



COURTING  
*Curves*

# THE LOVE

*Bargain*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**FERN FRASER**

# The Love Bargain

*Brother's Best Friend, Matchmaker gone  
wrong romance*

# Fern Fraser

The Love Bargain

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# Chapter 1

# *Courtroom Chaos*

## Sabine

**C**hasing Ryland to the courthouse on the first day of a highly anticipated environmental case trial wasn't my brightest idea, but he isn't answering my calls.

I need an answer from him, and I need it today because everything I've worked for is on the line.

If I fail, I'll be another step closer to losing the matchmaking business I'm working hard to build.

The sidewalk in front of the courthouse is swarming with people. Everywhere I look, photographers and news crews jostle for position, their bulky cameras obscuring my view. I step out of the cab and am immediately met with a rush of noise.

People chant slogans, and camera shutters click. It's so loud I can barely hear myself think. I understand the stakes are high. The outcome of the trial could have far-reaching consequences for the future, but I wasn't expecting this. It's a circus!

Although my reason for being here seems trivial in comparison, it's important to me. I take a deep breath, plunge into the swarm, and dash up the steps.

I follow closely behind a tall man wearing a trench coat. We step past the chaos of the bustling crowd outside and into the foyer.

I tear my eyes from the colorful murals on the walls, lost and confused, I wander through the crowded foyer, trying to decide which way to go.



Ahead of me, the reception desk stands tall and proud, manned by a clerk with a rigid posture and a stern expression.

The polished oak floor creaks ever so slightly as I approach. My feet feel heavy and my stomach churns with dread.

It's a closed court, and I can't enter without credentials. If the clerk points me in the right direction, I'll wait for Ryland to come out during a break. But if she asks me to wait outside? I'll never find him.

A reporter pushes past, drawing the clerk's attention. I wander aimlessly through the crowded foyer until I spot a quiet nook behind a pillar. I tuck myself behind it while I figure out my next move.

Trying to look as though I belong, I scroll through my socials, checking out one of my competitor's accounts. When I see wedding photos, I stop scrolling and stare at the images of picture-perfect love.

I sell this message to my matchmaking clients and dream about finding love like this myself, although I'm not holding out much hope.

The only man I yearn for is Ryland, my big brother's best friend. I met him when I was a senior in high school, and he was about to start law school. Ryland didn't notice me, but I've had a crush on him ever since the day we met.

Three months ago, we bumped into each other at LAX. I confided in him that my brother helped me to finance my business, which was struggling. I was delighted when Ryland offered to help.

The prospect of us working together thrilled me. It was like a dream come true. I thought Ryland would help by

recommending clients, but when he suggested signing up himself to find a match, I was devastated.

Although I want my business to succeed, it means ignoring my desires. Setting Ryland up with other women will be agony, but we've agreed, and it's too late to back out.

I take a deep breath and stand back, surveying the foyer. Four security guards in crisp uniforms are pacing the tiled floor, their beady eyes scanning the crowd for any sign of trouble.

Two guards man the courtroom entrance, and getting past them without credentials will be impossible.

My heart races. I imagine how it would play out if the security guards stop me and I try to explain.

*Me: Hi, I'm Sabine O'Neill from Elite Connections. I'm Mr. Brooks' matchmaker and need to speak to him urgently.*

*Guard: Does it pertain to the case?*

*Me: No, but it's urgent, and I must speak to him privately. You see, I've lined up a date with Hollywood actress Margo Raine, and her agent needs an answer right away.*

I'd rather eat my own earwax than admit any of that and betray Ryland's confidence. Not to mention that my professional reputation as a discrete matchmaker would instantly be toast.

Margo Raine's timing is terrible. At this point, I'm beginning to wonder if coming here was the right thing to do.

A reporter is recording a news grab into her phone as she races past.

“It’s undeniable that the impact of the trial will reverberate throughout the nation. Some speculate that it could be a catalyst for policy reform.”

She turns to the cameraman with a sly grin. “Others are waiting to see what eligible bachelor Ryland Brooks is wearing.”

Forbes magazine recently printed an article titled “Rising Stars of the Legal World.” Ryland Brooks came in at number three on the list, which is high praise for a man who only turned thirty-two a month ago.

Although he’s a younger partner in his firm, he’s the second co-counsel on this case. I don’t even understand what that means, but judging by the level of interest in these proceedings, I’d say it’s a big deal and will fast-track Ryland’s career.

I step forward, holding my hand up to ask the reporter a question, when the burly cameraman trailing behind her almost knocks me off my feet. He mumbles a hasty apology but doesn’t stop to see if I’m okay.

“I’m fine,” I mutter after regaining my balance.

Suddenly, I’m aware that people are watching and hope I don’t look as uncomfortable as I feel. As I try to wrap my head around my next move, a voice jolts me out of my thoughts.

“Did you drop this?” a man asks, holding out a media accreditation pass and offering it to me.

Grabbing it, I clutch it tightly to my chest. “Thanks! It must have fallen out of my bag.”

The heavy oak doors open. After glancing around to make sure nobody is watching, I quickly slip the lanyard over my head. With no other plan in mind, I can at least pass myself off as a reporter and gain access to the courtroom.

I step past the security guard, confidently walk into the courtroom, and take a seat in the public gallery. I'm quietly relieved when the judge finally calls for the session to continue.

Knowing that my cover is safe for now, I take a deep breath and relax.

My stomach flutters when Ryland enters and takes his position. He's as handsome as ever, and looking at him leaves me breathless.

Tall, with dark hair, he's as hot as sin. Ryland was always larger and more muscular than any of my brother's friends.

He's all broad shoulders and bristling masculinity, perfectly filling out the Italian-made gray suit.

The navy tie makes his blue eyes pop, contrasting with the crisp white shirt underneath.

The pants are a perfect fit, hugging his thick thighs and accentuating his ass.

He radiates an aura of raw power, which seems at odds with his polished appearance. I remember how he and Zane would train for hours boxing — their sweat-slicked bodies maneuvering around the ring as if it were a second home.

That's enough reminiscing. I'm getting carried away fantasizing and need to pay close attention. This is an important moment for Ryland.

Even though I find it hard to keep up with the legal jargon, he's an excellent storyteller, spinning a yarn that has the jury mesmerized.

His deep, calm tone hypnotizes me as he answers the judge's questions while I silently applaud him. He's obviously done his homework, and being prepared today is paying dividends. I'm glad I have the opportunity to watch him work. He's something special.

As the session draws to a close, Ryland stands tall and scans the crowd, running a hand through his tousled mop of brown hair.

His cool blue eyes land on mine, then his full lips turn up into a breathtaking smile, with dimples on either side.

My breath catches in my throat, and my cheeks heat as we hold a long stare. He's my kryptonite.

Of all the men in the world, why did I fall for the only one who will never see me as anything more than his best friend's little sister?

# Chapter 2

*Fire*

## Ryland

**T**he court case is attracting national media attention. Winning will put me on the path to the success I've dreamed of my entire life.

During a short break in proceedings, I check my phone for media updates but find missed calls and messages from Sabine.

Why the urgency? Frustration fills me because I can't call her straight away. She's probably calling to set me up on a date, something I don't want to do. Anxiety tightens like a band around my chest.

Sabine couldn't possibly be here, could she? Although I wouldn't be surprised if she were. I scan the public gallery, and the constriction in my chest finally loosens when I see her sitting at the back, close to the exit.

We lock eyes. Sabine O'Neill is a vision. I nod acknowledgment and send a quick message, asking her to meet me in the foyer during the next break.

She gives me a quick smile, and I turn my back, taking my seat as court proceedings resume. I feel her eyes on me, but knowing she's close calms my nerves.

I met Sabine when she was a few months shy of turning eighteen and entering her senior year of high school.

Her brother Zane and I had just graduated from college, and I was about to start law school. Zane warned me to stay away, but our paths didn't cross much, even if I wanted them to.



A year ago, we met up again at her cousin's wedding, and that's when I realized I have feelings for her. We were paired up as part of the wedding party.

We spent the week relaxing and getting to know each other better at her uncle's farm.

Attending a casual countryside wedding with a stunning date to dance and flirt with was perfect....until Zane reminded me that his sister was off-limits, effectively firing a warning shot.

I gave him shit, making out like he'd insulted me for even bringing it up, and we laughed it off as a joke.

Only the joke was on me. I had to fight every instinct to keep my hands to myself. It was one of the most challenging weeks of my life. Since the wedding, we've kept in touch through a group chat with Zane to avoid raising suspicion.

When we bumped into each other at the airport, she bravely confessed that her business was in trouble, and her disappointment broke my heart. Despite not competing with Zane, she's always striving to prove herself.

I volunteered to help, not because I was looking for a partner, but because the thought of Sabine being sad for any reason killed me.

When the session concludes, the spectators in the public gallery make their way out of the courtroom. Sabine's leaning against a pillar in the foyer, exactly where I asked her to meet.

A smile brightens her face when she sees me. Sabine is hot, goddamn it. When did she become even more beautiful?

"Hi, Bean," I say, genuinely relieved to see her.

"Hi, yourself," she replies, her dark eyes scanning my face.

“What are you doing here?” I pull her in for a quick kiss on the cheek. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes!” She smiles brightly. “You’ll never guess which famous Hollywood actress I lined up as your date.”

I groan inwardly at the thought of dating anyone other than Sabine. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry, but she’s excited, and I don’t want to disappoint her.

“My date? I’m sure whoever you arranged is fine, but why the urgency?”

“It’s Margo Raine! Her agent told me she’s in town filming her new movie with Luca Regis, *the* director of the moment. He’s crazy talented. They’re on a tight schedule, and that’s why I needed to see you.”

“I see.” I reach for my phone and tap the diary app.

“I sent the invitation to your calendar,” Sabine says, animatedly pointing at the screen.

It was amazing how technology allows information to infiltrate my devices without my permission, but I had to give it bonus points for efficiency.

“I’ll look at the dates when court is in recess and respond with one that suits. How does that sound?”

I’m relieved when she nods encouragingly. I’ll play along with the charade, but I’m already regretting it and haven’t been on the date yet.

I’d do anything for her, even if it meant offering myself up as a guinea pig to attract new clients to her business, something I regretted the instant I realized what was involved.

“Mr. Brooks! Ryland Brooks!” I glance over my shoulder and see a reporter with a swarm of news crews racing behind her.

“Vultures,” I mutter.

“Linda de Vries, WRBL News. Care to comment on the day’s proceedings?” The reporter shoves the microphone in my face, trying to squeeze a comment out of me.

*Nope. Not going to happen.*

A camera shutter clicks, and a flash pops as photographers document our every move. Suddenly, we’re enclosed in a circle of arms.

The reporters begin jostling, everyone yelling and shoving, but the only thing on my mind is how to protect Sabine.

When a reporter asks Sabine who she is, I become furious. “No comment,” I snap as I reach for Sabine’s hand, preparing to make our escape. “We need to hurry,” I tell her, my tone urgent. “Come with me.”

A cameraman tries to block me, but I elbow past with a gruff, “Out of my way.”

I rush her toward the stairs, desperately trying to avoid the press and protect Sabine from prying eyes. Her soft hand is shaking, so I gently squeeze her fingers, hoping she’ll find strength in my touch.

Finally, we escape by ducking into a cramped stairwell. Our feet pound on the steps, echoing off the concrete block walls as we leap up the stairs.

“We should probably stop here,” I say when we reach a quiet landing.

I lean against the wall inside the dim stairwell, Sabine close by my side as we recover from our mad dash. The cramped space seems to press us closer together, and the heat of her body rolls over me.

The chaotic scene in the foyer was nuts, and I need to make sure she isn't hurt. Besides that, being so close to her makes the urge to touch her irresistible.

Holding her hand feels incredibly intimate. It's the lightest touch but feels like foreplay. I pull her toward me, and though it's hard to be certain in the dim light, I swear I see her pulse skip in her throat.

I lift her chin, and her eyes meet mine. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but wow, that was intense," she says, her cheeks rosy from our run.

"It isn't usually like this," I confess.

"It's a circus out there. How do you concentrate and remember everything you're supposed to say?" Her gaze is full of admiration, and I'm proud of myself for making an impression.

"Plenty of practice." I laugh.

She smiles. "You're certainly impressive."

Surely, that was a Freudian slip?

Heat rises between us, and my eyes drop to her lips. I desperately yearn to lean in and kiss her, to give in to the desire building inside me, but I wouldn't dare cross that line unless I knew for certain she wanted me to.

She breaks the tension by asking a question, causing my stomach to drop. "We were interrupted before we finished talking about your date with Margo. Are you sure you're okay to follow through?"

I run a hand through my hair and shift my weight, unable to look her in the eye. Sabine's head tilts to the side, and her gaze lingers as she waits for my response.

Did she sense my inner conflict between wanting to go through with it and making an excuse to back out?

“I volunteered as tribute,” I say, holding up three fingers in the Mockingjay salute, and she laughs. “Don’t worry. Everything will work out fine, and I’ll write you a kick-ass testimonial and recommend you to my colleagues.”

“You’d do that?” she asks with stars in her eyes.

“Anything for my—” What am I supposed to call her?

“You’re the best!”

Sabine throws her arms around my neck and presses her sweet curves into my body. I embrace her warmly, wrapping her in my arms.

“Anything for you,” I say, stroking her hair. The heady aroma of wild strawberries tickles my nose. I take a deep breath, drawing her unique scent into my lungs. I never want to let her go.

Regrettably, I accepted the role as her client, even though I’d promised never to commit to anything without thinking it through. Still, I couldn’t stand to see her suffering, so I let my emotions guide me.

Making emotional decisions leads to trouble. That’s why I bury my nose in legal books and complicated paperwork, where I can hide in the labyrinth of rules and regulations.

There, I can mask the undeniable truth that my heart only wants one woman.

Sabine.

# Chapter 3

# *Elite Connections*

## Sabine

**F**ollowing the incident with the press and us hiding out in the stairwell, Ryland gives me the once-over, checking to make sure I'm not hurt from the scuffle.

The way he looks at me makes me feel secure and protected, but when he tips my chin to meet his gaze, I think I'll spontaneously combust from the heat in his eyes.

I doubt we have much more time to talk and will need to face those people again soon, but I'm content to hide out in the stairwell for now.

"What are you doing tonight? Do you want to catch up at dinner?" Ryland asks, drawing me out of my idle reveries.

A soft, fluttery feeling rushes through me like a gentle summer breeze, calming my soul.

"Tonight?" My hand moves to my throat, and my pulse picks up at the thought of seeing him again so soon.

Suddenly, I'm nervous, and all thoughts of Margo Raine, the reason for my visit, flee from my mind. I shouldn't be this excited to have dinner together since it's only business, but my pulse picks up at the thought of seeing him.

"Yeah. I'll need to unwind after a day in court. If it's okay with you, I'll order pizza, and we can eat in the office."

*Oh.* My feelings are ridiculous, silly, and inappropriate.

I'm in my head again, imagining things that don't exist, like maybe he's asking me out on a date. Of course, he isn't, because we are just friends, and more importantly, we're working together.



Good lord, what is wrong with me? How did I forget my entire reason for being here?

“Sure,” I reply, trying to inject some enthusiasm into my voice. I smile to mask my disappointment, but it seeps into my body and settles in the pit of my stomach. “Pizza in the office sounds great.”

“Kidding.” He smirks, making my heart flutter. “I’ll pick you up from your office, and we’ll go to Ironbark.”

“Awesome. That sounds great.”

Ironbark is a chic new eatery downtown run by an Australian chef and features authentic food inspired by the flavors of the outback.

I’m curious to taste what that means in real life and have been meaning to try it.

“I could use some coaching before my big date with Margo...” Ryland snaps his fingers as he tries to remember the actress’s name.

“Raine.”

Is he for real asking me to coach him? How would I know what it feels like to be a glamorous Hollywood actress or what he should do to impress her?

He nods. “That’s the one. Thanks. Are you okay with helping me out?”

“Of course. It’s part of the service at Elite Connections,” I reply, desperately trying to sound casual but feeling like a dork.

He rakes his gaze over my face, but his expression is unreadable. “I’d better let you get back to work, but thanks for taking the time to talk to me.”

“Anything for you, Bean. I’ll see you tonight.” Ryland grips my upper arm and leans in to kiss my cheek.

He’s more than just a crush. His approval means everything, and that’s why he’s my kryptonite.

Under the right circumstances, Ryland could grow to mean more to me than my brother, which in a way, feels like a betrayal. My feelings are complicated.

I wish there were more between us. I want him so much, it aches to think of living life without him in it, but it’s a dream, pure fantasy.

I need to shake the thought from my mind because wanting someone I can never have will only lead to misery. Helping others get their happily ever after is tough, knowing I can’t have the man I want.

\* \* \*

After seeing Ryland, I race to the office and continue where I left off with setting up. I’m determined to make my business successful, and I want the place to look its best before Ryland sees it.

I’m embarrassed by how desperately I’m trying to impress him, but I can’t help myself.

The purpose of our meeting tonight isn’t romantic. It’s a coaching session for his big date with the knockout beauty I set him up with.

What was I thinking by agreeing to do this? I’m too jealous to offer impartial advice.

The thought of Ryland touching Margo makes me feel sick, and I wish I’d never accepted his offer of help. I only did so

out of sheer desperation because it seemed like the best solution at the time, but now? Not so much.

The delivery man carries the final boxes filled with stationery supplies and places them beside the potted plants on the back wall.

He heaves a sigh of relief, removes his cap, and wipes the sweat from his brow before popping it on again.

“Done.” He wipes his hands down the front of his pants and retrieves a tablet I need to sign to show I’ve received the order.

“Great. Thank you.” I smile, turn to my screen, and refresh the browser on the banking app.

I let go of the breath I was holding, relieved that there’s enough money in the account to pay the bill. I’m spending money like it’s burning a hole in my pocket, so how long will the loan my brother gave me last?

After quickly refreshing the browser and updating the banking app with proof that I’ve paid the invoice, the man hands me the tablet to sign.

“Have a great evening,” he says when I hand it back.

I wave bye and nervously watch as he lumbers across the polished hardwood floor, stomping over the white area rug in his work boots.

I designed the office with inspiration from Pinterest, choosing a soft pastel palette. The new setup is shaping up to look even better than I’d imagined, even if I took a risk by placing a white rug in a high-traffic area.

Ideally, all the stationery would be unpacked and neatly stacked in place by now, but today’s schedule went out the window when I set foot inside the courthouse.

Ryland will be here soon to pick me up for dinner, and a quick glance at the stack of boxes lining the walls tells me I may as well give up for the day and start fresh in the morning.

The doorbell buzzes, and my stomach tightens in anticipation. I quickly finish arranging furniture, shifting a floor lamp to a better position beside the bookcase, before answering the intercom.

“Hey.” Ryland’s face fills the tiny security monitor.

“Third floor.” I buzz him into the building, take a deep breath, and check my reflection.

I pop a quick slick of gloss on my lips, then flick on the lamp to make the place seem larger.

The rhythmic sound of footsteps nearing the office makes my pulse quicken. I open the door, ready to show off my hard work.

He’s wearing the same navy suit and crisp white shirt, meaning he’s come straight from the office. I feel more comfortable, as I haven’t been home to change, thinking it might be too much like a date if I had.

“Do you have time to show me around?” Ryland kisses my cheek and flashes a winning smile. Warmth spreads across my chest as my heart swells, wishing the kiss were more than platonic.

“Y-Yes, of course,” I stammer, my face flaming.

Although I saw him a few hours earlier, he looks even more handsome. How is that possible?

Ryland sweeps into the room with a confident swagger, and I show him around the office, my heart in my throat the entire time.

I desperately want him to be proud of me and to think highly of my work. I stare at him, waiting for his approval when we're done.

"It's fantastic," he says. "Elegant. Very you."

The warmth of his words washes over me like a wave, and I turn to him like a flower turns toward the sun.

He gives me that smile I've come to love so much—the smile that makes me feel like I'm the best woman in the world.

I struggle to keep my composure and act aloof, all while a fire burns inside me that cannot be contained. That fire burns for Ryland.

# Chapter 4

*Coach me*

## Ryland

**S**abine is stunning, and I love spending time with her. How can I stay away when all I want to do is get closer?

Since we reconnected at the wedding, I've been looking for the right opportunity to make my move and show her that there's more to me. Doing nothing means I'll lose her forever.

I need to find a way to make her change her mind about how she sees me because being Zane's friend is killing any chance I have of getting closer.

It drives me crazy not to tell her how I feel, but I figured the day would come when everything would change. Although I didn't know when or how the situation would present itself, I'm a patient man, and she is worth waiting for.

I made a reservation at Ironbark, but when we arrive, the table I booked is occupied.

The manager escorts us to the bar, where we order drinks while we wait for our table to clear. The bartender, Miles, slides two coasters in front of us before taking our order.

"Enjoy your drinks," Miles says as he hands Sabine the cocktail she ordered.

Sabine eyes the fruity concoction thoughtfully. The cocktail is a vibrant watermelon color, with a frothy white topping and a lively pink umbrella perched on top.

"You can always ask for something else," I tell her.

"I'm fine with it," she says before taking a sip and promptly screwing up her pert nose.



“What does it taste like?”

“A little too sweet.” She pulls a slice of lime off the rim and squeezes it into the glass.

“Impossible,” I mutter under my breath. Nothing’s too sweet where Sabine’s concerned. She looks positively delicious and good enough to eat.

“What was that?” she asks, her eyes meeting mine. I feel the weight of her gaze, and the intensity of her stare makes me want to take her in my arms and kiss her until we’re breathless.

“Nothing,” I reply, swigging the beer Miles brought me.

“You’re being very secretive.” Her voice is low and husky.

“And you’re being nosy,” I reply.

“A little,” Sabine says, her attention focused on her drink as she swirls the cocktail with the swizzle stick.

“Then I’ll have to punish you.” Everything inside me tightens when I realize I spoke my innermost fantasy aloud.

Sabine’s eyes widen, and she quickly looks away. She picks up her drink and takes another sip, clearly avoiding eye contact.

The barman slides a couple of menus across the top of the bar. I grab them, handing one to Sabine before scanning the options for something suitable.

“Check it out.” I place the menu in front of Sabine and point to an item in the appetizers section. “Chili and garlic shrimp with crispy fried noodles.”

“You’re so mean. You know I don’t eat noodles.” Sabine glares, a disgusted look on her face. “Why did you have to remind me?”

I laugh at the memory of how she screamed when she opened a plastic container filled with worms I'd collected for a day of fishing.

I was storing them in the fridge when Sabine came home and went searching for a snack.

"Because you're adorable," I tease.

Her lips curve, and I know she's fighting a laugh, but I don't want her to hold anything back from me, ever. I want to hear it.

"I was looking for something to snack on, and I almost died when I saw these worms in the fridge!"

"I could tell by the way you were screaming."

"Come on, it was disgusting! Why would you put worms in the fridge?"

"Hey, don't be mad," I say. "We brought home extra in case we wanted to go fishing the next day."

"I was mad at you for sure." Sabine purses her lips.

"Why? Were you scared? Did you think the worms would escape from the fridge and start running around the house?"

"Oh, shut up." She glares at me.

"Actually, I read an article recently noting how high worms can jump."

"Okay, now you're just messing with me. It isn't true, is it?"

"You're right. They can't jump but could have escaped and started a conga line in the living room."

"Ryland! That's not funny!"

“No, but you taking them out of the fridge and releasing them outside sure as hell was.” I chuckle as I think about her reaction to the worms.

“Do you remember what you did next? You were so cute when you were being nice to the worms.”

She nods. “I took them to the backyard, didn’t I?”

“Here you go, little worms. I hope you find a nice home out there,” I say, doing my best impersonation of Sabine at the time.

“Yeah, yeah. You can stop teasing me now.” She blushes, dropping her head. “You scarred me for life. I can’t even eat noodles at a restaurant.”

“Sorry.” I love teasing her and making her laugh.

“Fine, but I’m skipping the snacks and changing the subject back to you.”

“Sure.”

“I enjoyed being in court and watching you work.” She sips her drink thoughtfully. “I’ve never asked what made you decide to study law. Is it the money?”

“It’s not only about the money. I’ve always been competitive, and I enjoy the win.”

“You’re so ambitious,” she says, and there’s no missing the way her lips quirk.

“That’s the rote answer, but it isn’t what drives me. At heart, I like helping people resolve conflicts. I grew up with opinionated parents who fought constantly. There was always shouting and arguing at our house, and I was always finding ways to make my parents compromise.”

Sabine regards me thoughtfully. “I would never have guessed if you hadn’t told me.”

“Growing up was tough, but my parents love each other, and they’re still together.”

“And you learned how to fight,” she says.

In the courtroom, you always need to be ready to catch what the opposition throws at you and adjust your position at any time.

My ability to do both makes me good at my job, but life is no different.

“Being a successful lawyer is about honing your instincts. It’s about knowing when to fight, when to back down, and—”

“When to bluff,” she finishes. She hides her playful smirk behind a curtain of dark hair, but I see it and laugh.

Following a short pause, Sabine regards me thoughtfully.

“I see how your early life experience plays out in the cases you choose to work on. Your ethics are front and center.”

*Ethics? Ouch.*

The server interrupts politely and offers to escort us to the table, saving me from making a fool of myself.

Unlike many of my friends, I’ve never been a man controlled by his dick. Despite arguing, my parents have a strong bond, and their relationship taught me that waiting for the right woman is worthwhile.

Running into Sabine at the airport was a stroke of luck, and when she told me about starting her own business, I was so proud.

Offering to help was my tactic to spend time together and draw her naturally into my life.

I assumed I'd help with legal issues or business setup, not offer myself as a guinea pig for matchmaking. Desperate times call for desperate measures, but that was the wrong move. I have no desire to go on a date with Margo Raine.

I can negotiate my way out of most situations, but how will I back out of this one?

# Chapter 5

*Striking a bargain*

## Sabine

The server escorts us to our table, and we order dinner and a bottle of wine. When the server leaves, Ryland toasts to our future success.

I'm unsure how to define "success" if it means losing the man I want but clink my glass with his.

When Ryland focuses his laser-like gaze on me, I feel like the only person in the room. It's an impressive feat, considering we're in a crowded restaurant.

Unfortunately, I lost my train of thought between moving from the bar to the table.

"What were we talking about earlier?" I ask. "It was about your work."

Ryland leans in, and the distinct and alluring musky scent of his cologne wafts around me, making my heart beat a little faster.

"That's enough about me. I'm proud of you, Bean. The office looks terrific."

"Thank you," I reply before taking a sip of wine.

Desperately trying to ignore the urge to reach out and touch him, I clasp my hands together in my lap and look away so I won't be tempted.

"Focusing your business on time-poor and cash-rich CEOs is a great idea," he comments thoughtfully. "You're going to do great things."

"I hope so." I sigh. "I've got a lot riding on it."



“Because of Zane lending you money? Is that why you’re feeling the pressure?” he asks with a tilt of his head.

Nodding, I reach for my wine glass and take a long sip.

“You’ve always had a talent for matchmaking. I remember you once created a list of girls that Zane liked and ranked them in order of suitability,” he says, his eyes crinkling at the edges.

“I was very scientific,” I say, remembering the lists of girls I thought were hot and ones that were sweet. I even made a chart with their attributes.

Ryland throws his head back and laughs harder than I’ve ever seen him laugh. How did I never notice that his dark hair is just long enough to curl around his ears?

“That’s one way of putting it,” he says when he catches his breath.

“Your date with Margo is next week, so I’ll need to interview you about your dating history and such.” I’ve never heard my brother mention a girlfriend or anything.

Poking a finger inside his shirt collar to loosen it, he clears his throat.

“I’m an open book, Sabine. You can ask me anything, but I’ll tell you now, there are no skeletons in the closet.”

“Sure, but if I ask questions about your personal life, will that feel weird because we’re friends?” I grab my drink. My mouth is so dry.

“I have no time for dating, but I fit your ideal client profile, which makes me a suitable candidate.” Ryland avoids giving me a direct answer. I see why he’s an excellent attorney.

I don’t have the heart to do a deep dive into his dating profile. It hurts too much, and I sense it’s making him uncomfortable.

“Okay, sure. I’ll email you a comprehensive list of questions, and you can take your time answering. Is that okay?”

“Sounds good.” He seems relieved to drop the subject.

I relax a little, thinking we’ve navigated our way out of the woods, but Ryland rakes his gaze over me with a look of appreciation that heats me up and makes my nipples tighten.

It might be the wine we’re drinking or perhaps the compliments he’s paying me, but I loosen up and enjoy the way he’s looking at me. I’m starting to sense a deeper connection between us.

Is it possible he might see me as something more than Zane’s sister one day? There’s no harm in daydreaming. I’m not hurting anyone if I imagine what it would feel like to have his lips on my skin.

Ryland cocks an eyebrow and gives me a roguish grin. “And you? What do you want in a lover?”

My heart stops for a moment. Ryland’s doing that thing again where he’s staring at me like he knows what I’m thinking. Instead of freaking me out, he makes me want to open up and tell him more.

“I want to look into a man’s eyes and feel like he truly sees me.” I blurt it out a little too quickly but can’t stop myself. “I want a man who understands me. I want him to accept me as I am, quirks and all, without any expectations or pressure to change.”

“That’s idealistic, but yeah, you should definitely hold out until the right man comes along, one who can give you what you need.”

I nod enthusiastically, grateful that he gets what I’m talking about. “That’s the kind of connection I’m holding out for. It’s

what I want to experience.”

Suddenly, I realize where I am, who I’m with, and I remember what the purpose of this dinner was. It isn’t a date.

Ryland is putting himself out to help me, and it would serve us both if I could keep that in mind. I swing straight back into work mode.

“That’s enough about me. We’re here to talk about how to serve your needs, and I want to assure you that I’ll do my best to give you top quality service.”

“I don’t doubt it, but having said that, don’t assume that because we’re friends, you can take the arrangement lightly,” he says, his blue eyes intensely focused on me.

His arms are crossed, and his voice holds a hint of challenge.

“I would never.” There’s too much at stake, both personally and professionally, but there’s something unreadable in his expression, and it needs clarification.

I hold his gaze for a moment, my breathing slightly faster than normal, before asking, “What do you mean exactly?”

Ryland’s gaze narrows even further as he regards me carefully. It feels as if he’s looking into my soul. Despite suspecting that this is all a game to him, I can’t help but feel a bit of hope.

“I’ll give you a chance, but if you fail, you owe me,” he says. He uncrosses his arms and leans forward, steepling his fingers under his chin.

I hesitate for a moment before responding. “Owe you what?”

I feel his nervous energy vibrating in the air between us. He moves closer until our legs touch, and his full lips curl into a slight smile. “A date. With me.”

“But...” My hand flutters to the center of my chest.

A date with Ryland would be my dream come true, but it could never happen. My eyes dart around nervously, and I lick my lips. My mouth is suddenly so dry.

“We can’t.” My hoarse voice cracks, the sound barely a whisper.

Ryland shakes his head and chuckles, his deep voice contradicting me when he replies, “There’s no such thing as can’t.”

Tingles run up my spine, but I feel so uncomfortable like I’m potentially risking too much. But I remind myself it’s Ryland, and he would never do anything to mess up what we have.

Never. Even if our conversation is flirtatious, I’m aware this is as far as it will go.

“What if it doesn’t work out? Will it affect our friendship?” I sit back in my seat.

“Sabine, I’d never do anything to jeopardize what we have. You and Zane mean too much to me,” he says.

It’s like he’s reading my mind, but is he talking about our friendship or something more?

“Okay, that’s a relief because I don’t want that either.” Money aside, I imagine the guilt I’d feel forever if something I did cost my brother his best friend.

Ryland’s watching my mouth move with a knowing look on his face. No one else can hold a stare like Ryland.

He smirks like he’s hiding a secret, and I realize he’s messing with me. He’s using the date as a threat so I do a good job.

I smile into my glass of wine, feeling as nervous and giddy as a teenager before pushing to my feet.

“Deal.” I thrust my hand out, and we shake on it.

Before I can pull back, Ryland brings my hand to his lips, kissing it gently, and my hand trembles. I’m close enough to feel the warmth radiating from his body while my own heart is beating against my chest.

The warmth of his lips sends a wave of emotions crashing through me. I’m lost in the moment, completely taken in by the tenderness of his touch.

Stunned, I stare into his eyes, not wanting the moment to end. We look at each other for what feels like an eternity, neither of us saying a word, until, finally, he breaks the silence.

“You don’t have to worry about your business succeeding. I have faith that you’ll make it work,” he says sincerely.

My heart flutters. “Thank you,” I say softly. Now it’s up to me to uphold my end of the bargain.

He leans in closer, capturing my gaze. “I believe in you, Bean, and I’ll do everything I can to help.”

The way he looks at me, with such tenderness and love, takes my breath away. I don’t understand what’s happening, but I trust him.

## Ryland

All throughout dinner, I can't stop myself from thinking a million inappropriate sexual thoughts. My body heats up, and my mouth goes dry as I sit across the table from Sabine. My mind races as I imagine her wearing lacy, pale pink panties... and all the ways I'd peel them off her with my teeth.

Now that I've made a bargain with Sabine, the guilt I've stuffed down deep in my gut breaks through to the surface of my mind.

I'm not being honest with my best friend. What would happen if I told him how I feel about his sister? Would he believe me and understand my feelings are real? Would he accept me or fight? Fuck.

The thought prods at me like a thorn in my side, reminding me I'm crossing lines with my best friend's sister.

Although Zane's out of town for work, he'll return, and the short time we have to get to know each other won't last. The clock is ticking, and it's counting down to midnight.

After dinner, I drive her home and walk her to the door. We stand outside on the porch, and my eyes roam her face. The moment stretches for what feels like forever.

I can't tear my eyes away and wonder if she feels the electricity bouncing between us.

I take her hands in mine, bringing her close. Her touch sends a wave of warmth through my body, and I realize that this is not just electricity I'm feeling but something much more powerful.

“You’re amazing, Bean. You know that?” My voice is full of emotion, and she stares, speechless.

“Goodnight.” I press a gentle kiss on her forehead before letting her go inside.

“Night,” she whispers as she steps inside and closes the door.

I remain on the porch, staring at the door, burning with need and fighting every instinct not to kick down the door and force my way in.

As I walk to the car, I picture myself standing in a courtroom, waiting for sentencing.

*“What do you have to say in your defense?”* the stern judge asks as he gives me a beady-eyed stare over the rim of his half-moon spectacles.

*“I have nothing to say, sir.”*

*“How do you plead?”* The judge lifts the gavel into the air.

*“Guilty and ready to burn in hell.”*

# Chapter 6



*Failure to launch*

## Sabine

**T**his past week has been torture. I couldn't get Ryland out of my head, so concentrating on work was challenging. I sit in my office, staring at the clock and waiting for him to call with an update on his date with Margo Raine.

I stop scrolling through my social media feed, suddenly fixated on the photos of Ryland sharing a candle-lit dinner with the actress.

He meets her dazzling smile with rapt attention. A pang of jealousy courses through my veins, intensifying my envy.

The images, now burned into my retinas, add to the sting of disappointment which settles over me like an unwelcome shroud.

A shroud I'll keep tightly wrapped around my shoulders to shield me from the harsh and painful reminder of unrequited love.

This digital self-torture rouses a sense of bitterness I didn't know I was capable of feeling. The situation is all my doing, and I need to get a grip.

After an excruciatingly long wait, Ryland sends a text.

You did a great job, Bean.

My heart tightens.

My fingers hover over the keypad, unsure how to respond. I try to dampen my disappointment, but it settles in my stomach.

The bubbles appear on the screen before another message pops up.

Margo's nice. I've made a new friend.

Friend?

We weren't compatible, but we ran into a lawyer friend of mine, and the two of them were much better suited.

Now what?

You know what.

Time to pay the piper, right?

The screen lights up with an incoming call from Ryland. I answer immediately.

“You got it, Bean. It's time to pay up, but remember, you did a good job. It isn't your fault Margo wasn't right for me.”

“Um... okay.”

“I wasn't in the right headspace.”

“Oh. I'm sorry about the timing. It wasn't ideal, with the trial and all the distractions.”

Matchmaking is a delicate business, and now I feel guilty, as though I forced him into doing something as a favor to me.

I should have known this wouldn't be smooth sailing, but I rushed ahead, believing everything would work out.

Instead, all I've done is create more mess for both Ryland and Margo. I make a quick note in my diary to call her agent right away.

“That isn’t the reason. There’s someone else on my mind.” Ryland chuckles, and the deep rumble sends a shiver up my spine.

“Who?” I blurt, sounding more defensive than I intended.

“Meet me for dinner. We’ll talk more in person.”

I roll my eyes. Awesome. He’s being cryptic when I need him to spell things out clearly. I don’t need more mysteries to solve.

“Sure. I owe you, and thanks for introducing Margo to your friend. Did you know Elite Connections offers a referral fee for successful matches?”

“Keep your money, Bean. And wear your best dress because we’re dining at Blue Lotus.” His voice is low and husky. I’m so turned on right now I can’t think straight.

“Wow. That sounds amazing.” My voice is full of breathy excitement, and my mouth pulls into the widest smile.

“Excellent. Listen, Bean, I need to go, but I’ll call later, and we can discuss the details.” Ryland ends the call.

It’s a good thing I’m already sitting because I’d fall over in a stiff breeze.

“Blue Lotus” is a three-star Michelin restaurant located inside the Elysium Cove resort.

It’s the most exclusive restaurant in the area and the type of restaurant you’d go to for a special occasion, not a regular dinner with a friend or business associate.

Well, unless you’re super wealthy, like the new folks who seem to be flocking to Bailey’s Cove since the airport opened.

The Elysium Cove resort attracted new people, and real estate prices are climbing every day.

Crap, I need my brain to start working again and stop getting distracted thinking about irrelevant things.

*Real estate prices? Really Sabine?*

I need to focus and solve the problem at hand before things spiral out of control.

I need to find another high-flying client and start over in order to save my business or rethink the business model altogether.

Although Ryland hasn't been explicit about his feelings, he wouldn't make such a bold move if he wasn't serious. There's too much at risk.

If he has feelings for me, I want to explore what could happen and find out where things could lead. Elite Connections was my focus until now, but I can't deny the way I feel.

What if I can't find a client and my business fails? I'm determined to succeed, but I believe I'll find another way. I'll pick up the pieces, pivot and come up with a new idea.

I'll pay Zane what I owe, but not at the expense of losing Ryland because the thought makes me feel sick.

I'm determined to find a way to have it all and even more determined to show Ryland how I feel.

Opportunities like this don't come around every day, and I need to know if Ryland feels the same way.

## Ryland

Sabine sounded surprised before accepting my dinner invitation, but I heard the excitement in her voice. She's all I've been able to think about over the past couple of days, but finally, it's date night.

I tried to convince Sabine to let me pick her up, but she insisted on meeting me at the restaurant. I love her independence, but I wish she'd let me take care of her.

I arrive early, and the maître d' ushers me to a corner table. The dim lighting and subtle music set the perfect tone for a romantic evening.

I wait for Sabine, anxiously drumming my fingers on the table. When that gets old, I check the starched tablecloth for wrinkles.

Finding none, I peruse the menu, constantly looking up in search of her.

Sabine turns heads when she enters the restaurant. She's a beautiful woman and has every right to feel proud of herself.

She's a sight to behold in an emerald dress split high on the thigh, displaying enough skin to draw attention from other diners.

I can't stop people from gawking at her, and as long as no one touches her, everything will be fine. If anyone dares come closer—heads will roll.

But all that is about to change. If everything goes to plan, Sabine O'Neill will be spoken for very soon. As soon as tonight.

My eyes remain fixed on her. Goddamn it, she's the most stunning woman I've ever seen, with her long dark hair, pouty, thick lips, and dark-eyed stare.

Her dark silky strands are piled high on her head and pinned up in a twist to emphasize her swan-like neck.

Would she enjoy it if I laid soft, lingering kisses across her collarbone, along the smooth column of her throat and up to her ear?

My desire must be written all over my face because she puts a little extra sway in her hips as she approaches the private table in the quiet corner.

My mind wanders and begins fantasizing about all the ways I could give her pleasure. I imagine her sexy body under my hands as I slowly caress her smooth, naked skin.

I'd lick a path from her neck all the way down to her belly, driving her wild with need and making her beg for more.

I stand and greet her with a kiss on the cheek.

"Ryland," she whispers.

My name on her lips sounds so damn good. I love the way her voice goes all raspy when she says my name.

The instant I hear it, my imagination fires, and all I can hear is, more, harder, please, now, yes, yes, yes.

I shut down my vivid fantasy as Sabine takes a seat. She smiles when she sees the single red rose in a small vase in the center of the table.

My eyes snap to the server, who has appeared beside the table out of nowhere. He introduces himself, hands us a menu, and tops up our water glasses.

Sabine peruses the menu, her face animated by the offerings.

I'm a man of simple tastes when it comes to food. I don't care what I eat, but scan the delicacies on the menu, hoping something suitable jumps out soon.

The server, dressed in a crisp black uniform, politely clears his throat.

"Madame and monsieur, the chef's specials this evening."

Sabine flashes him a warm smile. I hope she doesn't develop a taste for fine dining because I don't understand most of the ingredients.

Looking at the size of the meals being served around me, I'll be ordering a club sandwich from room service or going to sleep hungry.

"Artichoke broth with smoked yolk and winter leaves." The server pauses for a beat before adding, "We also have Halibut, oyster, and seaweed. The third special of the evening is Monkfish, spiced aubergines, black quinoa, burnt lemon puree."

I don't know what the first two specials were, but the last one sounded like a clash of all the wrong things. Something black and something burnt? No thanks.

So far, every ingredient is unrecognizable and sounds as appetizing as caviar scraped from the belly of an ancient race of whales that just flew in on a spaceship.

"Madame?"

"Thank you. I'd like a moment to decide."

The server bows his head. "Monsieur?"

"Do you serve steak?" *Does it come with a side of blue balls?*



I deserve it as punishment because there's only one fire in my body—a fire that sparks an aching need to be inside her.

“Oui. Filet mignon.” The server looks as though he's about to launch into a spiel, but I cut him off.

“Rare, please.” I've heard enough. I snap the menu shut and hand it to him. Sabine orders, and the server bows politely before leaving us.

As I listen to Sabine, all I can think about is the suite I reserved in the hotel attached to the restaurant. I'm counting the minutes until dinner is over, and we can go upstairs.

I've been holding back my true feelings for too long, but tonight I'll finally confess everything.

It won't be easy, but it's the right thing to do. This evening is all about being open and honest.

Our food arrives, and we halt our conversation to admire the presentation. The mushrooms, beef, and salmon all look succulent, and I'm already salivating.

When the server leaves, Sabine looks at me with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“This looks delicious. Are you ready to taste it and see what it's like?”

I raise an eyebrow and give her a suggestive smile. “I'm ready to dive right in.”

Sabine laughs before taking a bite of the risotto. “Mmm,” she hums, her eyes lighting up with pleasure. “Try it. It's amazing.”

I take a spoonful of the risotto and savor the flavor while Sabine tries the beef tenderloin. “It's so juicy and tender, I think it's even better than the risotto.”

I can't help but watch her lips as she chews, and my heart beats faster. Sabine blushes and takes another bite of the beef.

After dinner, the server returns with a cheese plate and a bottle of dessert wine. Behind him, I hear a commotion the staff gathers around the people who entered the restaurant.

Abruptly, the tranquility of our evening is shattered when paparazzi approach our table. The restaurant staff scramble to keep the situation under control.

Sabine looks nervous. "What's happening?"

I force myself to remain calm and composed. My face is expressionless so I don't frighten her, but I'm furious.

"Someone ratted us out." I shoot the maître d' a filthy look. "Photographers turned up when I took Margo out for dinner, and with the trial running at the same time, I'm not surprised."

I bet someone inside the restaurant tipped off the press. If this is what being a celebrity is like, it's not for me.

"I'm sorry." Her voice is high and tight, her eyes dart around the room.

"We should go," I tell her, my voice gruff with frustration. Our evening is ruined by the intrusion, but my only priority is to shield Sabine from harm.

I throw a few bills on the table. Taking her hand, I lead her out of the restaurant and away from prying eyes.

"It's like déjà vu, right?" she asks breathlessly.

"More like Groundhog Day." I want to take her in my arms and keep her safe, so no one can hurt her.

As the reporter and photographer approach us, I snag her around the waist, lift her off her feet, and race to the elevator.

“Where are we going?”

“I booked a room. It’s upstairs, and we’ll be safe there.”

She bites her lip and hides her face in my chest. The elevator doors shut, enclosing us safely inside.

# Chapter 7

# *Sharks*

## Sabine

**T**he paparazzi came out of nowhere, and the restaurant's security seemed powerless to do anything. Escaping the photographers gives us the perfect excuse to leave the restaurant, but I didn't expect Ryland would have a room booked.

We race into the foyer, the sound of camera shutters spurring us to run faster toward the elevator. I've never sprinted in heels, and don't recommend it.

Maybe the fiasco is a sign that I'm not cut out to work with famous people. I can't seem to attract the right clients anyway, so why am I trying so hard?

"It's too dangerous out there, but we're safe now," he says as the elevator doors close.

I nod, my heart racing. Ryland holds me firmly in his embrace. I'm facing the doors with his solid chest against my back and his big hands wrapped around my waist. My ass is pressed against his thick, firm thigh, and it's all I can do not to rub against him.

His breath is hot on the back of my neck, and when his lips ghost over my skin, I shiver with pleasure. Being in his arms feels so right, and I sink into him. There's so much we need to talk about, but right now, all I want to do is kiss him. And more. So much more.

"We're going to your room, right?" A room you reserved in the hope we ended up here?

"Yes." His tone is clipped like he's holding himself back.

“And we’ll camp out until the press leave us alone?” I have a ton of questions, and they all lead to the same place. It’s easier to ask when I’m not staring him in the face.

“Sabine, you can stay as long as you like. If you feel safe from danger but want to go home, I’ll drive. Or you can stay.”

Ryland’s heated gaze was on me constantly as we enjoyed dinner, and he kept stealing small touches. I felt my stomach twisting with anticipation, but questions swirled around my mind like a dust storm. For so long, I didn’t think he wanted me, and now it’s the complete opposite.

I pull away from his embrace and face him.

“Why now? What’s changed?” I ask.

“What do you mean?” His brow furrows, and his gaze drills into me.

The question hangs between us like an invisible barrier, and the atmosphere becomes thick, pressing down on me like a weight. I’m trying to figure out how to phrase the question and not invite criticism.

But I set my pride aside because getting an answer is too important. I’ll never be content without knowing his reasons. That doesn’t mean I’ll understand, but I need to know.

I push forward, speaking more boldly than usual, but my voice trembles despite my best efforts to remain calm. “Why did you agree to be my client?”

“Bean, your happiness is everything,” he says in a low voice. “It isn’t my place to judge your methods. My job is to support you.”

My heart softens, but still... was that the best way to show support?

“Were you trying to make me jealous?” Frustrated, I snap my mouth shut.

His eyes blaze and the mounting tension between us rises another notch. He clenches his jaw, and his shoulders tense up.

I feel uncomfortable and edgy. It’s like my defensive walls went up, as did his. Letting out a long breath through his nose, Ryland shifts his stance.

Finally, he breaks the silence with three broken words he grits out as if he’s spitting sandpaper. “I made a mistake.”

Dropping his gaze to the floor, he runs a hand through his hair, messing it up further, and his polished appearance crumples. Ryland’s disheveled appearance, the deep creases around his eyes, and his downturned lips break through the walls around my heart.

“If I stay, you know... it changes everything.” My voice is shaky.

Ryland nods. We stare at each other for a long moment, neither of us moving, not even taking a breath. The elevator doors slide open, forcing us out. He takes my hand, shielding me with his body until we reach his room.

Once inside, Ryland locks the door and turns to face me. The air between us is charged with electricity. I can feel the heat emanating from his body, and my heart races in anticipation.

“If you stay, it changes everything,” he agrees. “But I don’t want you to go.”

The words send a thrill through me. I feel like I’m on the edge of experiencing something incredible, but the nagging voice in the back of my mind won’t pipe down.

“Why didn’t you tell me how you felt earlier?”



“You were so young,” he replies softly, avoiding eye contact.  
“Then, of course, there was your brother.”

“Fair enough. But then what? You lived your life and had other girlfriends?”

“What girlfriends?” Ryland tenses, eyebrows furrowing. “Can you name one?”

“Actually, no.”

“Dating was never important because I was waiting for one person in particular.” His eyes twinkle.

“Me?” I ask, not trusting my voice to stay steady. I hold my breath as he trails his finger along my collarbone. My heart races, but I want this.

“Yes, you. And now you’re here with me, and there’s no way in hell I’m letting you go.”

My heart races at his admission. He wants me and has for a long time.

“You can’t keep me in a hotel room forever,” I tease. A blush spreads across my cheeks, and I glance around the room. We’re in a luxury apartment, and I could absolutely live here happily.

He chuckles softly. “Are you sure about that?”

“No.” I swallow hard, feeling a wave of emotion, but unable to look away. Ryland’s eyes drop to my lips. “What about my brother?”

“I’ll talk to Zane. Don’t worry. I know how to handle him.”

“Does he know how you feel?”

I’ll need to face Zane too, but I’ll figure out what to do later. This isn’t the time. I put further thoughts of Zane out of my

mind for now.

“What matters is how you feel. Do you want to do this?” he asks.

I bite my lip. He’s got that sexy smirk on his face, and my throat fills with emotion. Being the object of his desire feels like a dream. I can’t resist him. No man has ever looked at me like this, not even in my fantasies.

“More than anything.”

“That’s my girl,” Ryland says in a gruff voice.

I force myself to speak, but my voice is barely a whisper, “What did you call me?”

“You heard me,” Ryland says in a low voice, thick with emotion. He pauses and continues in an even quieter tone. “I mean it. I’ve been holding out, waiting for you, but you were always my girl.”

I’m taken aback by the intensity of his words. He makes me feel safe and desired at the same time.

## Ryland

Everything feels like it's falling into place. Our friendship is growing into so much more, and there is trust between us. It's a relationship I will handle with care forever.

When I run my thumb along her cheek, her plump lips part, and she shivers. There's so much desire in her eyes, so much of everything I crave. She stares at me as if I hung the moon.

I'm overwhelmed by powerful desire when her lips part, wanting to draw the moment out forever. I want her to understand the magnitude of what I'm feeling and share the intensity of my emotion, but I can't wait any longer. I'm desperate for her kiss.

She trusts me, and I appreciate having the privacy to explore each other without the worry of being watched or, worse, getting caught.

I thread my fingers through her silky hair and skim my nose across it, letting her scent wash over me. She smells like flowers and sunshine and all the good things that remind me of spring.

When I brush my lips against the back of her neck, I'm overwhelmed by longing, and my mind goes hazy with desire.

The electricity between us grows so strong, it's palpable. I run my left hand slowly down her arm, her fine hairs lifting with each lingering caress until I reach her wrist. As soon as I touch her, a million tiny sparks of electricity seem to dance around us.

Her body quivers at my touch, and I feel an overwhelming urge to keep exploring her soft, supple skin. It feels erotic and

romantic at the same time, and I never want to stop touching her.

Every nerve inside me blazes. I've never felt anything like it, and I'm certain by how she responds to my touch that the feeling is mutual.

As I place open-mouthed, passionate kisses along the side of her neck, her breathing becomes shallow and erratic, her shoulders heaving. She mewls little sounds of pleasure, showing me how much she wants me. The urge to kiss her everywhere is so strong, and I can't resist any longer.

"Sabine?"

"Yes?" Her voice is dreamy and soft. I'm dying to feel my lips press against hers, to feel her body close to mine.

"Can I kiss you?"

She nods invitingly, and my heart races. I tuck a finger under her chin, and she blinks up at me.

I've waited years for a taste of her, and I'm not going to waste another second. I lean over, pressing my mouth against hers. Our lips meet, and I kiss her softly and tenderly, honored to glimpse her secret self, the side she doesn't share with many people.

"You're mine," I growl before taking her mouth.

Some kisses turn you on. They start off soft and slow, but you can feel them all over your skin. Then you feel them all over your body until their power sinks into your bones. Others stop time.

I feel her warmth and softness and know I'll never forget this moment. Wrapping my arms around her, I pull her closer,

never wanting to let go. The kiss seems to last forever, yet it still isn't long enough.

# Chapter 8

*Dream come true*

## Ryland

**K**issing has never felt like this. I slide my tongue between her lips, and she opens for me. Our breath mingles, becoming one. Her sweetness is intoxicating.

She threads her fingers through my hair, cupping the back of my head like she can't get enough of kissing me. I can't get enough of her, either.

Sabine melts into me, her warm, pliant body is so soft in my arms. She moves with me, gliding against my chest, her breasts pushing into me, as she plays with the hair on the back of my neck.

The need to have my lips all over her and explore every inch of her body becomes urgent.

She lifts my shirt over my head, letting it fall to the floor. She eyes me appreciatively as her hands roam across my arms, tracing patterns over the contours of my body. She runs her fingers up my chest, and my cock grows hard. I need to make her mine in every way.

I rake my eyes over her body. "Strip for me."

"Is that what you want?" I feel her eyes on me as I park my ass on a chair. Lacing my hands behind my head, I nod, hoping the distance between us gives her the confidence to strip.

"Do it nice and slow."

She unzips her dress and drops a shoulder strap, taking her time to tease me. "More?" she asks seductively.

"Take it off," I say, my voice gruff like a command. "Take it all off so I can see you."



The fabric loosens from her body, and she pushes it past her hips and thighs. When the silk dress falls to the floor, all the breath leaves my body.

She's wearing a black lace bra that pushes her tits high, black stockings, and a garter belt with little bows on the snaps.

I wolf whistle.

"You like it?"

"So much."

"It's new."

"Were you thinking of me when you bought it?"

Her eyes flash with sincerity. "Yes."

I want her to want me so badly, her admission is like a punch to the gut. I've dreamed about this moment for so long, and now it's finally happening. *She wants me.*

I watch as she carefully unclasps her bra. Her nipples harden as she lowers the straps off her shoulders and takes it all the way off.

I drag my hand over my face, take a huge breath and rasp out, "Jesus fucking Christ."

"Do I drive you wild?" she asks, slowly unrolling the stockings down her legs.

"Crazy." My voice is husky, and my chest is heaving. When I say, "Take your panties off," she shivers.

"You're bossy," she teases with a flirtatious smile.

"Yep," I answer, feeling smug.

She traces the edges of the fabric delicately with her fingers, and my heart races.

With her head bent down and eyes closed, she hooks her fingers in the sides of the panties and slowly peels them down and off her legs.

Sabine tosses them to the side, and before she can protest, I pick her up and throw her onto the bed, pinning her under my weight.

She gasps, and the sound ignites me. I eagerly kiss my way down her body, and she leans back on the bed. I lower myself down, admiring the way she spreads her legs for me without trying to hide.

Her breathing becomes faster, and her skin is flushed, but I see how our intense connection makes it easier for her to let go.

Gripping her hips, I pull her to the edge of the bed, spreading her legs wide so I can see everything. I fall to my knees and bury my face between her thighs.

“That’s my girl,” I murmur, parting her silky folds with my tongue and lapping up her arousal like a starving man.

“Do you know how much I fucking love you? All of you, but this part is my favorite.”

My tongue circles her clit, teasing her, as I slide two fingers in and out, getting her ready.

“Ryland!” She cries out my name, her back arching off the bed as her first orgasm rocks through her body, hard and fast.

Pushing to my feet, I grab a condom from my pocket before removing my pants. She watches me strip, licking her lips when I push my boxers down and my cock springs free.

“I need you,” she whimpers. She’s so damn desperate.

I sheathe myself, my dick throbbing as I stare at her slick pussy, then at her eyes, so full of desire. I curl a hand around

her hip and rub the tip between her legs. She shudders, arching her back.

“You’re incredible,” I rasp out. “I want you so fucking much.”

“I want you too,” she says. She needs me. Being with her is like a dream come true.

Reaching the center of the bed, I lower my hips, pressing her into the mattress. Gripping her hips with both hands, I thrust in slow, shallow strokes.

With my lips against her ear, I pull back, only leaving an inch inside her. “You want more?”

“Yes.” Her voice is strangled.

She nods, and I press in another inch. Sabine adjusts her legs. Her heels are digging into the backs of my thighs as she urges me deeper.

“You need more?” I tease.

“More,” she begs as I sink into her silky depths.

She’s soaked. Her body takes me easily, and I take my time, rocking in and out while she grinds her hips against me. She loves this, and I want to see it all.

My eyes want to roll back from pleasure. But I resist, not wanting to miss any of her expressions.

I push in deep and drop my weight onto my elbows, our chests pressing together. Her nipples pebble, her body writhing beneath mine.

“More,” she pleads, wrapping her legs over my ass, feet locked. I ease out and then push in, sinking into the woman of my dreams. “Oh, God.”

“Perfect,” I rumble. Being inside her feels divine. She’s hot and snug, and we fit together as if our bodies were made for each other.

We move together, rocking so naturally as if we’ve done this a thousand times before. Sabine grips my hair with one hand, the other clawing my back.

“Oh... fuck... Ryland—”

Her uninhibited moans and all the little sounds she’s making, like she’s lost in pleasure, drive me wild. I’m moments away from reaching the peak of pleasure. I’m holding back, waiting for her. She’s close.

“Do you need to come?” I growl between clenched teeth.

“Oh God, please, yes.” The words spill out in a breathless rush. I slip my hand between us, fingers finding her clit.

“I need you to come for me.”

Her body locks around me. She’s so primed that she explodes in orgasm within seconds, crying out my name.

My pulse races, and my skin glistens with sweat. I chase her there, pushing deep inside at a fevered pace. The pleasure intensifies until it rips through me, and she shudders beneath me.

Our foreheads touch and I come so fucking hard that nothing but incoherent sounds fall from my lips.

I roll off her, tie the condom, and toss it in the bathroom trash. I return with a washcloth and make my way back to bed, where I find Sabine waiting.

She’s naked, her lips are swollen, and her hair is a mess. She’s the epitome of freshly fucked and the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen.

I hold her close, whispering sweet nothings until her eyelids flutter closed. Her breathing becomes slow and steady.

My hand is resting on her stomach. My cock jerks to attention, enjoying the sensation of her soft skin against my hand.

I want more, but I don't want this moment to end. If I move, I'll wake her, and I'm not ready to lose the feeling of her in my arms.

Although I don't know what tomorrow brings, I'll never give up.

Not on this. Not on her. She's worth fighting for. She always has been.

# Chapter 9

*Walk of shame*

## Sabine

The following morning, while Ryland's in the shower, I turn on my phone. It beeps with a message from my friend, Lacey.

Are you okay?

More than okay.

Except for the pounding headache and furry mouth. But the sweet ache downstairs, where Ryland put me through my paces last night, makes up for any discomfort.

Besides, science created Tylenol.

Okay. Just checking.

I'm fine. Why are you acting weird?

After sending the message, I stretch my limbs to shake off the night's sleep.

Did you open the attachment? I sent a link.

I saw an attachment but hadn't opened it. My mood immediately sours when I read the headline "Playboy Attorney."

Underneath it is a picture of Ryland and me running for cover from the photographers who cornered us last night.

All the blood drains from my face as I quickly scan the article, which is filled with insulting allegations.



Who is the mystery woman dining with Ryland Brooks, the darling of the legal scene?

Ryland takes one look at my face and doesn't bother asking what's wrong before plucking the phone from my hand.

"Shit," he mutters. The short bristles of his stubble give off a distinct sound as he scrubs a hand over his face.

"It's okay. I'll make this right," he says, his eyes pleading with me to trust him.

"Of course, it's okay. Today's headline is tomorrow's trash. I understand how the media works." I plaster a fake smile on to reassure him.

We did nothing wrong, but that doesn't stop me from feeling like my stomach's dropped to my feet.

Ryland's eyes follow me. I'm glossing over the issue of Zane finding out the wrong way, but he's waiting for me to bring it up.

Ryland's eyes narrow as he begins pacing.

"I know, I know—we haven't told Zane." I throw my hands in the air, frustrated that the situation is getting out of hand.

When Ryland pulls out his phone, I push to my feet, closing the distance between us. I place my hand over his.

"It's four in the morning for Zane. Why don't we get something to eat and call him after breakfast?"

It's Saturday morning, and the hotel dining room is crowded. We make our way to a quiet corner near the back of the dining room and help ourselves to the breakfast buffet.

Ryland is unusually quiet. I try to make light-hearted conversation, but my attempts feel stilted.

Seeing the photograph dampened my mood, and I feel as if an ax is swinging like a pendulum over our heads.

Anger and frustration rise within me until I can no longer hold the unpleasantness inside. I reach across the table, placing my hand over Ryland's.

“About Zane...”

Ryland rolls his eyes. “You know how protective he is.”

I give him a small smile. “Yes, and I love him for it, but we've done nothing wrong. Besides, Zane isn't the boss of my body or my heart. I am, and I'm in charge of who touches me.”

“Bean. I meant what I said last night. I love you.”

“I know you do. I love you too.”

Although I don't understand how things will work out for the best, for once, I feel content.

Like I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

Ryland's phone beeps, and he looks at the screen. “I need to take it.”

I nod, then help myself to another buttery croissant from the buffet while I wait.

By the time I've eaten the pastry, washing it down with another cup of coffee, I begin to worry. What's taking so long?

## Ryland

All I can think about is Sabine. She's my everything, and I'm never letting her go.

I need to call Zane and tell him I've fallen wildly, madly, deeply in love with his sister and can't live without her. I'm sure he'll be thrilled and welcome me into the family with open arms.

*Yeah, right.*

Zane's reaction will be what it is. I hope to reach him before he sees the paparazzi photos with that wicked headline and thinks the worst of me.

The work call takes longer than expected, but when it ends, I head to the restroom.

On the way back from the men's room, I'm shocked to see Zane blocking my exit. I freeze under Zane's piercing glare. My feet feel like lead weights.

"What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in—"

He holds a hand up to stop me, a scowl on his face.

"Why didn't you answer when I called? I tried a bunch of times. I called Sabine too, but you already know that."

It's my responsibility to tell Zane, but the situation is awkward as fuck. I was hoping to break the news gently, under better circumstances.

Glancing at my watch, I break eye contact. "Yeah, about that. I was going to call after breakfast."

“I took the first available flight home when I saw the photos of you and my sister.”

“I see.”

I’d played out this scenario in my head many times, yet no rehearsing could prepare me for how uncomfortable it would be.

“What the fuck, Ryland? One day, you’re dating an actress, and the next, my sister? What’s with you? You’ve never behaved like a man whore before. Why did you have to do it with Sabine, of all people?”

I’m speechless. I stand rooted to the spot, staring at my best friend, unable to speak. I’ve repeatedly played this scenario over in my head, but I never imagined it like this.

“Seriously? Are you just going to stand there and gawp? Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?” he asks.

Zane turning up at the hotel unexpectedly has blindsided me. He must have been watching us while we were eating breakfast, or he wouldn’t be following me to the men’s room in this part of the hotel.

But his level of fury tells me there’s more to the story.

“How long have you known?” I ask.

“I had my suspicions at the wedding, but after you ran into each other at the airport—I don’t know how to explain. It was just a feeling.” He shakes his head, and there’s sadness in his voice. “I thought I was imagining things until I saw the pictures.”

“Fucking photographers.” I shake my head.

“You told me Sabine was finding you a match. I thought you were working together.” Zane’s features twist into an angry

scowl, and he clenches his fists.

“That’s how it started,” I admit. “I wanted to help her with the business because I could see it was important to her.”

“Yeah? Then what? You end up in bed together?” His voice rises in indignation.

Admittedly, from Zane’s perspective, things look bad, but his reaction is over the top. Sabine is keeping Zane in the dark about the trouble her business is facing.

I know both sides of the story, but disclosing that information could break Sabine’s trust. Where do I draw the line? Fuck.

My loyalty from now on is to Sabine. If our friendship means anything to him, he’s going to have to trust me on this.

“What do you expect me to say?” I spit out. “I can’t deny it’s true, but you’ve got the facts all wrong.”

“You mess around with my sister, and you dare say that to my face?” Zane’s mood darkens. “I’m so fucking mad at you,” he says, curling his hands into fists. “If there weren’t so many people walking around, I’d deck you.”

“For the record, I’m not messing around with Sabine. I’d never do anything to hurt her.”

“Shut up.” Zane shakes his head. His Adam’s apple bobs above the collar of his T-shirt as he swallows his rage.

“I don’t need your approval to fall in love with Sabine.” A maelstrom of emotion sweeps over me, confusing everything.

Sabine has risen to take the top spot in my life, and I’m not willing to let go of her.

“Wait, back up. Did you say you’re in love with her?”

Dragging a hand through my hair, I look at him and sigh.

“Absolutely, one hundred percent in love. I tried respecting the boundaries, but the more time we spent together, the more difficult it was to deny how I feel. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about it, but everything happened so fast.”

“And she feels the same?” Zane looks toward the hotel rooms above.

“Yep. We’re a couple,” I say, confirming everything.

Zane softens his stance, and the anger is gone from his voice.

“Look, everything changed when I realized she has to fall in love with someone, so why not me? I’ll do the right thing by her, and we both know I’ll take better care of her than anyone.”

There are other, more intimate reasons as to why I feel territorial toward Sabine, but Zane doesn’t need to hear them.

“Is that right?” He arches a brow.

“Yeah, even better than you.”

“Dude, I don’t wanna hear any dirty details. She’s my sister, for fuck’s sake,” Zane says. “And for the record, the reason I was so strict about you not dating her was if you got together and things didn’t work out, I’d have to kill you.”

“Fair enough.”

“And that would suck because it would mean losing my best friend.” Zane embraces me warmly, slapping my back a little harder than necessary.

“Sorry to do this, but I need to go and find her,” I tell him when we break apart. “I only left the table to answer a call. She’ll be worried.”

“Sure, although I need to call her too. I bet she’s upset.” He shrugs, and we leave it at that, promising to catch up with each other later.

A rush of tenderness makes my heart feel like it’s opening to new possibilities. I’d only considered what it would feel like to lose a friend, not gain a brother.

Our relationship will change. We’ll be closer in some ways, but in others, he’ll be in the dark. I’m tempted to tell him

I’m proposing as soon as possible but decide to leave it as a surprise.

I’m a patient man, but when I set my sights on winning, I win. Every time. That’s why I am the best.

Although I wasn’t ready to act on my feelings before, the truth is undeniable. I love her and want to spend the rest of my life with her.

Now is the time to act.

It’s time to claim what’s mine.

# Chapter 10



# *Bells*

## Sabine

**R**yland left the dining room ages ago. I've been sitting here for what feels like hours, my phone ringing out to Ryland's voicemail each time I call. I'm done waiting—it's time to do something.

Although I don't have a room key, I figure Ryland needs to return to the room to collect his things, and I'll meet him there.

I head to the reception desk, eyes open and looking for Ryland, but I can't see him anywhere. Moments later, card in pocket, I return to our room and push the door open, hoping against hope that he'll be here. He isn't.

I'm alone with my thoughts, and all I can do is ruminate on the situation. Anxiety builds like a knot in my stomach.

Ryland said he'd take care of things with my brother, and I believe him. They need to deal with their relationship, but regardless of what they discuss, I need to explain the situation to Zane from my perspective.

I have my responsibilities too. I care about my business and will repay every cent I borrowed from Zane. If my business fails, so be it. I'll pivot or come up with a new plan.

There are other ways to make money. Losing Ryland would hurt too much, and nothing is worth the sacrifice.

Will my brother give me crap when he finds out how I feel about Ryland? Will Zane get territorial and make out like I need to get a life and stop muscling in on his?

Maybe he'll resent me and think I'm throwing myself at his best friend. It isn't like that. I've always loved Ryland from

afar, and my dreams are close to coming true.

How can I explain how I feel when I don't understand it myself? I feel comfortable around Ryland, and our connection goes far beyond anything I can put into words.

Both he and Zane share certain protective traits, and that's why spending time with him is so calming. I only hope our relationship isn't the end of their friendship.

I won't stop loving Ryland, but I don't want to lose Zane. It's also important to me that Ryland doesn't lose his best friend.

Ryland enters the room, frustration radiating from his red face. He slams the door, causing me to jolt back in surprise.

"Thank fuck you're here. I looked everywhere and couldn't find you." His voice booms in the small space.

"Are you okay?" I ask cautiously, my voice barely a whisper.

His gaze snaps to me, and he growls. "Where did you go?"

It isn't like Ryland to lose it like this. He's acting out of character, but I don't know why.

"I could ask you the same thing!" I point my finger at him. Not that it helps because he towers over me.

He sighs heavily and takes a step closer. "I missed you so damn much," he adds in a softer, more vulnerable tone.

"We weren't apart for long." I search his face anxiously for answers. Why is he acting this way? "You still haven't told me where you were."

Ignoring my question, Ryland brushes his fingers against my cheek, lifting my chin to meet his gaze. My pulse races.

He drops his mouth to mine in a passionate kiss, only stopping to rain kisses down my jaw and neck. He scoops me into his

strong arms and carries me to bed.

But as soon as he lets go, I jump off the bed and confront him, both hands on my hips.

“You’re so feisty.” His eyes roam over my body, and he looks like he’s enjoying himself.

“What’s going on? Why are you acting weird?”

“You look damn sexy when you’re pissed.”

“What’s gotten into you?” I’m confused. He’s blowing cold one moment and hot the next.

“Ryland, please talk to me. You’re scaring me.”

He looks at me, his eyes dark with emotion. “I ran into your brother downstairs.”

A lump forms in my throat. “Zane’s here? He knows about us?”

Ryland’s jaw clenches. “He saw us together.”

Now I understand why Ryland took so long and is acting weird. That must have been tough.

“And? What did he say?” I shake my head in disbelief. “I’ll call Zane and explain everything.”

“You don’t need to do anything.”

“That isn’t fair. I’ll go talk to him. Where is he? God, does he think you’re taking advantage of me?”

“Bean. Everything’s fine. I explained everything, and Zane understands. I told him you’d call later.”

His eyes roam my face, and my heart settles. Everything is going to be okay. I can’t believe it. Dreams really do come true.

Ryland stares at me, desire burning in his eyes. Then he does what he does best. He takes what he wants, and he wants me.

His mouth on me feels so good. I never want him to stop. I adore being the object of his desire.

“I love a good argument,” he murmurs against my neck. “It bodes well for our marriage.”

I pull away, shocked. “Marriage? What are you talking about?”

The smile drops from his face and is replaced by a look of pure carnal hunger. He’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.

“I love you, Bean. You are mine,” he growls. “And we are definitely getting married.”

“I love you too.” My heart swells to say the words I’ve carried in my heart forever.

He stares at me like I’m the center of his world. “Marry me,” he says against my lips before taking my mouth in a searing kiss.

“Okay.” I nod in agreement because, well, why wouldn’t I? Marrying Ryland is my dream come true.

“Good. That was easy.” He sounds relieved.

“Why wouldn’t it be? I don’t need to question everything. I trust you.”

“You can trust me. I’ll do everything I can to protect you and never give you a reason to doubt my love for you.”

We kiss as though we are starving. I melt into him, and we can’t get enough. We kiss until my lips tingle. As do other parts of me.

He doesn't waste any time stripping my clothes off, then his, and burying his face between my thighs. I swear he can't get enough.

It's the first day of a brand new life with my one true love by my side, and I couldn't be happier.

Foolishly, I let myself lose hope, thinking we could never be together. But I was wrong. When you meet the One, you know it. Never give up.

Hold onto your dreams tightly and never lose hope. Even if it takes years before you get together, it's worthwhile in the end.

# Epilogue

**I**t's hard to believe that only five years ago, I was alone—a determined person with an idea but no love or money. Today, I'm a married woman and owner of a growing matchmaking business.

My life is everything I've ever dreamed of, and it's all thanks to Ryland. I'm so grateful for every blessing we share.

Ryland and Zane decided to become partners and open a law office. Those two are thick as thieves, and our daughter loves when Uncle Zane spends time with her.

I sometimes joke about Zane taking time away from work to find someone special, but he brushes me off and changes the subject.

Loving Ryland taught me that work isn't everything. Zane will learn that lesson when the time is right for him.

It's late. Ryland ate dinner at the office, and I'm waiting for him to return home. I always wait up, no matter what time it is, unable to fall asleep if he isn't beside me.

The front door creaks open, and Ryland releases a deep sigh as he crosses the threshold. His footsteps are heavy and deliberate, each demanding more energy than the last.

I feel his disappointment in the air, like a heavy blanket covering the entire house.

Our daughter is asleep in the nursery. I listen carefully to the baby monitor on the dresser and make out the soft rustling sound of our daughter's breath.

I'm in the bathroom, getting ready for bed, dressed in only a silk bathrobe. I hastily run a brush through my hair, tie the silk sash around my waist and saunter out to greet my handsome husband.

Ryland storms into the bedroom, ashen face twisted in a grimace. He stops in his tracks when his gaze meets mine. His body language softens, but his features still hold darkness.

I know that look. He's been through an emotionally and mentally draining day. When he's in a mood like this, he needs help to snap out of it, and I know exactly what to do.

"Tough day?"

"Fine. How about you?" He starts unbuttoning his white shirt, his movements terse and clipped.

I see the tension he holds in his jaw and shoulders as he slides his suit jacket off and loosens the knot of his tie.

I slide my fingers under my robe and drop it, exposing my shoulder. His eyes snap to my body, and he's looking at me like I just stripped naked.

His scowl turns into a smirk, and his eyes follow as I walk to the dresser, my hips swaying seductively.

We've discovered many ways to keep our marriage fresh. One of his favorite games is "*Crime and Punishment*."

Another is "*Let's do a deal*," also known as "*The Love Bargain*," in honor of how we got together.

With a bit of skill, I might be able to combine the two into one. We play this game often and launch into role-playing without a



preamble.

I pick up a file off the dresser, studying it carefully before glancing at him. “I need help with a contract.”

Ryland begins flipping the pages angrily. “Who wrote this contract?”

I run my finger along the edge of the paper. “It’s a pro forma from my old job. I can’t afford to hire anyone and need to keep overheads low.”

Ryland shakes his head. “It won’t do. The opposition will be all over it like it’s a prenup. You need something better.”

Slipping further into the role, I draw a shaky breath. “Good point. Can you recommend anyone?”

He smiles, displaying a row of gleaming white teeth. “Contracts are my specialty. I’ll do some tweaking and fix it if you want me to.”

“Thank you. That sounds great, but ah—what’s your fee?” I ask, nervously biting my nails.

He tries to hold back his amusement. “There’s no charge for you, Bean.”

“Thanks, that’s super generous, but are you sure there won’t be a conflict of interest if you do the job?”

He tilts his head, regarding the question thoughtfully before answering with another question. “What about a trade?”

My mind wanders to the bargain we made and how it led us here. Sweet memories flood my mind. But life is even sweeter now than ever. I turn back around, having gotten lost in the moment.

“A trade could work. What do you have in mind?”

He shakes his head and gives me a mischievous look. “I’m offering a great deal. All your legal work, and I’ll throw in a thousand toe-curling orgasms.”

“Is that right?” I sass.

“I’m a generous man.”

It doesn’t sound like much of a trade to me. My husband is an incredibly giving lover who does wonderful things with his tongue.

His trade sounds pretty much one-sided and all in my favor.

I tap a finger on my lip thoughtfully, drawing out my answer to build more tension.

“Yep. How’s that? Do we have a deal?” he asks.

We stand there for what feels like an eternity, not saying anything but communicating more with our eyes than words could ever express. Without breaking eye contact, he comes for me.

My pulse quickens as he moves closer. He cups my face gently, his lips are inches away from mine. Our noses brush ever so lightly, and a spark of electricity runs through my body.

His tongue swipes past my lips, and he takes my mouth in a claiming kiss. His hands run down my back until they reach my waist, where they stop. I drop the bathrobe to the floor.

Ryland picks me up effortlessly and lays me down gently on the bed, his eyes locked on mine. I scoot further up the bed, naked and exposed.

I watch as he strips off his shirt and drops it onto the floor behind him, revealing a toned chest and abs that make my mouth water.

He crawls onto the bed, his muscular body hovering over me. Ryland's breath is hot on my neck, and he plants a trail of kisses along my collarbone.

His hands roam over my body, exploring every inch of my skin. I arch my back in pleasure when his lips find my breasts, closing over a nipple.

He uses his tongue to tease it while his fingers play with the other nipple.

I run my hands over his muscular arms and arch my back, pressing myself closer to him, desperate for more. The ache between my thighs is almost unbearable.

Gripping the sheets, I gasp with pleasure when he slips two fingers inside. He slides his hands down to my knees, then to the inside of my thighs.

He works his way down my body, tongue flicking over my navel.

“I want you to come on my tongue. I want to savor your taste when you scream my name.”

Spreading me wide, he buries his face between my legs. His tongue dances over my clit, sending waves of pleasure through my body.

He devours me, closing his mouth over my pussy. He works his magic, making me moan his name, but I'm careful to keep my voice low so we don't wake the baby.

I'm getting closer to the edge, and know I won't last much longer. I run my fingers through his hair, whispering his name, the sensation of his mouth on me is almost too much to bear.

And when I think I can't take anymore, Ryland stops. His eyes are pure lust. He crawls back up to me, his lips tingling with

my taste as we meet in a passionate kiss.

He groans into my mouth, his hands tangling in my hair. God, I love the sounds he makes.

Then he flips me onto my stomach and whispers. “The name of the game is ‘*Crime and Punishment*,’ and you’ve been so bad.”

His words prickle my skin, causing a ripple of gooseflesh. He’s so bossy. His words turn me on, making the ache inside me grow hotter, but everything about him does.

He’s always been the perfect man in my eyes and the man.

I shiver with pleasure when he enters me from behind, writhing beneath him, my body shaking as I explode in a delicious climax. We melt into one in a moment of bliss.

My love for him knows no bounds. Our love fills my heart and soul, and I never want this moment to end. Thankfully, it doesn’t need to.

Ryland belongs to me just as I belong to him. Always and forever.

\* \* \*

Dear Reader,

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart, for reading [THE LOVE BARGAIN](#). My goal with writing is to lift your spirits and make you smile. If you enjoyed the book, you can help an independent author like me by leaving a review.

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