seeing my angel again.

"I'm sorry, David, but she's not here." Then she did the oddest thing. She started to giggle.

"What is so funny?" I asked, utterly confused.

"Sterling and I just dropped Scarlett off at the airport. I'm surprised you didn't see her there."

"What?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Where is she going?"

"Los Angeles," Macie said.

My eyes widened. "Why would she be going there? Didn't she just arrive here last night?"

Macie nodded. "She came, she slept, she left. She went back to Los Angeles to talk to you."

I scratched my head and sighed. "She flew all the way back to say goodbye to me?"

"No, you fool. She flew all the way back so she could tell you she loves you."

I stood up fast. “She does? She said that?” I was already walking to the door.

“She did. You have a hell of a woman who loves you. I think you better get your ass on a flight home, and she’ll be waiting there for you.”

“I’m sorry to drop and leave so quickly. It was nice to meet you, Macie. I hope I see you again sometime.”

“I imagine you will, but only if you hurry. Gosh. I’d hate to see you get there, and then since she can’t find you, she ends up back here. Then you go there, and she’s here. That would be an absolute mess. You could be doing that for weeks!”

“I see why you’re Scarlett’s best friend. You’re funny. I like you, and I hope I see you again. Thank you.”

“Come here and give me a hug,” Macie said, wrapping her arms around me. “Now, go get your woman!”

I was out the door before she finished her sentence.

I was driving back from the airport when I got a text message from my mother. She told me that I might want to stop at her place on my way home. I called her to find out why she was texting me that. The conversation was brief. She said that Scarlett was at the house. I told her not to say a word to her until I got there. *Oh no!* I prayed she wasn’t saying anything bad to her. I’d never forgive her if she ruined this for me—again.

I drove a little faster, praying I wouldn’t get into an accident. I pulled into the driveway and was relieved to see a car I didn’t recognize. I rushed in the door and saw her surrounded by everyone. Christina, Mia, my mother, and Claudia. At the sight of Claudia, I really started to worry.

“Before you tell me to leave, I have something I have to say to you. I’m really sorry for the way I behaved. I’ve already apologized to Scarlett. She was innocent in all of this, and I took everything out on her. I was selfish, and I hope that someday you’ll forgive me.” She looked genuine as she said

this and even had a tear in her eye. I gave her a hug, and Mia ran over to us.

“Group hug.” Mia said, looking up at me and pointed to Scarlett. “Stepmom, not a new mom.” She looked up at Claudia and smiled. Claudia smiled back.

“That’s right, kiddo. Assuming she’ll still marry me. For real this time.”

Scarlett stood up and ran over to me. It felt so good to have her in my arms again. “I thought I’d lost you forever.” I kissed her soft angelic lips with all the love I had in my soul.

“I love you, David Moore,” Scarlett said.

“I have one thing to say,” my mother said as she walked over. “I behaved like a buffoon. You’re right. I was acting selfishly. I just want you to be happy, son. With whomever you choose. But I think you’ve made a good choice with this one.” She put her arm around Scarlett’s shoulder and kissed her on the cheek.

“Another group hug,” Mia said, running over to us.

“Daddy, will you take me to your French house now?”

“I will, but only if Scarlett comes with us.” I looked at her, and she was tearing up.

She smiled and said, “There isn’t anywhere else that I would rather be.”

I took her in my arms and looked into those unforgettable green eyes and knew that I had found the one and only woman who would love me for who I was and not what I was worth. She was my angel, and I was never going to let her go.

Afterward: Scarlett

“You may kiss the bride,” the officiant said, smiling at us.

David smiled warmly and leaned down to give me my first kiss as his wife.

Everyone cheered. Mia ran up to us in her adorable miniature wedding dress and threw flowers at us. “You’re married!”

Everyone congratulated and hugged us. I never let go of David’s hand.

After all the commotion had calmed down, I asked him if he would come with me for a walk in the gardens for a few minutes.

I slipped my hand in his as we walked through the gardens to the gazebo. “What is all the secrecy about, Mrs. Moore?”

I smiled. “I have something I need to tell you.”

He turned me around to face him. “What is it? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, of course.” I took his hands in mine. “I don’t mean to be secretive. I just didn’t want to tell you this while everyone was around us to watch. This is kind of a private thing between you and me.”

“You’re making me a bit nervous. What is it?” Alarm washed over his face. “Are you sick or something?”

“Well, not exactly.” I smiled.

“That’s good. But what is it, then? The anticipation is killing me. Literally. Spill it, Mrs. Moore.”

I shivered at my new name.

“Well, I’m not exactly sick. Yet.”

“Yet? What’s that supposed to mean?”

I stared at him, waiting for him to clue in. We stared at each other for a few more minutes.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“What do you think it means when I say I’m going to be sick?”

He thought about it, then his eyes bulged out. “You mean we’re—” A smile grew wide on his handsome face. “We’re pregnant?”

I nodded and grinned.

He whooped and lifted me up. “We’re going to have a baby?”

“Not just one...”

“No way. We’re having twins?”

I nodded.

“I, wait. Twins?” Fear took over his features. “But I don’t change diapers. That’s a lot of diapers you’re going to have to change. And I’m not sure I want a nanny.”

I swatted him. “We’re not getting a nanny. I’ll do it all by myself. With your help of course. And you will be changing diapers, David Moore.”

“Nope. Not happening.”

“Do you mean to tell me you never changed any of Mia’s diapers?”

He hung his head low and grinned. “Of course I did. I’m just messing with you. I will change one or two.”

I glared at him.

“Or as many as you want me to, love of mine.” He grinned.

“We should tell Mia and Christina.”

I texted Christina and asked her to bring Mia to us.

David grabbed me and kissed me with his soft, warm lips. It was gentle at first but grew with intensity.

“I know it’s your wedding day, but seriously. There are children in the audience,” Christina said.

“Yucky,” Mia said.

“We have something to tell you both,” David said. He put his arm around my shoulders.

“What is it?” Christina asked.

David looked at me and then back at them.

“Mia, you’re going to have a brother or sister. Or both. Or two brothers or two sisters. Oh, dear. This is complicated,” David said.

“I’m pregnant, and we’re having twins,” I told them.

“Yeah, what she said.” He kissed my forehead.

“Yay!” Mia said as she jumped up and down and hugged us. “Group hug!”

Christina joined in on the hug and said, “Congratulations. I’m so happy for you both.”