

A man and a woman are shown in a romantic embrace, nearly kissing. The man is leaning over the woman, who is lying on her back. They are both looking at each other with intense gazes. The man is wearing a dark blue t-shirt and blue jeans, while the woman is wearing a white t-shirt. The background is dark, making the couple stand out.


A MERSHANO
EMPIRE NOVEL

THE PRINCE'S *Game*

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The, PRINCE'S GAME



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

The Prince's Game

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This book is dedicated to my husband for his unwavering patience, love, and understanding. It takes a special man to marry (and tolerate) a writer, and I'm so blessed to have you in my life.

To my critique partners and beta readers, thank you for your guidance and advice.

And last, but not least, to Dodie. Because abs.

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BOGUS INTERVIEWS

“Hi. My name is Sarah Summers. I’m a thirty-one-year-old marketing director in Chicago.”

“Cut.” The director, if Paul could be called that, stood up from behind the camera and flashed a dazzling smile. He was short and in his forties, but in decent shape. His blond hair was spiked in a way a high school kid might call hip. “Perfect, Sarah. Now let’s move on to the next line.”

I read the teleprompter and shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

This was all bullshit anyway. Once Rachel found a loophole, I could put this nightmare behind me. She texted this morning to say “Nothing yet,” but I had faith. If anyone could find a way out of this insanity, it was my corporate-attorney best friend. Then I would be free to strangle my twin sister. Abby took our sibling rivalry to a whole new level with this prank. I could lose my job over it. As if Greg would ever let me take a several-month leave for a dating show.

“Three, two, one ...”

“I’m perfect for Evan because I’m driven and loyal.” True traits, but I could care less about Evan. I didn’t know anything about him other than he was the heir to the Mershano empire’s fortune. That name I recognized because my company booked rooms at the Mershano Suites for business travel. It was a popular chain in major cities throughout the world.

“Cut. Beautiful, Sarah.” Paul waved the hairstylist over to make subtle changes to my updo. My dark brown hair went from being over my left shoulder to my right with one loose

strand tickling my cheek. The makeup artist joined in to touch up my eyeliner.

“Trying to make those gorgeous brown eyes of yours pop,” she explained in her Brooklyn accent.

“Don’t add any more blush.” The hairstylist liked my natural tan. She said it brought out my Argentinian roots. The pink powder made me feel like a clown, so I was good with the suggestion.

“Are we ready, ladies?” Paul called, checking his watch. The next phrase popped up on the teleprompter.

“Uh, no.” There was no way in hell I was saying that.

Paul frowned at the screen. “What’s the problem?”

“My favorite thing about Evan is his ass. Seriously?” I wasn’t sure if the man had a nice face, let alone ass. “I can’t say something more educated? Like my favorite thing about Evan is his drive to succeed?” He was the CEO of a billion-dollar enterprise. That couldn’t be easy even though the position was handed to him on a silver platter.

“Come on, sweetie. This is television. No one cares about his work habits.”

“So we’re trying to marry him for his ass?” This show wasn’t about his backside, nice or not. It was about him being a billionaire bachelor in need of a wife. The fact that he needed to go on the Romance Network for Women (RNW) told me all I needed to know about him. “Okay, sure. Why not?” Let’s talk about the man’s ass.

It’s not going to matter, I reminded myself. Rachel was going to work her magic and get me off this show.

Paul’s frown was comical. Plastic surgery froze his lips into a forever smile that did not turn down well. “We good?”

“Sure.” I read the teleprompter like a good parrot and even threw in a smile. Paul called me perfect again. The man threw out compliments like crackers.

There were a few more lines after the one about Evan’s butt, most of them little snippets about the part I was to play

on the show. I gathered my age was a factor, as was evidenced by my final line.

“As the oldest contestant, I have the experience and maturity Evan will want in his future wife.”

Paul engulfed me in a hug meant for good friends, not ten-minute acquaintances, and told me he was looking forward to next week. “Yeah, me too.” *Because I have every intention of not being here.*

I gathered my belongings and went to the dressing room to change into jeans and a sweater. Chicago was cold in March, yet the producers had me in an orange sundress on set. The show was set to film in Louisiana. It was warmer down there, but it was not dress weather.

My phone dinged as I was leaving the changing area. *Meet me at La Rosas, 7pm*, was all it said. If Rachel wanted to meet at my favorite Italian place, it was either to celebrate or to ply me with wine before giving me bad news. I started typing a note back to her when I hit a male wall.

“Oomph.” *Christ, he’s hard.* His chest was solid muscle beneath his black leather jacket. I shook my head twice to clear it and looked way up to apologize. Dark chocolate eyes grinned down at me. “Sorry, I shouldn’t text and walk.” The man was at least a foot taller than my five feet four inches.

“No worries.” He didn’t move. “You’re the one who had a problem with the word ‘ass,’ right?”

Oh, great. The guy was a producer or maybe a writer. If he was the latter, he needed a new job. I cleared my throat. “The word is fine.” I used it all the time. “It was the context.”

“You don’t like talking about a man’s ass?”

“Actually, I frequently call men an ass.” The cocky grin he was flashing made me want to call him one. “I just took issue with commenting on the appearance of a man I haven’t met yet.” Not to mention it was ridiculous.

“Surely you’ve googled him.”

“No. Why would I?”

“Because you’re a contestant on a game show to win a marriage proposal?”

I snorted. “Yeah, no. That’s not going to happen.” I wouldn’t be around long enough to make it to that point, and I had no intention of accepting or hearing a marriage proposal in the next five years. I liked my single life just fine, thank you. *Damn you, Abby, for sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.*

“Really? Isn’t that the whole point of the game?” His hands were tucked into his jeans, leaving only an inch or so between us. Leather and peppermint tickled my nose, an alluring scent that had me wanting to get closer to him rather than back away. *Too bad he works for RNW.*

“Is it? I thought the point was to produce good television at the expense of a bunch of hopeful reality stars?” That was too harsh. “Sorry, still a little bitter about the teleprompter. You’re not one of the writers, are you?” Because that would be embarrassing.

His laugh was unexpected and made me shiver. Who knew a laugh could be so sexy? It was like a cup of hot chocolate on a cold Chicago night, warming me from head to toe. *Yum.* It might be worth going on this show to see him again. Except it would cost me my job, so maybe not. Stern and Associates wasn’t my dream career, but it paid the bills. My MBA from Northwestern wasn’t cheap.

“What’s your name again?” There were dimples in his smile. Very cute.

“Sarah Summers. My parents had a thing for alliteration.” “So your middle name is something with an S?” “Savannah.” I grimaced. “Yeah, it’s as bad as it sounds.” “Sarah Savannah Summers.”

“That’s me.” My sister was the lucky one. Abigail Bridget Summers. A normal name for a quirky woman who didn’t know when to grow up. For years we impersonated each other, much to our parents’ chagrin. It’s what identical twins did. What they didn’t do was try out for reality television shows

under their sister's name and send the paperwork with the word "Enjoy!" written on a Post-it note.

I thought it was all a bad joke until the travel documents arrived. A one-way ticket to New Orleans. The Big Easy was on my travel bucket list, but I never thought I'd get there through a dating show. When I tried to call Abby for an explanation, I got her voicemail. When I called her best friend, I learned my devious sister was on a European cruise with her latest sugar daddy. The vacation timing was not an accident.

"Are you one of the producers?"

That made him laugh again. He had this just-got-out-of-bed-and-didn't-give-a-damn-for-the-world look going on. It was the five o'clock shadow paired with his dark, messy locks that completed it. He must have run his hands through those thick strands a few times this morning and decided it was good enough for public. Or maybe he just rolled out of bed after a long night of pleasing a woman. Those full lips looked like they could do all sorts of wicked things to a girl.

"I'm really starting to think this isn't an act." "An act? Am I auditioning for something?" "To be a wife, right?"

I couldn't help rolling my eyes. "Sure. That's my life goal. To get married," I deadpanned. I had nothing against marriage. It was a fine institution that worked for most people, but not for me. I dreamed of one day owning a firm that assisted nonprofits with marketing efforts. If I found the right guy who respected my aspirations, I would consider settling down. So far, every man I dated was interested in sex or creating a family. The former was fine; the latter wasn't in my near future.

A short, white-haired woman rounded the corner with frantic steps, her heels clacking against the tile. When she spotted us in the hallway, her nose scrunched up so high her eyes squinted.

"*Mr. Mershano !*" The lady had the "mom voice" down pat. It made both of us cringe. *Busted*, ran through my mind even

though I wasn't doing anything wrong.

Wait ... Did she just say Mr. Mershano?

“Hey, Valerie.” He gave the woman a charming grin, one he no doubt spent his youth perfecting every time he got into trouble. “Did you need me for something?”

“You are *not* allowed to speak to the contestants before the show. If the producers found out, they would throw a fit!” Her lips pinched as her hazel eyes sharpened with disapproval. “Back to your room.”

“Yes, ma'am.” His gaze was pure sin as he addressed me. “See you next week, Sarah Summers.”

Well, shit. Evan Mershano was a fox.

“That'll be all for today, Miss Summers.” Valerie pointed the opposite way toward the elevators, her tone brooking no argument.

He was the first to move, shooting a wink at me over his shoulder before sauntering down the hallway. *Huh. Well, wouldn't you know?* Evan Mershano did have a nice ass. Pity I wouldn't be getting acquainted with it.



No amount of wine was going to fix this situation.

“So let me get this straight.” I was on my third glass in less than twenty minutes. “My only options are to not show up and risk my professional reputation, or press criminal charges against Abby for false representation?”

“Or go on the show.” Rachel tucked a blonde strand behind her ear—a nervous tell of hers I learned in college. The woman sucked at poker.

“And risk losing my job.” I was going on my third year at Stern and Associates. “I only get two weeks of PTO a year. Any longer, and they'll fire me.” I wasted one of those days today, which meant I had nine vacation days left. Another negative point for Abby.

“You think you'll last on the show that long?”

“Well, no.” Not after telling Evan I had no interest in marriage. That had to be a red flag for the *Prince of New Orleans*. He wanted a wife, and I told him I wasn’t interested. “I’m sure he’ll send me home during the first round of cuts.” The paperwork said a third of the contestants would be sent home the first night. Those were good odds. “So consider it a paid vacation to The Big Easy.” Rachel shrugged. “Not my first choice, but it beats winter in Chicago.”

“I’d prefer Hawaii since I’ll be risking my job and all. I’ve told you about how Brett is sniffing around after my accounts. You know he’ll use my impromptu vacation as an excuse to pounce.” The jackass thrived on competition, making it a challenge to take time off.

She snorted. “He won’t stand a chance. Your clients love you.”

“Maybe, but I need to keep them happy.” I wanted to manage my own firm one day, and that required positive client references. “Somehow I doubt any of them would be crazy about me going on a dating show.”

“You’re going to need to come up with a good excuse.”

“Do you think they’ll understand if I say I need to take a vacation to murder my sister?”

Mirth filled my friend’s blue eyes. “God, I hope so. I thought sleeping with your professor was bad, but this is a whole new level.”

“Oh my God, I don’t even want to think about that.” Abby pretended to be me during our sophomore year of college and seduced Mister Hawthorne. Class the next day was a nightmare. He approached me afterward, and I had no idea what he was talking about, while Abby laughed her ass off. “He was the teaching assistant, not the professor.” Not that it was any better. “I had to drop the class.”

“She really has no understanding of how her actions affect others, does she?” Rachel marveled. “I mean, this could destroy your career, and she’s off on vacation with boyfriend number fifteen hundred.”

Abby was a free spirit. She had no desire to work, no understanding of what it meant to make a living, and no respect for my career. Her college degree in art was useless because she refused to do anything with it. The woman was talented with a paintbrush, but that required focus and discipline—two traits that didn't apply to Abigail Summers. Instead she relied on men to take care of her.

“I got her back by joining that sorority, though. She had her heart set on being a Gamma, but ended up a Chi whatever instead.” Once a girl rushed and bid on a sorority, she couldn't change houses. It was minor payback for all the stunts my sister pulled, but it was one of my better schemes.

Rachel tossed her head back and laughed. “She was so pissed.”

“She deserved it.”

“Very true, though.” She sobered, tucking a blonde strand behind her ear again. “So, what are you going to do? I'd be happy to recommend a criminal attorney. Jail might do her some good. You and I both know she needs to grow up.”

She did. “I can't press charges against my own sister, can I?” We were like night and day, and she didn't know when to stop, but I loved her. “My mom would kill me.” Abby and I were all she had left after my dad died.

“So you're going on the show?”

We both knew not showing up wasn't an option. The network would run my name through the mud and ruin my marketing career. Stern and Associates was a top firm in Chicago. They would drop me in a heartbeat if I brought them bad press. “I don't think I have a choice.”

Rachel lifted her wine goblet and clanked it against mine. “Cheers, then. To paid vacations?”

I laughed, lifting the glass to my lips. “Sure, to paid vacations with weird rules and guidelines.”

“The electronics thing makes sense.” Rachel read all the paperwork, including the handbook I was given about how the

show operates. “They probably don’t want to risk you taking any photos and posting on social media.”

“Because I have so much interest in that.”

“Well, maybe not you, but the other girls might. The wardrobe clause was a bit sexist, though.”

An understatement. The producers were in charge of my clothes. No negotiation. I had to put on whatever they told me to wear; however, I was allowed to pack certain items to be worn off camera. It was all outlined in the contract. “You know the interview I had this morning? Well, they put me in an orange dress. I looked like one of those tiny minions from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.”

“Yeah, whatever. Orange looks amazing on you, unlike on my pasty whiteness.” Her mom’s Irish genes gave her the blue eyes and pale skin, while her dad’s Germanic influence gave her the light hair and height. She was gorgeous, and she knew it. I couldn’t remember the last time she bought her own drink at a bar. Wearing her trademark lawyer skirt suit everywhere she went made her a dick magnet. Something about her *piss off* look attracted the men in droves. They all took it as a challenge, and they all failed. She was married to her job, just like me.

“I figure I’ll pack a few days’ worth of clothes. I won’t be there long anyway.” I told her about meeting Evan earlier and our conversation. “Despite having a nice ass, I think I’ll pass.”

“He had to be pissed that you didn’t recognize

him.” “I don’t think he believed me.” “Uh, arrogant much?”

“Well, in his mind, I’m on a dating show for him. So I guess his arrogance is justified.” I wasn’t sure why I bothered defending him. I didn’t know him. He could be arrogant. Most rich men were. “Anyway, he’ll send me home the first night, and all will be well.”

“Knowing you, you’ll purposely sabotage it anyway.”

“Oh, I’m packing a one-piece swimsuit to wear instead of whatever crap they give me.” Not that I owned one. It was on my to-do list after talking to my boss about getting next week off.

“That’s my girl. Jeans, too?”

“Obviously.” No rulebook was going to dictate my wardrobe. Nothing like turning women’s rights back several decades. “I don’t understand how this show is marketed toward women.”

“It’s the dream to marry rich, right? You said he’s hot, too, so there’s that. Think of all the girls out there who will live vicariously through you.”

“Yeah, I’ll be the example of what not to do to win the prince’s heart, or get in his pants, or whatever the end-all goal is of a game show.” There was nothing wrong with seeking true love, but doing so on a game show seemed fictitious.

“You’re going to make so many friends.”

“Yes, that’s my goal.” I sounded so bitter, but that wasn’t my intent. It wasn’t the show’s fault, nor did it have anything to do with the participants. This was my sister’s doing. “Are you still friends with that sexy fed?”

“Mark?” An understanding gleam lit Rachel’s eyes. “Oh, I like where this is going. What are you planning?”

“Do you think he’d be willing to help me teach Abby a lesson?” The handsome federal agent could teach Abby a much-needed lesson about tinkering with other people’s lives.

“He could be persuaded, I’m sure.”

We put our heads together, throwing out ideas and timelines. It would have to wait until after the show, but that wasn’t a problem. I would be back before Abby returned from her cruise. Then the fun would begin.

AND SO IT BEGINS

I'm in the middle of a fairy tale, surrounded by froufrou ball gowns and desperate princesses.

Mershano Suites was known for its opulence, but the New Orleans location took the standard to a new level. The property spanned a block of prime real estate on the Mississippi waterfront. It was the original hotel and headquarters for the Mershano empire. Gold, purple, and green were the decor colors of choice, which was appropriate considering the location. Plush sofas, antique tables, and vases filled with fresh floral arrangements decorated the reception area. Original oil paintings hung from the violet walls throughout the hotel, and chandeliers lit the lobby from three stories above. Gorgeous with a touch of wealth and grandeur.

The contestants were standing in line on the second floor, waiting to descend the grand staircase and meet *The Prince*. I was number twenty-three in line.

“So, what do you do?” Paul told us to ignore the cameras and socialize. He said it was a way for the audience to get to know our personalities. So far, all I knew about the women in front of me were their names, Amber and Bianca.

“I’m a kindergarten teacher.” Amber’s southern twang was nothing like my midwestern accent. Her light blue dress and blonde ringlets were very *Cinderella*, while my lush red dress was more *seductress* with the deep neckline and slit up my left thigh. I liked the way it hugged my curves. It made me feel

elegant yet feminine. Not a bad first outfit pick by the producers.

“Yeah, I thought about doing that but decided the whole kids thing wasn’t for me.” Bianca fixed the neckline of her forest green dress. It dipped to her belly button and was a wardrobe malfunction waiting to happen. *Good thing we’re not on live television.*

“What about having kids of your own?” Amber played the southern belle role well, but there was a cunning gleam in her blue eyes that made me wary.

Bianca shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe. Not really my thing, ya know?”

Amber pursed her lips, disapproval stark in her blue gaze. “Girl, Evan’s going to want kids. Why else would a thirty-five-year-old man want to settle down?”

“Because he’s thirty-five?” Bianca made him sound ancient. That explained the nose scrunch earlier when I mentioned my age. Thirty-one wasn’t too far off from thirty-five.

“Bianca Stone.” Joseph, one of the show’s hosts, stood at the top of the stairs with an expectant smile. His shock of white hair was combed over in a style common for a man his age. I overheard one of the girls say he was a famous producer, and that was how he landed the role. Our other host was a redhead named Carrie. Amber told me the woman won a beauty pageant last year. I gathered from her tone that she wasn’t thrilled by her presence.

“Toodles, ladies.” Bianca gathered her brown hair over one shoulder, gave us a wave, and sauntered over to take the host’s arm.

“She won’t last long,” Amber murmured before flashing me a smile that was a touch too sweet. “So, how do you feel about kids?”

I knew better than to respond the way the brunette did. “I want them, but only when the time is right.” *Which won’t be anytime soon.* Creating a family required me to find a husband

who respected my goals and didn't mind my work life. That wasn't an easy feat. "How about you, Amber?"

"Oh, I've always wanted to be a mom. It's my dream." A starry-eyed look came over her that I didn't believe for a second. She flashed the camera a shy smile. "Hopefully that's with Evan."

I suppressed a snort. It was the first night, and the girl was talking about her future children with the prince she hadn't met yet. *What reality is this?*

"Amber Darlington." Our host in the three-piece suit was back and wearing his trademark grin.

"I'd tell you to wish me luck, but I don't need it." She gave me a wink and waltzed off to meet her future baby daddy.

You have fun with that, dear.

I tapped my fingers against the balcony railing. I couldn't see what was going on downstairs due to the way the stairs curved toward the bottom. The crew positioned us this way on purpose. They didn't want anyone getting a glimpse of the *Prince of New Orleans* before their grand introduction. I researched his nickname over the weekend and learned the Mershano family was famous in The Big Easy for their financial contributions to the city's infrastructure and their generosity in giving back to the community. Evan was the oldest child and viewed as the heir to the Mershano empire, giving him the prince pseudonym. His sister, Mia, was referred to as the princess, and his younger brother, Wyatt, was the rebel.

I didn't read a lot about his family but instead focused on Evan's ascension to the Mershano Suites CEO throne. The company's success took a dip three years ago when he took over the family business. Regime changes often yielded uncertainties in the market, so it wasn't surprising. What was surprising was how fast he was able to turn things around. The stocks were on a steady incline, and the company was expanding all over the world. A hint of admiration crept into my heart after reading some of his business articles. The man knew what he was doing.

“Sarah Summers.” Joseph was back on the landing, his smile ready. *Time to see those wicked, dark eyes again.* I took a deep, steadying breath and walked over to greet the host. “You look lovely, darling.”

“Thank you.” *I’m sure you’ve said that to everyone tonight.* Twenty-two women had already gone before me. The girls who went ahead of me were in the lounge, awaiting phase two of the evening. I hoped it involved alcohol.

Joseph locked his arm with mine to start our descent. Evan stood waiting in the lobby with his hands clasped behind his back. His chocolate locks fell in a stylish wave over his forehead, and the five o’clock shadow was gone, revealing a strong jaw and high cheekbones. The rugged style from last week was sexier, but tonight’s handsome look was more appropriate. It suited the black tuxedo he was sporting, which was no doubt a handmade Italian import. A stunning redhead in a black gown stood behind him with a smile plastered on her pretty face. *Carrie, the beauty pageant hostess.*

“Evan, may I present Sarah Summers from Chicago, Illinois.” The host gave my hand a squeeze and backed up to stand beside Carrie.

There was no wicked gleam in Evan’s gaze tonight, and his smile didn’t reach his eyes. Everything seemed forced and brittle, including the hug he gave me. It lacked heat and comfort and ended with an awkward pat on my back. I imagined this situation made him uncomfortable, but I missed the easy candor of a few days ago.

“Miss Summers. A pleasure.” *So formal and cold.* That wasn’t working for me. I wanted the playful man from last week.

“Minus the hug, this feels like a job interview, *Mister Mershano.* Would you like a copy of my résumé? I hear it’s impressive.” Sarcasm was my go-to in uncomfortable situations.

“Is it?” He smirked and gave me a once-over. “Well then, if we were to go on a date, what would be your top three strengths?”

“That’s a *very* original question, Mister Mershano.” I paused to consider. “Well, I guess it would be my wit, sarcasm, and my breasts.” He was a man, after all, and his gaze had dropped to my neckline twice so far. I didn’t mind him noticing; they were two of my more impressive assets. “Now, I’ve always believed an interview works both ways. So tell me, what makes a date with you better than other men?”

The way his eyebrows hit his hairline told me he wasn’t expecting me to turn the tables on him. Carrie’s and Joseph’s alarmed expressions said they weren’t anticipating it either. Good. I wasn’t here to be predictable. A glimmer of respect flared in his pupils as he took measure of me. He paused on my breasts and grinned at the knowing look I gave him. *Not an ounce of shame*. If we were in a bar, I’d buy him a drink for that alone.

“If I’m honest, I haven’t compared my strategies to other men; however, I can give you insight into my dating style. Would that suffice?”

“I would accept it as a response.” My tone was steady despite my escalating pulse. The look in his eyes unnerved me. It was part devious, part knowing, and overloaded with confidence. Something told me I’d met my match when it came to witty banter.

“I prefer creative dates that involve intellectual conversation and subtle seduction.” He stepped into my personal space, making me look way up to meet his gaze. “And as for my strengths, I’m a skilled conversationalist, enjoy healthy banter, and I’m told I have a fantastic ass.”

I swallowed. *Holy shit*. Why was this guy on a dating show? He had more than enough game to land a wife without the help of RNW. Intelligent, rich, gorgeous, and heir to a billion-dollar fortune. Where were all the flaws? “Yeah, I’m out of questions.” It was a rare occurrence for my cleverness to falter. *Who the hell is this guy?*

Sinful amusement teased the corners of his mouth. “Are we concluding the interview, then, Miss Summers?”

“I believe we are, Mister Mershano. Do we shake hands or hug again?”

“Oh, I think we definitely hug again.” A scent of pine mixed with peppermint teased my nose as he pulled me into his arms. The brittleness was gone, and there was no pat on the back this time. He held me against him, giving me a chance to feel all the hard, hot muscle beneath his clothes. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on him. His woody cologne was also tinged with leather, making me want to breathe deeply through my nose. *Not going to happen.*

I forced myself to step back and gave him a tight smile. If we were anywhere else, I’d give in to the desire to get to know him better. But not tonight. “A pleasure, Mister Mershano.”

His gaze narrowed at my use of his earlier phrase. “Likewise, Miss Summers.”

Carrie guided me to the next phase—an interview about my *first impression* of Evan and my game plan for the evening. I read the cue cards verbatim. He was “dreamy,” and I could “definitely see myself falling in love with him.” Sexy was a more apt description, and I could see myself falling in bed with him, but not in love with him.

I played along and moved into the lounge with the rest of the contestants. Violet sofas and black chairs littered the room, and a full bar sat open in the corner. Floor-to-ceiling windows made up the back wall, leading to a balcony overlooking the Mississippi River. The evening hour painted the water in moonlight, an eerie sight that set my blood on fire.

Marketing was my undergraduate degree, but I had a minor in art. Creativity ran in the Summer genes. Abby was the painter, and I was the photographer. Our mother was the romantic visionary. She couldn’t draw to save her life, but she could tell a story that would melt every heart in a room. My dad was a financial planner and also the one I inherited my business skills from despite being taken from me at an early age. I missed him every day.

“Wine?” The waiter knew my favorite drink. *How wonderful.*

“Yes, please.” I took a glass of the white and found a seat near the back of the room. I chose a table with bad lighting to better see outside. City colors decorated the night sky, giving the sky an alluring orange-black hue. *Gorgeous.*

Joseph and Carrie made a grand entrance a half hour later with Paul and his crew of minions right behind them. Cue cards flashed, telling the contestants to be quiet and gather around the hosts. We moved to the center of the well-lit room to await further instruction. Bianca stood beside me, radiating tension. Amber picked at some invisible lint from her dress, ignoring the death glare she was receiving. *Uh, okay. Catfight, anyone?*

“Ladies, Evan will be arriving in just a few minutes.” Clapping and high-pitched shrieks broke out at Joseph’s words, making me cringe. The man was hot, but *come on.* “He had to go pick up a few guests.”

“Yes, some members of Evan’s family are joining us.” Carrie’s voice had a high quality to it, reminding me of a bell. “I suggest saying hi and making them feel welcome. You never know what they might say to our prince.” Murmurs of who might be here flooded the room while the hosts went back to the door and waited. I picked up a new glass of wine and went back to my seat by the windows.

“Are you all ready?” Joseph’s deep voice carried through the oval-shaped room. “Evan’s outside. The future Princess of New Orleans is in this room somewhere, and he’s anxious to come inside and get to know her better. Let’s make him feel welcome.” Excited squeals broke through the air, making the hair on my arms stand on end. This was not my scene.

The girls rushed Evan as he entered, forcing him to take a step back. His bemused expression made me grin into my wine glass. His life was surreal. I couldn’t begin to imagine what was going through his head. *Thirty girls are trying to seduce me. How many can I take to bed with me tonight? Wasn’t this a man’s dream come true? The start of a good porn film?*

The cameras followed the mob into the room, and I laughed as Evan was dragged down onto the couch by four of

the women. One of them was Amber, and she wasted no time in putting a hand on him. He had a helpless expression on his face that made me feel sorry for him. Poor guy was living every male fantasy come to life at once and had no idea how to handle it.

When a curvy brunette walked over a few minutes later and grabbed his hand, he followed her outside to a secluded seating area out of view. A hoard of women went to the windows to watch, while I admired the water again. No way was I getting involved in any of that shit.

“Mind if I sit down?”

MEDDLING COUSINS

The deep male drawl belonged to a man with thick blond hair, who was dressed in a charcoal-grey suit. He draped his arm around the chair in question and cocked an eyebrow.

“Uh, sure. Go for it.” His dark gaze reminded me of Evan, but this wasn’t his brother. Wyatt had brown hair in his pictures. “You must be the cousin.” I didn’t read much about him, but I knew he grew up with the Mershano family after his parents died. “William, right?”

“I prefer Will.” He swirled his glass of red wine and cocked his head to the side. “And you are?”

“Sarah Summers.” Two cameramen danced around us, filming from different angles. I did my best to ignore the annoying duo.

“Why are you sitting all alone in the corner, darlin’?” The flirtatious smile seemed to be a natural fixture on his handsome face. Like Evan, he was athletically built and easy on the eyes, but there was a harder edge to Will despite the carefree air. The hand toying with the stem of his glass was rough and calloused. Those marks spoke of hard labor, not the cultured background of a groomed billionaire.

“I was enjoying the view.” Honesty never hurt anyone.

“View?”

I gestured to the window and the water outside. “Looking at the lighting over the water. Eerie, right? Just sort of drew me in, I guess.”

“Huh.” He tipped the glass to his full lips and studied me over the rim. “Not bad, but shouldn’t you be trying to get Evan’s attention?”

The beehive of women around him made that option unappealing. “Perhaps, but he’s busy.”

“So you won’t even try?”

Aware of the camera on us, I kept it light. “Maybe I’m shy.”

“Or maybe you’re hoping the standoffish thing will attract his attention?”

Uh no. I kept it vague with a shrug. The videotaping was getting old fast. Maybe if I bored them to death, they would leave. “So, what do you do for a living?”

He cocked a blond brow. “You don’t know what I do?”

“Uh ...” Was I supposed to look that up? “No?” My research was on names, pictures, and stock details.

“You’re drinking it, darlin’,” he said as I took a sip of the wine. I pulled back the glass to examine it. The fruity notes were delicious, if a little dry.

“This is yours?”

“Mershano Vineyards.”

Well, I’ll be damned. “Nice.”

“You really didn’t know?”

Why did both Mershano men assume I was acting? I couldn’t lie my way out of a speeding ticket, let alone a social faux pas. “Nope, but I do now. And it’s pretty good.”

Both eyebrows went up. “Pretty good?”

“Yeah, it’s a little dry for my taste, but it’s still good. I like the citrus notes.”

His brown eyes took measure of me, pausing on my breasts before leaning to the side to look over the rest. My legs were crossed, which left the slit exposing my foot and calf. “Is

it customary for the cousin to check out contestants for the *prince*?" I wasn't one to mince words.

He chuckled. "Here I was expecting a shy, dark-haired beauty, but you're a little minx, aren't you?"

"I've been called worse." My last boyfriend called me a ballbuster who would die an old hag. He didn't take kindly to me turning down his proposal to move to Seattle. My career was in Chicago. The relationship was over the second he told me my job wasn't a big deal.

"You sure you don't want a minute with Evan? He's going to love you."

"I'm good." Remembering the show minions, I rephrased. "I mean, he's good. I don't want to interrupt." He was inside again lounging on the couch with his arms spread out along the back. There was a woman on each side, and two more sitting on the sofa back behind him. I had to give him credit; he did a great job flirting with the women without getting too close. I wasn't sure what he did outside, but I suspected if he'd kissed anyone, the other women would have been in an uproar about it.

The clinking of glasses quieted the room as the hosts stood to address the crowd. It was Joseph who spoke. "Ladies, as you all know, there are only twenty room keys to be given out tonight. That means a third of you will be going home. What we haven't told you is Evan's family gets to pick the first three." Will's foot nudged mine beneath the table, and he waggled his eyebrows at me. *That can't be a good sign.*

"Now, I know we've only been socializing for an hour, but Evan's family watched the footage from your initial meeting with our beloved prince, so they're prepared to make their choices. The three women they select will be escorted to their suites by our prince, and then he'll return for a final hour of socializing before the other seventeen keys are distributed. Evan, I understand you want to say a few things before we proceed?"

"Yes." He joined Joseph at the front of the room and ran his hand through his hair, messing up the elegant style. His

chuckle was warm and elicited several smiles. “I meant to make a welcome speech when I walked in, but I was swept away by all the beautiful women.”

Joseph laughed. “That’s easy to do in your situation. You’re a lucky man, Mister Mershano.”

“I am.” Evan’s grin was infectious as he addressed the room. “I want to thank all of you for being here. I can’t begin to describe how unique of an experience this is for me. Dating multiple women, the cameras, my family picking women for me ...” He paused to search for his parents in the crowd and gave them pointed looks while the girls laughed. His tone implied it was a joke, but the tension in his shoulders suggested otherwise. *Interesting.*

“Well, it’s a lot,” he continued. “But I know it’s a lot for all of you as well, and I just wanted to say thank you for putting your faith in me and for being here. I hope we can have fun, make some memories, and go to some cool places. What do you think? Sound like a good time?” Excited yells and applause broke out in response, making him smile. “Yeah, I thought so. Then let’s get started.” He raised his wine glass to the room and took a healthy sip.

I wondered if anyone else noticed he didn’t talk about marriage or love at all. Wasn’t that what he wanted from this experience? To find a wife?

“Excellent.” Joseph didn’t have a glass to drink from, so he settled on a clap instead. “Let’s get started. Will, Ellen, and Jonah, please join me with your choices.”

Will leaned over while the crew member was distracted. “Ready, darlin’?” With a wink that resembled a punch to my stomach, he stood.

Please tell me I didn’t just screw this up. The evening was perfect. I ignored the prince, kept to myself, and socialized with one person. *His cousin.* A family member with the ability to choose whom he wanted to stay on the show. And he wasn’t leaving.

He pulled a key out of his pocket and showed it to me.
“How do you feel about the fourth floor?”

Fuck. “Are you serious?”

His charming smile held a sinful glint. “Don’t get shy on me now, little minx.”

I finished my glass of wine and set it down with a clink. The refusal clause Abby signed on my behalf flashed through my thoughts. *Damn it.* I had to accept, or I would be in breach of contract. Abigail Summers was a dead woman when I got my hands on her. Blowing out a breath, I stood up. One extra night wouldn’t hurt. I’d find a way to sabotage myself tomorrow and be on the first plane out. I could do this. “Okay.”

I accepted the key and followed his lead. Envious glares and pouts tracked our steps toward the front of the room. *Yeah, this isn’t uncomfortable at all.* Evan’s parents stopped to present their choices to Evan first. Ellen, a blonde-haired woman with hazel eyes and stern features, picked Amber. *Shocking.* Jonah was an older version of his tall and handsome son, with salt and pepper hair and sinful eyes. His choice was a brunette in a purple dress, named Georgiana. Evan gave both women hugs before fixing his gaze on me.

Will whispered something in his cousin’s ear, eliciting a grin from the prince. “You know I have good taste, E,” he added as he pulled away.

“We’ll see.” His gaze was curious as he studied me. “Your interview skills must be improving, Miss Summers. You impressed Will.”

Ouch. Was he implying my interview skills hadn’t impressed him? “Yes, I applied those strengths we discussed.” *Seriously?* That *was my best comeback?* I blamed the situation. I wasn’t used to performing for a crowd.

“Indeed.” He gave me a quick hug that lacked sincerity, and focused on the crowd. “Ladies, I’ll be back soon. Enjoy the wine while I’m gone.” There were a few mewls of disappointment as he led the three of us out of the room, the

crew minions hot on our tail. Amber looped her arm through his, and Georgiana took the other side, leaving me to trail behind them. *Yep. Not awkward at all.*

The four of us and two cameramen squeezed into the elevator. We started with the third floor, where both Georgiana and Amber were staying. I waited with one of the cameras in the elevator while the other followed the trio into the hall. I was in charge of holding the open button. *Fun.* When Evan returned, his hands were in his pockets and his jacket reeked of perfume. That didn't stop the goosebumps from prickling my neck when his arm brushed mine.

"Four forty-seven?" he asked me.

"Yep."

"Did you enjoy talking to Will?"

"Sure. He seems nice enough, but I didn't expect him to pick me."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." I followed him out of the elevator and down the hallway. "I figured he'd go for someone else."

"I did, too, but something you said impressed him." He stopped at my door and gave me a look I couldn't interpret. "I'm looking forward to finding out exactly what that was, Miss Summers."

"Right, well, I'm sure you will." I put my key in the door and opened it. "See you tomorrow?" I had no idea what I was supposed to do or say in this situation.

He looked me over, his gaze uncertain. "You will." He caught my hand as I was about to walk into the room and pulled me into his arms. I hugged him back and breathed in his woody scent. It was strong at the center of his chest and overpowered the stench of perfume. *God, he's hot.* His arm tightened around my waist as he dropped his lips to my ear. "Your act isn't fooling me, sweetheart. I'm onto you." The words were so soft I wasn't sure I heard him right.

"What?"

“Good night, Miss Summers.”

THE PERSONAL ASSISTANT

“Welcome back to *The Prince’s Game*.” We were in the lobby, standing in a semicircle around Carrie and Joseph. It was day two of filming, and Evan was nowhere to be seen. *I’m onto you*. What the hell did that mean? I stayed up most of the night thinking about it. Did he know Abby set me up, or was he onto something else? Was I in trouble for something?

“I’m Carrie Gavins,” our hostess continued, “and this is my handsome cohost, Joseph Grisham. We’re here with the twenty gorgeous women vying for the Prince of New Orleans’s heart. So, ladies, how excited are you to be here?” A cue card was held high from the crew, instructing the girls to scream. It was *loud*. “A third gone, three to go this week. Who will it be?”

“So, today is going to be a bit different.” Joseph’s tone was conversational.

“Oh? And why’s that, Joseph?”

“Well, Carrie, it seems our prince wants to put his women to the test.” He gave the camera a conspiratorial look. “He spent years working in hotels all over the world before gaining control of the Mershano empire, and he wants to give the girls a dose of that. To better appreciate his life’s work.”

“Is that why he sent all the staff home this week?” Carrie’s acting skills were impressive. I almost believed she was surprised.

“That is indeed why he did it.” Bright blue eyes took in the semicircle of uneasy contestants. “Ladies, he wants you to run

the hotel for the week.”

“He wants us to work?” The one who spoke flipped her long brown hair over her shoulder and pursed her lips.

“Perfect.” Paul mouthed the word and honed in on a few others as they chimed in with their disapproval. The lines were all part of a script the writers handed out to specific people during breakfast. They skipped me. *Smart move.*

“Uh, yeah, I’m not here to work.” That came from a tall redhead.

“You expect me to wash dishes? That will, like, totally ruin my nails.” Some blonde Valley girl.

“Isn’t the whole purpose to be his new princess? If he wants a maid, he can hire one.” Another redhead. I was sensing a theme.

“Oh, stop your yappin’. Evan spent years workin’ in the industry before taking over the Mershano empire.” Amber’s hands were on her hips. “I think Evan wants us to prove that we can respect his hard work and what he’s built. If y’all can’t do that, then there’s the door.” She pointed to the exit.

“Buh-bye,” Georgiana added with a theatrical wave.

Chaos ensued as insults were hurtled back at the pair. The minions Amber adopted this morning were quick to defend their queen bee, evoking a huge grin from Paul. I fought the urge to roll my eyes as everything went to hell in a handbasket fast. At the crest of the complaints, Paul silenced the group with a loud “Cut!” He then continued in a normal tone, “That was fantastic. Joseph, we’re going to pan back to you as you try to silence them all. When that doesn’t work, Carrie, I want you to whistle. Got it?”

The former beauty queen beamed. “Yup.”

“Ladies, resume bickering in three, two, one ...” The yelling picked up with a wave of his hand. The show’s host waited until a finger went his way to start interrupting, and then the hostess blew a whistle that deafened my ears. The lady had a pair of lungs on her.

“Now, hold on, ladies.” Joseph flashed an affable grin. “There is a benefit to all of this. Evan will be watching everyone closely, visiting different groups to supervise and chat. At the end, he’ll select two of you for a very intimate group date. This is a big deal because there will be no other dates this week prior to the elimination.”

Excited chatter broke out around me as challenge swept over the crowd. We were getting to the heart of the game show. I could hear the announcers saying in a dramatic voice, *Who will win the prince’s two-on-one date tonight?* I refrained from rolling my eyes.

“Now, there are twenty positions ranging from his personal assistant to dishwashers to maids to reception staff. Each ...” He smiled. The word *assistant* echoed thickly through the air. “Yes, ladies, a *personal* assistant, meaning one of you gets to spend the entire day working alongside Evan in his office upstairs, but whoever lands the assistant role isn’t eligible for the date tonight. As I was saying, each job will be randomly assigned using the conventional method of picking a position from a hat.”

Carrie nudged her cohost playfully. “But who goes first, Joseph?”

“I was thinking by birthday, youngest to oldest.” Which would make me last pick. *Joy*. “Or we could go by birthday month and day?” That would put me in the middle of the pack with my July birthday. It’d be a little better, and wouldn’t focus on me being the oldest of the bunch. “Is there a preference?”

“Let’s go by month and day.” Carrie snapped her fingers. A crew member dressed in a tuxedo handed Joseph a purple-and-green top hat with a gold feather. Several of the girls giggled at it. I suspected it came from the streets of New Orleans—a throwback to the show’s location. *Nice*.

They called us out by birthdate. Each woman picked a gold coin from the hat; on it was the job title. Paul captured each woman’s reaction on film, chuckling silently at the frowns and distaste radiating from those who were given manual work.

The girl with the nails ended up a maid, while Amber, who had a February birthday, was placed at the reception desk. There were five positions left when the camera rolled my way. I grabbed a heavy token and read the title out loud.

“Personal assistant.” Those two words took a moment to register. I expected to be a dishwasher or a cook. If the girls disliked me before, they hated me now. *Well, crap.* An entire day working with Evan? I wanted to know what he meant last night, but I didn’t want to spend *time* with him. Unless I could make him send me home ...

“I guess it’s a good thing we didn’t go by age, huh?” one of the girls remarked. I didn’t know who said it, and I didn’t care.

The rest of the positions were handed out, and directions were given on where to report. I was told to wait for the hosts, a clear indication of how my day was going to go. Nothing like working under the pressure of a camera all day. If drama was their hope, they would be disappointed. I wasn’t built for television. Abby was the one they wanted. Her interviews were what put me on the show. Too bad we were nothing alike.

“Okay, so here’s the deal.” Paul’s hands were on my shoulders. “The sweater is cute and all, but we need you in a dress around Evan.” *Of course you do.* “Work with Kami over there. I have something specific in mind for you to wear.”

Like a good puppet, I went with Kami and found myself in a tight black dress that hit me midhigh. At least it wasn’t orange this time, and it was better than some of the maid outfits the other girls were forced to wear. Brenda, the makeup artist assigned to my face, stopped by to touch up my mascara while a hairdresser pulled out my twist and worked my hair into luxurious tousles. The whole experience wasted an hour of my life, but I looked hot.

I met Joseph and Carrie in the hallway near the elevators. The redhead gave a nod of approval. “Nice. Camera crew is already upstairs.” She hit the button to call the elevator. “Paul says to pick a part before the doors open.”

“A part?” I was an actress now?

“You know, seductress, shy and quiet, nervous, excited, whatever. Just make it good, or we’ll have to do this all over again.” From her tone, I gathered she didn’t want that to happen.

“Right.” Would annoyed work? Because I could pull that off. I had nothing by the time we hit the top floor. Theater wasn’t my strength.

“And smile,” Carrie instructed as the doors opened.

Bright lights and four-inch stiletto heels were not a good combination. I managed a smile and shuffled out of the elevator into the center of a lavish reception area where Evan was waiting in a suit and tie. His brown gaze darkened upon seeing me, but his grin remained in place. That small tell made me uneasy. *Okay*. At some point, I pissed him off. I thought back on my conversation with Will last night. It was the only thing I could think of that may have angered him after our meeting at the bottom of the stairs. Did Will insinuate that we were flirting last night? A drama ploy for the cameras?

“Good Morning, Evan,” Carrie greeted. “Sarah will be your assistant for the day.”

He held out his hand, and I shook it on autopilot. Very businesslike. *Seriously, what the hell?*

“Put me to work, boss.” I went for cheeky as my *part* and avoided Paul’s scrutiny. If he didn’t like it, he could yell “Cut!” and start us over again.

Evan gestured to a large desk in the corner of the room. Beside it was the door to his office. A glimpse of floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Mississippi River made my heart race. *The pictures I could take from up here ...*

“I hope you’re good with spreadsheets.” The sarcastic edge in his tone was not appreciated.

“I think I can manage.”

“We’ll see.” His expression radiated doubt.

Yeah, okay, asshole.

Where was the man I met last week? The one with the wicked gleam and dimpled smile? I liked him a lot more than this suited jerk. He still had a great ass, one that looked fantastic in those black slacks, and the five o'clock shadow was back, but the attitude had to go. If the cameras weren't on us, I would say a few choice words. Rachel's astute point Thursday night that the network could destroy my reputation was what kept me quiet. As a marketing professional, it would be detrimental to my career. I had to play nice for the producers.

Damn you, Abby.

I followed him past the reception area's couches and the double doors of an ornate conference room. The desk he led me to in the walled corner was boring by comparison and void of any decor, but I could see into his office from the chair.

"Here's a list of what I need done." Evan waved a hand toward a stack of papers with a note on top. "I'll be in my office, if you have any questions."

I picked up the list. He wanted a spreadsheet reformatted and two memos edited, a stack of business cards needed to be added to his electronic contacts, and five meetings needed rescheduling. This was supposed to keep me busy all day?

"Okay." I sat down and fussed with the chair while he looked on expectantly. "Oh, I don't have any questions."

"All right, then. No cameras in my office," he said to Paul as he disappeared and closed the door.

"Cut." Paul sauntered over and leaned against the desk. "Nonchalant was not the way I expected you to play it, but I like it. What else are you planning?"

"Right now?" I picked up the stack of crap and dropped it beside the keyboard. "I'm going to get this done." *Have fun filming it.*

He frowned. "You're not going to wander in there and ask questions? You know, as a way to get to know him?"

"I think he made it clear he doesn't want to be bothered at the moment, so I'll play along for now." Besides, the computer

had internet. *Excellent.*

MERSHANO STANDOFF

My tasks were done. I considered informing my “boss,” but he was on a call, so I pulled up my work email. One of my clients sent a proof back with edits. It was a human resources ad for an accounting firm in Chicago. I tinkered with the programs on the computer and found one that worked, and then I pulled up the design and started making the requested adjustments.

“Thought you might want lunch, since someone rudely forgot to offer.” Brenda tossed a sandwich on my desk. The makeup artist flashed me a smile. “I hope you like turkey.”

“Thanks.” It was after twelve. The crew members took a break to eat their lunches, but it was short-lived. They sprung into action as Evan’s parents stepped out of the elevator.

“No filming,” Ellen snapped when the camera turned on. “All crew off the floor. *Now*. I need a private moment with my son.”

I set my sandwich down and made to leave, but Jonah caught me by the arm. He was as tall as Evan and had to lean down to whisper in my ear. “Can you stay and make sure the cameras don’t come up here while we’re chatting?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” My hesitation was in part due to his request, but it was more a result of his manhandling. He held me too close for a man who didn’t know my name.

“Thanks, dear.” My skin crawled as he rubbed his palm up and down my arm before returning to his livid wife. She supervised the crew as they packed up their cameras. When

the last one left the floor, she marched over to the executive office door and threw it open.

“You are unbelievable, Evan!”

“I’m sorry, Monsieur Delante. I’m going to need to call you back. Oui. Au revoir.” He set down the phone. “Hello, Mother. To what do I owe the pleasure? Father.” The latter was added as an afterthought.

“Son.” His father used the same curt tone.

“Oh, you know exactly why we’re here.” Ellen slammed the door, not that it shielded their voices from the reception area. I tried to finish my sandwich, but it was tasteless. I set it aside as Ellen ripped into her son. “We only agreed to your idea of putting the girls to work because you promised to socialize with them in each area. It’s one o’clock, and you haven’t left your office! You haven’t even socialized with your *assistant*.”

“There are cameras everywhere, Mother. I’m watching.”

There weren’t any cameras in the lobby. None that were obvious anyway, but just in case, I engrossed myself in work again as the argument flowed in the background.

“Don’t you lie to me, young man. We both know you’re up here working.”

“Yes, well, multitasking between a frivolous dating show and a multibillion-dollar company is time consuming.” His deep voice was underlined with a patience I admired. This was the man who owned a successful, lucrative company. He would have to be well versed in restraint. “I’ll get to the girls in a bit.”

That didn’t pacify Ellen. “Our deal was very simple, Evan. You either take this seriously or you hand over the reins to Wyatt.”

“Mother, I agreed to be on this ridiculous show. I’ve been nothing but pleasant to the gold diggers taking over my hotel, and I’ve tolerated that ridiculous director stalking around like he owns the place. I’ll propose to one of the debutantes at the end, and if she accepts, she’ll become my wife. All to *appease*

you, Mother. So do not start with the threats again. I know what my inheritance clause states despite it being an archaic stipulation you refuse to grant me leniency on.”

Well, that’s interesting. I gave up all pretenses of working; the marketing ad paled in comparison to what was going on behind the door.

“Part of our agreement was for you to *try*. Picking a woman who denies you at the end because you ignored her the entire time goes against our terms.”

“When do you expect me to work if I’m playing this stupid game? I’m going on a date all day tomorrow, wrapping up filming on Thursday for this episode, and kicking off a new episode on Friday with another group date.”

“You make being surrounded by over a dozen willing women sound like a hardship.” His father’s tone was bored. “Take each of them to bed, have a good time of it, and pick the best performer. I don’t see why this is so hard?”

“Oh, do shut up,” Ellen snapped.

“What? I’m giving the boy helpful advice.” “You’re acting like a pig.”

“Better than pushing romantic babble on the poor boy.”

“And you two wonder why I have no interest in marriage,” Evan cut in. “Look, let me finish up what I’m working on, and then I’ll go wander around the hotel to check on everyone.”

“You’ll go now.” Ellen’s tone brooked no argument.

“I’ll go in thirty minutes and spend a total of two hours touring around. We’ll discuss the date picks later. That’s the best you’re getting from me today.”

“I want to see more effort, Evan.” Ellen was quiet but firm.

“And you will when I don’t have twenty women chasing me around like hungry puppies. Now get out of my office. I have work to do.”

I flipped the screen back to Mershano-related work and pretended to review the memo I edited this morning.

“If I don’t see you in thirty minutes, you won’t like my actions,” Ellen threatened from the opening door.

“Duly noted. Good-bye, Mother. Father.”

Ellen stalked over to the elevator and punched the button with more force than was necessary. Jonah lingered by my desk. “Sorry about that, sweetheart.”

I forced a smile. “It’s okay. I enjoyed the break from the cameras.” He wasn’t listening to a word I said, too focused on my breasts to care. When his wife cleared her throat, he gave me a wink, which I didn’t return, and joined the woman in the elevator. *Charming.*

A sigh fell from the other room through the open door. Evan’s head was in his hands, his thick hair clenched in his fingers. I thought Abby forcing me onto this show was bad, but it seemed his situation was worse. I went to the coffeemaker to get him a fresh cup. It wasn’t a huge consolation, but there wasn’t much to work with up here. I left it black and carried it in with a small knock. Wary eyes looked up at me as I set it on his desk.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Coffee?”

“Yeah, you look like you could use it.” Not wanting to linger, I walked toward my desk.

“Did you hear all of that?”

I paused in the doorway, my back to him. “Uh, yeah.” “And how will you use it?” I turned around.

“Use it?”

“In this game. How will you use the information?” “Why would I use it for anything?”

“Why wouldn’t you? What you just overheard is gold, right? A payday? Doesn’t that excite you?” That glower was back, raising my hackles. I wasn’t some punching bag to take hits on when he was feeling down. His parents pissed him off; I didn’t. I hadn’t done anything wrong despite his allegations that he was *onto me.*

“No, it made me feel sorry for you, which was clearly a mistake. Now if you’ll excuse me, *sir*, I’ll be at my desk, working.” I shut his office door and took a seat. “Ass,” I muttered. Taking his frustration out on me when I tried to do something nice for him was unacceptable. If he didn’t send me home tonight, I would have to find a way to get myself kicked off the show. This was stupid.

The door opened and he stepped out, his dark eyes alight with fury. “Playing hard to get is not impressing me.”

My eyebrows flew upward. “Excuse me?” “You heard me.”

“I’m not playing hard to get.”

“Then what do you call this game of pretending not to know a damn thing about me or my family and purposely shutting the door on me in the middle of a conversation?”

“Uh, I call it being realistic? I didn’t know who you were last week, assuming that’s what you’re talking about, and I shut the door during our *conversation* because you were being an ass.”

He gaped at me. “I saw the tapes. You knew all about me during your interviews.”

“I’m sure I did.” Abby would have done her homework. When my sister had a goal, she achieved it. And getting me on this stupid show was her ultimate hoax. At his confused look, I shook my head. “Never mind.”

“No, explain that.”

I puffed out a breath. “There’s no point. You wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

“Try me.” The arrogant line of his jaw taunted me, but it was the accusatory glower that did me in. I couldn’t stand it.

“Go look at the social media accounts for Abigail Summers. Then we’ll talk.” I returned to my project, dismissing him. Whatever he chose to do was up to him. I had a marketing ad to finish.

THE REAL SARAH SUMMERS

I was toying with marketing fonts when Evan walked out and popped a hip against the desk. The glower was gone and was replaced by curiosity. “You have a twin sister.”

“An *identical* twin sister. Yep.” I toyed with the size of the phrase on the screen. The purpose of the ad was to attract job applicants. The more legible the better.

“Okay, and that applies to this how?”

“It’s simple, really.” The text color was next. Something bold but not overstated. I toyed with shades of red while I spoke. “Abby and I have a history of pranking each other by impersonating one another. This time her impersonation went above and beyond the call of duty.” Red wasn’t working, so I moved to orange. And when that wasn’t quite right, I went the other way to purple. *Ah, there we are.* I grinned at my masterpiece. *Beautiful.*

Evan said nothing while standing beside me, too busy staring at my screen. His eyebrows were pulled down. “What project is this?” He surveyed the notes left on the desk with a frown.

“Oh, uh, this is something for work. *My* work in Chicago, I mean. I finished your tasks a few hours ago.”

“That list should have kept you busy all day.”

“Well, it didn’t.” I pulled up the completed spreadsheet and the memos and then showed him his contacts and calendars. “So yeah, when I was done, I checked my work

email and got distracted.” I chewed my cheek, waiting for his reply. That probably wasn’t what he expected his assistant to do for the day. “Were there other, uh, tasks that I missed?”

“No.” He rubbed the back of his neck, a look of unease filling his features. “You had access to the internet and used it to work?”

“Well, yeah, what else would I use it for?”

He leaned over me to take control of the mouse on my computer. It placed his broad chest right next to my cheek, giving me a whiff of his woody cologne. He started going through my internet history. “Did you post anything on social media about the show?”

I snorted. “No, why would I? Only two people know I’m here. Abby and my best friend, and she only knows about this because she’s a lawyer. She reviewed the contracts and couldn’t find a loophole, so here I am.” Not that he had sufficient proof to believe me, but it didn’t matter. Crazy or not, he would send me home this round, and all would be right in the world. Except for one thing. “What did you mean last night when you said you were onto me?”

He paused his perusal of the internet search history to meet my gaze. His close proximity left our lips inches apart, creating an air of intimacy between us that was entirely inappropriate. “I was referring to this act of yours about not knowing who I am or anything about my cousin. I’m not a fan of games.”

“Yet you’re on a game show.”

“Yes, and as you overheard, not by choice.” His chocolate eyes burned into mine, making my heart flutter. *A girl could get lost in that gaze ...*

“I don’t know what to say here,” I admitted, “other than I’m sorry and I’m not playing a game. I don’t want to be here any more than you do.”

“I almost believe you.” He flicked through the computer programs and pulled up the ad again. “You really worked on this all morning?”

“I worked on edits.” I took the mouse back from him to flip over to my work email and show him the notes my client provided. “My vacation request was last minute and the project is due Monday, so I was trying to get a head start. Otherwise I’m going to end up working all weekend.”

“And how do you plan to do that without a computer?”

“Oh, I have a laptop at home.” Because I wasn’t allowed to bring it with me on the show. “I only borrowed this one today because it was here and connected to the internet.”

“You have a laptop here or in Chicago?”

“Chicago.” Why did he look so incredulous?

“So you planned to fly back this weekend and then return to the show?”

“No, I plan to be home by then. Well, I mean, I expected you to kick me off last night, but that went to hell in a handbasket because of your cousin. So I figure you’ll let me go this round and I’ll be home in plenty of time to work on my projects.” This ad was one of many presentations due in a few days. It was going to be a long weekend.

“I’m letting you go?”

“Well, that’s the hope anyway.” Realizing how that sounded, I grimaced. “I’m sorry. That was rude. This has nothing to do with you; it’s just work. They’ll fire me if I’m not back on Monday.”

“Because they don’t know you’re here?”

“Among other things, yes. I didn’t know I was going to be here until the paperwork arrived in the mail, and by that point, Abby was already on a plane to Europe. Otherwise *she* would be here. I’m sure your producers would love her.”

His grin made my belly flip. Those cute dimples were back. “She, or you, or whoever, was entertaining in those interviews.”

“I bet.” Abby was an actress at heart. That was how she snagged all her wealthy boyfriends. It was never about love for

her, but she played the hopeless-romantic role better than anyone I knew. “So anyway ... that’s why I’m here.”

I took over the mouse and hit save on my work before exporting it to the format my client needed. His hand settled beside mine on the desk as he watched me type up a short email and send the proof back to the customer. It was nerve-racking having him over my shoulder the whole time, but I thrived under pressure. Stern and Associates would never have employed me otherwise.

“You must love your job.”

“I love *marketing*,” I corrected. “Working for Stern and Associates is an amazing opportunity, but helping large corporations amass more wealth isn’t very satisfying.” I typed a link into the web browser and pulled up one of my favorite projects. “I helped design the website for this organization while finishing up my MBA. *This* is my true love.”

I showed him the interactive pages I designed for children at an inner-city school to log physical activity. I had a soft spot for public health programs designed around preventing noncommunicable diseases. They needed the most help because their benefactors tended to pull out when the results weren’t immediate.

“This is amazing.”

“I can’t take all the credit.” I flipped to the contact page. “It was their idea; I just created the website and portals for activity logging. So far, it’s successful.”

“Do you keep in touch with them?”

“Of course. I make updates whenever they request it.”

“And they pay you?” His business side was showing.

“Sure, but nothing compared to what I make with Stern and Associates.” I closed the browser and settled back in the chair. He was leaning over me, reminding me of our interaction last week. The man was oblivious to personal space, not that I minded. Without his jacket on, I was up close and personal with all that delicious muscle beneath his thin white dress shirt. *Eye candy indeed.* “One day, I want to own

my own firm and focus on altruistic projects instead of moneymaking initiatives. I'd still take a few on to pay the bills, but the majority would be public health related."

"Why not do that now?"

I looked around his ornate reception area. "Not all of us come from the same background that you do, Mister Mershano. I still have an MBA loan to pay off and an expensive studio in Chicago to keep up. Besides, branching out on my own requires contacts and project proposals. I need a couple more years at Stern and Associates before I get there."

"The job you plan to go back to this weekend." "That's the one."

The wicked glint was back in his intense gaze. He angled his body toward mine instead of the computer and picked up a strand of my hair. Coiling it around his finger, he murmured, "And if I decide to keep you around?"

My heart jolted. "Why would you do that?"

"Why indeed?" His gaze dropped to my lips. He was about to say more when the elevator opened. His gaze held mine while his mother marched out with a cameraman right behind her. She stopped upon seeing us at the desk, her hazel eyes widening. "I believe that's my cue to start my rounds. This has been an enlightening conversation, Sarah."

He pressed his lips to my cheek. The back of his hand brushed my breast as he let go of my hair. My nerves tingled at the unexpected intimacy and woke up parts of me that hadn't been touched by a man in far too long. Those delicious dark eyes gazed knowingly down at me as he straightened to his full height. He played the part of bad boy caught in the act well. His expression didn't show an ounce of remorse. I was too flustered to pull that off.

"Let me grab my jacket." He smoothed out his tie and walked into his office. I avoided the camera by pulling up his memo and reading it for the fifth time. He stopped by the desk on his way out and leaned over to brush a soft kiss against my

temple before whispering, “Your internet access shall remain our little secret. Don’t abuse it.”

Heat crawled up my neck at the display of affection and the impact his words had on my heart. His gift meant I could keep working. He had no idea how much that meant to me. “Thank you.”

He winked, and unlike his father’s, this one left me feeling warm inside. *The man better send me home soon, or I’m in trouble.*

UNCLEAR INTENTIONS

Twenty women, one prince, and seventeen keys. *Not my kind of fairy tale.*

The tension was palpable, and the waterworks were on standby. I stood between Tiffany and Georgiana on the third step of the grand staircase, waiting for the ceremony to start. Evan's family wasn't involved tonight, and he knew the truth. He had every excuse needed to send me home this time. *And then I'll never see him again.*

The pit in my stomach tightened. I wanted to get back to my life in Chicago and move on from all this, but there was something about him that captivated me. He stood before us in a suit that hugged his muscular form to perfection and exuded a quiet confidence I admired. Despite my best intentions, I was drawn to him. *Like a moth to a flame.* If I got too close, I would get burned.

Sharp nails dug into my arm as Tiffany lost her balance beside me. She grimaced and let me go after regaining her footing. "Oh, Sarah, I'm sorry. It's these damn shoes."

I looked at her four-inch stilettos. "No worries." She was one of the women Evan chose for his two-on-one date. Amber was the other one. It seemed the prince had a preference for blondes. Unlike the southern belle, Tiffany was all legs and model-tall. She was the kind of girl men looked at twice and women hated on sight. Kind of like Rachel.

"Why did they put me in stilettos?" Tiffany muttered.

“Because the producers want to show off your legs in that dress,” I replied. It was a deep blue that ended just below her ass. Mine was a burnt orange with a plunging neckline. I had to go braless because of it. *Good thing the girls are perky.*

She snorted. “I look ridiculous. I would never wear this at home.”

I couldn’t say the same about mine. It popped against my tan skin, and my breasts looked great. If I had somewhere to wear it, I would do so in a heartbeat.

“They made me wear a tight minidress last night, too,” she added. Pink tinged her pale cheeks. “I was so uncomfortable.”

“At least you got to go,” Georgiana sneered from my other side. “I wouldn’t complain if I were you.”

“Oh, I wasn’t.” Tiffany’s hand fluttered against her chest as she peeked at the buxom beauty on my other side. “I just, it’s, well, I’m not used to this.”

“None of us are, honey. But you better buck up and get used to it.” Georgiana dismissed her with a look and whispered something to the brunette in front of her. The slender woman with hawkish features glanced over her shoulder with a smirk, making Tiffany’s blue eyes drop to her feet. Her lack of self-confidence and sweet demeanor made her an easy target for the other girls. If it was an act, it was a believable one.

“For the record, I’m not a fan of it either,” I replied loud enough for all the girls to hear. Evan quirked an eyebrow at me. *A little too loud, then.* “Sorry, discussing wardrobe choices.” Some of the girls gasped, surprised by my audacity. What did I care? He was sending me home in a few minutes.

Those sexy dimples flashed up at me. “Not a fan of evening attire, Miss Summers?”

“Oh no, I love my dress, Mister Mershano. I’m just not a fan of stilettos on stairs.” My feet didn’t care about the heels at all, but I wanted to make Tiffany feel better. I wasn’t a fan of bullying.

His alluring laugh made me shiver. He turned to the spiky-haired director. “She has a point, Paul. Can you hurry up?”

“Yeah, just two more minutes.” The man took a call after filming Joseph’s intro to the elimination ceremony and left us all standing here to wait. *Not like we have anything better to do.*

“Why does he call you Miss Summers?” Tiffany whispered.

“I have no idea.” *But I’m starting to like it.* The other night it came off as formal and dismissive. Tonight it was said with an affectionate lilt that made me smile. He was flirting with me. I could get used to that.

“Ladies, sorry about that.” Paul pocketed his phone. “Producers take priority. Anyway, let’s get back to it. Joseph, off to the side. We’ll pan around Evan to get varying shots of his emotions and then shift to the girls’ faces.” He started sounding off commands to his minions to get everyone in place. Getting it done in one take was his goal. *Works for me.*

Evan stood in the center of the ornate lobby, beside a table with a stack of hotel keys. Not a glamorous gift, but the hotel suites were nice. Mine had a view of the Mississippi, just like Will said it would, and an oversized king bed. As far as luxuries went, it was top-notch.

“All right, Evan, the time has come.” Joseph stood beside the prince, his hand on his shoulder. “Good luck.” He gave him a pat and stepped out of the shot as Paul requested. Cameras rolled around Evan as he waited for the signal to let him know that he could get started.

“Ladies,” Evan greeted after receiving his signal, “you all look amazing tonight.” A few of the women returned the compliment, making him grin. The suit was hot, but I missed the jeans and jacket. It was sexier and gave him the illusion of being attainable. Casual looked good on him. Not that I would ever see it again.

“Thank you all for your help in the hotel this week. I hope you had fun and learned a little bit more about what I do. I

enjoyed watching your reactions and answering your questions and getting to know a bit more about each of you.” He met my gaze on that last comment, making my heart drop to my stomach. “That being said, this wasn’t an easy decision. You’re all spirited, gorgeous women, and I’m pretty sure men everywhere envy me right now.” That elicited a few giggles, but he didn’t smile. *Because he doesn’t want to be here.* “Well ...” He cleared his throat and picked up the first key. “I only have seventeen of these, so let’s get started.”

The room fell silent as all the girls stopped breathing. It was an odd sensation that sent goosebumps flying over my skin. Nerves played racquetball in my abdomen as we waited for him to speak. I wanted to go home, but the anticipation of hearing my name on his lips floored me. *What if he picks me? What if he doesn’t?* Logic warred with instinct. I *needed* to get out of here. The game was messing with my head.

Tiffany Chambers was the first name called. The tall woman would have fallen if I hadn’t caught her elbow. She flashed me an appreciative smile before moving down the stairs to accept her key. He gave her a hug before sending her back to the spot beside me and continued the process. It was a good thing they placed five women on each step. We used the extra space to shift around as each woman went down to accept her key.

My nerves danced as the pile dwindled. Each name he called that wasn’t mine felt like a punch to the gut. The competitive atmosphere was getting to me. It made me want to stay for the wrong reasons. Returning to Chicago and my real life was the goal. He wasn’t meant for me. My lust for him would fade, and all would be fine in a week or two. *It’s not like I know him.*

“Ladies, there’s one key left,” Joseph murmured. “Who will it be, Evan?”

I swallowed. *I’m going home in three, two ...*

“Miss Summers.” Evan’s all-consuming gaze pinned me in place. *He just said my name.* And it wasn’t in conjunction with

me leaving. My pulse jumped. Was this a joke? *Did I hear him right?*

Tiffany nudged me when I didn't move. "Go," she mouthed.

I stepped forward on heels that wobbled, and stopped a foot away from him. His grin was sin personified. He called my name last on purpose. *Bastard.*

"Your résumé is almost as impressive as your work, Miss Summers. I can't wait to learn more about you." He handed me the key and trailed his finger down my knuckles. The flirtatious touch burned. His lips brushed my ear as he pulled me into a hug. "Surprised, Sarah?"

I was speechless. He was supposed to send me home. *What the hell is going on here?* I returned his embrace on autopilot and melted against him as he held me a moment longer than was appropriate. Hot, hard, virile. *I'm in so much trouble.* He pressed his lips to my temple and then to the corner of my mouth. The intimacy of the act was not lost on me—or the other girls, if their expressions were anything to go by on my return trip to the stairs. I knew what jealousy looked like, and I saw it in several narrowed gazes.

Joseph and Carrie said something to the group, indicating it was time for the three eliminated contestants to say their farewells. Their exits bordered on dramatic. They bid Evan a tearful good-bye before a hoard of cameras escorted them out the door. Champagne flowed in their wake as we were invited to toast the final seventeen around the prince and fawn over him for *selecting* us.

It all went by in a blur as I struggled to understand what I did to deserve the prolonged stay in hell. *What the fuck just happened?* I wasn't sure what bothered me more: the fact that he didn't send me home or the realization that a part of me was happy he said my name. *I need therapy.*

When they dismissed us for the night, I went straight to my room and jumped in the shower to wash all the crap out of my hair and off my face. Playing dress up wasn't my favorite activity, but I had to do it all over again tomorrow. *Shit.*

He kept me. What did that mean? What happens if he forces me to stay? That wasn't something I factored into my plans. I assumed it would be a no-brainer to send me home, yet here I was in the top seventeen. *This cannot be happening right now.*

"You need to get a grip," I told myself and shut off the water. I had a few days to figure this out. As long as the next round of eliminations happened Sunday, I would be fine.

I wrapped a towel around myself and combed the tangles from my damp hair. My hand was on the dryer when a soft knock caught me off guard. Expecting it to be one of the girls or a crew member, I walked over and opened it without looking. Evan stood on the other side, his arms braced on either side of the door, caging me in the room. The hallway behind him was silent and empty.

Amusement darkened his eyes as he took in my towel and wet hair. "Evening, Sarah. I have a proposition for you."

THE PROPOSITION

“Get in here before someone sees you,” I hissed. The last thing I needed was a scandal. *“The Prince of New Orleans Makes Midnight Visit to Contestant’s Room” would be the news headline on those gossip sites.*

Evan walked in with a devilish grin, kicked off his shoes, and collapsed onto my bed. He crossed his jean-clad legs at the ankles and slipped an arm under his head to prop himself up on the pillows. The black leather jacket fell open to reveal his grey shirt and a sliver of his flat stomach. *So much sexier than the penguin suit.*

“What are you doing in my room?”

Those full lips curled upward. “You just invited me in, sweetheart.”

My hands went to my hips, reminding me I was in a very short towel, something he more than noticed. “You know what I mean.”

“I have a proposition for you.”

“Yes, you said that already.”

He patted the bed with his free hand, and I rose an eyebrow. I was not a pet to be commanded.

“I like to be on the same eye level when I negotiate.”

“Then you should have stayed standing.” Not that I minded him lounging on my bed. He looked good there. *Sin incarnate.*

“And tower over you?” He tsked. “That could be seen as intimidation, sort of like how you’re staring down at me now.” Yet he was the picture of ease, one arm behind his head and the other lying at his side while his fingers drummed over the quilt. He was like some sort of decadent dessert, sprawled out on my bed and ready to be savored. My thighs clenched. His body was made for licking, and if that glimpse of skin was anything to go by, he would taste delicious. *Stop drooling, Sarah.*

“Fine, but I’m putting on clothes first.”

“I’m fine with you in a towel.”

“I’m sure you are.” I picked a pair of black shorts and a tank top from my suitcase before going into the bathroom to change. I didn’t bother with a bra. It was late, I was tired, and my breasts enjoyed their freedom. He could deal with it. I combed my wet hair again before joining him on the bed. I sat cross-legged and faced him. His eyes went to my chest as I expected they would. He was a man, after all.

“I’m fine with this, too,” he murmured. His chocolate gaze flicked over my exposed legs before settling on my face. “I’ll pay you to stay.”

“Excuse me?” There was no way I heard that right.

He sat up and rested his back against the headboard. Drawing up a knee, he wrapped one arm around it and laid the other over his thigh. “There’s a clause in my inheritance that requires me to produce an heir before I’m thirty-eight. If I don’t, I forfeit the company to the next in line, which would be Wyatt.”

I didn’t know much about his younger brother other than he lived up to the rebel nickname. “I’m guessing by your tone, you don’t want that to happen.”

“My wayward brother has no interest in running Mershano Suites, let alone working. Putting him in charge would be catastrophic for the company and my employees. Why else would I agree to this frivolous dating game?”

Why else indeed? “Does the inheritance clause apply to Wyatt as well?” I couldn’t remember his exact age but recalled him being in his thirties.

“It does, and he’s already fulfilled it despite being very single.”

I frowned. “You’re saying he has a kid?” *Totally missed that fact while researching.* The younger brother really was a rebel.

“Yes. Not one he ever sees or takes care of, but I don’t want to discuss my brother’s antics. What matters is that Wyatt meets the archaic qualifications but lacks the maturity and desire to run Mershano Suites.”

“Okay.” I could understand one’s desire not to run a multibillion-dollar organization, but it seemed Wyatt Mershano had an aversion to responsibility. “That’s quite the predicament, but I don’t understand what it has to do with me.”

“Well, this show is a bargain of sorts. My parents picked the thirty contestants based on qualities they think make a good wife, and I have to propose to one in the end. If she says no, the clause is null and void, and I’m a free man. The problem is they went out and picked a bunch of women who would never refuse, except you.”

“Because they interviewed Abby.”

“Exactly.”

“Meaning you believe me.” *And forced me to stay on this show despite me telling you I wanted to leave.*

He looked me over and grinned. “You don’t giggle, Sarah.”

“I don’t giggle?” What the hell did that have to do with anything?

“Abby giggles, but you laugh. I saw it on the camera footage Paul forced me to watch this morning. Your laugh was nothing like the woman in the interview despite your identical appearance.”

I stared at him. He was right, but few people ever noticed our minute differences. How strange that this man who knew little about me recognized something so nuanced.

“You’re also a terrible liar,” he added. “I watched the conversation you had with Will. When he asked if you wanted time with me, you said no and tried to cover your tracks. It was almost sad.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s an insult.”

He grinned. “Probably. But the point is, you’re not the woman my parents picked for the show, and that gives me an advantage. Let me be blunt, Sarah. I’ll pay you to stay on until the end and refuse my proposal.”

I gaped at him. He couldn’t be serious. “You think money will make up for having to go through all this crap every day for the next two months? Not to mention putting my life on hold and losing my job, and probably my apartment, in the process. For a man I hardly know? Yeah, I’m going with ‘no way in hell.’”

His chuckle was all confidence. This was a man who was used to being told no and negotiating his way out of it. “Your dream is to own a marketing firm that caters to companies with altruistic values, but you know it’s a false hope because they don’t pay well. Isn’t that what you told me the other day?”

“Yes, and—”

He pressed a finger to my lips. “Hear me out. What you need is a silent partner, someone to provide initial funding to get you on your feet and help you network. I can provide all of that and more.” He traced my mouth before dropping his hand and laying it a scant inch from my bare legs. “I can contract with your firm for certain marketing needs for the Mershano empire and pay you handsomely for it. It’ll be enough to sustain you for life and grant you the opportunity to do what you love, and I’ll require minimal services in exchange.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I’m very serious.” All amusement fled his features. His eyes burned with a fervor that elicited a shiver from deep down inside me. That was the kind of look a woman wanted to see in the bedroom. His words, however, were anything but sexy. “I have no desire to marry. Ever. And if it means beating my parents at their own fucked-up game, then that is exactly what I will do.”

“And if I say no?”

He didn’t reply right away. “You can’t afford to, Sarah.”

A simple, quiet statement that implied so much more. I told him I would lose my job if I wasn’t back in Chicago next week, and he had the power to keep me here until then, or longer. “You would force me to stay to spite me for saying no.” Not a question. His unrepentant stare told me I was right. “That does not make me want to help you. At all.”

“I’m not heartless, Sarah.” He brushed the back of his fingers down my cheek in quiet apology. “But I am desperate.”

Varying degrees of heat followed that touch, some inspired by his caress but most a result of the anger burning through my veins. I did not like being cornered. “So you’re willing to ruin my life to better yours?”

“I’m trying to better both of our lives here. I’m offering you your dream career for the price of my freedom. It’s a fair deal. I could keep you here anyway, knowing full well you would reject my proposal out of hatred at the end, and leave you with nothing. That’s not what I want to do. I *want* to help you, but I need help, too.”

“And if I go to the media with this little proposition?”

“Assuming they believe you, it’ll paint a black mark on both of our records. I’m guessing I’ll survive that better than you.” He shrugged. “But go for it.”

“This is not endearing me to you at all.”

“Endearment isn’t my goal. I want to come to a mutually beneficial agreement.”

“One that forces me to give up my life,” I reminded him.

“But you’ll go home to a new life where you take on the clients *you* want and report to yourself as a boss. You have to see the allure in that.”

“Of course I do.” I wasn’t stupid. “But what guarantee do I have that you’ll hold up your end of the bargain? And what happens when the media finds out that the Mershano empire is backing my marketing firm after I conveniently dismissed your proposal?”

“That’s the beauty of a silent partnership. No one needs to know where the funds came from, not publicly anyway. A couple of years from now when the media hype has died down, the Mershano empire will hire your firm for a sizable annual sum that ensures you have enough funds to stay afloat. Done deal.”

“Okay, and my guarantee?”

“My attorney is already drawing up a confidential contract. It’ll have a nondisclosure agreement clause, of course, and the terms of our deal, including funding costs and the future partnership between your firm and my company, for the price of you staying on and refusing my proposal at the end. Two months of hell for a future of freedom.”

“You’re confident I’ll accept.” Why else would his attorney draft a contract before receiving my verbal commitment?

“Very.” His grin was all arrogance. “We both know it’s a good deal, Miss Summers. So what are your terms? What will it take to convince you to accept?”

COMING TO TERMS

It was a tempting offer. My position at Stern and Associates was a good job, but I had no intention of staying there in the long term. Evan had the means to make my dreams a reality, and all I had to do was stay on the dating show for two months and reject his proposal. It was more appealing than being forced to stay and reject him for nothing in the end.

“You do realize even if you make me stay, I could say yes in the end and make your life a living hell.” Not that I wanted to get married, but it would be worth it to make him suffer for being an ass.

He considered, those piercing eyes assessing. “A risk, certainly, but I suspect your need for independence will prosper in the end. From what I’ve observed, you’re driven—admirably so—and have your priorities in order. And most importantly, you’re not in the market for a marriage certificate. Am I right?”

That was a lot of detail to gather from a couple of conversations. His astute summarization implied he was skilled at assessing situations and reading people. There was a reason this man managed a hotel empire, and it wasn’t just his last name. *Color me impressed.* He could vote me in night after night, forcing me to stay against my will, but he was offering me my dreams instead. A ruse, albeit an intelligent one, to keep me agreeable and happy rather than scornful and rude. I would be a fool not to accept it. After a thorough review of the contract, of course.

I left the bed for the desk. His gaze was like a touch against my ass as I bent over to write down a few key numbers and a name. When I turned, his brown eyes went to my breasts, making me shiver. As far as business practice went, it was inappropriate. But we were negotiating my dating him for a fee, in the bedroom of a hotel. Couldn't get more lewd than that.

Rejoining him on the bed, I handed him the paper. "I will agree under the following conditions: First, I want the contract delivered to Rachel Dawson for review. Second, you get me a phone so I can review it with her. Third, we add a clause that guarantees our contract remains intact should you decide to go with a different woman in the end."

"Worried I might fall in love?"

"No, I'm worried I might piss you off." My ex-boyfriends would all agree to that. I had a habit of being too independent. Men didn't like that. "Oh, I also reserve the right to add anything else I think of between now and the time I sign the contract, and Rachel can add anything she deems necessary."

"Rachel Dawson will need to sign a nondisclosure agreement. Do you trust her to keep it?"

"Unconditionally. She's my best friend and the only person, besides you, me, and Abby, who knows why I'm really here. I trust her with my life."

He read the contact details. "I'll ask Will to deliver the papers to her tomorrow."

"He'll go to Chicago for you?"

"He's the only one I trust to do it."

"I take it he's not on board with your parents forcing you to get married."

"Not at all." He pocketed the details and eyed me. "As for the phone, I'll figure something out. I requested you for the one-on-one date on Saturday, but you're going to need that phone tomorrow to give notice at work. I'll need to add you to the group date. An afternoon exploring the French Quarter with eight women. Should be a blast."

“Wow. Don’t sound too excited there, Evan. You might bring down the house.”

He grinned. “Something tells me having you around for two months won’t be so bad, Sarah.”

“Oh, give me time. I’ll find a few buttons to push.”

“I can think of a few I wouldn’t mind pushing.” My nipples stiffened beneath his open perusal. Faking attraction for the camera wouldn’t be a problem here.

“Draw up the contract.” Then we could talk about *buttons*.

“Yes, ma’am.” He stretched his arms over his head, lifting that shirt enough to afford me a glimpse of his belt, before dropping his hands to the bed. “If that’s my cue to leave, I’m ignoring it for a few more minutes. I have no interest in moving.”

“Hey, it’s your hotel.” I relaxed into the pillows beside him. “I might fall asleep. I have to report downstairs at seven o’clock sharp for filming. Then I finally get to see some of the city.”

“Is this your first time in The Big Easy?”

“Yep. My plan was to get kicked off the show the first night so I could explore all the cemeteries before going back to Chicago, but that didn’t happen.” I had a thing for dark, scary places. It went hand in hand with my horror film obsession.

He pushed off the headboard to scoot down and lie on his back. His arm went behind his head again, and that sliver of skin peeked up at me. I licked my lips. *Yum*. “Cemeteries, huh? I’d enjoy that more, but Paul wants to hit Bourbon Street and get everyone drunk. I’m positively thrilled by the idea.”

“I can tell.” I yawned.

“I’ll see if we can add something historic to the list that doesn’t involve women taking off their shirts for beads. If not, I’ll take you around sometime. I know a few good haunts.”

“I’d like that.” The bed was too comfortable for me to keep my eyes open. I was exhausted. “You can stay as long as

you'd like, but my conversational skills are falling to the wayside."

His chuckle was deep, rolling through me on a wave of warmth. I wouldn't mind hearing more often. "I'll let you sleep." He ran the back his fingers over my cheek and down my neck to my shoulder. The tender touch hit every nerve and set my blood on fire. *Oh, he's going to be trouble.* His intoxicating scent consumed my senses as he placed a chaste kiss on my lips. "Thank you, Sarah. For everything."

Cool air replaced his natural heat, and it was the opposite of what I wanted. I curled my fingers in his jacket and pulled him back down. I wasn't one to mix business with pleasure, but I could make an exception for this man. His leg slipped between mine as he braced himself with a hand on either side of my head.

"Did you think of a contract amendment already?"

"No." I wasn't tired anymore. Not with him leaning over me like this. "You know Paul's going to expect chemistry on set."

His eyes dropped to my lips. "That won't be a problem."

No, it wouldn't. "Our first kiss is not going to be in front of a camera, where I'm receiving some bogus instructions on how to use my tongue or whatever else those producers have in mind. And I won't be doing anything more than kissing you while on film."

"And off film?" One of his hands went to my hip as he lowered himself onto his elbow beside my head, closing the gap between our bodies. His groin was hot and heavy against my leg, leaving no doubt that the attraction between us was *definitely* mutual.

"We'll see where it goes, but it's not like you won't be getting action from the other girls."

"Does that bother you?"

"Should it?"

"Probably."

“Isn’t that the nature of the show?” If I told myself that enough times, I wouldn’t care. I didn’t know him well enough to be jealous. Holding him this close was making my heart race, but that was lust. Deeper feelings weren’t an option between us. As long as I remembered that, I would be fine.

His thumb slipped beneath my tank top to caress the bare skin of my hip. “I can flirt without getting sexual. I’ve managed to ignore Paul’s encouragement so far.”

“I bet he hates that.”

“An added bonus.” His pupils dilated with a hunger that was palpable, the hand on my hip tightening. “He’ll make me eventually. Sooner rather than later, I’m sure.”

“You make it sound like a chore.” What kind of man complained about making out with various women? *The good kind*. Not a thought I needed if I wanted my heart to remain off-limits. Lust was an emotion I could handle. Anything deeper, and I would be in trouble.

“It will be. For the most part, anyway.” Desire radiated from his bedroom eyes as they dropped to my lips again. “If I kiss you right now, I can’t guarantee it’ll stop there.”

“If you value your contract, you’ll make sure it does.” A kiss was an introduction. That was our current stage. Moving to the next level required more trust. He brushed his fingers over my jaw while still balancing on that forearm.

“Just so we’re clear”—his lips inched closer with each word, his intention obvious—“when I stop, it’s only because you tell me to.” An electric current zipped down my spine, igniting every nerve ending in my body as his mouth took mine.

I tangled my fingers in his thick hair and reveled in his passionate claim. Mint, wine, and scotch blended in my mouth as his tongue twined with mine. As far as first kisses went, this one blew my mind. There was nothing slow or gentle about it. His mouth left no question as to what kind of lover he would be. *Demanding, hot, and oh-so passionate*. I loved it.

My stomach was in knots—the good kind—and my hard nipples grazed my top. I wanted to tear the offending fabric from my body and rub against his leather jacket. *Too fast, too soon.*

This man could ruin me, and I wouldn't regret a second of it. The realization both terrified and thrilled me. I ran my hands down his back, luxuriating in the leather and hard male beneath. He was temptation incarnate, surrounding me on the soft, plush bed. The hard thigh lodged between my legs was an invitation for so much more. When my palms drifted down to cup his ass, he lifted a fraction.

“Groping was not part of our agreement tonight, Miss Summers.” Arousal thickened his voice, going straight to the apex between my thighs. I wanted to hear all sorts of dirty things come out of his mouth in that tone while in bed, and now was a great time to start.

“Yeah?” I squeezed. “What are you going to do about it?”

He removed his hand from my hip to palm my breast. I arched into his touch, my nipples oh-so sensitive from the thin layer of fabric separating them from his leather jacket.

“Responsive. I like that.” He licked my lower lip. “I plan to learn all about you over the next two months, Sarah. What makes you moan, how hard you come, how you taste.” Another slow lick, followed by him dipping his tongue into my mouth for an open kiss. I was shaking when he pulled back again, my body more than ready to move to the next level of this seductive game. “In due time. But first, I have a contract to draw up.”

“Tease.”

“I told you when I started, you were the one who set the terms. I'm only abiding by them.” He kissed my cheek and lifted off of the bed. I smiled when he adjusted his jeans. I wasn't the only one left in a sensual fog from a kiss. *If he can kiss like that, the other things he could do with that mouth . . .* I shuddered. He was more than welcome to *taste* me anytime he liked.

“Don’t forget I want a phone to talk to Rachel tomorrow.” My calm tone was undermined by my stiff nipples, something his gaze not only noticed but admired through the thin cotton of my tank top.

“I’ll get you a phone, but it’ll be up to you to hide it.” “I can handle that.”

“Oh, I have no doubt as to what you can handle, sweetheart.” He fixed his jacket and ran a hand through his hair, giving it that fresh-out-of-bed look. *How appropriate.* “I’d kiss you good night, but I’ll just end up in bed again with you looking at me like that.”

My grin was all female satisfaction. It felt good being wanted by a man like Evan Mershano. I didn’t need compliments, but a little ego-stroking went a long way. He walked around to the foot of the bed and sat to put on his shoes. When he stood, it was to run his fingers through his hair again and blow out a breath.

“Can you check the hallway?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s probably a good idea.” I popped out of bed and checked the peephole first before the hallway. “All clear,” I whispered.

His palm landed on my ass as he pushed into me from behind. “This is almost as alluring as the towel.” He pressed a kiss below my ear, scattering goosebumps down my spine. I was a sucker for a man’s lips on my neck, and the grin I felt there told me he noticed. “Good night, Sarah.”

He stepped around me with a wink and left on silent feet. *I hope there aren’t any hidden cameras in the hallway, or we’re both screwed.*

DANCING IN THE STREET

The producers let me wear jeans and flats to wander Bourbon Street. I was in heaven, with the exception of being on a date with eight girls and one man.

Evan was supposed to get me a phone today, but I didn't see how that would be possible with all the cameras. The late afternoon hour meant I wouldn't be able to call my boss until Monday to give my notice. Not that I planned to do so without a signed contract in hand. That would be naive.

I kept my distance, listening while socializing with a petite woman named Lily. I liked the girl. She was quirky, had a computer science degree, and was one of the few women not trying to climb Evan like a tree.

"Somehow I don't think that's what he had in mind when he suggested dessert," she muttered as Carmen dumped powdered sugar all over Evan's black shirt and dark jeans. He made the mistake of buying us beignets after lunch. The wannabe brides were all worked up over the sexy lilt that came out when he ordered. It seemed the prince knew how to please the locals with his southern charm, or maybe he fell back into the accent on instinct. Either way, it was hot as hell.

"Do you think she's trying to get him to remove his shirt?" Lily wondered as Georgiana slid her manicured fingers over Evan's abdomen. The busty brunette wasn't holding anything back today. I watched as she drew a line of sugar along Evan's cheek and went up onto her toes to lick it off. Her overconfidence was astounding.

“Wow.” Lily’s almond-shaped eyes rounded. “Think he tastes good?”

Yes. “Everything tastes good with powdered sugar.” I gave our paparazzi a coquettish glance for fun. Most of the crew were around the prince, but we had a few trailing us.

Evan brushed the sugar off with a half grin. No one seemed to notice his discomfort, or maybe they didn’t care. Three women rushed over to help wipe off his shirt, all using it as a chance to cop a feel. Amber stood off to the side, lips pursed. When she rose on her tiptoes to whisper something in his ear, his dimples flashed. It was the first real smile all afternoon, and it went to her.

Last night he implied he hadn’t been intimate with any of the girls, but the private look they exchanged insinuated otherwise. Why would he lie about something I could see on television later? It wasn’t like I would judge him. *Well, not much anyway.* If he chose her, a few snide thoughts might escape.

Amber was groomed to be a trophy wife, with that long blonde hair, model-thin body, and old southern charm. She would make a perfect billionaire wife, except he didn’t want one—at least, that’s what he said. As he bent down to murmur something back in her ear, I started to question his intentions. Unless all he wanted was sex. I couldn’t blame him for that, being around all these willing women. But why visit my room and kiss me to oblivion if he was getting it from blonde Barbie over there?

“I see you like the bimbo bitch about as much as I do.” Patty approached from the side, her long ebony legs on display from her clingy tan dress. She snorted when Amber laughed with delight at whatever Evan told her. “Oh, I’m sure he’s just *so* funny.” She batted her thick lashes, making Lily and me laugh.

“Yeah, she’s a piece of work.” Lily blew the black bangs out of her matching eyes with a huff and scrunched her nose. “I couldn’t believe how she threw that poor girl under the bus

the first night. What was her name? Oh, I think you were talking to her. Brianne maybe?”

“You mean Bianca?” She and Amber were the only contestants I talked to that night.

“Yeah, that’s right. Amber told Evan something about Bianca not wanting to have kids, and the girl about lost her shit.” Lily gave a dramatic shiver. “It was scary.”

Well, that explains the tension radiating off her that night.

“Bet Paul loved that.” Patty gestured at the director, who was saying something to the cameramen around Evan. “Looks like he wants something to happen between Evan and Amber to create drama.”

The flirtatious exchange between them was like watching a train wreck. He tugged on one of her blonde curls and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek, but she moved at the last second to snag his mouth with her own. The kick to my stomach was neither expected nor appreciated. Feelings were not meant to get involved here. Lust was fine. Safe. Other emotions were not.

Angry stares and dramatic whispers rushed over the group as the women reacted the way Paul wanted them to. *He must love his job. Creating drama, making people cry—just living the dream.*

I ignored the hysteria and admired my surroundings instead. The French Quarter’s architecture was adorable, with flowered balconies and brick siding, and the romantic, jazzy notes in the air went straight to my heart. I was born to dance, my curves loving a good tune, and the live street music made me want to groove. I gave in to the temptation and let my hips sway to the beat.

Lily and Patty joined me, and with them came more cameras. I didn’t care. My tango-loving mom taught me all her moves and more, making me an experienced dancer by the age of ten. I used to skip around the house on my toes, flying in circles and living to the beat of my own drum. Patty kept pace, showing me up with some moves of her own. Lily’s short legs

and tiny waist weren't as practiced, but I gave the girl props for trying. I was midlaugh after shimmying at her, when a hand caught my hip and a hard chest met my back.

“How am I supposed to resist three dancing women in the street?” His lips were by my ear, but the words were meant for all of us.

“Hey, you're welcome to join us anytime. Assuming you can keep up.” Patty kept moving, showing off her skills, while Lily's olive skin flushed red. She missed a step and nearly took Patty out midmove. I kept my hips swaying to the beat, unable to help pushing back into his groin. He chose to grab me from behind. Not a good idea unless he wanted to walk away in discomfort. I had curves for a reason.

His mimicking the move was not what I expected. He gyrated his hips against mine, taking control of the rhythm. *So, the man can dance.* That made things interesting. I tested how far he would go by picking up the pace and shaking my God-given gifts while raising my arms up into the air. With his chest to my back, it forced me to arch a little to clasp my fingers behind his neck. He slid his hands up and down my sides as he followed my lead.

Dancing was the foreplay to sex, and this man knew how to play. The hardness against my backside told me I wasn't the only one enjoying the friction. I tilted my head back to flash him an appreciative smile and found his intense gaze on my cleavage. My lacy shirt wasn't low-cut, but the position forced my breasts up and out. The cameras no doubt noticed, but I was too consumed by the sexy, hot male pressed up against me to care.

His lips dropped to my ear. “The phone you requested is in my front right pocket.”

“A convenient location.”

“I thought so.” His hands went to my hips to turn me around. I didn't miss a beat, undulating my hips to the jazzy melody with my front to his. The erection brushing my belly was impressive. Someone was mixing business with pleasure. My fingers drifted down his hard arms. His black T-shirt clung

to him like a second skin, granting me access to every muscle and dip.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Enjoying yourself?”

I shifted my hips to brush his groin. “Are you?”

“With you dancing like that in front of me? Absolutely.”

“Good.” I explored his torso, taking in his hard pecs and muscular abdomen. “Any suggestions?” With the cameras and eyes on us, it would be impossible to grab the phone without someone noticing.

“Mmm, I can think of several.”

“Is there a particular one you care to try?”

“Leave it to me, sweetheart.” He placed a finger beneath my chin and tilted my face upward to meet his kiss. It was measured, slow, and brimming with unveiled passion. If it weren’t for the audience and his intentions, I would have gotten lost in it. His arm snaked around my waist, pulling me tight against him while maintaining our rhythm. He deepened the sensual assault by parting my lips with his tongue and devouring me in an open-mouthed kiss.

I grabbed his shoulders for support as my legs threatened to buckle. *Holy shit*. The man was potent. His hot touch trailed over my jawline and neck and then continued the journey down my left side. When his palm met my hip, the arm around my back guided me into an angle to hide his actions. Those clever fingers removed the slender device from his pocket and slid it into mine without screwing up our beat or detracting from the kiss.

I smiled against his lips, impressed. “Nice.”

“Glad you approve, Miss Summers.” He returned the grin and nipped my lower lip. The wickedness in those dark eyes sent butterflies to my lower abdomen. *The things I could do with him* ... Dancing was an aphrodisiac. A man who could move like him? It was my biggest weakness. We could go to bed anytime he wanted, and from the way he was looking down at me, the feeling was mutual.

“That was fantastic!” Paul exclaimed, spoiling the moment. Lost in those sinful eyes, I almost forgot about the cameras. “Sarah, darling, you’ve been holding out on me.” His tsk was unsettling, making me feel like a child. *Thanks for ruining the mood, jackass.*

“I’ll be by tomorrow night to discuss everything,” Evan whispered against my ear. “I’m going to get everyone a drink,” he said to Paul and let me go.

He walked into the bar, leaving me on the receiving end of several female glares. My skin went from hot to cold. I loved to dance, but I hated being the center of attention. Not that I regretted it. Evan’s skills left me craving to see his rhythmic talents applied to the bedroom. I kept my head high despite the snide comments rolling through the air. My favorite was the one about my oral skills.

“No wonder he needs a drink. I would want to wash the taste out of my mouth, too, after that. She practically ate his face.” It was Georgiana who said it. She flipped her brown hair over one shoulder and gave me the look of death, while Amber eyed me with newfound interest. I was becoming a competitor. Not that any of the feelings between us were real beyond lust. A few nights in bed together would scratch that itch.

“That was hot.” There was a look of envy in Patty’s ebony gaze, but her tone was light. “And I totally hate you.”

“Me too.” Lily grinned. “But only a little.”

“Aw, thanks, guys.” I did a girly twirl, pretending to celebrate sharing a moment with Evan. It elicited more glowers from the group. *Oh well.* The hot kiss alone was worth the scorn, but I also got a phone out of it. I’d call Rachel as soon as I got a moment alone.

CONTRACT REVIEW

“What the hell are you thinking?” Evan must have given Rachel this phone number so she would know it was me calling. She sounded thrilled to hear from me.

“Hi to you, too, Rach.”

“Have you lost your fucking mind? Two months, Sarah. Nine flippin’ weeks. That’s how long you have to stay on that show just to refuse his proposal. You’re giving up sixty days of your life for a man you don’t even know. A rich, powerful man who could easily throw you under the bus. Not to mention you’ll be giving no notice to Stern and Associates, so say good-bye to any good recommendations from them to future employers. When exactly did you become Abby?”

“Okay, ouch.” I pulled my shirt over my head and threw it on the bed. It was close to midnight thanks to the after-date interviews Paul made us sit through. I dialed Rachel’s number as soon as I shut the door because I knew she was waiting for my call. “You realize he could keep me here against my will, knowing I would turn him down in the end, right? At least I get something out of it.”

“You could leave and sue his ass. Hello, you have an attorney for a best friend.”

I snorted. “The same best friend who legally advised me to do the show because it would ruin my reputation otherwise?”

“Well, there’s that, but this is insane. You don’t know anything about him.” Rachel’s distrust in powerful men was

what drove her concern more than anything else, which was why I jumped to the point.

“Is it a good contract or not?” I asked, pulling off my jeans.

“Oh, of course it’s brilliant. There’s a reason Evan has Garrett Wilkinson on retainer. The man drew up the contract himself, and I’ve gotta say, he’s more than earned his nickname on this one.” It took a lot to impress Rachel, and her tone indicated Garrett had her respect.

“What’s his nickname?” I asked, curious.

“The Devil. It’s not original, but it’s deserved. He’s charming, sly, and manipulative as hell. The contract he drafted is solid and protects Evan in every way imaginable. I’m begrudgingly in awe of it.”

“I’ll be sure to pass on your sentiments,” said a deep voice from her end of the line.

“Yeah, and speaking of charming”—her sarcasm was palpable—“did you have to send Evan’s cousin to hand deliver the contract? He hung around my office all day. Just lounged on the couch like he owned the damn place.”

I paused in the process of pulling on a tank top. “Are you still at work or at your apartment?”

“You sure are cute pacing around in those stockings, darlin’.”

“Oh, do be quiet,” Rachel snapped, making me laugh. Knowing my best friend, she was roaming around in her sheer tights and skirt suit. From the amusement in Will’s voice, he was enjoying the show. Most men would. “It’s not funny, Sarah.”

“Actually it is, but you didn’t answer my question.” Because the other comment wasn’t meant for me.

“My apartment,” she grumbled. “He stalked me the entire way here.”

“I didn’t hear you complaining when I provided dinner, darlin’.”

“What part of *be quiet* don’t you get?”

“You know, I don’t think a woman has ever demanded silence from me before.”

Rachel snorted. “Well, I’m happy I could be your first.”

“Let me know if you want to explore a few more firsts, sweetheart. I live to please.” Will’s amusement was palpable. I could only imagine the way he was looking at my best friend right now.

“Seriously, Sarah, do you see what I’ve put up with all day? For a fucking contract that is insane, by the way?” Rachel then said to Will, “Don’t look at me like that, you think it’s nuts, too.”

“Actually, I think it’s perfect.”

“Just stop talking. Can you do that? For five minutes? Thanks.”

My face hurt from grinning so hard. Will Merghano had my friend worked up in a tizzy. She was notorious for her cold shoulder, but it seemed Evan’s cousin had wormed his way under her tough exterior and found a soft spot. One that inspired her to argue instead of ignore. Good. My friend needed a challenge. Maybe this one could help her get over her crazy ex.

“I can’t believe you let him into your apartment, Rach.” That was a big step for Rachel. The last time she invited a man up, it didn’t end well. But now wasn’t the time to press her on Will. Not with him listening to every word. “Anyway, I want to know about the contract.” I listed the terms Evan and I discussed, and Rachel confirmed they were all in there. “Even the get-out clause should he decide to go with someone else in the end?”

“Yes, even though Will says it’s a pointless requirement.” From the derision in her tone, it was a source of contention between her and the billionaire cousin. *Just how much did they discuss today?*

“I want it in there in case he changes his mind,” I said.

“Oh, it’s a smart clause. If you’re really going through with this, though, then I think you need to add something about his involvement in your future firm. The silent partner agreement is good, but there isn’t anything in here about his say in business affairs.”

“Yeah, we should add that.”

“I’m already working on it.”

This was why I adored my best friend. “You’re awesome.”

“But are you sure you want to do this, Sarah? Influential men like that ...” She fell silent, not needing to finish the statement.

“He’s not Ryan, Rach.” Her former fiancé was a renowned Chicago politician with deep family ties and even deeper pockets. He was charming and sweet on the surface, but deep down he had control issues. Even after she called off the engagement, he believed Rachel still belonged to him.

“They’re all believable at first. It takes time to see their true colors.” Her quiet voice was underlined by a thousand memories that made me shiver. I didn’t know everything that happened, but I knew enough to understand her stance.

“Evan has nothing to gain by playing me, but just in case, I asked my awesome lawyer of a best friend to review it. To make sure there are no loopholes.”

“There aren’t any. It’s solid, but I need to add language about his involvement in your firm. I’ll give the amendment to Will for Evan’s review. If you’re sure this is what you want to do.”

“He’s giving me the opportunity to own my own firm, Rach. How do I turn that down?”

“I knew you were going to say that.” We were childhood best friends. She knew what this opportunity meant to me. It was a backward way of achieving my goals, but fate intervened in mysterious ways. Stern and Associates wasn’t my future; it was a means to an end. This contract allowed me to cross the finish line sooner rather than later.

“I know why you’re worried, but we’re not really dating here. It’s an agreement that helps both of us. Him especially.” No one should be forced into marriage or to create an heir. And it wasn’t like spending time with him would be a hardship. He was gorgeous, knew how to dance, and our attraction was mutual. I just had to make sure it didn’t go beyond the physical, and it was a win-win scenario.

“If he hurts you, I’ll kick his ass.”

“He can only hurt me if I let him, and I have no intention of letting him get that close.” It was the only way this arrangement would work.

“Nine weeks is a long time to guard your heart.”

“Should be pretty easy with him dating several other women. He’s going on a date with one of them tomorrow night while I hang out with the girls and do some more of those stupid interviews.”

“God, that sounds awful.”

“Oh, you have no idea.” I told her about the last few days and could hear her cringing over the line. “I’m sure Director Paul has more fun planned for us tomorrow.”

“About that, I’m adding a clause for you to keep the phone. I have a feeling you’ll need my sanity over the coming months.”

“This is why I love you.” I didn’t think to include that in my requirements, but it was needed for my emotional health.

“You should. I’m awesome. Anyway, I have work to do and a Neanderthal to kick out of my bedroom.”

My eyebrows rose. “Did you just say bedroom?”

“Yeah, the damn Mershano thinks he owns the place. Do you see what you got me into?”

I grinned. “I hope something fun.” If Will was anything like his cousin, Rachel was in for a treat.

“Not going to happen.” And then she said to Will, “And don’t give me that look. You’re leaving as soon as I get off the

phone.”

“Are you this bossy in bed? Because that could make things interesting, darlin’.” The deep drawl was filled with a sensual promise that made Rachel grumble an unflattering remark.

“I need to go deal with him.” She hung up without saying good-bye.

PLAYING HIDE-AND-SEEK

Evan took Kristin out on the solo date today while the rest of us wandered around the hotel and filmed various scenes. Most of it was scripted by the writers and made to give the show an air of drama. The evening ended in the pool, where several of the girls grilled me about my kiss yesterday with New Orleans's hottest prince. By the end of it all, I was more than ready for some alone time, but I found a handsome man waiting for me in my room instead. *Someone has a skeleton key.*

"Hello, Mister Mershano."

"Good evening, Miss Summers." Evan was on the bed in a pair of black slacks and a white dress shirt. The fabric was rolled to his elbows, exposing muscular forearms, and the top button of his shirt was undone with his masculine throat on display. His tie and jacket were on the chair, and his shoes were by the desk. "I hear you have a few contract amendments?"

I cleared my throat. "Uh, yeah. Rachel's adding some business management language, and I want to keep the phone."

"The phone doesn't need to be in the contract, but the business details are fine. I have no intention of being involved in your firm. Marketing is not my forte."

"Doesn't hurt to add the phone, too. It's to help keep me sane over the next few months." I pulled off my swimsuit cover and hung it on the wardrobe to dry before grabbing a

pair of black shorts, a thong, and a white top from my suitcase. “I wasn’t expecting you, so give me at least five minutes to shower and change. Then we’ll go over the contract.”

His eyes were on my breasts. The black string bikini top was held together by a silver clasp in the front. The desire in his gaze said he approved. “I don’t have it back yet. Garrett is reviewing the changes Miss Dawson made first.”

“So Will brought it back for him to review?”

“No, he’s still in Chicago with your friend. I think they’re on a conference call negotiating the changes right now. I should have the finalized contract in the morning.”

“They’re talking right now?”

“That’s what Will told me five minutes ago.” “And he’s with Rachel?”

“Yeah, at her apartment. He never checked into the hotel, so I assume he stayed over last night. Why?”

My eyebrows met my hairline. That didn’t sound like my best friend. “She let him stay over?”

“Knowing Will, he insisted.”

Oh God. “She’s going to kill me.” I picked up the phone Evan gave me and dialed Rachel’s number. She shot me a text as it went to voicemail.

Conferencing with Garrett. You owe me BIG TIME.

“Shit.” I set the phone down. “Yeah, I’m going to take a shower.” His gaze was a warm caress against my skin all the way to the bathroom. I half expected him to join me, but he didn’t. The offer wasn’t made or insinuated, but I wouldn’t have kicked him out if he tried. The man was the epitome of temptation.

I got dressed after rinsing off all the chlorine and grabbed my brush on my way back into the bedroom. His bedroom eyes left no question as to what he was thinking about when he took in my braless breasts and exposed legs. I hopped up beside him on the bed and fell into the pillows. His arm was

hooked behind his head and one knee was drawn up. *So fucking hot.*

“So if you’re not here about the contract, why did you stop by?”

“I’m hiding from my parents.”

“You own the hotel, and you chose my room to hide in? I’m flattered.”

He smiled. “With you dressed like that? I might have to hide in here more often.”

“You’re welcome anytime, as long as I can keep the phone. Which reminds me, I’ll need a charger.” I turned it off to reserve the power, but it wouldn’t last long.

“Demanding little thing, aren’t you?” He rolled onto his side, keeping that arm tucked under his head while the other fell over his flat abdomen. “What if I want something in return?”

“Such as?”

He brushed his knuckles over my cheek and down my neck, pausing at my collarbone. “Kissing with a little light petting might encourage me to get you that phone charger sooner rather than later.”

I scooted closer, craving his intimate touch. “Upgrade light to heavy and you have yourself a deal, Mister Mershano.”

“I like the way you negotiate, Miss Summers.” His hand wrapped around my neck, and his thumb caressed the tender skin behind my ear.

“Feel free to proposition me anytime,” I whispered, his lips an inch from mine.

“Deal.” He took my mouth in a slow, burning kiss, sending butterflies to my lower belly. I closed the gap between our bodies by rolling onto him and forcing him onto his back. My nipples tightened as I aligned my chest with his and slid one leg between his thighs. My core met his hips, setting my veins on fire with sensation. He felt amazing beneath me—all hard, hot, aroused male.

I took control of our kiss, twisting my tongue with his in a way I knew drove a man mad. One of his hands fisted in my hair as the other went to my ass to press me harder against him. Bourbon notes hit my throat, making me moan. He had good taste in alcohol, and it paired well with the red wine I enjoyed earlier. I cradled his face between my hands, angling his lips the way I wanted them, and seduced him with my mouth. The squeeze on my backside told me he approved of my attentions.

I loved that he let me take the lead. Most men wanted to call the shots in and out of the bedroom, but Evan was proving to be an equal-opportunity lover. The kiss the other night was a mating of mouths, which ran at his pace. Tonight was about what I wanted, and the hard man beneath me had no qualms about it. I had no doubt he would eventually assert his dominance, as powerful men were wont to do, but he was letting me have my fun.

Buzzing hit my inner thighs, going straight to my clit. I bit off a groan and pulled back. “Do you need to answer that?”

“I should.” His fingers knotted in my hair and pulled me back down for another kiss, his tongue spearing my lips to take charge. I ran my hand through his hair, down his neck, and along his bulging bicep. The silk of his dress shirt was the perfect barrier, giving him the silk-over-steel feel. I trailed my fingers down to his exposed forearms and back up, luxuriating in every inch.

The vibrations started again, resulting in delicious sensations between my legs. If it were a few inches higher, it would be in the perfect location to make this all the more interesting. His hand slipped upward beneath my tank top to my bare back, those clever fingers working their way closer to my ribcage. I was about to sit up and pull off my shirt for easier access when his phone went off again. He growled deep in his chest, a pleasant surprise for my aching nipples.

“They’re not going to stop calling.” He traced my lower lip with his tongue.

“The vibrations are not bothering me.”

His grin was wicked. “I’ll have to remember that.” He restarted our kiss only to pull back as the buzzing began again. The hand under my shirt went to his pocket. “Don’t move.” He placed the phone to his ear. “Yes, Mother?”

“Where are you?” Either the volume was at full blast or Ellen was yelling.

“In the hotel.” He winked up at me. I held my lips a few tantalizing inches from him, ready to resume whenever he finished the call.

“Where in the hotel?”

“What does it matter?”

“Don’t give me that. You’re supposed to be taking this seriously.”

“I’m taking this very seriously.” His brown eyes were on my lips, the hand in my hair sliding down to wrap around my neck. “But I’m working right now.” I cocked an eyebrow at that.

“Negotiations,” he mouthed.

“Right,” I mouthed back and nuzzled his chin. The hand around my neck tightened, as did his lower body.

“We need to discuss the filming schedule for the fourth episode.”

“What about it? Paul mentioned the yacht.”

“Well, now he wants to organize a dance class. Apparently you and the Latina girl were having some fun in The Quarter yesterday, and he wants to capitalize on it. He’s thinking about a competition where you take the most talented of them all to dinner.”

I stared at the phone. *Latina girl? Really?* And a dancing competition sounded like a way for Paul to embarrass everyone.

“Her name is Sarah, Mother. And I would rather go out on the yacht. Nix the dancing. There wouldn’t be a competition with the way she moves.” His compliment didn’t warm me as

much as the irritation in his tone when correcting Ellen Mershano.

“All right. I’ll talk to him. Oh, and have you thought about who will get the other key to your wing?”

His body went rigid. “Yes.”

“Who?”

“It’ll be a surprise, Mother. You like surprises.”

“Are you falling for one of them?” There was hope in Ellen’s voice that confused me. She was forcing her son to marry a woman from a dating show, yet that tone spoke of a mother who wanted happiness for her son. Maybe even love.

“I’m hanging up now. Good night.” He hit the end key and set the phone on the nightstand. His fingers combed through my hair as I rested on top of him. Those chocolate irises swirled with a hundred emotions. “This show is going to leave a black mark on my soul.”

HEAVY-PETTING REQUIREMENT

I scooted down and folded my arms on his chest to rest my chin on them. His hand drifted down to draw obscure patterns across my shoulders. The other was behind his head again as he stared down at me.

“So, say I didn’t exist. What would you do at the end of this show?” I wondered.

“I would propose to someone tolerable, give her a healthy dose of what reality would look like for her after the show, and hope like hell she’d call off the engagement.” He shrugged. “It’s harsh, but my life isn’t a fairy tale, like some might believe. I work a lot, I’m never home, and my job will always come first.”

All values I understood. “And if that failed?”

“Then I guess I would get married and have a relationship similar to my parents’, minus my father’s proclivities.” He had forgone the razor the last few days, and his chin was decorated with a delectable smattering of stubble. I wanted to rub my face against him like a cat. It would undoubtedly make me purr. “I would still be cheating on her, though. My job is a demanding mistress.”

“How are you getting by with all this filming and not working?”

“Delegation. My management team is going to require a long vacation when I get back into the swing of things.”

“Hence your planned dose of reality.”

His dimples made an appearance. “Exactly.”

“And do you feel bad eliminating the girls?” Because it seemed to bother him.

“Yes. No. I don’t know. It’s complicated. They’re here for my money and name, not me. But some of them are actually pretty nice, like your two friends. Lily and Patty. Tiffany is sweet, too.”

“Calling them my friends might be a bit of a stretch, as we just met, but yeah, they’re pretty down-to-earth. Some of the others, though, are pieces of work.” Georgiana was becoming my least favorite person here. She had a sharp tongue and a nasty personality. Amber wore a pretty exterior, but something about her wasn’t right. *Yet* ... “You seem to like Amber, too.”

He scoffed. “My parents love Amber. I’m about seventy-five percent sure they paid her to be here.”

“What?”

“Call it a hunch. She’s exactly what my mom wants as a daughter-in-law, and my father has a penchant for southern blondes.” He shook his head. “I can’t prove it, but she’s saying all the right things. As if she was coached.”

“Or maybe she’s your soul mate.” I waggled my eyebrows at him. “I hear they exist.”

“Yeah? Maybe you’re my soul mate.”

The flutter in my chest was unexpected and unwelcome. I kept it light. “Nah, I’m just the negotiator.”

“A hot negotiator.” His hand stroked up and down my spine. “Visiting you might have to become a nightly thing. I haven’t felt this relaxed since the whole nightmare started.”

“I have that effect on people.” Sarcasm was my defense mechanism. His words were touching me in places they shouldn’t. “So what’s this about the yacht?”

“Episode four. Tomorrow is a Mississippi River cruise with the girls who didn’t go to Bourbon Street. Monday is elimination day, and Tuesday is yacht day with all fourteen of

the final contestants. Unless Paul gets his way and we have a dance class instead.”

Well, that sounds wonderful. “So I’m adding wine to my list. At least two bottles with the phone charger.”

“Yeah? In exchange for more kissing and *heavy* petting?”

“Bring them with you tomorrow night and find out. As well as the contract. I need that so I can call my boss and give him the bad news.” I cringed at the thought of that conversation. “He’s going to hate me for giving no notice.” Explaining I was on a dating show would not help my case. Chances were he would laugh and assume it was all a joke.

Evan tucked a strand of hair behind my ear before tracing my jaw with the pad of his index finger. “Tell him I offered you a job you couldn’t refuse. It wouldn’t technically be a lie, and it saves you from explaining your involvement on the show.”

“Until he hears about it a few months from now.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Is your manager the kind of person who watches the Romance Network for Women?”

I laughed at the idea of Greg watching a cheesy romance film. “Yeah, he’s not the type.” But I saw his point. My boss would never know I went on this ridiculous show unless his wife watched it. “Does it break the contract if I tell him I’m working for you?”

He shrugged. “I’m not worried about it. If he looks into it, he’ll find out you’re on the show and assume that’s what you meant.”

“Then he’ll think I lied.” Better to tell Greg the truth about the show and bite my pride. Rachel was right about kissing any recommendations good-bye. Accepting his offer was a gamble, but the promise at the end was worth the risk. Spending time with him like this was an added bonus. He made an excellent pillow despite being ninety-five percent muscle. “When do you get time to work out?”

His hand was on my back again, exploring my shoulder blades and fondling my hair. “First thing in the morning. I like

to run, but I lift at least three times a week. How about you? All these curves are underlined with some serious athleticism.”

I snorted. “I also run in the morning, but I haven’t since coming here. The curves are compliments of my mom. It doesn’t matter what I do; they stay. Not that I’m complaining.”

“You shouldn’t.” He palmed my ass and pulled me back up so our lips were only an inch apart. “They’re perfect.”

“Sweet talker.”

His fingers slid into my hair, knotting with my strands. “So about that heavy-petting requirement. I’m ready to fulfill that contractual obligation.”

I smiled against his mouth. “Are you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He led with his tongue, twining it with mine in an open-mouthed kiss that was all passion and exploration. It was addictive, pulling me under a wave of seduction that threatened my senses. We couldn’t take this too far, not without the contract in place, but he lit my body on fire like no one else. I clung to his shoulders as he flipped me onto my back. His thigh remained between mine, tight against my hot center.

The friction was luscious, hitting me right where I needed it. He didn’t hold back, his palm gliding under my shirt to my chest. I arched into him, loving that my breast more than filled his hand. He kissed a path to my neck, pausing to suckle the tender midpoint. Goosebumps rained down my arms in response, my body tingling from his touch. My neck had always been sensitive, a pleasure point that wasn’t as obvious as some of the others. He nibbled along my collarbone and down to my cleavage. “Heavy petting includes licking, right?”

“It does now.” My hands were in his hair as he lifted my shirt and took one stiff nipple into his hot mouth. I came off the bed at the impact, my body ridiculously responsive to his. That wicked tongue swirled, creating an inferno in my lower abdomen. A few minutes of foreplay and I was ready to explode. *Not good.* No one should be this attracted to a man. It

wasn't safe for womankind. He switched to the other breast, repeating his actions and making me squirm.

Orgasms were not part of our negotiation. Not tonight. I barely knew him. None of those realizations stopped the fire consuming my body. He was hazardous to my health, but in all the right ways. His phone started to vibrate again, this time on the wood, making an obnoxious sound neither of us could ignore.

With a sound of annoyance, he picked up the phone. His scowl turned into a grin. "Talk to me, Garrett."

"Your girl has a good lawyer." The phone was on speaker this time. "She drew up some stern language about your involvement in this firm you're promising to fund. She also stated financial figures for the record and wants them in the contract."

Finances weren't something we discussed. This was why I had Rachel. She thought of specifics I failed to negotiate. Like how much he was going to lend me to start my firm. *Probably important, Sarah. Good job.*

Evan rolled onto his back beside me. "Yeah? Am I going to hate this provision?"

"It's modest, but it's more than I would want to give for this deal. Not when you could just keep the girl there without giving anything in return."

I popped up onto my elbow, pulling down my shirt in the process, and made sure he could see how I felt about that statement. His lawyer sounded like an ass, and practical, too. A bad combination.

"I'm asking her to give up a lot to stay on and refuse me in the end. She could stay and accept."

"So you draw up the prenuptial agreement, knock her up like your parents want, have the kid, get divorced, and go back to your life. Not hard."

My frown went to full-on scowl at the lawyer's callous words.

“You’re hot when you’re pissed, you know that?” Evan said to me as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “And, Garrett, I’m really looking forward to you meeting Sarah. I’m guessing she’ll be introducing you to her fist, or worse.”

“Worse,” I told him.

Garrett’s laugh came through the line. “Damn, you’re already in bed with her? A warning would have been appreciated, but also, well done.”

“*Definitely* worse.”

“Calm down, sweetheart. I don’t mean any harm. Well, not much anyway.” Garrett’s smooth tones were no doubt perfected over years of turning women down after one-night stands. “Call me back when you’re done bedding her. We’re going to need a provision about mixing business with pleasure.” The line went dead, and Evan slid the phone into his pocket.

“You remember my issue with the word ‘ass’? Well, your lawyer is an ass.”

“You have no idea.” He grinned. “But he makes a fine lawyer and best friend.”

“*That’s* your best friend? A man who suggests you marry me, knock me up, have a kid with me, and then divorce me? How charming.”

“He’ll grow on you.” He pulled me down for a kiss that seared my insides. “Remind me never to make you angry. As hot as it is, I don’t want to be on the receiving end of that death glare.”

“A good choice.” I didn’t lose my temper easily, but when I did, it wasn’t a pretty picture. I could paint a room red.

“I need to call him back and finish the conversation. Anything monetary requires approval and vetting, so it’s going to be a long night.”

“I’d apologize, but it’s a necessary provision.” Even though I didn’t think about it. *Thank you, Rachel.*

“It’s smart. I get it; I just need to see if I agree to the terms.” He stood up and stretched. Those dark eyes went to my breasts before my lips. “It’ll be worth it to see you looking like that every night.”

“So this will be our nightly routine?”

“Oh, I hope so.” He pulled on his jacket and folded the tie into his pocket. The shoes were next. I dragged myself out of the comfortable pillows when he was ready to leave so I could check the hallway. He caught me by the hip and placed one long, lingering kiss on my lips before I reached the door.

There was no one in the hallway.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night, Miss Summers.” He kissed me on the cheek before slipping out into the hallway.

Two months of him joining me every night in bed for a make-out session? Yeah, I could handle that. I just had to keep my emotions in check.

Easier said than done.

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AND THEN THERE WERE FOURTEEN

I signed the contract Sunday night and gave my notice to Stern and Associates yesterday. Greg thought I was joking. It was a testament to how likely a candidate I was to join a reality show.

Evan was out exploring the Louisiana bayous with six of the girls while the rest of us were forced to socialize in the hotel. Tiffany and Lily made for better company, but seeing Amber tromp around in the muck would have been entertaining. Watching her flirt with Evan, however, not so much.

“Who do you think he’ll send home?” Lily asked. The three of us were sitting in the hot tub with a camera stuck in our faces. Joseph informed us this morning that this round would be different. Instead of an elimination ceremony, one woman would be sent home during each date instead. Of the six who followed Evan into the swamp today, five would return.

“One of the brunettes,” I said, guessing. There were three of them.

Lily snorted. “That’s cheating.”

“Well, we know it won’t be Amber.” Tiffany’s blue eyes flashed as she mentioned the southern belle’s name. She and Georgiana weren’t popular amongst the girls. Then again, neither was I thanks to the infamous Bourbon Street kiss. “Hopefully it won’t be Patty. I like her.”

“Me too, but it’s about who he likes.” Lily scrunched her nose. “Which I can’t seem to figure out at all. I don’t know why he’s kept me around when we’ve said all of ten words to each other.”

Tiffany consoled her with a pat on the shoulder. “There are a lot of girls in the same boat. Maybe you’ll be part of the two-on-one date.”

“Oh God, I hope not. That gives me a fifty percent chance of being sent home.”

We didn’t know who was going on the yacht with Evan tomorrow. Process of elimination would tell us the names for the two-on-one date. Carrie held the cards that dictated our fate and wouldn’t read them out loud until the producers gave her the go-ahead. Despite my arrangement with the prince, I wasn’t sure what to expect next. We didn’t see each other after the ceremony last night thanks to post-elimination interviews for the episode.

“I wouldn’t mind those odds if it meant I could get more alone time with him again.” Tiffany toyed with the strings of her blue bikini and frowned. “Amber monopolized our two-on-one.”

“That doesn’t surprise me at all,” Lily muttered. “She kept pulling him away for one-on-one time during our group date. Sarah, I think you were the only one he spent any intimate time with besides her, but it was in front of everyone.”

Her narrowed gaze made me grimace. He kissed me, and I didn’t regret kissing him back. I was embarrassed that I lost myself in the moment, but that was an internal issue. It implied deeper feelings that I wasn’t allowed to harbor for an unavailable man.

“He’s a really good dancer?” I wasn’t sure what else to say.

She scoffed at that. “Clearly.”

“Ladies,” Carrie called. She was standing in the doorway that joined the outdoor swimming area to the indoor pool. Her floor-length ball gown did not fit the bikini theme. “Gather around.” She waved the infamous blue envelope with

tomorrow's plans and waggled her auburn brows at the camera.

The three of us exited the hot tub and joined the other contestants as we formed a semicircle around our hostess. Goosebumps cascaded down my arms. A reaction to the chilly March air coupled with the anticipation. It was hard not to get caught up in the tense atmosphere. I *wanted* to know if I was going on the yacht tomorrow, because I wanted to see Evan again. *I'm so screwed.*

“Okay, as you know, tomorrow Evan is taking six of you on a yacht. As for who . . .” She slipped her manicured nail through the envelope and pulled out a card. Her blue eyes danced over us, thickening the excitement. “Lily, Tiffany, Kristin, Kathy, Gretchen, and Jan.” She met each woman's gaze as she read their names. “Leaving Leanne and Sarah as the two going on the two-on-one date. Congratulations, ladies. I look forward to seeing who comes back.” She gave the camera a simpering smile and left the pool area.

Two-on-one date. I met Leanne's gaze. Her grin wasn't friendly. “I wonder where we're going,” she said.

“Hopefully not somewhere that involves dancing,” Kristin replied. “Or you're going home.”

She's going home either way. “I doubt it'll involve dancing.” Evan wouldn't be that cruel. I went back to the hot tub and ignored the comments that followed me.

The girls on the group date returned with stars in their eyes. Amber was among them, not that I was surprised. Despite Evan's suspicion that his parents hired the woman, he seemed interested in her. The idea that he could feel something for her made my stomach hurt. I blamed the intense sexual attraction. All the heavy kissing, without much action besides the occasional grope, put my hormones on edge. We were going to have to negotiate the next level soon or cease the evening foreplay. The former appealed to me more.

There was a text message waiting for me when I got back to my room. *See you in an hour.* It was time-stamped thirty minutes ago. I showered and changed into shorts and a tank

top. It was my signature evening wear, and I didn't mind Evan seeing me in it. But he wasn't the one sprawled out on my couch when I walked out of the bathroom.

"Hello, Sarah."

"Uh, hey, Will." *How many skeleton keys exist in this hotel?* And what was up with the men not knocking first? I sat on the bed and curled my legs beneath me. "A warning would have been nice."

"Sorry, I didn't want to get caught lingering in the hallway. Evan turned off the security feeds to the floor, but you never know who might be wandering around."

"Oh." I drummed my fingers against my thigh. "So, you came by to chat?"

"Sure. Ellen and Jonah were giving me a headache, and I thought, 'Why not visit Sarah?' Evan's always in a good mood after he sees you. Figured I'd come see what all the fun's about." His suggestive tone was belied by his grin. *Tease.*

"I doubt he would appreciate me putting you in the same mood." Not that Evan would *really* care. He was dating a dozen other girls. Who knew how many of them he was kissing on the side. My stomach revolted at the idea. It wasn't my business what he did with the others, just as it wasn't his business what I did. Not that I wanted anyone else right now. Tall, dark, and handsome was my current addiction.

"Probably not, but I didn't come here for whatever it is you two have been doing. I want to know more about that gorgeous friend of yours."

"Rachel?"

"That would be the one." The biceps under his snug grey shirt bulged as he tucked his arms behind his head on the armrest. His feet were kicked up on the other side. "She has spirit."

I rolled my eyes. "What is it with you men always going after the unattainable?"

“I don’t know about the others, but I’ve always enjoyed a good challenge.”

“I’m sure you do, but Rachel isn’t a challenge you’ll win. Ask all the guys who have come before you.”

“Oh, sweetheart, you have no idea what I’m capable of doing to get what I want.”

I didn’t doubt it. “She’ll give you the biggest fight of your life.”

“I’m counting on it.”

I grinned. He had no idea what he was getting himself into. If sex was what he wanted, he stood a chance. Anything beyond that was a lost cause. He was successful and came from old money. She’d never grant him access to her heart.

“How did you convince her to let you stay over at her apartment?” I texted Rachel the same question. She replied, *I don’t want to talk about it.*

“I can be very charming.” His smile edged on the devilish side more than the handsome side, reminding me of Evan.

“I bet. Just like your cousin.” The two men were more like brothers than cousins. They grew up together after Will’s parents died, and I gathered they were close. That was why Evan trusted him with the contract in Chicago.

“He likes you, you know. As I predicted he would. It’s why I chose you that first night despite him telling me to send you home. Now look at you two—signing contracts and going into business together.” Those blond eyebrows danced at me again. “You can thank me later.”

He jumped off the couch at the knock on my door, motioning for me to stay put. I crawled on all fours to the edge of the bed to look around the corner as he opened it to let Evan inside. He paused upon seeing his cousin, indicating he was surprised to see him in my room. Spotting me in my usual tank top and shorts had him raising an eyebrow at his cousin.

“Chill, E. I was asking her about Rachel.”

“That better be all you were doing.” He folded his arms and leaned against the wall at the foot of the bed. I scooted back into the pillows and wrapped my arms around my knees.

The blond rolled his eyes and went back to collapse on the couch. “Says the man dating fifteen, oh, excuse me, fourteen women.”

“Not by choice.”

“Yes, it’s a hardship. We get it.”

“Fuck you, man. It’s not dating when there’s a camera crew following me around.”

“Not stopping you from kissing all of them, though, is it?” Will’s carefree words pricked at my heart more than they should have. Not a good sign.

“That was for the show and you know it.” Evan took off his leather jacket, laying it on the chair, and put his shoes beside Will’s before sitting on the bed. His fierce gaze met mine. “There’s only one girl I’m kissing off film.”

I held up my hands. “Don’t look at me. I didn’t say anything.”

“No, but I’m saying something. What I’m doing for the show has nothing to do with us.”

“Except it has everything to do with us because the only reason I’m still here is to refuse your proposal. But, Evan, you can kiss whomever you want. That was never part of our contract, and I’m aware that we’re on a dating show that’s going to require certain things from you.” The words served as a reminder to myself more than to him. I needed to keep my emotions in check. Feeling nauseated at the mention of him kissing other women wasn’t a healthy starting point.

His full lips curled down. “Will, can you—”

“Yep.” He stood up before Evan finished talking, and put on his shoes. “Uh, yeah, good luck.”

“You don’t have ...” My voice trailed off as the door closed.

THE MARRIAGE GAME

“I’m not a philanderer, Sarah.”

“Uh, okay.” *Says the man on a dating show that started with thirty women.* “I didn’t say you were.”

“No, but Will just implied it. You need to understand that I don’t have sex or kiss women indiscriminately. This entire show is a fucking nightmare for me. I like to date one woman at a time, and I’m always up front about my feelings toward marriage. Long-term relationships might not be my preference, but neither is dating a dozen women at once.” His earnest expression coupled with the misery in his tone told he was telling the truth.

“We don’t have to talk about this, Evan. I don’t have any expectations here.”

“Maybe you don’t, but I do. You’re the only woman I’m kissing off camera. This is the only relationship, if it can be called that, that I’m in right now.” He ran a hand through his thick hair before letting his arms fall to his denim-clad legs.

Relationship was a dangerous word. I preferred *friends with benefits* as a term to describe what we were doing here. If he wanted to be monogamous about whom he kissed off camera, that was fine, but I wouldn’t let myself look too deep into it. This arrangement was temporary.

“Look, my father is not a good man or role model,” he continued. “He’s spent years tearing my mother down and blatantly cheating on her. That behavior is what I grew up watching—him screwing everything that walked while my

mom cried behind closed doors. Then he had Wyatt with another woman, and my mom raised him as her own because that's what Jonah Mershano expected." He ran his hand over his face and shook his head. "I can't believe I just told you that."

The news about Wyatt being an illegitimate child wasn't something I read, but from the way he said that last statement, I gathered it wasn't well known. "If he's not really hers, how can he be next in line to take over the company?" I hadn't meant to ask it, but the words slipped out.

"Because my mother's name is on the birth certificate, making him legitimate."

"Oh." I didn't know that was possible, but I supposed the saying was true. Money could buy anything. I shifted on the pillows and waited for him to continue.

"My father loves reminding my little brother how lucky he is to be part of our family. He could have left him with nothing but chose to raise him as a Mershano. He doesn't care that it hurts my mother. She's mastered the fake grin for the media. She graces their presence whenever he needs her at his side, always putting on the charade of the perfect family for the cameras. Afterward, she retreats to her room for days." His faraway stare made my heart ache. It cleared when he met my gaze. "Look, I'm telling you this because I want you to know that I will never treat a woman like that. Ever. I'm not my father."

Interesting that Evan didn't take after his dad and instead learned from watching his mother's pain. It was no wonder he was anti marriage. If I grew up with parents like that, I would be, too.

"Look, if you're afraid of hurting me, don't be. You won't. Am I attracted to you? Yes, but I know it can't go beyond that. I don't expect anything from you other than what we've already discussed." I went into this arrangement with my eyes wide open. *If* I ended up hurt in the end, I would only have myself to blame.

He studied me for a long moment before giving a single nod. “Okay, as long as we understand each other.”

“We do.”

“Good.” He shifted to lie down at the foot of the bed and tilted his head toward me. “You know about our date this week, right?”

“Uh, yeah. What about it?”

“Nothing, I just wanted to make sure you knew.” He scrubbed his hand over his face. “God, it’s been a long day. My parents are driving me crazy. They are so pissed that I sent Allison home, because she was one of their picks.”

I frowned. “Picks?”

“Yeah. It’s what the producers haven’t told any of you. My parents pick half of everything. Tonight, for example, they picked Amber, Georgiana, and Allison for the date. I picked you for the two-on-one; they picked Leanne. You get the idea.”

“That’s ...” I couldn’t find the right words.

“Fucked up?” he supplied. “Yes.”

“Huh. And does Will get a say in who stays?”

“No. He only picked one, you, the first night. I’ve picked you every other night. He’s actually going home tomorrow. Work and all that.”

“So wait”—my brain was still processing everything — “when you get down to the top two, your parents ... ?”

“Get to pick one of the final candidates. Yes.”

“Okay, yeah, that’s fucked up.” They were taking overbearing in-laws to a whole new level.

“Want to make any wagers on whether or not Amber will be that final pick?” His laugh wasn’t the deep one that made my toes curl, but a fake one that lacked humor. “The only choice I get is the one in the end, and even then it’s not a choice since I have to propose.”

“In under two months,” I added. “An impossible amount of time to decide to marry someone.”

He rolled onto his side with one arm tucked under his head. His blue shirt stretched across his pecs and his biceps. My hands itched to explore those hard muscles again, but without the shirt. It would be new territory for both of us. Even when he exposed my breasts to his lips, he left my tank top on. No wonder I was getting wet just looking at him. Almost a week of foreplay had me primed and ready for the next level, but the severity of our discussion left me hesitant to make a move.

“My mother believes in love at first sight, while my father thinks I should bed each woman and make the best performer my wife.” His tone was chilling when he spoke about his dad.

“Your father sounds like an ass.”

“He is.”

Right. *Time to lighten the mood a little.* “So, what’s on the agenda for our two-on-one date, my dear prince?” My sarcastic tone evoked a grin from him.

“Other than kissing you senseless in front of Paul and the cameras, you mean?” My tummy fluttered at the words. His kissing me senseless was becoming one of my favorite activities. “We’re going to see some of New Orleans’s better haunts and then have a traditional Creole-style dinner. It’s a good way to end our time in the city. The next few episodes take place elsewhere.”

“We’re going somewhere else for the next episode?” At his nod, I asked, “Where to?”

“A surprise.” He reached out to snag my ankle, pulling one leg away from my chest. “I’m not sure how I feel about you dressing like this around Will. It probably gave him all sorts of sordid ideas.”

“Dating or not, I can dress like this around whomever I want to. But in Will’s case, I didn’t know he was coming over until I found him on the couch.”

He started massaging my foot, sending tingles up my right leg. Those clever fingers of his were created to please a woman, and I was more than happy to be on the receiving end of his attentions. “I would be a hypocrite to ask you not to dress that way around Will again.”

“You would be.”

“Can I admit that I hate the idea of Will seeing you like this? That I want you to only look this way for me?”

My heart skipped a beat. “You can admit to anything you want.” It came out thick as I fought to swallow my emotions. *They’re just words, Sarah. Don’t think too much into them.*

He tugged my other foot free and repeated the motions. I moaned as he found a pressure point. Being in various stilettos all week for filming was hell on my feet.

“Mmm, I love that sound.”

“And I love what you’re doing.” I relaxed into the pillowy heaven, closing my eyes in delight. The pads of his fingers worked their way to my ankle, massaging up to my calf as Evan moved up the bed. When he hit my thigh, I peeked at him. Those black pupils were dilated with an intent I knew all too well. He straddled my leg, settling one muscular thigh between mine and placed his hands on either side of my head.

“Still love what I’m doing?”

“I do.” I tugged at the hem of his shirt. “But I’d like this to come off tonight.”

“Yeah? Are we renegotiating terms?”

“No, you still owe me several bottles of wine.” He brought me the phone charger, but never the wine. “I’ll take the shirt instead.”

“Not getting enough wine at the pool?”

“I need my inhibitions down there.” I limited myself to three glasses each night. Just enough to take the edge off without feeling comfortable enough to speak my mind. A happy medium. “Shirt.”

He brushed a lingering kiss over my mouth. “If I start removing clothes, it won’t stop there.”

“Who says it has to?”

“So we are renegotiating.” He went to his elbows on either side of my head and settled himself on top of me. “Okay. I’ll start by saying, I didn’t bring a condom.”

A NEW LEVEL OF NEGOTIATIONS

“We’re getting right to it, then.” I liked that. “I’m on birth control, and I was checked out by my doctor after my last relationship ended six months ago. I’m clean, but I still prefer safety over stupidity.”

“Why did your last relationship end?”

Not that it was relevant to our conversation, but ... “He wanted me to give up my job and move to Seattle. I said no, and he had an issue with that.”

“So you haven’t had sex in six months?”

When put like that, it did sound like a long time. But I didn’t do one-night stands. I liked to know what I was getting into before taking a man to bed. “Roughly, yes. Your turn.”

He smiled with his eyes. “It’s only been a month for me, but I’m clean, too. I ended my last relationship because of the show.”

“How did she take the news about you leaving her for a dating show?”

“I think she felt worse for me than she did for herself. We were never serious, just friends with certain benefits. Also, I always use a condom. So no sex tonight.”

“I’m sure we can get creative.” I wasn’t ready for the final level, but I was ready for him to remove his shirt. It was only fair considering how acquainted he was with my breasts. I trailed my hand down his back and tugged at the hem of his shirt again. “Off.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He went to his knees and grabbed the shirt at the back of his neck to pull it over his head. The gorgeous wall of muscle he revealed was a masterpiece of smooth lines and tan skin. Whatever he was doing at the gym was working.

I ran a finger along the happy trail of fine, dark hairs to his belt buckle. “I can work with this.”

He slid my tank top up to my breasts and rose an eyebrow. I sat up and lifted my arms over my head in invitation. He tossed the fabric onto the floor beside his shirt and wrapped his hand around the back of my neck to stop me from lying back down. His lips met mine in a demanding kiss filled with pent-up lust that I returned full throttle. We were both panting when he moved his mouth to my neck and lower to my breasts.

“A man could fall in love with these curves, Sarah.” He pushed me back onto the pillows before sucking a nipple deep into his mouth. I tangled the fingers of one of my hands in his hair while my opposite hand went to his shoulders.

“And a woman could fall in love with your mouth.” I bowed off the bed as he swirled his tongue around my sensitive peak. If he didn’t bring me to orgasm tonight, we were going to exchange words. My underwear was soaked through to my shorts. I grabbed his ass, squeezed, and moved my hand to the front to undo his belt buckle. Those intense eyes met mine as he took my nipple between his teeth. The image nearly undid me. My thighs clamped tight around his leg. I *needed* more friction, and the jeans had to go.

After unfastening his belt, I popped the button on his pants and slid the zipper down to reveal his navy blue boxer briefs. A sharp jerk on the fabric told him in no uncertain terms what I wanted. I was in tiny shorts; it was time he joined me. He took his time, licking my breast and suckling the other before lifting enough for me to pull down his jeans. I used my feet to push them off all the way and trembled when his bare thigh met my hot center.

“Mmm, I like the way that feels,” he murmured, his lips returning to my neck. I rubbed against him, creating the

friction I craved. His hands went to my hips to slow the movement and prolong the sensual torture. It set my veins on fire. I ran my nails down his back to the waistband of his boxers and trailed it around to the front. With his mouth on my neck and his thigh lodged between my legs, it left a gap between his lower abdomen and mine. I palmed his thick cock through the thin fabric and loved the hiss he unleashed against my skin.

“Impressive.” I stroked him through the blue cotton. All those delicious muscles along his abdomen tensed with his resulting shudder. I repeated the action and smiled when he pulled away from my neck. His irises reminded me of hot fudge. *Yum.*

“You’re making me really regret that condom.” The deep growl in his voice went straight to my throbbing heat. I wanted to hear him say my name in that tone. I was turned on enough that it would probably make me come.

He was up on his elbow again, making it easy for me to pull down his boxers. I went slow in case he wanted me to stop, but he didn’t move. His member sprung free and landed on my lower abdomen. The bead of liquid on the tip had me licking my lips. *Oh, we would definitely be getting creative.*

“That look in your eyes ...” He trailed off on a low hiss as I grasped him again. He was hot and heavy and so smooth against my palm. I marveled at his size. *Impressive* was an understatement. I pushed him onto his back, something that took little effort with my hand wrapped around his cock. He was at my mercy as my lips went to his neck and lower.

Fingers twined in my hair, encouraging me to continue my exploration of his body. I traced the defined lines of his abdomen with my tongue, loving the way they rippled beneath my touch. He was lost to my seductive will, those hypnotic eyes watching as I marked a direct path to his groin. When I hit the base of his shaft, he looked torn between taking over control and letting me continue my exploration. Not willing to give him back the reins yet, I licked him from base to head and took him into my mouth. His groan went straight to my core. It was pure masculine pleasure, and it set my pace.

The taste of him hit the back of my throat, and I loved it. *Sweet, salty, and all male.* I worked my mouth lower and cupped his heavy sack with my hand to add to the sensation. His pupils dilated with each suck and pull, his hand tightening in my hair. I owned him in this moment. His body undulated beneath me as I undid him with my lips running up and down his thick arousal. I swirled my tongue around the head before taking him deep.

“Keep doing that and I’ll come.” A warning and a promise tied up in that growly voice I was starting to love. I repeated the action, my way of telling him that what I wanted was for him to come. “Fuck.”

His fingers had a death grip on my hair, his forearms straining, as he gave in to the sensations and thrust into my mouth. He hit the back of my throat with each move. I encouraged him to continue, sucking hard while fondling his tightening balls. Wrapping my free hand around the base of his shaft tilted him over the edge. His seed shot into my mouth in hot spurts, spilling over my tongue and down my throat. I wasn’t one for swallowing, but his taste was addictive. The way he repeated my name as he came had me sucking him dry, devouring every last drop. I had to squeeze my legs together to keep from coming myself. *Jesus.* This attraction between us was borderline lethal.

He shook as I released him from my mouth. The hand in my hair didn’t loosen, his muscles too tense. I started to crawl up the bed to lie beside him, when he flipped me onto my back and took my mouth with a fierceness that left me breathless. My shorts disappeared with my panties as his tongue dominated mine. He was taking back control. *Fine by me.*

“My turn.” He nipped my lower lip before moving to my breasts and lower. His tongue licked a similar path along my abdomen but took a detour to my hip. He traced the crease along the top of my thigh. The stubble from his five o’clock shadow scattered goosebumps down my legs.

“I approve,” he whispered, noting my Brazilian wax. I kept minimal hair down there as a personal preference, but it was also a benefit for *this*. His tongue parted my folds, licking me

up to my clit and down to spear me deep. My body trembled with unveiled need, already on the verge of climax from that thorough touch alone.

I wanted to prolong the sensation, experience everything his mouth had to offer, but I knew I wouldn't last that long. I told him as much, evoking a smile against my inner thigh.

"Then it's a good thing women can have multiple orgasms." I was convinced from experience that it was a myth, but I was more than willing to let him try. "I'll take the edge off so we can begin properly." He took my sensitive bud in his mouth and suckled, sending me into a climax that touched every nerve. I screamed his name, not caring at all who might hear me. My hands were in his hair, holding him between my legs, as I recovered with a few lasting shudders.

"Feel better?" he asked against my damp flesh.

"Yes." *An understatement.* I felt lighter than air.

"Good. Then I'll get started." He gave another long lick before thrusting his tongue deep inside. I arched into him, unable to handle the sensual onslaught. He placed a hand on my lower abdomen, forcing me back to the bed as his other hand joined his mouth. One finger entered me, making me feel fuller than I should be.

"Evan ..." It was part plea, part surprise as the bundle of nerves started tightening again in my lower abdomen. It was too soon. My body wasn't ready. I was still shaking from my last orgasm, but another was building under his tongue. He licked around my tender nub, careful not to touch me there. The brief passes left me aching for him and tightened my nipples. *This cannot be happening.* He added a second finger, eliciting a deep moan from my throat. Heat spread from my core to my limbs and cheeks. I tightened my hold in his hair, unable to articulate how he was making me feel.

"You taste amazing, Sarah." He closed his lips over my clit. Rather than it being too much, it was exactly what I needed, pushing me closer to the edge. He tongued the sensitive flesh with a skill few men possessed. I was in sensual heaven, but it was the look in his eyes that sent me spiraling

into a second orgasm. They were so penetrating and aroused that I had no choice but to fall apart. He was enjoying this almost as much as I was.

The explosion was so intense I couldn't scream his name. I was aflame with sensation, my body stilling under the impact. *This* was the myth, and dear God, was it worth the wait. It went on and on, locking my limbs and stopping my heart. Pleasure vibrated through every pore, spilling out of me in waves that took over my very being. By the time it subsided, I was so exhausted I couldn't move. I lay beneath him as he kissed his way up my body. My self-gratification was thick on his tongue as he took my mouth in a gentle mating, his palm on my cheek.

MARRIAGE COMPLEX

“I don’t want to move,” he murmured against my lips. “I might stay here all night, just like this.”

“After that? You can do whatever you want.”

His chuckle vibrated my chest. “I’m glad you approve.”

“I more than approve. Consider that our new negotiation level.”

His dimples flashed. “I guess I’m bringing condoms next time.”

“I don’t know. I enjoyed our creativity tonight and wouldn’t mind repeating it.” *Over and over and over again.*

He rolled to the side, pulling me with him. One arm went under my head while the other wrapped around my waist. I shivered when he pressed his leg between mine, locking us intimately together. *He likes to cuddle. Good to know.*

“I’m up for repeating all of that and more whenever you want, Miss Summers.”

“Every night for the next few weeks works well with my schedule.”

“Two months of spending every night with you? I think I can handle that. But you should know, Sarah, I’m in danger of falling in love with your mouth. It felt amazing wrapped around my cock.”

“Yeah? I have similar feelings toward your tongue.”

“Then we’re on the same page.” He ran his tongue along my bottom lip before taking my mouth in another deep kiss. “I’m definitely staying tonight.”

“I’m not arguing.”

“Good.” He disentangled himself and leaned away to grab his jeans. It was the opposite of what I expected. When he faced me again, jeans in hand, he laughed. “You’re adorable when you frown.”

“I thought you were staying.” There was nothing funny about him saying one thing and doing another.

“I’m glad the thought of my leaving upsets you.” He kissed me on the nose, deepening my scowl. He pulled his phone from the pocket of his pants and threw the offending fabric to the floor. “I need to set an alarm to get out of here before everyone wakes up.”

“That wasn’t funny.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.” He finished keying a time into his phone, set it on the nightstand, and then flicked off the lights. “But it was cute.”

It wasn’t cute at all. It was a telling reaction that burned inside. “I’m not a fan of men who say one thing and do another.”

“You’ll never have to worry about that with me.” He placed my head on his shoulder as he wrapped both arms around me and entangled our legs. “I mean what I say, Sarah. It’s a promise to you I’ll never break.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” I was relying on his word just by staying here. The contract was my security blanket, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t fight me over it one day. Yet, there wasn’t an inkling of doubt in my decision. I wasn’t one to trust easily, but something about him struck a chord deep within me. On some foreign level, I felt like I *knew* him despite our short time together. And wasn’t that terrifying?

“So serious.” He kissed my forehead, his lips brushing the frown lines there. “What’s the story here? Someone obviously went back on his word.”

“Who hasn’t? Most recently, my ex told me my job was important, until it wasn’t convenient for him anymore.” I was still bitter about that one. “Before that, I dated a guy who told me he admired my career aspirations and then dumped me a month later because I wasn’t giving him enough of my time.”

“Sounds like you dated a lot of men who didn’t understand your life goals.”

“I was more than up front with them about it, just as I’ve been with you. When it comes down to it, most men feel their own careers are more important. I’m considered selfish when I put mine before having a family, and that’s not just the male population talking there. I get equal, if not more, flack from women who don’t understand why I’m still single.” *How can a pretty girl like you not be married?* If I heard that question one more time, I could not be held liable for my reaction.

“It’s a double standard.” He toyed with a strand of my hair while he spoke. “Women are expected to give up their careers to raise the children and are often referred to as bad mothers when they don’t. When a man chooses to give up his career and raise the kids, though, he’s praised for his sacrifices. I see it every day in the business world.”

“So you understand my frustration.”

“Not entirely. Being a man, I’m not held to the same standard, but I can understand on principle. I would never ask a woman to give up her career for a family. Of course, I have no intention of ever marrying.”

“Why is that?” I questioned. “I get why you don’t want to marry anyone through a dating show, but why are you against marriage in general?”

He stiffened, his finger freezing midwrap around my hair. “Why are you asking me that, Sarah?”

“Oh, relax. I’m just curious. Don’t worry about me getting any ideas in my head. I know exactly what this is between us.”

He didn’t relax. “In my experience, female curiosity regarding my opinions on marriage never ends well.”

“I could see that.” I shrugged. “Don’t answer, then. I know how you feel about the institution, just not why. I can live with that.”

Silence.

“Okay, so that’s your button. Duly noted.” I yawned, exhausted. I wasn’t going to press him into talking about his feelings. I didn’t want to know the answer anyway. With every private detail, I fell deeper down the rabbit hole. The less I knew about him, the easier it would be to keep him out of my heart. Because the more he confided in me, the more I *felt*. I couldn’t afford to let him in much more.

I snuggled into his shoulder, closing my eyes. He was rigid beside me, as if waiting for something. Whatever it was, he would be waiting all night because I was on the verge of falling asleep.

“I told you about my mother and what my father did—*does*—to her. I grew up listening to her tears through the door. She never wanted to see me or my sister, Mia, because we look too much like our dad. Wyatt wasn’t really hers, so that made sense, and Will came to live with us when he was ten, which was well after my mother gave up on living.”

I didn’t open my eyes. It was too dark to see him. “That must have been hard on all of you.”

“It was hardest on Mia. My father refused to acknowledge her, and my mother was never there for her. The company, as well as the Mershano Estate, was given to me. They gave Mia a hefty inheritance and told her to move out whenever she wanted, so she did. She used some of the money to go to college and medical school.” The pride in his voice warmed me inside. “She’s an infectious-disease physician on assignment in Uganda. Her fellowship ends in December. I don’t know what she plans to do after that, but she’s ambitious. You would like her.”

“Sounds like it.” From the way he described it, Mia was the shunned one of the family. Yet she was making a life for herself and changing lives. I was in awe, and I hadn’t even met the woman. “I’d like to meet her someday.”

“I can arrange that.” He rubbed my back in hypnotic circles that had every one of my muscles relaxing in response. If I were a cat, I would be purring. “I’m not against the establishment of marriage on principle, but I’ve never been interested in pursuing it for myself. Mershano Suites is not an easy empire to manage. I’m always traveling, I hold meetings at three o’clock in the morning, women all around the world throw themselves at my feet, and the media is a constant presence. What kind of life would that be for a spouse? I can’t give any of it up, and there would always be the fidelity concerns. The Mershano name is notorious thanks to my father’s immorality. I’m not marriage material.”

I considered how to respond and opted to repay his honesty. “Sounds like you don’t have the energy to try.” I thought the demands my job placed on me were tough, but he was in a whole different ball game.

“A crude assessment, but accurate.” His flat tone told me he didn’t appreciate my *assessment*.

“I didn’t mean to offend you, Evan. I wouldn’t have the energy either. Hell, I barely had the energy to manage a relationship because of my job at Stern and Associates. You’re on a whole different playing field.” I palmed his cheek and kissed him. It was my way of showing I understood and didn’t judge him for it. I wanted to get married someday, but it wasn’t for everyone. And as far as reasons for not being interested in a long-term commitment went, his were better than most.

He returned the kiss, his tongue tracing the seam of my lips to request entrance. I acquiesced and let him push me onto my back. It was a lazy mating of mouths, both of us tired, due to the late hour, but not exhausted enough to sleep. He balanced on his elbow while the other hand ran up and down my side. His stirring erection against my thigh was contrary to his tender kiss. He made no move to take things further.

“Good night, Sarah,” he whispered against my lips. He folded me into his arms, my head going to his shoulder.

“Good night, Evan.” Sleep claimed me, pulling me into a dream that would never become reality.

THE HOUSE KEY

“A creepy tour? Seriously?” Leanne wasn’t on board with our post-dinner plans. She spent the last hour trying to convince Evan that a trip to Bourbon Street would be more entertaining. Paul’s responding grin indicated he put her up to the task of changing the prince’s mind.

Evan lifted a brow. “Afraid?”

“No, I think it’s a little dumb.” The svelte woman gave him a dubious look. “Dinner was great. Romantic, even. But a night tour of a graveyard? Not so much.”

I thought it was a great idea. New Orleans was alive with an electric vibe that danced across my skin, making a spooky evening all the more alluring. Cemeteries in the dark with flashlights? *Yes, please.*

“You’d prefer to go to the bars instead?” The sexy lilt Evan used with the locals during dinner was lost to his business tone. The man could flip between accents better than anyone I’d ever met. He spoke French the day I worked in his office and then used the Louisiana drawl on our group date and again tonight, but fell into a deep tenor in private. It was obvious he had formal training, and he applied it in every situation. *Could the man be any hotter?*

“Well, yes. I like all the live music, and maybe you’ll want to give me some beads.” Leanne toyed with the auburn curl bouncing above her breast and gave him an enticing smile. The grin he returned wasn’t flirtatious or happy, but the lanky

girl didn't seem to notice. She batted her light eyes at him.
"Please?"

His shoulders fell as he stared down at her. "You're more than welcome to go to the bars, Leanne. When you're done, Joseph or someone from the show will be waiting for you with a car to take you home."

Her full lips parted. "Home? As in, back to Maine?"

He nodded. "Yes, I don't think this is working out between us, sweetheart. You're a gorgeous woman, and I've enjoyed getting to know you, but this whole experience is about finding my future wife. And I'm sorry, but I don't see that happening between us."

My hand went to my mouth. I expected it. There was no other way for the evening to end, but I couldn't believe he was doing this in front of me. He was graceful about it, and the pain touching his sorrowful gaze told me he hated hurting her. It made me feel worse for him than the teary-eyed redhead. He put his arm around her shoulders and walked away with a startled Paul and cameraman trailing behind them.

I stayed by the restaurant doors, where the remaining minions taped my reaction. They wanted me to say something, but I couldn't. What was there to say? *Well, that just happened.*

Evan returned with his hands in his pockets. The black slacks and button-down combo were hot, but I missed the sexy jeans. His lips curled into a small smile. "Sorry about that, but I had to be honest. I hope it didn't ruin our evening."

"No, of course not. You had me at cemeteries." Everyone watching the show would think I was crazy, but I didn't care. This was my kind of date.

His chuckle was affectionate. "I had to pull in some favors for tonight, so I'm glad you approve. Most of these places close at five."

"Are we meeting a guide?"

"Sure." He laced his fingers with mine and led the way.
"Yours truly."

“Really? You’re my date and tour guide, huh? Mixing business with pleasure?”

He winked at me. “Maybe a little.”

“Well, I approve, Mister Mershano.”

“I thought you might.” He tugged me to him midstep and placed a hard kiss on my mouth. The move was unexpected and suave, leaving my breasts heaving against his chest and his arm wrapped firmly around my waist. “Mmm, I’m getting distracted.”

“It’s a good distraction.”

“It’s a *great* distraction, but the graveyard awaits.” He started forward again, pulling me along beside him with his hand wrapped around mine.

“I better see some ghosts on this tour.” Not that I believed they existed, but it was fun to tease.

Amusement danced through his gaze and teased the edges of his full mouth. I liked that look. “Halloween must be your favorite holiday.”

“Yep. I’m a fan of anything creepy, including scary movies.”

“Yeah? Do you have a favorite?”

I named a few movies that were older than our grandparents, making him laugh. “What? Those are the *classics*. All the crap these days are either fake or made for gore. Yuck on both occasions.”

“Fair enough.” He stopped at a large iron gate between two solid concrete walls. Beyond it was darkness littered with aboveground grave sites. The sinister sensations crept over my skin, making me shiver. *Excellent*. This scene did not disappoint.

Pulling a key from his pocket, he unlocked the entrance and handed me a flashlight. “Ready?”

“Definitely.” I entered first and peered into the darkness. The solid stone walls kept out the city’s sounds, giving the

eerie graveyard an otherworldly feel that scattered goosebumps down my exposed arms. I absently rubbed at them as I walked, my stiletto heels clicking against the cement walkway. Evan came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist.

His lips trailed a line up to my ear. “Is this what you wanted to see?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He kissed my temple and dropped his hands to my hips. “Lead the way, Miss Summers.”

I did as he asked and explored the graveyard with him at my side. With the trailing cameras, I didn’t need to use my flashlight, but I did at some points to peek into dark corners and read some of the decrepit stones. It was amazing. “The history here—I could spend hours absorbing it.” I glanced sideways at him as we started toward the exit. “I’m sorry. This must seem like the strangest date in the world to you.”

“Mmm, no, not really. There’s a certain romance to walking hand in hand through a closed, dark, eerie locale. I imagine it’s similar to visiting a haunted house, but more intimate. We’re very alone here, and it’s quiet.” He squeezed my hand. “I also like seeing that look of wonder in your eyes.”

Heat climbed up my neck. *Is he being real, or saying what the producers want to hear?* It was hard to tell. He chose this activity for me. A graveyard tour didn’t suit Paul’s filming style. Evan pulled strings to make this happen. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He relocked the gates and pocketed the key. “You know, I’ve never seen *Nosferatu*,” he admitted as we headed toward the waiting limo. It was parked at the curb, saving us the walk back to the restaurant.

I stopped moving. “What? I don’t think we can be friends anymore, Evan. *Nosferatu* is one of the greatest silent horror films of all time and quite possibly one of the best horror films in the history of horror films.”

“Duly noted.” His dimples made my belly flip. “We’ll make a date of it.”

“I’m holding you to that, Mister Mershano.” “You have my word, Miss Summers.” “Good.”

He opened the door to the limo, allowing me to enter first, and then he climbed in and settled beside me. The camera across from us was hard to ignore, but Evan seemed unbothered as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders. He used his other hand to tilt my chin toward him and capture my mouth in a passionate kiss. “Ignore them,” he whispered before sliding his tongue between my lips. I accepted the distraction and let him pull me into his lap and deepen the kiss. It was hot, demanding, and went straight to the sweet spot between my thighs. *Screw the show and its voyeuristic minions.*

I clung to his shoulders and followed his lead. One hand slipped to the back of my neck to angle my mouth the way he wanted it while the other strayed to my hip. It burned through the fabric of my dress. His fingers curled into the black material, telling me he was fighting for control. The dress was cocktail length, but the move into his lap pulled it up to mid thigh. His hardening arousal told me he was more than aware of the precarious position.

The temptation to straddle him grew with every stroke of his tongue against mine, but logic kept me grounded. When the limo pulled up outside the hotel, I was relieved. We would be alone soon.

I winced at the look on the cameraman’s face as I stepped out of the limo. The poor guy thought he was about to film an adult movie. I fixed my dress and waited for Evan. He adjusted himself before meeting me on the sidewalk with the hoard of cameras. Paul was nowhere to be seen. That meant we could say a quick good-bye and meet upstairs.

He ran a finger down my arm to my wrist and slipped his hand into mine. “Want to take a walk?”

From the look on the crew’s faces, this was not part of the plan. It wasn’t what I had in mind either.

“You want to take a walk?” *Instead of going upstairs and taking off our clothes?*

“I do.” Evan’s brown eyes brimmed with a devilish charm that could tempt an angel to fall. “There’s a path behind the hotel that runs along the Mississippi. Want to walk with me?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” *Awkward foreplay, but okay.*

One of the crewmen pulled out a phone and walked out of hearing range, while the other followed closely with a camera. I tried to ignore them, but the bright light in the dark night was intrusive. “So I’m thinking we can have a movie night later this week. At my house.”

“Your house?”

“Yeah, tonight’s our last night in the hotel.” The cameraman stumbled at his words, an indication that Evan was not supposed to be telling me this. “That’s why I thought a walk might be nice. Tomorrow we’ll be out in the country. I love New Orleans, but I’m looking forward to being home and surrounded by oak trees. You like creepy things; wait until you see them all with the Spanish moss. It’s gorgeous.”

We reached the path he was talking about, the other crewman running up behind us with the spiky-haired director hot on his heels. *Great.*

“So what do you think about the movie night?” Evan asked.

“If it gives me a chance to properly introduce you to horror films, I’m in.”

His grin was extra bright thanks to the cameras. “We can have it in your room since you’ll be just down the hall from me. Assuming you accept the key I plan to offer you.” Paul beamed at this, the opposite reaction to my confusion.

“Another key?”

“It’s a theme.” He stopped and pulled me close. “You are all moving in tomorrow. Two of those rooms are in my wing of the house, and I want you to stay in one of them. Accepting the key grants you access to my personal quarters of the

house.” He tucked a strand behind my ear and palmed my cheek. “Would you like that, Sarah?”

I would prefer the key to his bedroom, but staying near him worked, too. “Yes.”

“I hoped you’d say that.” He cradled my face between his palms. That *look* was in his eyes again, the one that told me I was seconds from being devoured. A girl could get lost in that stare. It carried an allure that made me want to stay frozen in this moment forever, with him. This pull went deeper than lust, and I wasn’t sure I had it in me to care. I wanted him, and not just in my bed.

His lips touched mine, slow and steady. Passion brimmed on the surface, flooding my veins with anticipation. Butterflies overwhelmed my abdomen as if this was our first kiss. Every time felt like the first time, something I couldn’t wrap my head around. I should be used to him by now, expecting what he would do and getting a little bored by it. But his lips were heaven against mine, coaxing a fervent response I couldn’t contain.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, closing the gap between our bodies as he deepened the kiss. His tongue deserved to be worshiped. So much skill should not exist in one man’s mouth. The heat in my belly went lower, readying me for more. We were moving faster than I usually liked, but I needed as much from him as I could get in the short time we had together. It was the only way to get him out of my blood. I could spend a lifetime craving more from this man.

His hands were in my hair, holding me to him as he delved deeper. The wine from dinner was thick on my tongue, warming me down to my toes. I was about to let my hands wander when Paul whispered something about angles to the cameraman. Lost in our embrace, I forgot about the crew. Now that I remembered their presence, my body tensed, something Evan felt.

He eased away with a gentle kiss before resting his forehead against mine. We stared at each other like that, saying

so much with our eyes that couldn't be said out loud. Not in front of others. Getting the hint, the cameras shut off.

THE DIRECTOR'S IN CHARGE NOW

“It’s about fucking time, man,” Paul muttered and turned to the crew. “That dancing scene from Bourbon Street will need more screen time, too, and we’ll need to redo some of the hotel scenes to enhance their chemistry. Especially that office scene.”

“Got it,” said one of the techies.

“You’re going to need a wardrobe change before we continue filming.” Paul was looking at me when he said it.

“Uh, it’s almost midnight. My only wardrobe-changing plans are to put on pajamas and go to bed.” *Preferably in Evan’s arms again.*

“Oh no, we have too much time to make up here.” He poked Evan’s shoulder. “You’ve been holding out on me. I wasn’t sure how to handle you dismissing Leanne ahead of schedule or insisting on the graveyard date, but now I can see the real you. All those other kisses were shit compared to what you just did with Sarah. I need more of *this* Evan”—another poke—“for this series to sell.”

He turned to another crew member. “Grab Amber and put her in that dress from their date. Get Tiffany and Kristin, too. And Georgiana. We’re redoing everything.”

Evan faced the director and folded his arms. “I have no interest in redoing that scene or any others. They’re fine as is.”

“Look, Evan, sex sells, and so far, all I have on film is a bunch of virginal shit no one is going to want to watch. That

kiss you just landed on her is what I wanted the first night of filming. You've been holding out on me, and it stops now."

I was starting to hate this guy.

"I'm not contractually obligated to make out on film," Evan pointed out.

"No, but you *are* contractually obligated to do what I need you to do to make this show a hit. If you don't, I have to tell the producers that you were disagreeable, which *is* a violation of your contract. Ask that fancy lawyer of yours what will happen then."

From what I understood, if Evan didn't try to make this work, they would take the company away from him. Rachel said Garrett was one of the best attorneys in the South. He no doubt looked for a get-out clause in whatever legal document Evan's parents were holding over his head. That meant he had to do whatever was best for the show and go along with Paul's rules, or he risked losing everything. *What a predicament to be in.*

"Look, it's my job to make sure this show takes off, and if you continue holding back, I'm going to fail, which means you fail. So we're redoing the kisses with Amber, Tiffany, and Kristin, adding a few more scenes between you and Sarah, and we're doing it all tonight. I have six weeks to turn this shit show around, and we're already behind schedule. So get with the fucking program." He clapped his hands at the crew and started shouting orders while Evan's expression blanked.

I placed a hand over his heart. It was the only comfort I could give him. This wasn't how I wanted to spend tonight. His pupils were so dilated I couldn't see any of the dark chocolate I loved so much. I leaned up to kiss him. It was meant to be a tender touch, to offer him peace, but the lights flickered on and ruined it.

Instead of pulling away, he deepened the kiss and gave them more of what they wanted. But it wasn't the same. The passion was replaced by a man going through the motions. It was all skill and no depth. My toes didn't curl, butterflies didn't form, and my panties were dry. It was like kissing a

robot. Not sexy, and it became the theme of the night. Every room they put us in, every kiss they forced on us was all the same. It lacked passion, but Paul liked it and said our chemistry was what the show needed.

I didn't see the scene he recaptured with Amber or the ones they ended up redoing with Tiffany and Kristin. I was too busy putting on the assistant dress from last week and redoing my makeup and hair.

It was five o'clock in the morning when they put us back in the office together. I was exhausted, grumpy, and not in the mood to flirt with anyone, which was why I did everything Paul told me to do. I wanted it over with so I could get the hell away from everyone. Evan and I ended up making out on the assistant's desk. It was so slutty and wrong that it turned my stomach. I had to bury my head in his shoulder after they were done filming to hide my revulsion.

"That's enough for tonight. We need to sleep." The authority in Evan's voice reverberated in my chest. I wished he would have stepped in hours ago, but he went along with Paul's requests on autopilot. He was picking his battles. I couldn't blame him, but that didn't mean I was happy to be awake and dressed in a tight black dress with my legs wrapped around his waist.

When I got back to my room, I collapsed onto the bed in the stupid outfit, kicked off my shoes, and curled into a ball. The whole office scene degraded my character, and that fucking pissed me off. I was not the kind of woman to bend over and pick up a pencil in an attempt to seduce my boss. But Paul insisted, and I was too exhausted to fight him on it. There were angry tears in my eyes when my phone buzzed. I picked it up to read Evan's message.

They're making me redo interviews now. Get some sleep, Sarah. We'll talk tomorrow.

I texted back, *Okay*. I wasn't in the mood to see him after all the crap the show put us through tonight. The emotional roller coaster that was today needed to end. I set my phone aside and refused to look at it again until the morning.

~

Paul's madness continued the next morning.

There were eleven of us left after the recent eliminations, and we were all required to attend a pool party with our prince. I was surprised the director didn't organize this scene sooner. Bikini-clad women groping the man of the hour in the hot tub seemed like opening-credit material after last night's shenanigans.

Despite being surrounded by half-naked women, Evan's smile never reached his eyes. He kissed women indiscriminately throughout the day, giving Paul exactly what he wanted and making me feel ill. The worst was Amber straddling him in the hot tub and sticking her tongue down his throat. I was trapped across from them and forced to watch thanks to the camera in my face. Acting wasn't necessary. All the warmth drained from my body, making me frigid as ice.

When the torture ended, I couldn't look at Evan. It was irrational and childish to blame him. I knew why this was happening, and it was my fault for developing *feelings* for him beyond lust, but did he have to grab Amber's ass like that?

He texted me while I was packing my suitcase, something we were given minimal time to do. I knew we were headed to his house next, but that didn't explain why I needed to be in my formal wear.

"Be in the lobby by six o'clock in the formal gown we left outside each of your doors," Carrie instructed after our playtime in the pool.

I scanned Evan's message. *I'm so sorry, Sarah.* He sent a similar one after I fell asleep last night. I never replied and felt obligated to do so now.

Not your fault. I blamed Paul, and the archaic contract that forced Evan into this mess, more than anyone.

Every scene today left me feeling degraded and sick to my stomach, but I only had to film with him. I couldn't imagine how he felt kissing a dozen girls on command and letting them grope him. I doubted he hated it—he was a man, after all—but

he couldn't love it either. The intensity never touched his eyes today, nor did his dimples flash. Despite the easy smiles and laughs, there was a depth to every move that was missing, like he turned off his emotions to get through today.

It killed me. My heart hurt each time he touched another woman, and yet I felt worse for him than I did for myself. This was why I didn't want to get involved with him beyond a sexual connection. It was too complicated. There wasn't a future between us. There wasn't even a *now* between us. Falling for an unavailable man was a stupid thing to do, yet my heart had other ideas. At some point, he cracked my emotional armor and wormed his way inside.

The solution was obvious. We needed to keep our relationship professional. That meant kissing for the cameras only and no more midnight rendezvous in my room. It would kill a part of me to do it, but better to feel that pain now than to let this go any further.

I turned off the phone and packed it deep in my suitcase. I wouldn't put it past the crew to search my belongings. I hid the cord in a different compartment and put everything by the door. My laundry was in its own bag; one of the few perks of the show was that I didn't have to wash clothes. Someone else would be doing that for me and leaving it in my new room at Evan's estate.

I shivered. *I'll be sleeping down the hall from him.* Last night, I was elated. Tonight, I was nervous. Putting a stop to our intimacy was going to be hard enough without the added temptation of him being a few feet away. I could kiss him mechanically on film. I did it all day. In private? There was nothing mechanical about it. *Fuck.* It was going to be a long night. I hoped the door came with a lock.

FRIENDS WITH MINOR BENEFITS

The key Evan handed me during the surprise elimination ceremony was a prop. The ceremony was an elaborate ordeal where he invited ten of us to move into his house. Kathy was sent home, while Amber and I were given the keys to his wing. I didn't know what the damn thing opened or unlocked, but it wasn't the door to my new suite.

The Mershano Estate was gorgeous, sitting on several hundreds of acres about thirty miles from New Orleans. It was dark when we arrived, but the grounds surrounding the illuminated mansion were astounding. We didn't have to report to Paul until noon tomorrow, giving me all morning to explore. I planned to go for a run. My body was complaining about the rich food and lack of exercise over the last two weeks. I could also use the mental freedom that accompanied a good workout.

My room was about twice the size of the one I stayed in at the hotel, with a full couch, entertainment center, king-size bed, and windows that overlooked the back of the property. The pool was lit up outside and being used by a few of the girls. It was huge, with hot tubs on either side and lounge chairs sprawled around it. *Heavenly*. Too bad everything else was a nightmare.

I unpacked my suitcase and took advantage of the empty closet and dressers. If I was going to be here for a month and a half, I would at least make myself at home.

The bathroom was as gorgeous as the room, with a walk-in shower, Jacuzzi tub, and double sink. As amazing as a bath sounded, I was worried I might fall asleep after the day I had, so I rinsed off in the tiled shower. Evan knocked and entered the room as I was pulling a tank top over my head. I grabbed my shorts to tug them over my thong and raised an eyebrow at him.

“Typically, it’s customary to wait until the girl opens the door.”

He swallowed. “Sorry, you weren’t answering the phone.”

“Yeah, it’s on the nightstand and currently off.” I walked back into the bathroom to grab a comb for my hair. He stood off to the side, leaning against the wall, hands in the pockets of his jeans, his eyes pensive. His red shirt stretched across his chest, and his feet were bare. This was like being on a diet and trying to say no to dessert. The devil on my shoulder was whispering all sorts of naughty things in my ear.

One bite won’t hurt you, Sarah. Just a few licks. You’ll be okay. You can start the diet tomorrow.

“I think we need to talk.” He took the words right out of my mouth.

“I think we do, too.” I set the brush down and followed him over to the couch instead of the bed. It seemed we both had the same conversation in mind. The realization made my chest hurt. I knew this had to happen, but that didn’t mean I wanted it to. Breaking up with my boyfriend of eighteen months hurt less than ending this, and Evan and I weren’t even dating. It was because I had a chance to grow tired of Kevin, but what I had going with Evan was new and fresh. We were killing it before it had a chance to bloom, and that’s why this bothered me.

I would get over it.

Eventually.

“So today sucked,” was his eloquent start.

“An understatement.” I hugged my knees to my chest. He sat opposite me on the couch, leaving a foot of space between

us.

“I’ll get right to the point, Sarah. I don’t want things to end between us, not when they’ve only just started, but I also don’t want to hurt you. The way you wouldn’t look at me today tells me I’ve already failed on that front, so I need to know, what do you want to happen here?” His matter-of-fact tone was a breath of fresh air. No games. No apologies. Just a straightforward assessment of the issue. *Very businesslike.*

“You’re right; today hurt. I don’t want to stop these nightly visits either, but it’s what we need to do. Before whatever this is gets messier and hurts me more.” I bit my lip, contemplating what else I needed to say. “I went into this with my eyes wide open. I knew what would be required of you, and I accepted it, but today taught me there’s a difference between acceptance and handling the reality. I don’t think I can handle it. It’s not your fault; it’s mine. And I’m sorry for it.”

His brow wrinkled. “Did you just apologize to me for not being able to handle my dating nine other women and making out with them in front you?”

“Well, yeah. I told you it wouldn’t bother me when this started, but now I’m saying it does. That’s not okay.” His gaze was assessing, and then he shocked me by laughing. A full-hearted, belly-aching kind of laugh that could no doubt be heard in the hallway. Affronted, I glared at him. “This isn’t funny, Evan.”

“No, it’s not,” he agreed, still laughing.

“Then why are you laughing at me?”

“I’m not. Well, I am. A little.” He chuckled again, making me want to kick him. “Any other woman—hell, any other person—would expect me to apologize in this situation. Not you.”

“And that’s funny to you?”

“Not at all. I’m shocked. I came here tonight expecting to grovel, and you’ve thrown me for a loop. Of all the scenarios I expected, this was not one of them.” He gave me a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry for laughing at you.”

It was the dimples that did me in. I missed seeing them today. “Fine. You’re forgiven.” His laugh was so full of life and pent-up emotion he needed to let out. I couldn’t fault him for that. And he was too adorable to stay angry at.

“Look, I’m sorry for the last twenty-four hours. Paul was out of line, especially when it came to you. I should have put a stop to it.” He lifted his hand as if to touch me, but thought better of it. “I’m sorry.”

“I should have stopped him, not you.” I didn’t need him to fight my battles for me. “You don’t need to apologize for anything here. I get it. And if we weren’t involved in this damn show, things between us might be different.” I would have never met him, for one.

“Sarah, I like spending time with you. I like kissing you as well. But I can keep my hands to myself if that’s what you want. What do you think?”

I think that I like kissing you, too. And I don’t want you to keep your hands to yourself at all. But I couldn’t tell him that. “What exactly are you proposing?”

“That we still see each other at night, just without the physical component.”

“Like friends.”

“Exactly. We’re going into business together, after all—might as well start building that relationship now.”

“No benefits, except for the kissing on camera.” Which would be robotic and lack passion. I could handle that.

His gaze smoldered as he took in my bare legs. “If that’s what you want, then yes.”

“You can’t look at me like that.”

“The no-touching aspect I can manage, but sweetheart, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to stop looking at you like this.” At least he was honest. “I can promise not to act on it unless given permission.”

“You make me sound like a chaste virgin or something.”

He chuckled. “With that mouth? Never.”

“Friends don’t talk to each other that way.” My nipples were hard under my shirt. Another thing friends didn’t do around each other.

“We’ll have a unique friendship, then. What do you say, Sarah? Please don’t shun me. I know I deserve it after all the crap today, but I’m hoping you’ll take pity on me.”

“Yes, poor Evan had to kiss eight women today.”

“Nine,” he corrected. “And trust me, that took work.” “You were just making up for lost time.”

He huffed a breath of irritation. “I’m going to punch Paul in the face if he says that to me again tomorrow.”

“I would really enjoy seeing that.”

“Then I’ll make sure you have front-row seats. Oh.” He jumped up to do something to the television. It flickered to life, and he grabbed a remote. “Before you decide, I want to show you something.” He collapsed back onto the couch and pulled up a movie menu.

When he hovered over a title, I jumped up and down in my seat, excited. “You downloaded *Nosferatu*.”

“I told you I wanted to watch it. I meant it.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Nothing sexy or romantic about this, right?”

Other than you showing interest in something I love?
“Nope.”

“A good *friend* movie?”

“Yep.”

“So I can stay and watch it with you.”

It was half past ten, and the movie was close to an hour and a half, putting me in bed around midnight. Plenty of time to get some sleep and go for a run in the morning. “I’m only saying yes because it’s what a good friend would do in this situation.”

“Duly noted.” He got up to turn off the lights and then settled down beside me on the couch with his legs sprawled out. “Snuggling is permitted if you get scared. As *friends*.”

“Uh-huh.” I extended my legs so my calves rested against his thighs. “Foot massages are friendly, too.”

“Sneaky,” he murmured. “I like it.” He hit play and dropped the remote in favor of my right foot. His thumb hit my arch, sending electric shocks up my leg to the apex between my thighs.

Okay, so maybe not entirely friendly.

Nosferatu was one of my favorite movies, but for the first time, I wasn’t engrossed by it. Not with Evan’s hands running up and down my calves and massaging my feet. He never took it further, always staying below my knee. Not that my hormones cared. I was so turned on by the time the movie ended, I couldn’t breathe.

The devil on my shoulder was daring me to go against everything we discussed and kiss him. It would ruin everything, including my credibility. Keeping my libido in check was never an issue for me, but tonight I felt like a thirteen-year-old girl alone with her first crush.

“Okay, that was amazing,” Evan conceded as the credits rolled. His hands were relaxed on my legs, his thumb drawing circles. “What’s your next suggestion?”

“Definitely *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, or *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*.” It was another favorite of mine, but not as well known as *Nosferatu*.

He flipped to the menu again and looked it up. The description was in German, but Evan didn’t flinch. “A hypnotist, huh?”

“You know German?”

“I do.” His grin was cocky as he added, “I speak Spanish as well,” in my mother’s native tongue.

“I’m impressed. German, Spanish, French, and you can do that sexy New Orleans accent.”

He laughed. “Ya noticed that, *chèr?*”

My stomach flipped. *Shit.* “Don’t do that.”

“*Quoi faire?*”

“What is that? Cajun French?” *And when did it get so hot in here?*

His grin was all male arrogance as he said something in a language I didn’t understand. *Japanese maybe?*

“Now you’re just showing off.” I cleared my throat in an attempt to get rid of my husky voice. “So, did, uh, Stanford require you study a foreign language with your hospitality management program, or was this a personal pursuit?”

“Neither,” he murmured, smiling. “Linguistics was part of my schooling from a young age. A benefit of knowing I would run a hotel empire one day, yeah?” His New Orleans lilt made me warm and fuzzy all over. *Why did I suggest we just be friends, again?*

“You put my bilingual skills to shame,” I muttered in Spanish. My accent paled in comparison to his, and I spent several summers in Argentina with my grandparents.

“So this is your next recommendation?” His deep voice returned to normal as he gestured to the movie on the screen. “Another silent film?” At my nod, he pressed a button to download it. “For tomorrow?”

Switching up sex for horror movies at night? “Sure.”

“It’s a *friend* date, then.” He patted my leg and stood. “I’ll let you get some sleep, Sarah. Again, I’m sorry. You might not feel I need to apologize, but I do. The way Paul is filming this ... Let’s just say it’s not how I would have done it.”

“You mean sleazy isn’t your preferred image? Huh. Never would have guessed that.” I stood and stretched my arms over my head. “Okay, yeah, I’m exhausted.”

His gaze was on my breasts. “Right.” He cleared his throat. “Good night.”

I let the slip slide because I wasn't any better. His ass looked too good in those jeans. "Good night, Evan."

He stopped at the door, shoulders rigid. "You're still the only woman I want to kiss off film, Sarah."

"Evan—"

"No, I need to say it." The television highlighted his serious expression in shades of grey and white when he turned around. "I might be flirting with the others and kissing them on command, but it's not the same as what we're doing behind closed doors. I need you to know that. It's a strange form of commitment, but that's what it is to me. You're the only one I *want* to be kissing, Sarah. I know it's not enough, but it's all I can give you right now."

"And then what?" I hated playing this card, but it had to be done. "After the show, I mean. We're going into business together. Getting romantically involved was never a good idea for us. I thought it could be all lust, Evan. But I realized today, that for me, it's more. Seeing you kiss those girls, especially Amber ..." My voice trailed off, and I shook my head. "I can't do this."

"I didn't give her the other key to my quarters, Sarah. My parents did."

I assumed that when he handed the blonde her key. "It doesn't matter."

"It does." He walked up and cradled my face between his palms. "It matters because I don't want her. I'm in your room right now, not hers, because I want *you*."

"Maybe you should be in her room." A cold suggestion that was the opposite of what I wanted him to do.

"Don't say that. I get that you're hurt, that you want to push me away, but don't degrade what's between us. Not by suggesting I go to someone else."

"But that's what you'll be doing, right? You know these dates are going to get more intimate. What happens when you get to the final two or three candidates? You're not going to

buy a car without test-driving it, right?” It was one of my favorite analogies, but it went over his head.

“Test-drive ... ? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Sex, Evan. You’re not going to propose to someone without having sex with her first.”

“Sure, yes, if I was planning to wed someone after this show, then that would be the case. But as we’ve discussed, that’s not my plan. No sex required.” He brushed his lips against mine. “You’re the only one I want, Sarah.”

“Tonight maybe, but what about next week? This is never going to work. I can’t make this just about lust anymore.”

“You seem to be under the impression that it’s only lust for me as well. Have you considered that it might mean more to me, too? I wouldn’t be here discussing this with you if all I felt was sexual attraction. I like you, Sarah. More than I should.”

“Don’t tell me that. Don’t make this worse than it already is.” Knowing how he felt would make this harder.

“I told you, I mean what I say. I won’t mince words around you, not about this. I want you, and not just because of the intense attraction between us. I want to know everything about you.” He kissed me softly, his lips firm against mine. It set off the butterflies in my stomach, making them flutter about in a dizzying pattern. How was I ever going to say no to this man?

“Evan ...” I clung to his biceps, unsure of whether to push him away or haul him closer. My hormones were whispering naughty things in my ear, while my common sense told me to run.

“Don’t decide tonight, or even tomorrow. We’ll be friends first—nightly visits and movies, whatever you want. You tell me when you’re ready for me, and I’ll be there. I just wanted you to know where I stand.” He gave me another tender kiss that melted my heart. “Good night, Sarah.”

My lips burned long after he left. It took all my strength not to go after him.

Friends first.

Okay.

SEDUCTION VIA SUNSCREEN

Two weeks later, there were six contestants left, and my hormones hated me. Evan spent every evening in my room and kissed me good night each time. No tongue. It served as a sweet reminder of what could be between us if I gave in to him, and it was killing me.

The dates were getting more elaborate with each round, and the tension in the house was high. One lucky woman went out with the prince to a location of his choosing during each round. What the girls didn't know was that Evan and his parents were alternating rounds of selecting who won the single date. Tonight was his turn, and he picked me.

"I'm going with subtle," Brenda said as she touched up my mascara. "You're hot enough without all the goop."

I grinned. "Charmer."

The makeup artist was growing on me. When I went for a run my first morning here, I found her stretching outside. The sun was inching over the horizon, and neither of us was in a talking mood, but we found a decent pace and ran together for an hour around the Mershano Estate. Evan was right about the trees. I told him later that night how I longed for my camera. The colors of the moss-covered oaks paired with the early morning sky were phenomenal.

"He's going to die when he sees you in this swimsuit." She held up a sexy red bikini the producers picked for me. It went in a bag with a towel and a few other necessities.

“Where are we going swimming?” The Mershano Estate pool was heated, making it comfortable for outdoor swimming. But that wasn’t where we were spending our date.

“It’s a surprise,” she replied. That’s what Evan said last night, too.

I followed the crew’s instructions and took a car to an airfield where the prince was waiting on the tarmac. I set down my bag to hug him, and he lifted me up into his arms. He buried his face into my neck. “Hello, sweetheart.”

“Hi.” I eyed the small plane behind him. “Where are we going?”

He let me slide down his muscular form to the ground and settled his hands on my hips. “How do you feel about the Bahamas?”

“The Bahamas,” I repeated. “For the day?” He couldn’t be serious.

“Why not? It’s two and a half hours by air, and we have a jet. I also reserved a private spot with a cabana on the beach. Feel up for it?”

I gaped at him. “The Bahamas?”

His grin touched his eyes. “That’s the idea.”

Surreal. “Uh-huh. Sure. Why not? Lead the way, Mister Billionaire.”

I didn’t believe him until my bare feet hit the sand. The turquoise waves rushed the shore ten feet away, and the sun was hot against my shorts and tank top. A cabana sat behind me with a lounge chair rivaling the size of a king bed, a table with cocktails and snacks, and wispy curtains that flowed in the hot Caribbean air. Evan stood to the side in his swim trunks and open button-down shirt, looking sexy as hell.

“We’re in the Bahamas.” The shock wasn’t wearing off.

He grinned. “Yes, we are.”

I shook my head. “Your life is unreal.” Behind the cabana was a Mershano Suites resort, which explained how he

arranged everything. I pulled my tank top over my head to reveal the swimsuit I changed into on the plane. “I hope you brought sunscreen.” My tan skin would turn a deep red under these conditions. It was after noon, but I wasn’t accustomed to the hot rays bathing my skin.

He walked over to a bag in the cabana and retrieved the lotion. Rather than handing it to me, he squirted some on my exposed shoulders and started massaging it into my skin.

“Turn around,” he whispered. I pulled my hair up into a bun and did as requested. His strong palms rubbed over every inch of my back before trailing his fingers around to the front to unbutton and unzip my shorts. Goosebumps pebbled my flesh as he tugged them down my legs in a slow, measured move. *Shit. Who knew applying sunscreen could be so seductive?*

Heat spread upward from his touch as he started with the tops of my feet and worked his way up my calves and thighs. I was a quivering mess by the time he turned me around to apply the ointment to my lower abdomen. His gaze darkened with each stroke and burned when he started on my chest. The red fabric cut diagonally across my breast, leaving ample cleavage on display. He licked his lips and took his time before moving onto my collarbone.

“Close your eyes.” His voice was husky. I complied and felt the cool touch of cream against my cheek as he finished the task. When he was done, I no longer had any interest in the beach or the alluring waves. A hotel room with a massive bed suited my mood.

“My turn.” He shed the beach shirt, letting it fall to the sand next to my shorts, and then handed me the sunscreen.

“Right.” An excuse to caress him without strings attached? I could do that.

My palms ran over his defined pecs to the happy trail dusting his lower abdomen. *Hard, hot male.* My thighs clenched. *Keep it together, Sarah.* I focused on the job of moisturizing his skin and tried not to think too hard about where my fingers landed. When I kneeled to massage the

lotion into his ankles and calves, I made the mistake of meeting his aroused gaze. The intimacy of being on my knees almost undid me. My throat went dry. His chocolate irises swirled with an unveiled lust that went straight to my slick core. My resolve threatened to crumble under his intensity.

Why did I think keeping him at arm's length would work? It didn't make me feel better when I saw him with other women. If anything, it made it worse. And the feigned intimacy on set was driving me mad. I knew what a real kiss from him felt like, but his kisses of late were robotic and controlled. I was tired of the half-assed experience, but it was a necessary evil.

The cameras surrounding us weren't enough to cool my spiraling libido. I knew they were there, watching our seduction unfold, and I didn't care. All that mattered was the look in Evan's eyes as I stood up. He wrapped a hand around my neck and pulled me in for a kiss.

There was nothing stale about the way his tongue entered my mouth. It was all fervor and unveiled need, and it left me quivering against him. If he kissed me like this throughout our date, I was going to be in trouble. When he pulled back, it was without an ounce of apology in those eyes. He knew I wanted him to keep the passion in check, and that look told me he was done playing nice. *I'm so screwed.*

My throat went dry. "I still need to do your back."

He let me go and turned around. I rubbed down his muscular torso and fought the urge to slide my fingers beneath the black swim trunks to fondle his ass. His gorgeous face was last. I traced his defined cheekbones, strong jaw, and straight nose while admiring his full lips. My body was quaking with need by the time we were done with the erotic dance. I eyed the water with renewed interest and prayed that it was cold.

"Ready for a swim?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Cut," Paul interjected as I took my first step. My hands fisted at my side as I considered punching the jackass in the

face. The short, orange-toned man was not my favorite person. *Too many self-tanners, buddy.* “I want to get some shots of the two of you on the lounge chair.”

“We’re going in the water first,” Evan said, taking my hand in his.

“No—”

“That wasn’t negotiable, Paul.” He tugged me toward the ocean with a fuming director protesting behind us. The crew couldn’t follow us beyond the shoreline without risking their equipment. I suspected that was the point as Evan lured me deeper into the waves. He didn’t stop until we were beyond the point where they broke over the surface. His long legs enabled him to stand while I had to tread water. Not that I minded. The exercise felt great.

“I haven’t done this in years,” I said with a laugh. My last beach vacation was in high school with a group of friends. “I forgot how fun this is.”

“Really?” He hooked an arm around my lower back and pulled me to him. “That’s a sin, you know.”

I grabbed his shoulders and wrapped my legs around his waist. “What is?”

“Not taking this gorgeous body to the beach.” He fingered the strings dangling from my hip. “This swimsuit is killing me.” His lips brushed my ear. “I both hate and love that you’re wearing it.”

“The producers gave it to me.” I liked the way the red popped against my tan skin. The bottom didn’t cover my ass, an aspect the producers no doubt knew when they picked it. When they aired the scene, they would have to add a blur for decorum purposes.

“Well, it’s the first show-related decision I wholeheartedly approve of.”

“Typical man, pleased by a little exposed skin.”

“There’s nothing typical about my response to you, Sarah. And I’m more than pleased—I’m floored.” He fisted his hand

in my hair and angled my head to receive his claim. The contact left me breathless. Our recent embraces were too remote, like he was turning himself off and going through the motions. There was nothing detached about this kiss. It was pure aroused male as his tongue parted my lips and delved deep into my mouth. His other hand palmed my ass, holding me to him.

I melted into his touch, forgetting everything around us. Desire consumed me, flaring outward from my center and making me shiver with want. Two weeks of ignoring temptation was wreaking havoc on my nerves, and his kissing me like this was not helping. *I can't give in ...*

His lips dropped to my neck, tasting every exposed inch. "I've missed you," he whispered against my collarbone. "Even though I've seen you every day, I've still missed you."

My hands were in his hair, tightening as he explored lower, licking the crease of my breast. His arousal was thick between my thighs, making me ache for him. *Fuck. Maybe I could have a little fun.* I rotated my hips against him and luxuriated in his heat hitting me where I needed it. When I did it again, his hand tensed, holding me still.

His chuckle was hot against my throat. "Only kissing for the camera. Isn't that what you told me?"

He wasn't playing fair. "You're driving me crazy."

"Likewise, sweetheart." His hardness brushed my sensitive center. "I've resisted you for over two weeks, Sarah. And it's killed a part of me to do it. Seeing you in this flimsy excuse of a swimsuit isn't helping."

I clawed his shoulders. "You chose the beach."

"The show did, but I regret nothing." He reclaimed my mouth in a kiss that devoured my soul. "Do you think Paul still wants us to romp around on the lounge chair?"

"Probably?"

"That's too bad. I prefer having you away from the cameras." He nipped at my bottom lip. "But I imagine you're getting hungry. Our breakfast on the jet wasn't very filling."

The tiny jet we took on the way here was packed with filming equipment and the crew. With the abundance of people walking around and the optional seating, it reminded me of a bus. “It was hard to eat with all the cameras in my face.”

“I think that’s the theme for today, but the food will be better. The hotel is giving us snacks for lunch, and then we have a big dinner planned at my favorite restaurant. I hope you like fresh seafood.”

I stifled a laugh. Of course he had a favorite restaurant in the Bahamas. Who didn’t? “I like seafood.”

“Good.” He gave me another soul-stealing kiss that I felt all the way down to my toes. My thighs tightened around his waist as my arousal thickened. I was hungry, but not for food. I wanted dessert in the form of a tall, dark-haired male with wicked brown eyes. *Yum.*

He smiled against my lips. “Sarah?”

“Yes.” My voice was husky.

“Remember what I said about keeping my hands to myself off camera?”

I clung to his shoulders and nodded. “I do.”

He pressed his mouth to my ear. “Let me know when you’re ready to renegotiate that clause, because I’m done holding back, sweetheart.”

CHOCOLATE FOREPLAY

“When I asked you about living in Chicago, you mentioned missing seeing the stars at night. So I thought you might like an evening under them,” Evan said as we walked barefoot along the beach after dinner.

“I can’t believe you remember that.” I mentioned it during the group date we went on last week. The moment was spoiled by Amber interrupting us and stealing Evan away for some alone time.

“I remember everything you say to me.” He kissed my cheek. We were both in our evening attire, him in black slacks and a button-down, me in a blue cocktail dress. Our shoes were near the beach entrance. “What do you think?” He gestured to a blanket sprawled out over the sand. A fruit plate and wine were sitting on a tray off to the side.

“It’s beautiful.” I couldn’t see the stars well, thanks to the blinding camera lights around us, but the evening air and roll of the ocean were calming. And from what I could make out above, the sky was gorgeous and clear.

I sat next to Evan on the blanket and picked up a strawberry. He caught my wrist and led my fingers to his mouth. The berry disappeared between his lips, making me lick mine.

“Gorgeous,” he murmured. I wasn’t sure if he was referring to the fruit or my mouth. He picked a strawberry from the tray and held it up for me to taste. I nipped his finger, making him chuckle, and then enjoyed the succulent sweet. I

approved. We fed each other another berry in companionable silence. So many unspoken words passed between us. Promises, desires, emotions. *You're falling for him*, my subconscious whispered.

I broke the intimacy by falling backward onto the blanket. He set the tray aside and joined me. The cameras flicked to night mode, allowing us a better view of the sky, but the audience ruined the romantic atmosphere.

“Tell me more about where you’re from, Sarah.”

“In Indiana?” I glanced sideways. “It’s not very exciting. Just a little town outside of Indianapolis with a population of fifteen thousand. Very flat. Some windmills. That about sums it up.”

“Your mom still lives there?”

“Yep, and so does Abby when she’s not traveling aimlessly.” I watched a wave roll up onto the shore. “They hate that I live in Chicago, but I love the city life. I can walk everywhere, so I don’t need a car, and there’s always something to do.”

“Would you ever consider New Orleans?”

The question caught me off guard. Was this for the show or for him? *Does it matter?* There was an unspoken pact between us to be honest. It was our foundation. I wouldn’t risk destroying it for a dating game.

“I would consider it for the right opportunity.” I loved Chicago. Moving was never a consideration, but the idea of resettling in New Orleans didn’t repulse me. Being close to him was a benefit rather than a deterrent, a realization that unnerved me. Relocating for a man was outside my comfort zone, especially one I met a month ago.

His gaze was intense. “Do you mean that?” The way he studied me was telling. These questions were for him, not for the show. He wanted to know if I would ever consider living in New Orleans. *For him? For work?*

“I mean what I say, Evan,” I said, repeating his promise from a few weeks ago. It was my way of letting him know that

I wasn't answering for the show, but for him. The answering smile in his eyes told me he understood.

"Hmm, I guess I'll have to come up with a good incentive." He rolled on top of me, his forearms rested on the ground beside my head. One strong thigh went between mine, causing my dress to bunch up high on my legs. "How am I doing so far?"

"It's a decent incentive."

"Decent?" His chuckle vibrated my stiff nipples and tingled my nerve endings. He brushed his lips against mine. "And now?"

"Getting warmer."

"Yeah?" He nibbled my bottom lip and sucked it hard into his mouth. Fiery lust stirred in my veins and settled in my lower abdomen. "Warmer or cooler?"

Hotter. I wrapped a hand around his neck and kissed him. It started as a way to give him a dose of his own medicine but blossomed into a passion I couldn't control. I wanted him. It would hurt later, but I didn't care. I craved him with a foreign lethality that threatened to break me if I didn't act on it. I was done saying no.

"Mmm, finally." He kissed me back with a vengeance, showing me with his mouth what he wanted. I shuddered under the intensity, loving the way it warmed me inside and out. There was a promise in those lips, one I returned in kind. No more chaste good-night kisses. He would be sharing my bed tonight, and I would welcome him with open arms.

His hands remained on the ground beside my head as he gentled the kiss and lifted his head. "I approve of this incentive."

I blinked. *Incentive?* "For?" *Sex?* Yes, please.

Those alluring eyes swirled with wicked intent. "New Orleans."

To move. Right. "I don't know, Mister Mershano. I think I'd need a bit more before I could decide."

He grinned. “I might take you up on that later.” “I hope you do.”

We were interrupted by waiters carrying some sort of pot. They set it down beside the fruit, and my nose was hit with a delicious scent.

“Is that fondue?” My favorite dessert. Another thing I mentioned in passing during filming last week.

“Yes. Dark chocolate with Irish cream, to be precise. To go with the plate of strawberries and bananas.” Because I told him those were the only worthy complements to melted chocolate amazingness. He rolled off of me and pulled me up to sit beside him.

“I think I might love you, Evan Mershano.” It was said in jest, but my heart skipped a beat at the veracity of my words. *No. Not happening. I like him. Nothing more.*

His chuckle was affectionate as he dipped a strawberry in the chocolate and brought it to my mouth. “Open.”

I welcomed the distraction and did as requested. Sweet deliciousness hit my tongue, making me moan. *Now, this is my kind of foreplay.* I dipped a banana in the chocolate and painted his lower lip before licking it off. His gaze darkened as I slid the fruit over his tongue. Not wanting our audience to hear me, I leaned in to nip his ear. “This would be a lot more fun if we were naked and alone.”

His hand went to my hip, holding me against him. “I would keep this dress on you just to drizzle chocolate between your breasts and lick it off.”

My nipples stiffened. The blue silk had a deep V-neckline, making that prospect sexy as sin. “Well played, Mister Mershano.”

“Oh, I haven’t even started yet, sweetheart.” His tongue trailed a long, sensuous path down my neck and back to my ear. “You told me fruit was your preferred chocolate complement. I’m thinking your skin, specifically your pretty pink nipples and swollen clit, would be mine.”

I swallowed thickly. “When can we leave?” Because I was craving a whole different dessert now.

He nuzzled my neck. “What about stargazing?” “Overrated.”

His laugh was low and hot against my collarbone. “You know what they say about delayed gratification.”

“That it’s also overrated?” I guessed.

He kissed me and grinned against my lips. “It’s all the sweeter.” He taunted me with another strawberry. I ate it because saying no to such an offer was wrong. I returned the favor by drizzling chocolate on his chin and licking it up. Dessert blossomed into an erotic affair involving stolen kisses, chocolate-coated tongues, and sensual deliciousness.

We polished off the plate and were both panting for each other by the end. Instead of finding a room where we could be alone, Evan pulled me into his arms and insisted on stargazing. I distracted my hormones by discussing the stars.

“Did you take an astronomy class in school?” he asked.

“No, my dad used to take Abby and me outside when it was clear, point out a few constellations, and read us the stories before bed.” Thinking of my dad made me wistful. I missed him every day, but clear nights like this always reminded me of him even more. “He loved all things science and math. That’s where I get my business skills from. My mom was the artist.”

“Hence the artistic eye for photography,” he murmured. I had told him about my undergraduate studies and my obsession with lighting during our private conversations. It was a slip I doubted Paul would notice.

“Yep, but Abby got all the artistic talent. She’s an amazing painter.” Thinking of her made me grin. Rachel called two nights ago to let me know my sister was back from her European cruise and looking for me. Rachel refused to tell her anything. It was her idea of revenge. I approved. Of course, my plan with the sexy fed would be the ultimate payback.

“I don’t know about her getting all the talent, Sarah. I think you have your fair share of it, but I understand. Mia would say I got all the business talents from my father, while she got our mother’s discipline. I think it’s a bit of both in the end.”

He didn’t mention his sister often, but I sensed his pride when he mentioned her name. “Do you miss her?”

“Every day.” He kissed my forehead and snuggled me closer. “Tell me more about the stars, Sarah.”

I did, pointing out a few of my dad’s favorite constellations that could be seen this time of year.

“What’s your favorite?” He was rubbing my arms, keeping me warm.

“Pleiades, commonly called the Seven Sisters. It’s a star cluster in the Taurus.”

“Any particular reason?”

“I like the Greek mythology about the heavenly sisters and their supposed affairs with the Olympian gods. Very scandalous.”

His chuckle vibrated my back. “And how old were you when your father told you these stories?”

“Oh, maybe ten or eleven?”

“That explains so much.”

I cocked an eyebrow at him. “That better not be an insult to my dad.”

“I would never insult you or your father.” He nuzzled my cheek before placing a kiss on my lips. “I’m sorry I can’t meet him.” Another thing I had mentioned in private, my father’s death. I doubted anyone would notice the slip, but we needed to be careful, or the producers might get suspicious.

“Me too. I think he would have liked you, and he would have definitely approved of this date.” Maybe not the chocolate part or the sexual innuendos, though. *Sorry, Dad.*

“And your mom? What will she think?”

I snorted. “Not even a question. You’re a gorgeous man who can dance. It’s a done deal.” My mom and I shared the same weakness for dark male features. Estrella Summers would fall in love with Evan the second she laid eyes on him.

“I look forward to meeting her.”

“Cut.” I jumped at the abrasive word, not expecting the intrusion. It came from Paul. “All right, that’s a wrap, and the jet’s waiting.” The wannabe teenager strolled over to stand at our feet. “I’m glad to see you finally touched one of your dates, Evan. We’re going to need more of that with the other girls, especially Amber.”

“Wow.” *Because that’s what a woman wants to hear at the end of her date.* I sat up and brushed off my dress, making to stand, but Evan’s hand on my hip kept me beside him.

“They’re not props; they’re people, Paul. And I will touch the ones I want to touch, but only with their permission. Now apologize to Sarah for spoiling what was otherwise a good evening until you opened your fucking mouth.”

“Excuse me?” Paul’s bleached blond eyebrows touched his spiky hairline.

“You heard me. Apologize. Now.”

“For what?” He sounded genuinely perplexed.

“The fact that you even have to ask that tells me all I need to know about you and this damn show.” Evan muttered an epithet under his breath and stood up. He extended a hand to help me up and fixed my dress before tending to his button-down shirt. “I’m sorry,” he said to me.

“Don’t apologize for him.” He wasn’t worth the time or wasted effort.

“That’s not why I’m apologizing.” He kissed my temple. “I meant—”

“Hey.” Paul snapped his fingers to get our attention. “Love the flirting, but we need to go if we’re going to keep on schedule, and that requires getting to the new hotel by

midnight.” Paul made a shooing motion before shouting commands for his minions to hustle.

I frowned after the spiky-haired idiot. “New hotel?”

“Uh, yeah.” Evan cleared his throat, his expression uneasy. “We’re spending the next two weeks in Jamaica. Surprise?”

UNGENTLEMANLY CONDUCT

My new room had a private balcony with a view of the ocean. The moonlight dancing over the waves made for a romantic sight that paled in comparison to the look Evan gave me in the lobby. It was filled with promise and made me wet with anticipation.

I didn't bother changing. The cocktail dress was sexy and perfect for the humid air outside. I kicked my legs up in the oversized lounge chair and waited. The privacy walls and lack of light gave the nook a secure feel, while the sweet sound of rolling water set the mood. It was the perfect place to seduce a prince.

I left the screen open behind me to make it easy for him to find me. He had a habit of knocking once before using a skeleton key at the last hotel, and I expected a similar entrance. He didn't disappoint. I heard the light rap followed by the snick of the latch. He joined me on the balcony a minute later in jeans and a white T-shirt. In his hands was a bottle of wine.

"I may have stolen this from the kitchen," he greeted.

"Is it stealing when you own the property?" We were staying at another Mershano Suites property. This one had a resort feel that catered to the Caribbean vibe. I approved.

"Probably not." He set the bottle on the table beside me. "Also, I brought you a new phone with international calling. It's on the coffee table in a box."

Smart, wonderful man. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome.”

I checked out his ass as he walked into the room to snag two glasses. They were tumblers because the room wasn’t equipped with a kitchen. The king bed and oversized marble bathroom were nice. I hoped to use both tonight, with Evan.

He poured two healthy glasses and took over the other lounge chair. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.” I clinked my drink against his and took a sip. It was a dry white with citrusy notes. “Not bad.”

He grunted his agreement and ran his fingers through his brown locks. “Sorry I took so long. I almost ran into Paul and Amber in the stairwell on my way back up. I had to wait for them to go back to her room.”

I choked on my wine. “What?” *Paul and Amber? Gross.*

Evan rested his head against the back of the chair and blew out a breath. “They could be fucking, or more likely, Paul is on my mother’s payroll. That would explain why he’s pushing all these damn scenes with Amber. He’ll probably receive some monetary gift at the end if the show pans out as expected.”

“How are you not pissed?” He sounded so nonchalant about the whole thing. If it were me, heads would roll.

“My parents are always meddling in my affairs. Rather than fight them on it, I’ve learned to beat them at their own game.”

“Hence your deal with me.”

“Sure. Of course, our arrangement has certain benefits.” His lips twitched. “Such as your lovely company and the low neckline of your dress.”

“Flatterer.” It came out thicker than I wanted, a side effect of his eyes dropping to my breasts.

He sipped his wine with a casual ease I didn’t feel, and sighed. “In all seriousness, this is a round they won’t win, so I’m not worried.”

“What if they come up with another plan after I reject your proposal?”

“Oh, I’m sure they will, but the amendment to my birthright, which they signed, makes whatever scheme they come up with null and void.” His smile was all triumph. “Garrett’s good at what he does.”

“That’s what Rachel tells me. Apparently he’s the ‘devil.’” I used finger quotes around the nickname.

Amusement teased his expression. “An apt description. Garrett’s into some kinky shit. But that’s not how he got the pseudonym.”

That piqued my interest. “Meaning?”

“Another time.” He shook his head and finished his wine. “I’m more interested in discussing you.” His pupils flared as he zeroed in on my lips. He set aside his glass. “Paul made me describe you in the lobby for the camera as part of the post-date interview. He had cue cards, but I refused to read them.”

“Bet he didn’t like that.” Whenever I tried to go off script, they made me start over.

“Not at first, but he approved in the end.” His grin was sinful. “Want to hear my description of you, Sarah?”

My nipples hardened under his gaze. “Does it involve my rack?”

“It does indeed.”

I set my glass on the table and moved to straddle his lap on the lounge chair. The strong wood base and plush top were made for lovers. My knees were cushioned on either side of his strong thighs. I didn’t want there to be any confusion about where tonight was headed. From the dilation of his pupils, the message was received.

“Well?” I placed my hands on his chest as he grabbed my hips. “How did you describe me, Mister Mershano?”

His dimples made me swoon. *So fucking hot.*

“Mmm, I told them you’re a gorgeous woman with a drive that rivals my own, enough intellect and sarcastic humor to keep me entertained for a lifetime, and a body that drives me wild.” He pulled my hair away from my face and let it fall down my back. “Physically, I described you as a temptress with fantastic tits, athletic legs that tangle well with mine, a firm ass, and a smile that tempts me even on my worst days.”

“Tits is not my favorite word.” But the rest of his description left me feeling gooey inside, especially the part about my intellect and humor. That usually turned men off, not on.

“Fantastic breasts, then.” He corrected. “With rosy nipples that melt in my mouth.”

I shivered. “Melt?”

“Yes.” He demonstrated through my dress, taking one nipple into his mouth and sucking hard. I arched into him, my fingers lacing through his thick hair. I wasn’t sure about my breasts, but my core was melting. That one touch soaked my panties right through.

“They look rigid to me,” I told him when he latched on to the other breast. My dress was wet around the stiff peak. His hand went to my ass, gripping firmly as he sucked harder. “*Jesus.*”

He bit my nipple, making me cry out. “Rigid maybe, but still melting, sweetheart.” He pulled my dress over my head and threw it, along with my strapless bra, on the ground. “And gorgeous.”

His lips against my bare skin nearly toppled me to the floor. He was right. There was something to be said about delayed gratification. My skin was so sensitive from denying my desires over the last few weeks. I ached for him in places I didn’t know I could ache. The apex between my thighs throbbed, and my breasts felt heavy in his hands. He lapped at my nipples, shooting pleasure to every nerve ending.

I hooked my thumbs in the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head. He grinned up at me with those chocolate eyes

before returning to my breasts, licking and nipping wherever he pleased. I ran my nails down his hard pecs to his rippled abs and followed the light dusting of hair to his belt buckle. “You brought a condom this time, right?”

“No.” He suckled my breast, making me groan in pleasure and frustration, before clarifying. “I brought condoms—as in, plural.”

“I was about to send you back to your room.”

“Not a chance in hell.” He trailed kisses along my collarbone to my neck and up to my mouth. His tongue delved deep, exploring, and possessed me down to my toes. Each thrust was filled with an intent that left me breathless in his arms.

“Foreplay is a fantastic pastime, but all these weeks of wanting you has driven me mad.” It was a growl against my lips. “I might be less than eloquent here, sweetheart.” His words were punctuated by a rip of lace, leaving me naked and exposed above him. I arched into his palm as it met my hot center. There were benefits to straddling a man in a chair, and easy access to my sweet spot was one of them.

“You’re doing just fine,” I breathed, more than ready to escalate things between us. He plunged two fingers into me at once, eliciting a gasp from my throat. “Just fine,” I repeated as he sucked a nipple hard into his mouth.

A fire burned deep within my lower abdomen. It ignited with our foreplay on the beach and burned throughout our date, waiting for this moment. A few passionate thrusts stroked the flames to a blaze that heated my veins. I loosened his belt and unbuttoned his pants. Lifting up onto my knees put my breasts level with his lips. He took full advantage, sucking a nipple into his mouth as I unzipped and pushed his pants down enough to free his member. He was without his boxer briefs tonight, no doubt knowing they wouldn’t be needed for long.

“Condom?” I prompted on a pant as he worked me over with his hand and mouth. The hand cupping my ass went to the pocket of his jeans to pull out a wrapper. I took it from him

and nearly fell when he switched breasts, dragging his teeth along the way. I gripped the back of the chair as he drove deep into me with those two clever fingers and twirled my tender nipple with his tongue. *Fuck*. His mouth was lethal.

I caressed his cock with my free hand, while the other held the condom and helped me balance over his lap. His head fell back on a moan as I tightened my grip around his shaft and stroked him hard. *Turnabout is fair play*. I did it once more just to hear that sound again and ran my thumb over the head. It was drenched in pre-come, something that made me want to get on my knees and worship him with my mouth. I calmed my urge by licking the pad of my thumb. He looked up at me from under his lashes as I shuddered from his addictive taste. *Smoky, salty, and all Evan*.

I released my death grip on the chair, ripped open the foil packet, and rolled it over his impressive member. It pulsed in my hand. I couldn't wrap my fingers around his girth, but somehow he was going to fit inside of me. *We'll make this work*.

He pumped his fingers deep, leaving me panting against him, before removing his hand from between my legs. I felt bereft without him there, throbbing painfully with a need only he could satisfy. He wrapped a hand around my neck, pulling me down for a kiss that left no question as to what he wanted next. I wrapped my hand around his shaft and guided him to my entrance.

"Slower," he whispered when I flinched. Six months without sex left my lower half unaccustomed to a man of his girth. He more than filled me, stretching me to the point of discomfort. I paused, waiting for my body to adjust. He reached between us, pressing his thumb to my clit and massaging it in sensual circles that instantly rekindled the flame in my lower abdomen. I started to move, working him deeper.

He moved forward so I could wrap my legs around him and take him all the way to the hilt. I buried my head in his neck as I acclimated. His cock was hot inside me and bigger

than I anticipated, and I loved every thick inch of him. I lifted a little and pushed him back in, deep and hard.

His body jolted beneath mine, a growl on his lips. “We’ll go at your pace this round, but I call next.”

“Is that how we’re going to play?” I nipped his ear. “What if I want to call all the rounds?”

“Not how this is going to work, sweetheart.” His abs tightened as he pulled back and thrust up hard into me. His thumb was still on my pleasure point, applying varying degrees of pressure. “We can go as gentle as you want, but then I’m taking you fast and hard.”

I liked the sound of that. “Okay.”

Using my legs around his waist, I found a rhythm that heightened the sensations building deep inside. He met my pace, thrusting into me and using his thumb to keep me on the edge of orgasm while he caught up. I grabbed his shoulders, intensifying the tempo as the fire burned hotter within me. His muscles were hard against mine, stroking my senses and spiraling me deeper into the well of desire.

“Come for me, sweetheart.” He applied just the right amount of pressure with his thumb as he thrust deep into me. I exploded around him, warmth flooding my veins as my body shook from the force of it. His name came out on a scream torn from my throat. He buried his head against my shoulder and followed me into heaven with a deep groan. His orgasm was long, hard, and hot inside me.

We came at the same time. That was new. From the way he clung to me, I wondered if it was new for him, too.

I shuddered around him, shocked by the force of our shared pleasure. *I’m so screwed.* He kissed my neck, moving slowly up my throat to my lips. “Shower or bed, Sarah?”

“I’m not tired.”

His chuckle was hot against my lips. “I wasn’t talking about sleeping, sweetheart.” His cock, still hard, moved inside of me.

“Oh.” Stamina was another one of those myths similar to the one about women having multiple orgasms. Evan proved the latter to be fact. I looked forward to a lesson on the other. *Shower or bed?* “Gentleman’s choice.”

“Hmm, only one problem with that.”

“What?”

“I don’t plan to be a gentleman.” He stood with my legs still wrapped around his waist and kicked off his jeans. His tongue parted my lips, tangling with mine in a seductive dance that had my body clenching around his until my back hit the mattress. He pulled out of me slowly, dealing with the condom one-handed while kissing me soundly. His mouth left mine to start a path down to the juncture between my thighs.

He wasted no time reacquainting himself with my most sensitive spot. His hand came down my stomach, holding my hips to the bed when I would have bucked against him, and he sucked my vulnerable flesh hard into his mouth. Pleasure erupted through my body, mixing with pain as my body rushed to recover from the last orgasm. I cried out in confused bliss as he penetrated me with his tongue. My hands were in his hair, holding him to me and trying to pull him away at the same time. The assault was too much but felt amazing at the same time.

I shook my head in wonder. “What are you doing to me?”

“Properly fucking you.” A gush of wet heat flooded my thighs at the hot words spoken directly against my swollen nub. I squirmed beneath him, needing more and less of what he was doing. His palm against my belly was the only thing keeping me still.

“Shouldn’t your cock be involved in the fucking part?” It came out breathy, almost like a plea. I felt empty without him, something that should have bothered me but didn’t. I wanted him too much to look into emotions right now.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart.” Another deep lick. “My cock will be plenty involved.” His words vibrated my damp center, making me moan.

Another orgasm was coming. I could feel it building in my belly, the embers burning hot and wild, awaiting release. Desire thickened my blood, sending my heart into overdrive. It pulsed all the way down to my clit, which had to be throbbing against his tongue. He pressed a kiss to my inner thigh and went to his knees to open another foil packet. He must have snagged the condoms from his jeans before dropping his pants to the floor. *Talented man.*

He rolled the condom on slowly, stroking his member twice as he stared hotly at my exposed flesh. I widened my legs in an unspoken invitation to enter. I *needed* to feel him inside me again. We had a month left together. Might as well make the most of it.

“You’re stunning, Sarah. Every time I see you, I can’t take my eyes off of you.” He lowered himself over me. “Let me know if this becomes too much.”

“Right now it’s not enough.”

His cock nudged my entrance. “I do love your mouth, Sarah.” He plunged into me, the sudden fullness forcing the air from my lungs. “And I love that sound.”

I clung to his shoulders as he thrust hard and fast, just as he said he would. I couldn’t meet his pace. It overwhelmed my senses and coiled pleasure low in my abdomen. I wrapped my legs around his waist, granting him deeper access. He hit tender points I didn’t know existed, heightening the euphoria growing inside of me and taking me to new levels. I came undone at the seams, holding him tightly as he pushed me over the precipice into ecstasy. I cried out over and over until his lips covered mine.

I was still shaking with aftershocks when his orgasm hit. My name fell from his tongue like an invocation as he shuddered from the impact. He kissed me long and hard, stealing the breath from my lungs. We were both panting when he released me, his lips trailing kisses along my jaw.

“Wow.” Someone had to say it. As it was the foremost thought in my head, I thought it should be me.

“Mmm.” He nuzzled my throat. “I’m not done with you yet, but I need at least thirty minutes to recover and some water.”

“There’s water in the shower.” Not that I was anywhere near ready for his brand of ungentlemanly behavior again yet.

“Yes, plenty of water in the shower.” He pulled out slowly, making me flinch. *Walking is going to suck tomorrow.* He ran his hands down to my hips and caressed my thighs. “Hot water is also good for sore muscles.”

“Yeah, about that ... I might need slow and steady for our next pace.”

He grinned. “I can do that.”

NO TERMS, NO PROMISES

Hot lips against my neck stirred me from a dream that melted into reality as Evan's insistent erection pressed into my backside. I moaned against him and allowed him to roll me onto my back. His leg slid between mine, hot against my bare skin, as his groin met my hip.

Well, good morning to you, too. My tongue danced lazily with his as my hands explored his muscular back. His body was one I could explore for months on end and never grow bored. My deep-seated attraction concerned and thrilled me. He gave me pleasure I never knew existed and opened my eyes to a whole new world of emotion.

Sex with Evan was better than I anticipated. He didn't demand control, didn't finish before I could get halfway there, and he didn't ignore my body's cues. His attentive strokes and knowing licks were those of a lover who knew his partner. He treated me as an equal in bed and wasn't satisfied unless we were both pleased. I loved it and hated it. How could any other man compete with that?

He eased up onto his elbows, his eyes intent on mine as we both caught our breath. The man knew how to deliver a good-morning kiss; that was for damn sure. "Mmm, I wish we could do this all day."

"We could," I murmured. "Let the show catch us and cause a big scandal and then send everyone home. Paul would love it." I was only half joking.

His lips brushed my ear. “Only one problem with that, sweetheart.”

“Yeah?” I swallowed as he placed an open-mouthed kiss against my neck. “And what’s that?”

“I care too much about you to risk your integrity like that.” He nibbled my earlobe, making me shiver. “I could never hurt you in that way, Sarah.”

“I don’t know how to interpret that.” Things between us were too complicated for a label. There was no term for a man dating and kissing other women as a charade while secretly fucking one of them behind closed doors. He wasn’t cheating because we weren’t dating, but last night took our relationship to a new level with unknown consequences and feelings.

“The show complicates things.” His lips were on my throat, kissing a path to my collarbone. “I’m not one for relationships, but I’m tempted with you. I like you more than I should.” He moved lower, taking the sheet with him to reveal my breasts. “I’m nowhere near done seeing where this goes. No terms. No promises. Can you handle that, Sarah?”

“How far does it go on camera?” I hadn’t seen him do anything beyond kissing, but I usually looked away before it could go any further. “With the other girls, I mean.”

He pulled my nipple into his mouth, tugging almost painfully. I shivered beneath him, my fingers winding in his hair on instinct. We were talking about him making out with other women, and I was still melting for him. *Seriously fucked up.*

“Kissing with light petting is as far as I’ve let it go, but the only one I want to kiss is you, Sarah. There’s a difference between the two.”

Maybe, but his kissing other women made me ill regardless of his intent or desire to do so. “Will the show demand more over the next few weeks?”

“Yes, but I reserve the right to refuse.” He rested his chin between my breasts and stared up at me. “Do you want me to refuse them, Sarah? To be exclusive to you?”

“That would qualify as a term, and your fulfilling it would be a promise.”

“True, but can you admit that you want me to be exclusive?”

“I shouldn’t have to, Evan. You already know I do.”

His dimples made a brief appearance. “You’ve never acknowledged it out loud.”

“Because it’s futile when you’re dating all these other women. To request it is unfair, even if it’s what I want.”

He studied me, those dark eyes intelligent and perceptive. “I have no desire to bed anyone from the show other than you. There will be a time when Paul will want me to at the very least pretend to take one or two of you to bed, and I will do it only to appease him and make this look real, but you have my word that you will be the only woman I truly take to bed. I might kiss them and fondle them as directed, but it holds no enticement over me. Not compared to you.”

“That sounded suspiciously like a promise, Evan.”

“Yes, but carefully worded as truth instead.” His grin was short-lived. “I know this is complicated, and all I can give you are my words, Sarah. You know where I stand on marriage and why, so I can’t promise you forever, but I can give you all of me now for as long as you’ll have me.”

“How did this become such a serious conversation?” We were doing so well last night, enjoying the moment and forgetting all about the show and our inevitable end. “I want to hide under the bed.”

He bit my nipple, making me yelp. “I want an answer, Miss Summers.”

“You didn’t ask me a question, Mister Mershano.”

“It was implied.” Another nibble followed by an open-mouthed kiss on my breast that made my toes curl. “Can you handle this or not?”

“I wouldn’t have slept with you last night if I couldn’t handle it.” His talented tongue was making me breathy.

“Still not a definitive answer.” He peppered kisses up my neck and settled his lower half between my legs. I was caged in by his biceps, his forearms resting on either side of my head. “Can we continue down this path, or do you need me to pull back? Tell me, Sarah.”

“For someone who isn’t into relationships, you sure ask a lot of questions.”

“And for someone who craves fidelity, you sure do know how to dance around the answers.” He tugged my lower lip between his teeth and let it snap back. “Communication is the key to all relationships, whether they be business, personal, or otherwise. It’s the foundation of trust, Miss Summers, and I require that and honesty between us. Talk to me.”

“I prefer us not talking.” That was an honest answer that earned me an arched eyebrow in response. “Fine. I want to continue exploring things between us, and I’m not crazy about the potential for you to sleep with the other women on the show. Is that what you want me to admit? Statements that should be common sense?”

“Yes, because although obvious to you, they are not entirely clear to me. Whether you realize it or not, you hide your emotions quite well behind that wall of sarcasm.”

“It’s the only way I can protect myself.”

“Because you assume I’ll hurt you?”

“There’s no assumption about it.” It was fact. Seeing him with Amber and the others made me sick. Charade or not, seeing the man I was falling for flirt openly with women and kiss them didn’t yield happy results.

“How would you feel if you were in my shoes, Evan? Watching me kiss a dozen other men? Would you believe me when I told you I didn’t feel a thing for any of them, including the guy I felt up in front of you in a hot tub?” My voice was quiet, nearing a whisper. Asking him this granted him deeper access to my thoughts and feelings than I wanted to allow, but his gaze was already penetrating my outer layer. He was right

about honesty being the foundation between us. I could tell him this, giving him a dose of the reality I faced.

“I turn off my emotions when the cameras are on except for when I’m with you. You’re the only one who cracks my armor.”

“That doesn’t answer my questions, though, does it? How would you feel, Evan? Consider what you just told me, and pretend I said those words to you.” I palmed his cheek. “You wanted to know how I feel; well, consider the reverse. I can handle this, knowing it won’t go anywhere in the long term. I can enjoy the moment, but don’t question my shields. They’re up for a reason.”

He brushed his knuckles over my temple and along my jaw, tracking the movement with his gaze. “I’m not a jealous man, but the idea of you kissing someone else makes me want to break something.” The growl in his voice was almost as sexy as his words. “You kissing men in front of me would be even worse. I don’t think I could be as strong as you and agree to this arrangement.”

“Then you realize what you’re asking of me.”

“I do.” He pressed his lips to mine, softly and tenderly. “Am I an asshole for being happy about you agreeing despite everything?”

“Only a little.” I pulled him down for another kiss, lingering in the moment. He was naked and hot, and pure deliciousness against my mouth. “I can think of a few ways to make it up to me.”

“Yeah?” His irises were molten chocolate. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I’m really sore for some reason. A massage and a hot shower sound amazing right now. Bonus points if we can combine the activities.”

“Hmm, a negotiation. Okay, then.” He traced my jaw with his finger, considering. “What type of massage are you requesting? Of the oral variety or hands only?” His serious tone coupled with his words had heat rushing to my core. I

loved when he went into businessman mode, especially when discussing sex.

“That’s a tough choice, Mister Mershano.” I licked my lips. “I think both.”

“And in exchange?”

“Well, my knees feel fine.” I wrapped my legs around his waist. “And my mouth isn’t sore at all.”

He grinned against my lips. “I do love the way you negotiate, Miss Summers.”

“So we have a deal, then?”

“Absolutely.”

EVIL TWIN SISTERS AND DISAPPROVING MOTHERS

After two weeks in Jamaica, we were down to three girls and switching locations again. Evan warned me about the next phase this time, giving me a chance to hide my phone before my bags were packed by the show's staff. The three of us were headed home to introduce the prince to our families. For me, that meant a trip to Indiana.

My mom met Brenda, the makeup artist, and me at the airport with a hug and several kisses, praising me in a mixture of Spanish and English. "It's about time you came home to see your *mamá*, Sarah."

"I was just home for Christmas, *Mamá*."

"Pssh, that was months ago." My mom was a gorgeous woman, measuring five foot two with all-natural curves. With her tan skin, long dark hair, and brown eyes, she resembled an older sister more than my mother. She was nearing fifty but didn't look a day over forty. "And who is this?"

"Brenda Kroger, meet Estrella Summers. Mom, this is Brenda, my babysitter. The show sent her along to watch me and make sure I don't contact the media."

"Actually, I volunteered for the part." Brenda smiled. "They asked who wanted to go to Indiana and I said, 'Why not?'"

"I hope you like corn," I muttered. Because Indiana was full of it.

My mom's foot tapped in irritation. Not a good sign. "You have a lot of explaining to do, Sarah. In the car."

"Uh, actually we need to get the rental ..." Brenda trailed off at my mother's raised eyebrow. "Right, your car is just fine." She leaned in to whisper, "Your mom is terrifying."

I grinned. "Yeah, she's amazing." We left our bags for the other crew members who followed us to Indiana, and followed my mom to the car. I was staying in a Mershano hotel downtown with the RNW staff, but my mother insisted on picking me up at the airport, and Brenda offered to tag along. She was my volunteer shadow.

Evan and his parents would be here in four days. They were headed to Virginia to meet with Tiffany's family first, and then they were going to Charleston for Amber. That gave me plenty of time to bring my mother up to speed.

"Is this Bob's car?" It was not her blue sedan but a sporty, red death trap. The flashy paint was too much for my sister, leaving my mother's boyfriend as the likely candidate for ownership.

"Sí, mine is in the shop again."

I sat in the front bucket seat, while Brenda took over the back. "Maybe it's time you get a new one, Mom."

"You say that every time you visit, *mi tesoro*."

"Sí, *porque es viejo*." The car was twelve years old and falling apart. She needed a new one.

"Hush." She went on a rant in Spanish that had Brenda's eyebrows hitting her brown hairline and me laughing.

"*Te amo, Mamá*."

"Sí, sí." She waved a hand and focused on her steering. Driving through Indianapolis was different than driving around my hometown of Fishers. "Now tell me about this reality show and why there's a cleaning crew in my house. Because you know how I feel about strangers in the home, Sarah. Your papa is not going to approve."

I grinned. She believed my dad's ghost haunted the house I grew up in, which was why she never moved. He was her one true love, and she refused to remarry. Bob and her previous boyfriends were just men she used to keep her company and pass the time until she could be reunited with my dad again.

"You didn't tell your mom about the show?" Brenda sounded incredulous. "Where does everyone think you've been?"

"Working," my mom replied for me. "Apparently, it's not true according to the man who called last night. Start explaining, *niña*."

My shoulders fell. It was going to be a long afternoon. "*Mamá*, I'm on a reality show called *The Prince's Game*. Evan and his family are coming over in a few days to meet you, and it's going to be on television."

"What is the game? What do you win?"

"I really wish Paul was here for this. He would be losing it." Brenda's backseat commentary wasn't helpful.

"I win a husband, I guess." I cringed at how stupid that sounded. "Have you heard of Mershano Suites?"

"*Sí, por supuesto.*" *Yes, of course.*

"Evan is a Mershano. He's sort of the heir to the empire, and he's looking for a wife." Not exactly true, but I couldn't admit that with Brenda in the backseat. "So ..." I cleared my throat, continuing. "I'm one of the, uh, contestants, and I'm sort of in the top three."

"It's a dating show?" She looked ready to crash the car.

"Uh, yeah, where thirty women try to win the prince's heart."

She struggled for a reply, her lips opening and closing at random. "So you went on a reality show without telling me?"

I figured Abby would do that for me since this is all her fault. "It's complicated. I didn't expect them to involve you."

“I expect this from your sister, not you. What about your job?”

“I, uh, sort of had to quit.” This was not going well.

“What?!” She dove into another tirade in Spanish that had me shrinking in my seat. My only saving grace was being the last on Evan’s family tour. That would give me time to turn this around. Telling her Abby set me up wasn’t an option. She hated our prank war. Mentioning Abby’s involvement would only make her angrier.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell your mom,” Brenda whispered after we got out of the car at my childhood home. It was a remodeled four bedroom with more than an enough space to raise two wild twin girls.

My mom went inside after a muttered comment about needing to supervise the cleaners. Family and friends were welcome guests, but strangers were my mom’s kryptonite. She wasn’t shy, but she disliked the unfamiliar.

“I didn’t expect to stay on the show this long,” was my weak explanation. I wasn’t exactly expecting the producers to introduce Evan and his parents to my mom.

I led Brenda into the living area, where she dropped her purse. Bob was sitting in his office, which was adjacent to the living area, and stepped out to say hello. For a man of fifty, he was in good shape, with broad shoulders, a flat stomach, and strong legs. He kept his head shaved to hide his greying hair.

Big blue eyes grinned down at me as he gave me a hug. Of my mother’s recent boyfriends, he was my favorite. I hoped she kept him around longer than the usual two years.

“Hi, kiddo. I hear you’re on some kind of show?”

“Yeah? Did the cleaning crew give that away?” One of them was in the kitchen, which was located beside us, mopping.

“That and your mom ranting about it all night.”

“Uh.” I swallowed, uncomfortable. “Yeah, sorry about all this.”

“It’s certainly interesting.” That was his nice way of saying, *This is ridiculous*. There wasn’t much to say to that, so I introduced Brenda, and they shook hands.

“Well, I have to finish this project I’m working on, but I’ll be out in a bit. Your mom is thinking *El Vaquero* for an early dinner since she’s been instructed not to touch the kitchen until after filming is done.”

“I bet she loved that.”

He grimaced. “I had to restrain her from clocking the guy in the face.”

“Sounds like Mom.” Abby inherited her feisty energy, while I got her strong will.

“Okay, but you had to be excited, right?” Brenda asked, resuming our conversation from the garage. “Wouldn’t you want to tell the world you got on this show?”

I snorted. “Would you?”

“No, but I’m not the type to go on one of these shows.” Realizing what she said, she backpedaled. “Not that there’s anything wrong with it. I mean ...”

“It’s fine. I’m not really the type either.”

“Yeah, so I’ve noticed.” Her gaze narrowed. “You’re not like the others, which has made me wonder more than once why you joined the show.”

The reason walked into the kitchen with a cheeky grin. She pulled a wine cooler from the fridge and offered me one, with a look. I glared at her in response. *Bitch*.

“Have I mentioned I have an identical twin sister?” Brenda laughed until she noticed the other woman. Then her jaw unhinged. “Brenda, this is Abby. Abby, this is Brenda. She’s from *The Prince’s Game*. I’m sure you’ve heard of it?”

Innocence flashed in those identical brown eyes. “*The Prince’s Game*? Huh. Yeah, no, not ringing a bell.”

Being unable to say what I wanted to out loud, I let my gaze do all the talking. *I’m going to murder you*.

“I’ve missed you, too, Sis,” she replied in a bratty tone.

“This is too much.” Brenda’s head was swinging back and forth between us. “Does Paul know you have a twin?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t mentioned it, and I don’t think it came up during my interview.” I raised a brow at Abby.

“Yeah, probably not.” She picked at a piece of invisible lint on her brown sweater. Her jeans were the same brand as mine, but my sweater was beige.

“Mom didn’t tell me you would be here.” The network mentioned Evan meeting my mom and Bob, but nothing about my sister.

“She called me yesterday asking if I knew anything about this show you’re doing. Andy put me on a plane right away.”

“Andy?” I frowned. “Weren’t you just gallivanting around Europe with a guy named Brad?”

“Yeah, we broke up. Andy and I met last week. He’s adorable. You’d like him.”

“Right.” Keeping up with Abby’s romantic life was like watching a serial soap opera. If I missed one episode, I ended up a month behind. “Are you staying for the meet and greet, or are you leaving?”

“Oh, I’m definitely staying.” Her grin was evil. “I can’t wait to meet your *prince*.”

“His name is Evan, and he’s not my prince.”

“Dude, Paul’s going to have a field day with you two.” Brenda was still gaping at us. “Does Evan at least know about her?”

Abby perked up at that, interest darkening her eyes. She was getting ideas about the billionaire. *Fantastic*.

“He knows all about Abby.” I tried to insinuate what I meant by that, but it went over my smiling sister’s head.

“They are cleaning my bedroom, *niña*.” My mom walked in, hands on her round hips. “Do they intend to film up there? Because I see no reason for this. But they won’t stop.”

“Sorry, Mom.” *This is all Abby’s fault.* “They’re obsessed with staging.” Something crashed in the basement, making me cringe. That was the sacred entertainment area with the big television and speakers. My mom went sprinting to the stairs with Bob right behind her.

“Uh, I’ll go do damage control,” Brenda said, leaving Abby and me alone in the living area.

I folded my arms and glowered at my twin. “Feel free to apologize at any time.”

“Oh, screw that. I did you a favor getting you out of that crappy job and making you try something new. Live a little, Sis. It does the body good.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? I had to quit my job because of you. Oh, but wait, that’s right, you have no idea what that means or why it matters. Commitment is just a word you use when you want something from a man, right? You’re too busy *living* to see how your actions impact others. I could lose my apartment, default on my student loans, and get blacklisted from future employers because of my involvement in a stupid dating show, but what’s all that for a little fun, huh?”

“God, you have the biggest stick up your ass, you know that? I thought a little romantic vacay with a hot man would cure you of it, but clearly not.”

“Did you forget about the other twenty-nine women on the show? Not the most romantic vacay, Abigail.”

She snorted. “Like they stand a chance against you. I know what you look like naked, Sis. Men love us.”

“Dear God, listen to yourself. You do realize men have brains outside of their dicks, right? He wants a wife, not just a lover.” A total lie, but I wasn’t going to tell her that.

“And it sounds like you’re one of the top three candidates. Congrats, Sis.”

I shook my head. “You’re impossible.” “And you love me.”

Cocky brat. “Love and hate are closely related.” And right now I was leaning toward hate.

“Hey, if you find true love as a result of this show, you owe me big.”

“Okay, first, true love is not something you find in two months. And second, I’m more likely to have my heart broken here, in which case I owe you nothing.” Why did the thought of Evan being my true love make my heart skip a beat? I rubbed my chest in an attempt to relinquish the ache there. Love was an impossible notion between us. I liked him more than I should, and I enjoyed sharing a bed with him every night for the last two weeks, but it was a passing romance. I wouldn’t even know what love feels like, let alone feel it for him.

Keep telling yourself that, Sarah.

“Oh. My. God.” Abby set down her wine cooler and walked around the counter, gaze intent. “You already love him.”

“I barely know him.” *Liar.* My subconscious needed to take a hike.

“That may be, but I know that look. It’s the same one Mom had when she looked at Dad. You’re in love.”

“I am not.”

“You can’t hide from me, Little Sister. You love him.”

“I’m only the little sister by two minutes, and no, I don’t.” Loving Evan Mershano would leave me broken in the end, and I couldn’t allow that to happen.

“Deny it all you want, but I see right through you. I always have.”

Now I *really* wanted to punch my twin. “First you get me into this mess, and now you claim I’m in love. Why don’t you go home to your *Andy* and leave me the fuck alone.”

“Touchy, touchy.” She picked up her drink and brought it to her lips. “I can’t wait to meet this man, the one who cracked

my sister's infamous armor. He must be fascinating for you to love him."

"I'm seriously—" "Are you two fighting already?" my mom snapped from the basement doors. She started chewing us out in Spanish, calling us immature and frustrating, and giving us a thorough verbal beatdown. "I want hugging in this house and no more bickering!"

"*Lo siento, Mamá.*" Abby sounded so contrite, the kiss-ass.

"I'm sorry, too." But only about the mess I was causing by being here with the show. Brenda came up the stairs with her phone to her ear.

"Crew," she mouthed. From the sound of it, she was arranging a pickup time for after dinner. I wanted so badly to check my phone and see if Evan messaged, but my phone was in my suitcase. I would have to wait until I was alone in the comfort of my hotel room to check in with him. *After dinner.*

A SURPRISE VISITOR

My mom wanted me to sleep in my old room, but the show insisted I stay in the Mershano-owned hotel downtown. Abby signed a bunch of nondisclosure agreements on my behalf before filming started, but those weren't good enough for the network. It was ridiculous. If they planned for the watchdog routine to continue after the show ended, they would be in for a surprise. I refused to be babysat from now until everything aired on television.

Evan never texted me today, something I should have expected. He was busy traveling to Richmond to meet Tiffany's parents. Jealousy soured my stomach. It was irrational. I knew this was part of the game, but my heart didn't understand logic. It would be worse when he went to Charleston for Amber. The fake southern belle pulled out all the stops to get his attention in Jamaica. She monopolized his time in front of the cameras and touched him like he belonged to her, and I hated it.

"Hello, earth to Sarah," Rachel said through the phone. "I asked why you didn't punch Abby today."

I cleared my throat. "It wasn't for a lack of wanting to, but my mom is pissed enough already."

"So tell her Abby set you up. Let that idiot twin of yours fry a bit."

The temptation to do so struck me more than once today. "I couldn't with my babysitter hanging around, and—" I was

cut off by a knock on the door. “Speak of the shadow and she shall appear.”

“Huh?”

“Sorry, someone’s at the door. Probably my makeup artist supervisor.” I crawled out of the massive king bed. “Going to have to call you back.”

“Your life is surreal.”

“Tell me about it.” I hung up the phone and stashed it beneath the mattress.

Wearing black shorts and a tank top, I opened the door and froze. “Uh, hi.”

“Is now a bad time?” Evan’s leather-clad arms were braced over the door, his lips curled into a mischievous grin.

“I thought you were in Virginia.”

“I decided on a detour.”

“Because Indianapolis is on the way to Richmond.”

Not. He shrugged. “It is when you own a private jet.”

“Right. Billionaire. I forgot.”

“Are you going to invite me in?” His intense gaze dropped to my breasts before rising to my lips. “Or should I make other arrangements for the night?”

“No skeleton key?”

“Going for incognito tonight.”

“Right.” I cleared my throat and stepped aside.

He kissed me on the cheek as he entered. “Sorry, I should have called you first and asked if this was okay.”

“I would have said yes, but the surprise is nice.” I grabbed the phone and texted Rachel a quick explanation for not calling her back and collapsed onto the bed.

Evan kicked off his shoes and draped his jacket over the chair. His soft white sweater clung to his biceps and broad shoulders. It made me want to pet him as he stretched out

beside me and hooked an arm beneath his head. “I feel like I should have brought you flowers or something.”

I rolled toward him. “For future reference, I prefer wine over flowers.”

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and traced his fingers along my jaw. “Duly noted. I just wasn’t thinking when I decided on this detour. All I wanted was to see you, so I came straight here.”

I cupped his cheek. “I’m not complaining, Evan.”

“I know, but I wanted to clarify. Honestly, I’m more in the mood to talk. I had a shitty day.”

“Paul?” He made me want to scream several times over the last few weeks.

“Yes and no.” He rolled onto his back and rubbed his hands over his face. “It’s so wrong to talk to you about this, but this whole thing with Tiffany is killing me. They know she’s the one I’m going to let go, and they want me to do it in front of her family tomorrow. It’s cruel and paints me to be such an asshole. At least with Amber, she’d get what she deserves, but Tiffany is a sweet girl.”

“You like her.” The words were bitter in my mouth but came out calm. He was right. It was wrong for him to talk to me about this. These were the feelings I didn’t want to know anything about.

“Of course I do. That’s why I’ve kept her around, but it’s more than that. I care about her, but not in the way she wants. Tiffany’s a good person whom I’ve let believe I’m romantically into even though I’m not. She’s attractive, inside and out, but I’m drawn to her in a friend kind of way. How do I tell her that without hurting her?” He scrubbed his hand over his face again, blowing out a breath. “I face intimidating people in the boardroom all the time, but I can’t figure out how to break up with a nice girl I was never really dating. This is so fucked up.”

“You tell her exactly what you just told me. She’ll appreciate the honesty more than a scripted speech.” I spoke

from my heart. It's what I wanted from him when this relationship ended, because I had no doubt it would be him walking away, not me. I was too far gone to be the one to end it. I would never admit it out loud, but I couldn't lie to myself.

Earlier, Abby accused me of loving him, and her words wouldn't leave me alone. Everything about Evan intrigued me. Even now, with him admitting how difficult it was going to be to hurt another woman, I adored him. It was an insight into his character. He called himself an asshole for doing exactly what the show and his parents demanded of him.

"I'm a selfish bastard." He looked pained. "I'm hurting people to secure my company. How is that right? I should have fought harder, gotten them to call all this off before it got to this point."

"From what you've told me, you didn't have a choice," I murmured. "Your parents forced this on you. They're the ones hurting people, Evan, not you."

He was suffering just as much, if not more than everyone else. I saw the way he tensed when Paul forced him into an uncomfortable position, told him to remove his clothes for the camera, or kiss a woman he didn't want to touch, all for the sake of entertainment. He was more than punished by the whole charade, and that was his parents' fault, not his.

His hands were in his hair. "You have no idea how many times I've tried to walk away from this mess. You're one of the few reasons I stayed. You keep me grounded."

I brushed my knuckles over his cheekbone, hating the frown lines marring his brow. We needed a lighter subject. "If that's your way of saying I'm good in bed, thank you."

He rolled his head my way, grinning. "You're not good in bed—you're phenomenal. It's why I can't seem to stay out of it."

"Trust me, the talent isn't all mine. It takes two to tango." I wagged my brows at him, earning a wider grin from him.

"Distracting me with sex talk?"

“Depends. Is it working?” I went up onto my elbow and placed a hand over his heart. He wrapped his fingers around my wrist and drew circles against my pulse. Despite the dimples, his brown eyes were troubled. Physical comfort wasn’t going to cut it tonight. He wanted me to console him with words, not my body. That inherent act spoke volumes about his feelings and faith in me.

“I’m not sure how to comfort you other than to say I understand. Tiffany will be hurt, and she’ll likely cry, but she’ll get over it. I know you don’t believe in marriage or soul mates, but I do, and her true love is still out there. She’ll find him and forget all about you someday. The best way for you to honor her is to be honest.”

“You believe in soul mates?” He cocked an eyebrow. “I never would have guessed that.”

“Why not?”

He traced the crease between my eyes. “You’re cute when you frown.”

“Don’t avoid the question. Why wouldn’t I believe in soul mates?” I wanted a man who looked at me the way my father looked at my mother. Someday I would find the one.

“I don’t know. You agreed to explore our relationship and see where this goes, knowing I don’t want to get married. I made assumptions based on that.”

“Just because I agreed to our temporary arrangement doesn’t mean I won’t look for a relationship with someone else down the road. It won’t be tomorrow or even next year, but I do eventually want to get married and have kids.”

His gaze narrowed. “Temporary?” It sounded like a curse on his lips, confusing me.

“Well, yeah. You’re going to go back to work after all this, right? And I’ll be back in Chicago. We could have a long-distance fling, but there’s no longevity there, aside from our business relationship. You don’t want anything long-term, hence the no marriage stipulation, and I’m okay with that. But

that doesn't mean I won't be looking for that at some point in my life with the right person."

"I thought part of exploring what this is between us was meant to go beyond the show." His fingers were locked around my wrist as if to hold me to him.

"Okay, but for how long? I'm being realistic, Evan." It was the only way to safeguard my heart, not that I could tell him that. He would end this tonight if I admitted how I felt, and I wasn't ready to say good-bye yet.

He studied me, his all-consuming gaze roaming over my features as if he were memorizing them. "I don't like the idea of you being with someone else."

My eyebrows hit my hairline. "That's rich considering you came over tonight to talk about breaking up with another woman." *Okay, that came out wrong.* I shook my head, clearing it. "I shouldn't have said that."

"No, you were right to say it." He sat up and ran a hand through his hair. "Maybe I should stay somewhere else tonight."

I grabbed his arm, stopping him from standing. "Please don't go, not like this." He didn't try to get up but didn't relax either. I blew out a breath, irritated that I let my big mouth speak before I could think it through.

"Look, I'm flattered you came to visit and confided in me. I didn't mean to botch it with a stupid comment. Just, okay, I get why the thought of me being with someone else bothers you, but I have to be true to myself here. You don't want a future with me or anyone, and that's fine. I respect that. But I need you to understand that although you don't want to get married, I do someday. I don't know who he is yet or when it will happen, but it's something I want eventually. I don't want to be lonely the rest of my life."

His shoulders were tense as he kept his back to me, his feet on the ground. "Do you think I'll be lonely the rest of my life?" A quiet question.

If you age the way your father has, then no, definitely not. “I think you’ll live your life the way you want to, Evan. Whether that be with flings, temporary lovers, or maybe the eventual relationship, you’ll find ways not to be alone.”

“I’m not lonely when I’m with you.” He turned, his gaze penetrating. “I don’t like the idea of this being temporary, even if it’s true.”

“Then we live in the moment and enjoy it while it lasts.” *And hope that it gives us enough memories to last a lifetime.* I was starting to doubt that I would ever find another man like him. One who not only respected my ambition but praised me for it. Someone who confided in me like a longtime best friend, not just a pillow mate. A man who gave me multiple orgasms every night and could melt me with a look.

God, Abby’s right. I’m falling for him. I looked away, biting my lip. This man was going to break me. He couldn’t handle the idea of me with someone else; meanwhile, I wasn’t sure there ever would be anyone else for me. I was fooling myself with all these words. If I had a soul mate, he looked a lot like Evan Mershano. And didn’t that suck? The man who could be destined for me was provisional at best. Fate was just cruel enough to pull this prank on me.

He palmed my cheek and brushed his nose against mine. “I don’t deserve you, but I’m glad I have you, even if only for the moment.”

I kissed him and poured all my feelings into the unspoken dialogue between our tongues. Frustration, adoration, humiliation, and love went into that kiss, and a piece of my heart broke off, forever becoming his. His leg slid between mine, pinning me to the bed as he embraced me with the same passion. He cradled my face between his palms and took his time exploring my mouth.

Each lick and nip was an introduction to something new, his way of prolonging the moment. This was a mutual exchange of emotions, not a seduction. It broke the remainder of my shields, unleashing everything from within until tears

pricked my eyes. I shuddered under the impact of it. I was so screwed.

THE FAMILIAL TEST

He spent the night again after his trip to Charleston. This time he brought his suitcase. We were getting dressed in the morning after a shared shower when he looked at me with a twinkle in his eye.

“So the producers said I’m meeting your mom and Bob. You’ve never mentioned him. Is he your stepdad?”

I laughed. “Oh no. My mom never remarried after my dad. She just dates to kill the time, and I think she likes having someone around to take care of her.”

“Ah, that’s right. You mentioned Abby has similar proclivities.”

I pulled on the cocktail dress given to me last night by the crew. It was black and skimmed my knees. Evan walked up behind me to help tie the halter neck.

“Yeah, but Abby just cares about their wallets, while my mom doesn’t need their money. She only wants their company.” My dad was a financial planner and set aside a nest egg for my mom. It wasn’t substantial, but it was enough to care for her after his passing.

“I’m beginning to understand why the show picked her as a contestant.”

“Yeah, I would love to put her in a room with Amber and watch the fireworks.” My sister would teach the southern belle all sorts of new tricks. “She’s not a bad person, not at heart anyway. She just has a hard exterior and no regard for

consequences. Sometimes I envy her ability to live in the moment without a care for the future. I'm always planning, while she's this spontaneous little ball of fun."

He kissed my neck and trailed his fingers down my spine. "Ambition and aspiration are sexier than spontaneity."

"You're only saying that because you woke up with my lips wrapped around your c—" He sealed his mouth over mine in a bruising kiss before I could finish.

"Keep talking like that and we'll never get out of here."

"I didn't realize I had that choice. In that case—" He kissed me again, hard, swallowing what I was about to say. "I think I like this game."

"I bet you do." He nipped my lower lip. "Now stop misbehaving, or I'll have to take you over my knee."

"Oh? Is that a promise?"

"You'd like that?" He grabbed my ass and squeezed. The devilish swirl in his brown irises made me want to get back into the shower with him.

"It's not my first choice, but I'm sure you would make it interesting."

"You're saying all of this to distract me from leaving, aren't you?"

"I don't know. Is it working?"

He growled low in his throat and kissed me again. I took that to mean yes and smiled against his lips. He thrust his tongue deep and set a harsh rhythm that reminded me of sex. The intensity of it left me quaking for more.

"Careful, sweetheart. I'm more than capable of playing this game, too."

"That's an enticement, not a warning." I sucked his lower lip into my mouth and let it go with a pop.

He grinned. "We'll pick this up tonight. I need to get downstairs before my parents go up to my suite and find it empty." He kissed my cheek and ran his thumb down my


exposed arm. “Bring a sweater, Sarah. It’s cold outside.” April in Indiana was unpredictable. It was a moderate temperature when I arrived two days ago, and this morning it was snowing.

“Yes, sir. Anything else?”

“Minx.” He patted me on the rump on his way to the door. My mom was going to drool over Evan. She was a sucker for a man in a suit, and he looked damn fine in the black one he was wearing. The maroon dress shirt was casually unbuttoned at his throat, giving me a slender view of what I knew to be a tan, muscular chest. *Mmm*. I liked him without the tie. “You’re ogling me.”

“I am.” Jeans were my preferred mold for his fine ass, but the dress pants worked, too. “You look good, Mister Mershano.”

He grinned. “Right back at you, Miss Summers. See you in a bit.”

“No,” I repeated for the fifth time.  Paul was having issues understanding the word. “Absolutely not.”

“Oh, come on, dove. It’ll be fun.”

“Watching my sister flirt with Evan is not going to be fun for me.” They had Abby in the same black dress with her makeup and hair done up for the camera. She loved the idea of playing a game of *Can You Tell the Difference between the Twins?* Any other time, with any other man, I would have been fine with it. But not with him. Not like this. If he couldn’t tell the difference between us, I would break.

“No,” I said again. Abby’s responding smirk made me want to punch someone.

“I think it’s a good idea.” I gaped at my mom. “You’re supposed to marry this man, *si?* After only a few weeks of knowing him? Then I say, if he loves you the way he should, he’ll know the difference between you and Abby.”

Great. This was my mom’s punishment for me not telling her about the show. Despite her recycling of boyfriends every

few years, marriage was a big deal to her. She vowed herself to my father and no one else. Love was sacred and reserved for family. Dating Evan would be fine, and even living with him wouldn't be a problem, but wedding vows were revered.

“Fine.” There was no disagreeing with Estrella Summers when she had that look in her eyes. I was asking for a verbal beatdown if I argued. “Where do you want me to hide?” I couldn't even look at Paul. This was what Brenda meant by him having a field day. His smile was permanently attached to his face after meeting my mother and Abby. Bob he could take or leave, but he loved having three gorgeous women for his camera.

“You can stay in here and watch with Bill.” He pointed to a crew member wearing a trucker hat, T-shirt, and board shorts. The crazy freckled man didn't realize it was snowing outside.

“Sup, beautiful?”

Oh, he's charming, too. I sat at the dining room table with my hands in my lap. My chubby new friend tried to sidle closer, but I shot him down with a glare. *Keep your paws to yourself, big boy.* His smile slipped, and his green eyes went wide. With the mood I was in, he better be scared.

He turned on his screen so I could see what the cameras were shooting outside. There were five of them on Evan's limo, where he and his parents sat inside waiting. Abby stood in the front foyer with my mom and Bob, awaiting their cue to exit. My mother's frown and ultimatum told me how she felt about all of this nonsense.

The train wreck started with Evan getting out of the limo and holding the door open for his parents. He held a hand out for his mother, and she used it to exit, her gaze flitting around the neighborhood and house as if she hadn't been staring at it for the last thirty minutes. Ellen's blonde hair was styled, her makeup was perfect, and her skirt suit was professional. Jonah's suit rivaled Evan's, except he wore a black tie with a white shirt.

They stood awkwardly beside the car, waiting for my family to exit. Abby went first, smoothing her hands over the skirt of her dress and giving the cameras a shy smile before moving toward Evan. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he held an arm out to hug her. She moved right in and kissed him on the jaw, nuzzling him like a cat. I threw up a little in my mouth.

“Hey, sweetheart.” His voice was affectionate, but there was something not quite right in his chocolate gaze. It was missing that wicked note I loved. No doubt a result of spending too much time with his parents outside. They frequently put him in a pissy mood.

“Hi, Evan.” God, Abby was laying it on thick, batting her lashes the way she always did around handsome men. “May I introduce my mom, Estrella, and her boyfriend, Bob.”

“Nice to meet you.” He shook their hands while Abby stayed glued to his side, and introduced his parents. Ellen gave a small smile, while Jonah looked my mother over with blatant interest. She was wearing a dark blue, spaghetti strap dress that flirted with her knees and displayed all her curves. The man had no shame. His behavior was caught on film, but his smile said he didn’t have a care in the world.

Knowing what I did about the elder Mershano, it was a wonder Evan turned out the way he did. His parents’ neglect throughout his childhood turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

“And you,” Evan murmured after all the introductions were finished, “must be Abby.”

SISTER BONDING

“Abby?” Ellen repeated while Jonah chuckled.

“Son, her name is Sarah.”

“No, Sarah doesn’t giggle.” Evan removed my sister from his arm with a wink. “But I’m betting her identical twin sister, Abby, does.”

“Well, color me impressed.” Abby’s smile was the one she used when she truly enjoyed something. My mom looked Evan over with keen approval. Neither of them had expected him to catch on at all, let alone so quickly.

My heart took off at a dangerous pace as heat swam up my neck and caressed my cheeks. He knew the difference. My stomach turned over, making me light-headed. Too many years of watching people, including my own mother, fail at this game had programmed me to doubt him. I should have known better. Of course he knew the difference. That was the foundation of who we were; he trusted me when I told him it was Abby who auditioned on my behalf.

“Uh, they’re asking you to come outside.” Bill’s hand hovered beside me as if debating whether or not it was safe to touch me. My glare earlier scared the poor kid. The screen showed everyone looking expectantly at the house.

“Oh, right, thanks.” I stood on shaky legs and made my way to the foyer. In a move that was just like Abby, I ran my clammy palms over my dress skirt and opened the door. Evan’s gaze hit me like a ton of bricks. Triumph mingled with a touch of wickedness in their dark depths, stealing my breath.

He didn't wait for me to walk to him; he met me on the porch and engulfed me in a hug that had nothing on the way he embraced Abby.

"You knew right away that it wasn't me." He had hugged my sister with one arm. He never hugged me with one arm.

His lips brushed my ear. "The smile wasn't right."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Knowing the difference." He would never know how much that meant to me. It was a rare gift. Abby and I were nothing alike, and yet too many people had trouble telling us apart. Our voice was the same, we were identical, and some said our mannerisms rivaled each other. I didn't agree on that last bit, but it's what we were told.

He kissed me on the mouth, not caring that everyone else could see, and smiled. "You're my Sarah. I'll always know the difference." Warmth touched my every nerve despite the cold air. "Shall we go inside? I hear your mom's been cooking up a storm."

His devilish gaze told me he knew full well caterers were the chefs inside, but the show wanted it to look like my mom cooked. It was a shame they didn't let her manage the kitchen. My mom could make a mean carbonada.

"Sure." I led him inside, followed by our families.

"This is where you grew up, right?" Evan had his arm around my shoulders and his lips were at my ear.

"Yep."

"I want to see your bedroom."

"What are you two whispering about?" Abby was taking in every detail, her gaze astute.

Is it hot, or is that just me? I cleared my throat. "Nothing."

"My sister's a terrible liar." She folded her arms, heightening the cleavage of her chest. It was an old trick meant to distract, but Evan's gaze was steady on hers.

“Yes, she’s an even worse actress. She tells me you got all those genes.”

She gave up on the cleavage front and toyed with a strand of her hair that fell over her breasts. His gaze never fled south. I frowned, unsure why my sister was trying to openly flirt with my man in front of me. We loved to prank each other, but men were a boundary we never crossed. Evan was mine. She knew this, and yet she was drawing her finger down her breasts in a taunting manner. “What else did she tell you about me?”

“You’re a remarkable painter who lives a carefree existence and loves toying with men.” He leaned in, pulling me with him so I could hear. “And by the way, all that flirtatious charm you’re throwing my way right now? It isn’t going to work on me, sweetheart. But feel free to keep trying.”

“Oh, I like him.” Her eyes sparkled. “I approve of the potential future brother-in-law.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you do.” She was easy to please.

“Can I borrow her for a minute?” Abby looped her arm through mine without waiting for a reply. “Thanks, future BIL.” She dragged me up the stairs too fast for the cameraman and pulled me into her old room before slamming the door. “Jesus, Sarah. He’s even more gorgeous in person.”

I punched her on the arm. “What the hell, Abby? Sister pact, remember? You were totally flirting with him!”

“Well, duh, to test him. Gotta make sure the man my sister’s in love with is worthy, and wow, is he worthy. He knew right away I wasn’t you! I wasn’t sure if he was just tense in general, but the way he melted when you walked out of the house, there’s no question, Sis. He’s as gone for you as you are for him.”

If only. I walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower and sinks. Abby’s forehead creased, but she didn’t say anything. “They’ve probably bugged all the rooms.” I kept my voice low. This was my first time getting her alone without

Brenda or anyone else lurking nearby. “He knows you’re the one who did the interview.”

“What?!”

“Shh! I don’t want anyone to hear this, okay?”

“He knows and didn’t send you home?”

“No, he proposed a deal instead. I stay on and reject his proposal in the end, and he’ll fund my marketing firm.” I waited while that sunk in. “We’re acting for the cameras.”

Her head swayed slowly back and forth. “No. You’re a shitty actress, Sis. You’re not faking the way you feel about him.” I didn’t deny it, making her lips part. “Oh shit, you’ve gone and fallen for him, and you have to reject his proposal.” Now it was sinking in, the guilt and the understanding that was long overdue. “Oh, I meant for this to be a joke, give you a short vacation. I didn’t ... Oh, I’m such a bitch!”

“Yes, you are. Big time.”

“Oh, Sarah, I’m so sorry. I had no idea. But hold on, he *likes* you. And why does he want you to reject his proposal in the end? Doesn’t he want a wife?”

I explained the history with his parents and how they were forcing him to get married or give up the company to Wyatt. Her lips were pursed by the end.

“And I thought Mom butting into my dating life was rough. That’s just, well, that *sucks*.” She shook her head again but then stopped. “Okay, but he likes you. I know what a man looks like when he’s smitten, and that man down there is more than smitten. He didn’t look at my boobs once, and my rack is fantastic. Well, so is yours, but seriously, being with two identical twins is like every man’s dream come true. The director is thinking it, Evan’s dad is definitely dreaming about it, and all the male members of that crew are looking—”

“Right, I get it. I have eyes, too. Get to the point.”

“Evan’s the only one down there *not* thinking about it. He’s not even interested, because he’s in love with you.”

A laugh escaped me. “No, he’s not. It’s only been a few weeks—”

“Yet you’re already in love with him.”

“Totally different, and he’s not interested in anything long-term. What we’re doing is temporary.”

“So there is something going on off camera. I knew it. He’s totally gone for you.”

“No, it’s just sex.” Okay, that needed to be reworded. “*Amazing* sex—totally not the point—but that’s all there is between us.” And a few late-night discussions that went beyond the physical and into the emotional. Not important.

“I’m sure the sex is phenomenal, with *that* body.” She paused, no doubt picturing it, making me pinch her. “Right, sorry. No, there’s more to it. He knew right away I wasn’t you. Not even Mom has won the game that fast. He’s into you.”

“Maybe.” I chewed my lip. “But I still have to reject his proposal. I signed a contract.”

“Screw the legalities. Say yes and see what happens.”

“After two months of knowing him? Seems a bit fast, doesn’t it?”

“Need I remind you that Mom and Dad were engaged and married within six months? Have you ever seen two people more in love than them? She’s still not over him, and he died fourteen years ago.”

I smiled, thinking of the nights Dad took Mom out back to dance under the stars. Abby and I used to spy on them until the kissing started. “He loved Mom.”

“And she loved him.”

“Yeah.” I flicked a tear from my eye and cleared my throat. “Brenda’s going to kill me if I ruin my makeup.”

“Speaking of which, we should get back. Otherwise the men are going to have all sorts of sordid fantasies when they find us both in the bathroom with the shower running.”

I groaned. “I don’t even want to know what Evan’s dad would think.”

“Oh, I can tell you *exactly* what that man would be thinking. Did you see the way he was looking at Mom?”

“Yeah, his dad’s a piece of work, huh?” I turned off all the faucets and fixed my hair. The humidity from the water and closed door made it frizzy. “Evan’s nothing like him.”

“My boobs and I figured that out quickly.”

I sent my eyes heavenward. “Stop trying to get him to leer at you, okay? I don’t like it.”

She pressed the back of her hand to my forehead. “Huh, no fever. But I swear I just heard a jealous note come out of your mouth. Strange.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“There’s my favorite twin.” Her grin was infectious. “Now let’s go down there and get you a husband.”

“You realize payback’s a bitch, right?” Little did my twin know that my plan was already in the works. Rachel’s federal agent friend was on board and waiting for my cue. Abby was going to learn the lesson of a lifetime, and I couldn’t wait.

“Hmm, you know, I loved Rome but didn’t get to spend enough time there. Maybe I’ll get Andy to whisk me off to Europe this time just as the show is finishing?”

“You’re terrible.” *Note to self: activate plan sooner rather than later.*

“It’s the men, Sarah. They’re too easy.” She plucked at her cleavage and grabbed a shawl from the closet on her way to the door. “It’s do-or-die time, Sis. Let’s go.”

MAINTAINING STATUS QUO

“He’s in France with Amber.” A week ago we were having dinner with our families. It felt like a lifetime ago.

“You sound pissed about that.” I pictured Rachel’s lips pursing on the other end of the phone, an expression to match her disapproving tone. “You’re falling for him.”

Oh, I’m beyond that point, Rach. I think I’m in love with him. Not a conversation I was ready to have with my best friend. She wouldn’t approve.

“I’m just cranky about being trapped in his house for almost a week while waiting for him to pick me up. I don’t see why I couldn’t stay in Indiana with my family or run home to Chicago for a bit.”

“Yeah, how did all that go, by the way?” This was the first time one of my rare moments alone overlapped with Rachel taking a break from work. The woman needed a vacation.

“Oh, it went okay. You got my text about Abby, right?” I told her how my sister admitted she was a bitch for getting me into this mess, but that didn’t change my mind about getting revenge. She was in for an eye-opening experience once Agent Kincaid got his hands on her. I couldn’t wait. “That was pretty much the highlight other than my mom giving Evan approval to ask the big question. I think she meant it, which is scary.”

“Estrella Summers gave Evan the okay to ask you to marry him?” She sounded about as shocked as I felt last week. “Did they ply her with wine or something?”

“No, I think he won her over.” Which said a lot about him.
“He passed the twin test. That alone decided his fate.”

“He was able to tell the difference between you and Abby? Even I struggle with that when you’re both on your game.”

“He knew right away.” My heart skipped a beat at the memory. “Everyone was shocked, including me.”

Rachel was quiet for too long, an indicator she was thinking hard about what she wanted to say. “Be careful, Sarah.”

My shoulders fell. “I think it’s too late for that.” A truth I reconciled myself to when he left for France. Five days without him was hell. Not knowing what he was doing with Amber was worse. He texted me every day but never called. They were sharing a suite in Paris. He couldn’t risk her overhearing him, and my heart didn’t want to know what was happening between them in that hotel room.

“Are you going to be able to say no?”

“I don’t have a choice, Rach. I have to reject him even if it kills me.”

“What if you tell him how you feel?”

“It won’t help. He’s made it very clear how he feels about marriage, and besides, it’s not the happily ever after that I want. It’s him.”

“So tell him that.”

She made it sound so easy. He would be horrified if he knew how I felt. Our connection went deeper than lust, but he made his stance on relationships very clear. This was temporary between us. My suggesting otherwise wouldn’t change his mind. It would only break my heart and make things awkward for us going forward. I had a future business to think about. He might be a silent partner, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t see him again. Better to maintain status quo, enjoy the moment, and get over him in the privacy of my own apartment hundreds of miles away.

“Yo, Summers. Time for makeup.” Brenda gave a double tap against my closed door to punctuate her words.

Great. “My babysitter’s back. Gotta go.”

“The makeup artist? Even at his house?”

“Yeah, the producers required it, and she’s outside my door.”

“Wow. That’s ... wow.”

“Right?” Another knock had me rolling off the bed. “I’ll talk to you soon, Rach.”

“Okay. Adiós, amiga.”

I rolled my eyes. “Your Spanish is still awful.” “You love it.”

“Uh-huh. Bye, Rach.” I hung up, stashed the phone, and opened the door to find Brenda with her arms full of supplies.

“What’s up with the locked door, Summers?”

“Can’t a girl have a moment of privacy?” I countered.

“Not when you’re on a reality television show.”

I snorted. “Whatever.” I let her in and paused on my way to the couch. “Hold on. Why do I need makeup?”

“Because the prince is on his way here to pick you up for your weeklong date.” She held up a pair of jeans, boots, and a white sweater. “Cute, right?”

“Very, but pajamas are more appropriate for ten o’clock at night.”

“You can change back into them on the plane. Now scoot it, missy. I only have thirty minutes to work my magic, and you need to do something with your hair.”

“With such short notice, and just before bedtime, a ponytail should suffice.” *Did she mention a plane?* “Where am I going?”

“It’s a surprise, sunshine.”

“Hence the lack of notice?”

“Oh, you can blame your prince for that one. He wasn’t supposed to get you until tomorrow, but apparently he couldn’t wait another day.”

My cheeks heated. *He’s on his way home right now? Why didn’t he tell me?* He usually gave me a warning, but he kept me in the dark this time. *What are you up to, Evan Mershano?* “All right, make me reality-show-worthy.”

PRIVATE JETS

I was surrounded by luxury. Plush recliner chairs, two matching couches, coffee tables, a fully stocked kitchen and minibar, and champagne were a few of the finer touches I noticed. There appeared to be a room at the back with a bed and a full bathroom. I thought the private jet we took to the Bahamas was nice, but this was quintessence of elegance.

“You’ve officially ruined me when it comes to future travel.” I sipped the bubbly from my flute and relaxed into my oversized executive chair. “I’m also starting to think this is the real reason you came to visit me in Indiana. If I owned something like this, I would live in it.”

Evan’s amused chuckle went straight to my lower abdomen. Our kiss for the cameras earlier wasn’t enough. I needed more. *So much more*. “Trust me, the jet was a minor incentive compared to seeing you.”

“Sweet talker.” I unbuckled my seatbelt. “Will you finally tell me where we’re going?” The show’s producers wanted it to be a surprise. There were worse things in life than hopping on a private jet to an unknown location, but the planner part of me wanted to know where we were headed.

“Nope. You have to open something first.”

“Well, that sounds kinky.” We were the only ones on the jet aside from the pilots. We could have some serious fun in this large, luxurious space. Hopefully we were in for a long flight. I had quite a few things I wanted to do to him. “I’m

surprised Paul didn't demand to be on the plane with five cameras to catch all the action."

His grin was wicked. "Yeah, he doesn't know we're on the jet yet."

I brought the flute away from my lips and cocked an eyebrow. "He doesn't know I'm here?"

"He thinks you're meeting him at the airport and flying with the crew in a few hours."

I gaped at him. Paul announced the travel schedule to the crew after filming in the mansion's foyer ended, but I assumed when the driver showed up that Paul wanted footage of me traveling, so I rolled with it. Then I stopped thinking when I saw Evan standing outside the airport, waiting for me.

"So yeah, the driver will be delivering a note, instead of you, to Paul in a few hours. As we're already in the air, it'll be too late to stop us when he reads it." His brown eyes glowed with self-satisfaction.

I laughed. "Oh, he's going to be pissed." Not that I cared.

"Yeah, well, it seemed sufficient payback for all the crap that asshole pulled in Paris. He had it coming."

"Do I even want to know what he did?"

The light vanished from his eyes. "No, you don't."

The silence that followed was deafening. He wouldn't look at me. Not a good sign. Neither was the tick in his jaw.

"Oh." *You don't have to talk about it*, was on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't force it out. I *wanted* him to tell me what happened. Five days without speaking to him left my brain running with all sorts of scenarios I wanted clarified. It was ridiculous to worry about it, not when the parameters of our relationship were so clearly defined, but I couldn't help the irrational part of me that needed to know.

He took a healthy sip of his champagne and set it down. "They forced us to share a suite, Sarah. Since I owned the hotel we stayed in, I upgraded us to a penthouse setup with two bedrooms, but Amber was, well, persistent." He still

wouldn't look at me. "Despite what the show is going to imply, nothing happened beyond kissing."

"Oh." I wasn't sure what else to say to that.

He got up and retrieved a bottle of dark liquor from a cabinet. I couldn't see the label, but I guessed it was bourbon. That was his preferred drink. He poured a glass and sipped it with his back to me. "I feel like I spent the last week cheating on you, yet here I am whisking you off on a romantic getaway like everything's fine. It's fucked up."

"This entire situation is fucked up, Evan." I joined him in the kitchen area and leaned against the cabinet, arms folded. It put me in his direct line of sight, but his gaze was on the brown liquor in his glass. "It's what we make of it that matters. Stop dwelling on the negatives and enjoy the moment instead. We're alone on your gorgeous jet. Surely there are better ways to spend our time?" *I don't want my final memories of you to be about the show. I want to remember you.*

He rested his forearm on the wood panel over my head, caging me between him and the cabinet. The scent of leather lingered on his maroon sweater, tantalizing my senses. *This* was what I wanted to remember. Not the sadness or the guilt, but the desire radiating between our bodies.

He crowded my personal space and sipped his bourbon while studying me. Chocolate was my kryptonite, and his eyes reminded me of molten fudge. A woman could melt under that intense gaze. "I'm brooding." His voice was deep and rolled over my skin like a caress.

"Yes, you are." Not that I was mad. I would rather he feel guilty about spending time with Amber than feel no remorse at all. It meant he cared. And knowing all they did was kiss while in Paris helped calm my nerves.

"I'm sorry," he murmured

"For brooding?"

"For everything."

"I can think of a few ways you could make me forgive you."

“Yeah?” He placed the rim to my mouth and tipped the glass just enough to give me a taste. The smoky liquid flowed over my tongue to my throat, warming me inside. I licked my lips to savor the flavor, and he followed the motion with his fervent gaze. He took another sip before setting the cup down on one of the shelves and grabbed my hip. His touch burned through my jeans to the bare skin beneath, making me shiver. One hard thigh slid between mine.

“Do you have any idea how much I missed you?” It was a breath against my lips.

“Probably about as much as I missed you,” I whispered, angling my head to kiss him.

“Debatable.” He kissed me with a force I felt all the way down to my toes. This was nothing like our embrace in the house’s foyer a few hours ago. It was too public to be what we wanted. There was nothing public about this. I twined my fingers in his thick hair, pulling him closer. His talented tongue was doing all sorts of wickedly delicious things in my mouth. I swallowed a moan as he plunged deep, taking control and showing me just how he intended to extract his forgiveness.

He popped the button open on my jeans and slid down the zipper. The act alone left me wet and aching for him. He lowered the fabric, exposing my silky black thong and traced the inky hem along the inside of my thigh. His light caress sparked a white-hot passion inside me. My experience wasn’t vast, but I knew without an inkling of a doubt that Evan Mershano had ruined me for other men. And I couldn’t bring myself to care, not when he was touching me like this.

His lips kissed a path along my jaw to my ear, and he nibbled the lobe. “I’m going to show you how much I missed you by devouring every inch of you.”

“No complaints here.”

“Good.” He grazed his teeth down my neck before going to his knees in front of me. I trembled under the force of those chocolate eyes. Possession lied in their depths. He was about to make me fully and truly his, and I didn’t have the willpower to deny him.

He slid my jeans down inch by slow inch, kissing and nipping the exposed skin along the way. My socks and boots disappeared with the pants, leaving my lower half exposed. His dark gaze went to my silky thong, admiring the view as he pulled it down to join my clothes on the floor. His palms went to my inner thighs, pushing them apart and granting him better access to my burning arousal. He licked my seam—light enough to taste and tease at the same time. My fingers tightened in his hair as my opposite palm went to the cabinets behind me for support.

“Mmm, I certainly missed this.” His hot breath against my sensitive flesh made tension coil at the base of my spine. I nearly lost my balance when the flat of his tongue hit my clit. The unexpected pressure coupled with five days of Evan withdrawal had me closer to orgasm than I ever thought possible.

“Fuck.” My voice trembled as the word traveled from my lips and into the humid air of the cabin.

“Soon.” He sucked my sensitive nub into his mouth, causing me to cry out. My nipples strained against my bra. My sweater needed to go, but if I moved my hands, I would fall. The palm against the cabinet was the only thing keeping me upright while he destroyed me below. I wanted to marry his tongue. The wicked things it did in my mouth were nothing compared to what he was doing to the sensitive bundle of nerves between my thighs.

His fingers teased my entrance, prolonging the anticipation. Then he thrust two of them deep into me and hit a spot I didn't know existed. It tipped me over the edge into an orgasm so consuming that I thought for sure the plane was going to combust around me. His free hand went to my lower abdomen to hold me against the wall, while his body kept my legs upright. Without his support, I would have collapsed. No question.

My limbs shook, and my breathing came in pants. The quickness combined with the force of pleasure made it one of the strongest orgasms of my life. I was still catching my breath when his mouth captured mine. His jeans and boxers were

gone faster than I could blink, and then he was lifting me into the air and wrapping my legs around his waist. He entered me in one thrust, his member hot and pulsing inside of me. I shuddered around him. *Yes, this is what I want to remember. Every. Single. Thrust.*

My arousal was thick on his tongue, adding to the moment. Renewed desire licked fire through my veins and pooled deep in my belly. Not even minutes after an earth-shattering orgasm and I was ready to have another. It was the heat below, so intense, so *new*. His cock was on fire inside of me. I'd never felt anything like it. If five days without him could do this to me, what would a few months feel like? Would I ever get over this?

Our position allowed him to drive deep, stroking me in places that sparked sensations low in my abdomen. His hands were on my hips, holding me tight against him as he thrust harder and harder. I panted his name, encouraging him as the bundle of nerves grew into a flame.

“Oh God,” I breathed. I was going to come again from his thrusts alone. *Impossible.*

I screamed his name as ecstasy overwhelmed my senses, sending me into a foreign abyss. He followed soon after, his pleasure hot and wet inside of me. I grasped his shoulders for support, my body incapable of moving anywhere but down. If he let go, I would be on the floor for a long time. His forehead rested against mine as we collectively caught our breath.

Sweat beaded down my spine and pooled between my breasts. I really needed the sweater to come off and maybe a shower. Especially with the wetness between my legs. It was thicker and hotter than usual, no doubt a compliment to Evan's skill. I tried to move my arms to remove the wool from my skin, but my limbs shook too much.

As my euphoric high subsided, rational thought started to inch its way into my mind. His hard cock pulsed deep inside. The heat radiating from him down there was too natural. The wetness between my legs took on a new meaning.

“We forgot to use a condom.” Five days apart removed reason from the equation.

“Yeah, we did.” His burning gaze held mine. “Want to do it again?”

I didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

A FLASHY GIFT

We took a shower together and had sex again without a condom. It was slower, more intimate, and ended with my legs around his waist as he braced me against the wall. My spine would be decorated with some questionable bruises tomorrow, but I had no regrets. None at all.

“You’ve ruined my relationship with condoms,” Evan murmured as he wrapped me up in a plush towel. He wore a matching one low on his hips.

“Seems only fair, as you’ve ruined my relationship with travel.” The bathroom on his jet rivaled the one in my suite at his house. It was twice the size of the one in my Chicago apartment and way nicer. The marble floors, glass shower doors, and oversized sinks were to die for. “Can I live on your jet?” Despite all the rocking we were doing, I barely registered that we were moving. This was so much better than traveling in cattle class on the airlines.

He chuckled and shook his head. “Don’t give me any ideas, Sarah.”

I slid my arms around his waist and rested my chin on his bare chest. “And what ideas are you having, Mister Mershano?”

“Hmm.” He kissed my forehead and returned my hug. “You living naked on my jet would certainly make business travel more interesting. It would inspire me to travel more for work, but I might have issues making meetings on time.”

“Ah, so I would have to trade my clothes for residence on your jet?” I pretended to consider. “Yeah, I could accept that deal. I would need a wardrobe for off the jet, you know, to attend my client appointments, but I have no qualms about working naked. Would the pilots mind?”

His eyebrows pulled down. “The pilots would have to be locked indefinitely in the cockpit. If you lived on this jet, you would be exclusively mine.”

“Oh yeah? And would you be exclusively mine?”

The mood shifted between us from light and easygoing to something serious. He tucked a damp lock of hair behind my ear. “Would you like me to be exclusively yours, Sarah?”

Yes, but ... “Only if you want to be.”

“And if I did?”

“Then yes, I would.” I nuzzled his jaw. I loved the way his unshaved chin felt against my skin. *So sexy.*

“Come, I have a gift for you.”

“The package I was supposed to open a few hours ago?”

“That would be the one.” He led me into the main cabin, where our clothes were in a pile on the floor.

“You’ll finally tell me where we’re going when I open this, right?” Not demanding he tell me earlier was a testament to how much I trusted him.

“I will.” He walked over to one of the cabinets near the television and returned with a neatly wrapped ten-by-ten-inch box. “So I stopped in New York on my way to you. I thought you might like this for our trip.” He rubbed the back of his neck and handed me the gift. “I don’t know much about these, but my research indicated this to be one of the best. You might already have one, too; I don’t know.”

Nervous Evan was endearing and so very human. I smiled at him. “I’m sure I’ll love it.”

He folded his arms over his bare chest and gestured with his chin. “Go on. Open it.”

“Okay.” I started on the edges of the gold paper and tore it across the middle. Abby and I used to make the biggest mess during the holidays, shredding gift wrap all over the living room. It was a competition as to who could make the best pile. I refrained from doing that now and removed the paper in a civilized fashion. The back of the box didn’t tell me much, but the front had my lips parting in awe. “Holy crap, Evan.”

“Well, no, it’s a camera.”

“Yeah, an expensive fucking camera. The resolution and shooting speed on this thing ...” I tore open the box to admire the gorgeous machine. It was one of the top name brands, too, and the best in the market. “I definitely don’t have one of these.” I couldn’t afford it.

“That’s good, then.” His cheeks reddened. “You’re always talking about good lighting and taking pictures, so I thought you might want a camera for our trip. It’s April, so I don’t know if we’ll get to see much of the Northern Lights, but we should be able to get around the roads in Iceland pretty easily to take photos during daylight. I hear the sights along the Golden Circle are gorgeous, and the glaciers will be covered in snow.”

I lowered the camera. “We’re going to Iceland?” My travel bucket list wasn’t extensive due to my work schedule and lack of extra funds, but Iceland was in my top five. I never mentioned it to him. “What made you choose Iceland?”

“Uh, was it a bad choice?”

“Hell no. It’s an amazing choice, but why Iceland? I’ve always wanted to go there, but it’s not common, is it?”

“Well, no, but it’s the only European country I haven’t visited and also the only European country Merghano Suites isn’t located. I’m considering changing that, but I wanted to experience the country for myself first. And knowing you love photography, I thought it would be a fun place for you to play with the lighting you’re always talking about. Not to mention the stars at night.”

I set the camera down on the table so I could throw my arms around him. He caught me around the lower back and lifted me into a hug, laughing. “I take it you approve, then?”

“Of course I approve. Iceland?!”

He kissed my temple. “They wanted me to take you to Spain, but that didn’t suit. I wanted to experience something new with you, and we’re starting with the hot springs. That’s where we’re going to meet the crew, but I planned it so we could have half a day alone as a normal couple before they show up. I rented a car and everything. Should be fun.”

“Where are you thinking you’ll want a hotel? In Reykjavík?”

“Maybe. I have a few locations in mind, but that’s not what this trip is about. I want to experience the country and culture, see if it’s worth investing in, and go from there.”

“Why not make it about both? We could explore some of the locations along the way, see what you think, and sightsee at the same time. I could even take photos for you and be the official Mershano Suites photographer.” With the amazing camera he bought me, I could easily pass as a professional.

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “You wouldn’t mind scouting a few places?”

“Why would I mind?”

“Because this is supposed to be a romantic trip for two that has nothing to do with work?”

“Your work is a part of who you are, Evan. I respect that and would be honored to be part of it.”

He was quiet a moment, studying me. “You mean that.”

“I mean what I say, Evan.” It was becoming our catchphrase.

“Careful, Miss Summers.” He pressed his forehead against mine. “I might have to keep you.”

My heart fluttered at the softly spoken words. “I think I can handle that.”

He tucked my hair behind my ear again, and his gaze took on a mischievous light. “What do you say we forget the show and just enjoy each other?”

“I doubt Paul will approve.” Not that I cared.

“We’ll smile for his cameras but do our own thing. They can follow us around and capture real moments instead of fabricated ones. We’ll decide the schedule, and they can either roll with it or miss the show. I’m done playing by his rules. I want to have some fun.”

“No more scripts?”

“No more scripts.”

“I think I could get used to that.”

“Good.” He kissed me on the nose. “Now that that’s decided, we have about five hours before we land. Want to see the bedroom?”

I grinned. “Mr. Mershano, I’m starting to think you missed me.”

He lifted me into his arms and started toward the back of the jet. “You have no idea, Miss Summers. Allow me to show you.”

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

“This location is perfect, Evan.”

It was on the water, with a gorgeous view of the mountains and a five-minute walk to the restaurants in downtown Reykjavík. The hotel building he was interested in would need renovations to meet the Mershano Suites’ standards, but it was the perfect size.

“I would keep the restaurant as is, though. It might not fit the mold of your other properties, but the quaint cafe reminds me of that place we ate at last night. It suits the vibe, if you know what I mean.”

“I was thinking the same.” He flipped through some paperwork as we walked toward the car. “About the cafe, I mean. The staff could keep their jobs if I did it that way, too.” He opened the passenger door for me without looking and walked around the car. Paul and his crew had opted to stay at the hotel when Evan told them about our afternoon plans to tour hotel properties.

It took a few days, but the director had given up in forcing his agenda on us. We were scheduled to fly back tonight for the final ceremonies this weekend. I was trying not to think about our time coming to an end, but the pit in my stomach served as a constant reminder. Iceland was a gorgeous country, and I had taken thousands of pictures, determined to remember every second. But the moments in our small, European-style hotel room were what I cherished most. Evan didn’t bother getting us a huge suite. All we needed was a bed and a shower.

Paul had gawked when he saw our living quarters, insisting we needed a room similar to the one they used for filming in Paris. Evan told him it wasn't necessary because the cameras weren't allowed to enter. We kissed when directed but kept everything else private, and I loved it. For the first time, I felt like we were a real couple, and that scared the shit out of me. There was no acting involved. My feelings for him were growing by the minute, and I had no idea how much of them he reciprocated. His feelings on marriage and relationships were crystal clear, and from what I could tell, they hadn't changed. But I was too chicken to ask him.

"So you like that one the most, huh?" He started the car and headed toward our final property.

"Definitely. It's central to the city, has a walking path running along the harbor, and it's right next to, what is this, route 41 or something? That's an easy drive to 49 and 1, which goes around the country, right?"

"You didn't tell me you minored in geography, Miss Summers. How useful."

I knocked my knuckles against his hard bicep, eliciting a deep chuckle from him. "You know what I mean, Mister Business Major. It's the perfect location."

"So you keep saying."

"I don't think you need to see the last one." "And why's that?"

"Because you agree with me." I saw the way his eyes lit up when we walked inside. We both knew it was *the one*.

His dimples flashed. "Is that so?"

"Yep."

"So confident, Miss Summers."

"Always." Except when it came to asking about our future. "But if you need to see the last property, I understand. It'll only confirm what we both already know."

“I see.” He kept driving, his gaze pensive. He was sporting a navy blue sweater and jeans. Not the look of a billionaire, but that was the point. He was going for inconspicuous. I matched him in jeans, boots, and a creamy turtleneck. Iceland in April was cold, but the capital was on the water and more temperate than the other areas we visited on our trip. My favorite part was the hot springs, but the country’s waterfalls were breathtaking.

We arrived at the final property, but Evan didn’t move to get out of the car. He pulled off to the side and studied the surroundings. We were in the center of the city, near all the local bars and restaurants. It wasn’t busy, but that was to be expected. The population in Reykjavík wasn’t much more than my hometown in Indiana.

“You’re right. The previous property is the best one.” He gave me a look I couldn’t interpret. “Maybe we need to reconsider this marketing partnership. You have an eye for real estate.”

I laughed. “Yeah, right. I just have an eye for location. All part of my photography brain, Mershano. I look at this location and see it being cute for a few city shots, but that other location offered city, mountains, and water. That makes it perfect, in my unprofessional opinion.”

“Well, I happen to agree with your *professional* opinion on this one.” He typed something into his phone before sliding it into his pocket. “Want to grab a bite to eat before we head back to the insanity?”

“Sure. What did you have in mind?”

“Want to hop out and walk somewhere random?”

“Sounds perfect to me.” I opened my door and met him around the back. He enveloped me in a hug and kiss that left me breathless.

“Thank you for today, Sarah. It meant a lot to have you by my side.”

I warmed at his words. “I enjoyed seeing what you do even if it was just a small part of it.”

“Maybe we can do it again after the show?”

My heart skipped a beat. “Like go on another mini vacation to scout out hotel locations?”

“Yeah, something like that. If you’re interested?”

I swallowed. We were making plans for *after* the show. What did that mean? I didn’t have the guts to ask or take it seriously, so I cracked a smile instead. “I mean, I’ll have to check my schedule, but I can probably pencil in a getaway on your private jet. I do plan to live on it, after all.”

“Naked, if I recall, correct?”

“I do believe that was the stipulation.”

“Excellent. We’ll have to make it a long trip. Thailand maybe?”

“Sure, why not?” I had no idea if he was serious or not, but *holy shit*. We were making plans for the future. Postshow. That had to mean *something*, right?

Oh my God, I was turning into the girl who overanalyzes everything. That wasn’t me. When it came to relationships, I went with the flow. I enjoyed the moment. I didn’t think about tomorrow or what might happen between myself and a man. He wanted to go on another trip. I did, too. This was Evan, the man against marriage, who meant what he said. I had to remember that. It wasn’t fair to him to expect more or read too much into it.

But would it hurt to ask?

I drummed my fingers against my jeans as we walked, biting my lip. It wouldn’t hurt to clarify, would it?

“How about this one?” He suggested after reading a menu of a pub a few blocks from the car.

“Sure.” I didn’t bother looking at the food offerings. My stomach was in knots. This relationship business sucked. I preferred the easygoing Sarah Summers, who didn’t care about long-term relationships and lived in the now. When did she get soft and fall in love? *When you met Evan. Fuck.*

We sat near the window, giving us a pretty street view. The architecture in Reykjavík was colorful. I loved the varying shades decorating each roof; it reminded me of the rainbow when viewing the city from above. The pub Evan chose was picturesque and quiet, with a single owner and one other dining pair. It gave the pub a romantic air despite the trademark beer signs littering the walls. I ordered a fish dish, something the country seemed to specialize in, while Evan ordered pasta.

“You’re pensive over there, Summers. Lay it on me.” He was starting to read me a little too well.

I shook my head. “Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

“Have I mentioned you’re a terrible liar?” His grin was infectious. Those damn dimples got me every time. “Or did I only call you a terrible actress? I can’t remember.”

“Ha, ha.” I sipped my water and looked outside again. *Am I really going to do this?* It was a conversation we needed to have, but I didn’t want to come off as needy. Why was love so difficult? “I was just thinking about your travel comment, postshow. We haven’t really talked about what we’re going to do, if anything, when it all ends.” I let the unspoken question hang between us. *Are we going to continue this or not?*

He nursed his beer, his gaze unreadable. “Well, the network’s contract is pretty strict about contact after the show. Not that I care, but the producers don’t want me seen with anyone after they finish filming. They don’t want to spoil the end.”

“Makes sense.” I remembered reading that part of the contract and thinking it wouldn’t matter much to me, but now it did. I wanted to see him postshow, but I wouldn’t be allowed. Not in public, anyway.

“But I don’t imagine there will be a lot of paparazzi in Thailand.”

“So you’re serious about the trip?”

“Sure, I love traveling, and I’m always scouting new locations. You have a good eye, and I enjoy your company.”

Not exactly what I wanted to hear as far as reasons went, but they could've been worse.

“Okay, so outside of travel, we'll have to be discreet.”
Assuming you want to see me beyond Thailand.

“I guess, but I won't have a lot of time after the show is over anyway. I've missed two months of work. To say I have a bit to catch up on is an understatement.”

“Right.”

“But yeah, we'll need to be discreet, especially with you refusing my proposal and all. I don't want the producers or anyone catching wind of our financial arrangement.”

“Right.” I sounded like a parrot on repeat. His blasé recap of our deal hurt, but I didn't let it show. Nothing had changed. He expected me to hold up to my end of the bargain and refuse his proposal, and it made sense that he didn't want anyone to know about our partnership. “Well, maybe we shouldn't see each other afterward. Or at least until the show's publicity dies down.”

He took another drink. I wanted him to protest but knew he wouldn't. What I said made sense, and Evan was logical. I *wanted* to keep seeing him, but I couldn't admit it out loud. It would be too much and ruin what little time I had left with him. He wasn't the commitment type. I knew that.

“We've done a good job sneaking around so far, but you being in Chicago would make it more difficult to hide. It would probably be best if we cooled off for a bit and play it by ear after the show airs. The last thing either of us needs is our arrangement being made public, and I have to remain a silent partner for it to work.”

“Right. Yeah, of course.” I needed a stiff drink. “So we're in agreement that this is over after the show.”

“At least for now, yes.” He finished his beer and signaled for another without looking at me.

My heart was in my throat. This was not how I wanted the conversation to go, but it was what I expected. We had a good

run, and the sex was phenomenal, but this was the end of the line. “Where are we going for the final episode?”

“Hawaii.” He watched the waiter walk over with his drink.

“That’s a long flight.”

“Yep.” He still wouldn’t meet my gaze. *Awkward.* “Want to take the jet again?”

“Am I allowed?”

“Probably not, but what are they going to do?”

Other than chewing Evan out, they didn’t do much about me traveling with him to Iceland. It would be our last few hours alone together before the show’s finale, and then we would go our separate ways. My stomach turned over. This time next week, I would be back in Chicago and Evan would be single and back on the market. I fought the urge to rub my chest. It ached with the realization that he would never be mine.

But he is mine for the moment. I could enjoy these last few hours with him, or I could dwell on my future without him. Precious time was being wasted as I considered this tomfoolery. I had to take advantage of the now, revel in it, and cherish it. It was all I had, and it would have to be enough. *Now, to get him back in the mood and to forget our discussion ...* I knew just what to say.

“If I say yes to the jet, do I forfeit my clothes?” That got his attention and returned the wicked glint to his smoldering gaze.

“It was part of our deal.”

“Hmm, you drive a hard bargain, Mister

Mershano.” “Is that a yes?”

I tapped my chin in a playful gesture that didn’t match my breaking heart. “Indeed it is, but I’m not disrobing until we’re in the air.”

“Change that to disrobing when you get on the jet, and I’ll consider our deal set.”

I smiled even though it hurt. “Yes, sir.” It would be a fitting end to our whirlwind romance, and I would treasure every second.

CONTRACTUAL OBLIGATIONS

Hawaii was a weather shock. We went from icy temperatures to intense humidity, making my black gown stick to my legs. My hair was flat, but that didn't stop the hairstylist from trying to fix it.

"I'm melting," I told Brenda as she touched up my makeup. It wasn't even that hot, but the difference between Maui and Reykjavík left my body confused. It didn't help that I was nervous. Evan was waiting for me on the beach.

Our final hours on the plane were spent with me in his arms, lying in the bed. We stopped twice along the way to refuel, the first in New York City and the second in Los Angeles. It made for a long ride that we took full advantage of by making love and talking about everything under the sun except the future. I stayed true to my word and remained naked the entire flight. Evan did as well, donning a robe whenever the pilots needed a word with him.

I wiped my clammy palms against my skirt and closed my eyes. It would all end today with one word. *No*. It would kill a part of me to say it, but it's what Evan wanted, and his happiness mattered more to me than my own. He would never forgive me if I accepted his proposal. I couldn't live with his hatred, not after everything we went through together. I had to say no, for him. It would be my final gift.

"You look fabulous, if a little hot." Brenda winked as she finished playing with my mascara. "Now go land yourself a billionaire."

If only it were that easy. “Yeah, I’ll get right on that.”

I faked a smile and walked over to where Paul was standing. He had just finished filming Evan’s scene with Amber, and from the somber look in his eyes, it hadn’t gone the way he wanted. I wondered how the southern belle reacted to the prince’s rejection. Assuming that was how it all went. It was possible Evan proposed to her after all, and that all this was for naught. That would almost make it easier on me. I would prefer he reject me than the other way around, but that wasn’t the deal.

“You look great, Sarah.” Paul’s tone lacked the joviality from our first day of shooting. He gave up while we were in Iceland and stopped giving us scripts. Whether it was because he knew it was a lost cause or because we didn’t need them, I wasn’t sure. “Ready?”

To have my heart broken on national television? “Sure.” That was every girl’s dream, right?

He guided me over to the path that led to the beach. “Walk slow and try to smile.”

Smile. Right. I flashed him a cheeky grin and started down the stairs with the cameraman. It was close to midnight, but the path was illuminated by all the production lights. I followed the cobblestone walkway down to the sand. Evan was standing about a hundred yards away, clad in a black suit and staring out into the waves with his hands tucked into his pockets. Between my formal black gown and his tux, we looked ready for a night at the symphony.

He turned with a smile as I approached, my presence obvious thanks to my well-lit entourage. His white shirt was open at the collar instead of adorned with a tie. I couldn’t blame him with this hot weather.

In lieu of a hello, I ran my fingers through his dark, windswept hair and pulled him down for a kiss. If this would be the last time our lips met, I wanted to make it memorable. My heart ached as he pulled away. Saying good-bye was going to be the hardest thing I’d ever have to do.

His grin didn't reach his eyes. "Hi, Sarah."

"Hi." I tried to smile but failed. I couldn't believe I was about to do this. What was I thinking agreeing to this deal? My dream was to own my own marketing firm, but meeting him changed everything. Being my own boss was still the goal, but being with him was my new fantasy. I wanted him to propose and beg me to say yes. No, that wasn't quite right. Marrying him would be amazing, but that wasn't what I wanted most. I craved a future with him. It didn't have to involve wedding bands or children. I desired a partnership, one on the physical and emotional planes that tied us together deeper than marriage ever could. And it was the one thing he would never give me.

He took a deep breath, his grin faltering. "Sorry, I had no idea how hard this would be."

"Me neither."

He took my hands in his, holding me close, but not close enough. "Sarah, I've enjoyed every minute with you. Your view on life is refreshing, your laugh always makes me smile, and your candor is a rare gift in this world that I cherish more than you'll ever know."

My cheeks heated at his thoughtful words. No one had ever praised me for being honest, but he reveled in it. I opened my mouth to thank him and return the favor, but he continued before I had the chance.

"You're also one of the most gorgeous women I've ever met, with eyes I swear see right through me, and I love how dedicated you are to your work. Our time in Iceland showed me the true potential of our partnership and made me really excited for the future to come. Which is why ..." He was so focused on his words that he didn't notice my brittle arms as he started to kneel. The warmth his earlier words created was replaced with a cold chill that went straight to my heart.

Dedicated to your work ... Partnership ... Future to come
... All subtle reminders of the contract I signed, as if he thought I might forget. After everything we went through, he didn't trust me to hold up my end of the bargain? Or did he

worry I would get so swept up in the moment that I would accidentally say yes?

“I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Sarah. I’m hoping we can negotiate a new contract”—this time his grin reached his eyes, while tears pricked mine, and not the good kind—“where you become my wife. I want to be with you, always, and I’m not just saying that. You know I mean what I say, and I mean this.”

Ice coated my veins. How could he be so cruel as to use our catchphrase, now of all times? Was he making a mockery of everything we shared? I couldn’t listen to this anymore. If he wanted to remind me of our *contract*, he did a fine job. Not that I forgot. I knew what he expected. He didn’t need to break my heart in the process, but of course he didn’t realize that’s what he was doing. He had no idea I had fallen in love with him.

It was such a stupid thing to do, and I promised myself I wouldn’t, but the heart was a fickle beast. I had to tell him. Not here, not now, not with the cameras rolling, but in private. I couldn’t leave tonight without him knowing. If I didn’t tell him, I would regret it for the rest of my life. Screw awkwardness. We’d get over it, but I would never get over withholding something so big from him.

“I’m sorry, Evan. I can’t.” He was in the middle of saying something I hadn’t heard, too lost in my own thoughts to listen to another word. I couldn’t take it. I had to go. I would find him later to explain, tell him the truth, and bear the consequences. It might end our partnership or make working together difficult, but nothing could be worse than continuing this charade without telling him how I felt. My heart was done handling the pressure. It was time to come clean.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated, letting go of his hands. The hurt radiating from his brown eyes was not what I expected. Was it an act for the cameras? He couldn’t react joyously, or they would suspect something wasn’t right. I hated that it was an act. I despised this situation, the deal we made, this entire damn show, everything. I hated it all. I had to get out of here.

BEDROOM ISSUES

I ran up the path to the hotel and straight to my room, where I opened the door and slammed it in the cameraman's face. I was in such a daze that I failed to realize I'd lost my shoes somewhere along the way. Fuck them. The show could have them. I threw myself on the bed and screamed into my pillow. It did nothing to soothe the pain in my chest. My entire body ached like I'd ran a marathon, and my heart was beating a mile a minute. This was what dying felt like. I was sure of it. Part of me died on that beach.

"God, that proposal," I whispered to myself. His words. He threw every little nuance between us back at me. Did he think it was cute? Clever? Because it wasn't. It hurt like hell. I wanted to hate him for it, but it was my fault for not telling him how I felt. I played it off like I was fine with our temporary relationship—enjoying the moment and forgetting the future. I *would* tell him tonight. Whenever I stopped crying.

I punched the pillow over and over, willing it to make me feel better. It didn't. Nothing would help except talking to Evan. I had to know if that look in his eyes was fake or real. Had my rejection hurt him? But he wanted me to say no. His speech was proof of that. All those damn reminders of our *contract*. God, I hated that contract. I would burn it when I got home. It ruined my life. I should have left when I had the chance.

But then you never would have fallen in love with Evan ...

“Fuck.” I repeated the word with each punch into my pillow. Falling in love with Evan was the best and worst thing to ever happen to me. I was content before I knew how that emotion felt, but now that I knew about it, I couldn’t live without it. Love opened my eyes to a world I never knew existed, one with romance and pleasure beyond my wildest dreams. I couldn’t hate Evan for introducing me to this, not when so much happiness preceded the pain. I had to tell him. Tonight.

I tore off my gown and replaced it with jeans, a tank top, and sandals. If I was going to him, I would at least be comfortable. He texted me his room number last night after telling me he left a copy of the key for me at the reception. I had picked it up with the intention of joining him, but he sent me another text on my way up letting me know that his parents had arrived. An hour later, he told me not to bother because it didn’t look like they were leaving anytime soon. I hoped he was in the same room. He shouldn’t have left for home yet. It was the middle of the night. Surely he stayed.

I got in the elevator and hit the button to his floor, key in hand. If his parents were there, I would ask them to leave. The show didn’t matter anymore and neither did our quiet arrangement. I didn’t care who found out. I stepped into his hallway and stared at his door. It was now or never. I knocked. When no one answered, I used the key. It worked and revealed a massive foyer of a penthouse suite. It was two stories and opened into a living area that overlooked a patio pool. *The life of a billionaire.*

The darkness revealed no one in the living room, kitchen, or outside. I moved toward the light down the hall, coming from what I assumed was a bedroom. I turned the knob without knocking. A big mistake.

My hand went to my mouth and fluttered uselessly there. I couldn’t scream. I couldn’t even breathe. The first thing I saw was Amber’s naked ass and Evan’s hands on her bare shoulders. They were standing beside the unmade bed. His pants were on, thank God, but he was shirtless. Had they just finished fucking?

The asshole met my gaze over the blonde's head and had the audacity to narrow his eyes. I glowered right back at him. "I guess you really do mean what you say, huh, Evan?" I turned on my heels and stalked out of his suite. *Un-fucking-believable*. After everything we'd been through, he was fucking Amber behind my back. Or maybe it was new. Now that the show was over, we were free to screw whomever we wanted. Either way, it sucked. And I hated him for it.

"What the fuck, Sarah?" Evan demanded as he followed me into the hallway. "How did you even get into my room? And have you heard of knocking?"

"Are you kidding me right now? You gave me a key, genius. And I did knock, but you were too busy screwing Amber to answer." I punched the button for the elevator. I *really* wanted to hit something. His face would do.

"What were you doing in my room?"

"I came up to talk to you, something I now see was a huge mistake." *Anytime now would be great, Mister Elevator.*

"About what? Your money?"

I rolled my eyes. "Sure. That was it." Like I would admit the real reason after catching him in the act with another woman. I clearly meant nothing to him.

The elevator opened, and I stepped inside. His hand shot out to keep it from closing. "You don't need to worry, Sarah. You held up your side of the bargain brilliantly, and you'll get your funding." His tone was scathing and went straight to my heart. "My finance guy will be in touch. No need to work through me at all. Anything else I can help you with?"

I gaped at him. He was angry with me for, what, following through on the contract? He was the one already rebounding with another woman, or hell, who knew what happened between him and Amber in France? Maybe he was fucking her the entire time.

"Miss Summers," he prompted, his gaze furious. "Do you require me for anything else, or can I get back to the issue in my bedroom?"

“Yeah, that’s some *issue* you’ve got. Go for it, Casanova. My bank account and I are thoroughly satisfied with your services.” I couldn’t believe what I was saying to him. I loved this man up until ten minutes ago when he ripped my heart out of my chest. This hurt worse than the beach. What the hell was wrong with me? I was the even-keeled one, not the hotheaded one. *Jesus, Sarah. Get a grip.*

“You can’t really be upset with me about Amber, can you? You turned down my proposal just three hours ago. Hell, you wouldn’t even let me finish.”

“Yes, and you were obviously really upset about that. So upset that you’re already entertaining another woman, huh? Or were you fucking her the entire time?”

“The fact that you’re asking me that tells me how very wrong I was about everything between us.” He shook his head. “Good-bye, Sarah.”

He removed his arm from the elevator and allowed it to shut. His words followed me all the way to my floor. They didn’t make any sense, but one thing was very clear. I would not be accepting the money from Evan Mershano. I could not be tied to that man in any way. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.

SECRETS AND CHINESE FOOD

6 weeks later ...

Rachel stormed into her apartment, muttering a colorful litany of curse words. It was impressive, if a little scary.

“You okay over there, Rach?” I was lounging on the sofa, working on a project for the public health firm I volunteered for in college. They hired me back on a part-time basis last month after I begged them for a job. Without a reference from Stern and Associates, I wasn’t having much luck getting a new full-time gig in Chicago. Everyone wanted an explanation for why I quit without notice, and I couldn’t bring myself to talk about it yet.

“No.” Rachel slammed her purse down on the kitchen counter and stalked off to her bedroom. I gave her space and waited for her to come back. When she did, she was dressed in pajama pants and a tank top, and her blonde hair was tousled up into a bun. My eyebrows hit my hairline. Rachel’s dressing down at this early hour was not a good sign. “What’s going on?”

“I’d offer you wine, but I don’t feel like sharing. And you’re going to work in a few hours anyway.” She pulled a fresh bottle from the fridge, opened it, and poured herself a healthy glass. She was halfway finished with it before collapsing beside me on the couch. “I fucking hate my job right now.”

“Bad day at work, then?”

“You have no idea.”

“Want to talk about it?” I didn’t know much about being a lawyer, but I understood bad work days. They were my norm as of late.

“You’ll never believe ...” She gave me an odd look and took a long sip of wine. “Actually, you know what? I don’t even want to talk about it.”

I knew my best friend better than she knew herself sometimes, which meant I knew when she was lying. She had a tell, a tick in her lower jaw. I was about to press when the door buzzer went off. Her blue eyes rounded. “Tell me you’re expecting someone.”

“Who would I be expecting?” I moved in last weekend. Three part-time jobs weren’t paying enough to cover rent and my student loans. Rachel offered me a spot until I could get back on my feet. Her two-bedroom flat had more than enough space, boasting two full bathrooms, a kitchen, dining room, and living area. I envied her lawyer salary.

The door buzzed again. I got to my feet. “I guess I’ll get that.” Because Rachel didn’t look like she was going to move anytime soon. What had gotten into her? Did Ryan come to see her today? That would explain her mood. Her ex showed up at the most inopportune times. If he was here now, I’d send him back to hell. He would never touch my best friend again.

My confidence deflated as I checked the peephole. “Shit.” What was Will doing here? I cracked open the door and met the trademark Mershano gaze that haunted my dreams at night. My heart hurt looking at him. “Hey, Will.”

His blond eyebrows lifted. “Sarah? What are you doing here?”

“She fucking lives here, Mershano,” Rachel yelled from the couch. “Go home.”

His brow furrowed. “I thought you had a place by the water or something?”

I wasn’t sure how he knew that, but I didn’t bother to ask. “Not anymore.” I forced a smile. “What brings you to our

apartment?” *And if you’re not here for me, why are you here?*
Why would he visit Rachel?

“Dinner.” He held up a paper bag and walked past me into the apartment. “I only brought enough for two, but I’ll order more.” He set the food on the dining room table and removed his leather jacket. The scent reminded me of Evan, but the brazenness was all Will. He meandered into the kitchen, found the plates and silverware on his first guess, and walked back to start distributing food.

“Sure, come right in and make yourself at home.” Rachel looked like she was considering throwing her empty wine glass at the intruder’s head. *Interesting.*

“Thanks, darlin’.” He flashed her a dimple and continued preparing dinner. “So how’s the new firm going, Sarah? Everything coming along okay?”

My heart dropped into my stomach. “Uh ...”

“*Seriously?*” Rachel stalked into the kitchen and poured herself more wine. “I thought I made myself clear this morning. I’m not working for you.”

“Right, and as I said, you’ll be working *with* me.” He waggled his brows and pushed a plate toward her. Sesame chicken with broccoli and fried rice. Rachel’s favorite. Her blue eyes narrowed, but admiration swirled in their depths. My best friend was impressed. I was, too.

She picked up the dish and gave Will a measured look. “Accepting this doesn’t mean I accept your proposal.”

“Uh-huh.” He winked at her and pushed the other plate toward me. “I’ll order myself something else.”

“Oh, don’t trouble yourself. I’ve got work in an hour and have to get ready. You two, uh, enjoy.” Something was up with them. Was this why Rachel came home in a huff?

“It’s almost seven o’clock.” He took a bite of his beef dish. The red pepper flakes gave it a spicy scent. “Isn’t marketing a day job?”

“Mostly.” I closed my laptop on the couch and stowed it in my messenger bag. “Bartending, however, is a night job.”

He stopped chewing and gave me a once-over. “Bartending?”

“Yep.” I gave Rachel a look that said, *You’re explaining this to me later*, and walked into my room to change. The red halter top and jean skirt reminded me of college, but I earned good tips wearing it. I threw it on, pulled my thick hair into a high ponytail, and put on a pair of strappy heels. Not my favorite job, but it paid the bills. I touched up my makeup and applied concealer to hide the bags beneath my eyes.

I didn’t sleep much these days. Every night I dreamt of *him*. The “time heals all wounds” rhetoric didn’t apply to my broken heart. It hurt just as much today as it did six weeks ago when I left Maui. I flew coach back to Chicago. It was a slap in the face, and all I could think about was Amber on his private jet. I hated him, and I loved him.

I never developed the photos from our trip to Iceland. The camera he gave me was packed away in a box in the closet. I refused to look at it. It hurt too much. Some nights I considered burning it, but whenever I got the nerve to retrieve it, I started to cry. I was a mess.

His finance guy called me to discuss the money a few days after I returned. I told him I wasn’t ready and would call him when the time was right. That appeased him for three weeks. When he phoned me a second time, he asked for a timeline, and I told him I didn’t have one. The other two times he reached out to me, I ignored him. Whenever my confidence returned, I would tell him to take a hike. Given my weak state, that would be a while.

When I walked back out into the living room, it was to find Rachel and Will engaged in a heated debate. They both stopped talking and watched me pick up my purse. *Yeah, guys, not awkward at all*. My best friend had a lot of explaining to do later.

Rachel cleared her throat. “You’re working at Louie’s tonight, right?”

“Yep.” I bartended at two places, both within walking distance of the apartment. They were more than happy to hire me, stating that my experience made me perfect for the job. As both managers were male, I knew the real reason had nothing to do with my brain and everything to do with how my breasts looked in a red halter top.

Will shook his head and walked off in the direction of Rachel’s bedroom, his phone going to his ear.

“William Mershano, now you listen to me.” My friend stalked off after him as he shut the door to her room and locked himself inside. She pounded on the wood and started up another litany of colorful curses.

“You and I are going to have an interesting conversation later, Rach.” If I didn’t have to get to the bar, we would be having it now.

“Oh, this is nothing and not at all what it looks like.” She knocked again, her voice rising to a shout. “He’s just a pompous ass who thinks he owns the damn place!”

“Uh-huh.” The pink coloring on her cheeks suggested otherwise. Rachel Dawson never lost her temper, but the billionaire winemaker had gotten under her skin. It seemed my best friend left out some pertinent details about what happened when Will came here to negotiate the infamous contract. She hadn’t mentioned him once since I returned, but their bickering indicated he hadn’t just shown up out of the blue. They’d kept in touch. *Interesting*. “I’ve gotta get going. Good luck with that.” I gestured to her door.

“I might need your help hiding a body later,” she muttered.

“That’s what friends are for, right?” I gave her a wave and left before she could see the tears fighting for life behind my eyes. The stark reminder of Evan was the last thing I needed. He hadn’t once tried to contact me. Not that I expected him to. We didn’t leave on happy terms. That was my biggest regret. Those final hours tainted our relationship, ruining all the good memories and replacing them with heartache.

The experience changed me. I lost everything—my job, my livelihood, and the love of my life—all in one night. My mom wanted me to move home, not in with Rachel. But going back to Indiana would be the ultimate sign of failure. I couldn't handle that. I needed to find myself again, and I couldn't do that in Fishers. Chicago was big enough for me to hide and reinvent the wheel.

Abby felt horrible. Whether it was because I found love and lost it or because she destroyed my life with a stupid prank, I wasn't sure. My plan for revenge was put on hold due to Rachel's sexy fed friend being pulled into a case, but I fully intended to see it through when he was available. The lull would make my sister complacent, and that's when I would strike. Her apologies weren't about the prank so much as about setting my heart up to be broken. Feeling bad for me was not the same as understanding why what she did was wrong. It was time for her to grow up.

"Hey, Sarah," Chuck greeted at the front door of Louie's. The burly bouncer was in his forties, bald, and about a foot taller than me. He was perfect for night security.

"Hey, Chuck." I bumped my fist against his and entered my new world. Someday I would get used to it.

LOUIE'S BAR

After working four nights in a row, I was looking forward to a day off. I had two hours left of my Saturday-night shift at Louie's, and then I was free to go. I hoped Rachel would be home tomorrow for some girl-bonding time. I hadn't seen her much since Will's mysterious appearance last week. There was something going on between them, something my friend didn't want to talk about. I gave her space, but my curiosity was piqued.

I poured a round of beers for a group of frat boys at the bar. The one I nicknamed Billy was in charge of the tab and drunk off his ass. "Thanks, sweetheart." He winked at my breasts.

"Anytime, Billy." I turned around before he could ask me out again.

I regretted wearing jeans and a tank top tonight. June in Chicago was humid, making my clothes cling to my sweaty skin. Louie's was known for its craft beers, not its air conditioning. I pulled my hair up into a ponytail and grabbed a menu to use as a fan as I helped the next customer.

The petite blonde chick gave me a once-over and pursed her ruby lips. Someone loved makeup. "Rum and Coke." The way she looked down her nose at me made her nickname easy. *Bitch.*

"ID?"

"Do I look like I'm carrying my ID?" She gestured at her skimpy dress and raised her eyebrows.

“Hmm, unfortunately, it’s bar policy to check anyone who looks under thirty. How about I get you a Coke and hold the rum?” I flashed her a smile that matched my saccharine tone.

“Seriously?”

“Is that a no? Too bad. I make a mean Coke. Let me know if you change your mind.” I moved on to the customer who sat at the far end of the bar during our conversation. My peripheral vision caught his movement, but not his face. I walked over with a napkin and set it in front of the guy.

“What can I get ... ?” My fake smile died as I met a pair of familiar dark eyes. *Fuck.*

“Hello, Miss Summers.” Evan gave me a once-over and took the menu from my hand. “Thanks. I’ll let you know what I want in a bit.” He dismissed me by lowering his gaze.

My mouth wagged, but nothing came out. *Of all the bars in Chicago ...*

“Hey, sweetheart!” Billy flapped his arms around in an obnoxious pattern. I picked my jaw up off the floor and started toward the drunk man. It would give Evan time to disappear if he entered the bar by mistake.

I folded my arms on the bar. “What can I get you?”

“Well, my buddies and I were thinkin’.” Nothing good ever followed that phrase. “What time do ya get off work?”

“Too late for you.” I smiled to soften my rejection. “You’ll be back on campus before I’m finished up here.”

“Nah, we could wait.” He wagged his brows. “You’d be worth it.”

“Oh, I’d be more than worth it, but I have to get some sleep tonight, and somehow I doubt that’s what you have in mind.” I walked away before he could ask again. If he pushed too much, Chuck would throw his drunk ass outside, and I didn’t want to do that to the poor kid.

I refilled a few drinks for others who approached the bar, and started when Evan took a stool two seats down from Billy. “I decided what I want to drink, if you don’t mind.”

I cocked an eyebrow at the impatient billionaire. “Bourbon?”

He gave a single nod. “Top shelf, please.”

I snorted. “Yeah, I’ll get right on that.” I snatched a bottle of Old Crow from the bottom shelf and poured two fingers over some ice cubes. I handed it to him with a wink. “Enjoy.”

The look he gave the liquid was one of grave offense. “This shit tastes like battery acid.”

“So I hear.” He deserved that and worse.

I helped a few customers waving at me. Evan’s glass was untouched when I returned. With his arms folded, his grey shirt stretched over his biceps. The wicked glint in his gaze made me nervous. I’d seen that look enough to know he was up to no good. Frat boy caught my attention first, stating he wanted to close out his tab. I helped him before returning my attention to the handsome man at the bar.

“What are you doing here, Evan?” His not leaving when he had the chance meant he was here for me, but I had no idea why. He made himself crystal clear when we parted seven weeks ago.

“Well, you know, it’s an interesting thing. I could have sworn I set aside a few million dollars to fund this marketing firm, but for whatever reason, the owner hasn’t used a dime of it. Odd, right?”

Of course. He was here about his precious money. “Maybe the owner changed her mind.”

“Hmm, no, I don’t think so. She told me it was her dream to manage her own firm and focus on public health programs. I doubt she’d give that up without a good reason.”

“Dreams change.”

“True.” He swirled his drink. “But I don’t think this one has, which is why I’m here.”

I was too exhausted from working three jobs to continue our witty banter. “What do you want me to say, Evan?”

He placed his elbows on the bar. “I want you to explain to me why you’re working here and living with Rachel instead of using the funds I set aside for you.”

I wanted to tell him it was none of his fucking business, but that wasn’t true. He set aside funds for an investment that wasn’t proving fruitful, and wanted to know why. This was a business visit. He could have saved time by calling.

“Look, I’ll make this short so you can get on your way. I’m not opening my own firm, so keep the money and do something else with it. I’ll sign whatever contract you want to relinquish the funds. Just give it to Rachel, and she’ll handle the rest.” I took his glass and dumped it in the sink on my way to the end of the bar. I needed a break. Jill was waiting tables off to the side and saw me coming. “I need five minutes.”

“Sure thing,” the redhead murmured, taking over the bar. She was in her forties and a veteran at Louie’s. That was why she got the tables, while I handled the bar. The seated patrons paid better than those who mingled by the stools, but I got more foot traffic.

I leaned against the wall in the back room with my hands on my knees. I felt sick to my stomach. My heart withered into a ball and died when he confirmed that he was here on business. He was married to his work. That took priority over all else. A month and a half later, and seeing him still took my breath away. His windswept, dark hair, sinful gaze, and muscular physique drew my eyes like a moth to a flame. And I hated him for it. I looked like hell turned over in comparison.

I slid down to the floor and put my head in my palms. Tears gathered in my eyes, but I swallowed them back. I would not cry here. Not at work. Not over him. Not again.

“I’m not interested in drafting a new contract, Miss Summers. I want to discuss the old one.”

MISCONCEPTIONS

“What are you doing back here?” I expected him to leave, not hunt me down in the employees’ break room. His presence took up all the available space in the tiny area, making my heart race. He leaned against the doorway, crossing his jean-clad legs at the ankles.

“We’re not done talking.” His casual tone made me want to hit something, or cry. The waterworks were ready to go, but I was holding them back. I wouldn’t be able to for long if he kept crowding me. It was too much.

“What else do you want me to say, Evan? I haven’t touched your money, and I have no intention of doing so.” I pulled myself up off the floor and dusted off my jeans. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to work.”

His arm blocked my exit. “Why are you turning your back on your dreams, Sarah?”

“Why do you even care, Evan? You won, right? You didn’t have to marry anyone, and now you get to keep your money. Yay you. Can I go back to work now?”

“Not until you tell me why. After everything we went through, why refuse the money?”

The laugh that bubbled out of me was part anger, part hysteria. I was losing it, and the last thing I wanted to do was break down in front of him. “You really want to know why?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Fine.” I had nothing left to lose. Why not throw my pride away, too? “Because I *can’t*. Silent partnership or not, you’d still be there, and I can’t be tied to you like that.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, Sarah.”

“It wouldn’t make sense to you, would it?” I shook my head. His words were the final nail in my coffin. He needed to go. Now. And I knew what I needed to say to make him leave. At least I would have my closure. “I love you, Evan. That’s why I can’t be tied to you. It hurts too much.” I swiped a treacherous tear from my eye and gave him a sad smile. “I know you don’t understand, and I don’t expect you to, but if you ever cared about me at all, then let this be. Take your money and leave me alone.”

I ducked under his arm and went back to the bar to finish my shift. There was nothing left to say. The three dreaded words were out there in the open. A weight was lifted from my shoulders, but my heart throbbed. Leaving him in the back room was the right decision. His response would have only served to hurt me more. I didn’t need him to tell me he couldn’t love me. I already knew.

I didn’t see him leave, but I wasn’t paying attention. I worked in zombie mode, filling drinks and closing tabs. When two o’clock rolled around, I grabbed my purse from the empty employee area and followed Chuck to the back door.

“Be safe, Summers.” He said that every night.

I gave him a wave and forced a smile. “Always.”

Rachel’s apartment was three blocks away. I counted each step, telling myself I could break down as soon as I closed her door. Alone time with a bottle of wine and a tub of ice cream was on my agenda. This depression needed to end. I would allow myself one more night to wallow in it, and then I would move on. I had to.

I was so focused on walking in a straight line that I didn’t see the man who stepped out in front of me on the sidewalk until it was too late. I ran right into his solid chest. His hands went to my hips, steadying me when I would have fallen.

“Fuck, Evan.” I knew it was him without looking up.
Leather and pine.

He didn’t let go of me. “Sorry. I was waiting by the front door, but you slipped out the back.”

“Front door of what?”

“Louie’s.”

“Oh.” I peered up at him and sighed. I was exhausted.
“What do you need now? Haven’t I told you enough?”

“You have, and I believe it’s my turn now.” “Your turn for what?”

“To talk. I know it’s two in the morning, but do you want to have a late dinner with me?”

I stared at him. “Dinner?”

“We can make it breakfast if you want.”

“That sounds like a pickup line.” He grinned. “It does, but it’s not.”

“Why?” His palms were hot on my hips. Seven weeks later and I was still weak for him. *Damn it.* “Never mind. Fine. Dinner or breakfast.” *Whatever it will take to get you to go away and leave me in peace.*

When he asked me to get a bite to eat, he meant in his room at Mershano Suites off Michigan Avenue. I didn’t have the energy or willpower to argue. His penthouse suite boasted gorgeous views of Chicago to one side and Lake Michigan to the other. It was dark, but the city’s lights reflected on the water, illuminating the living area. The suite took up half the floor, making me suspect there were two or three bedrooms down the hall to my right and at least that many bathrooms. The square footage of this place was triple that of Rachel’s apartment. I didn’t want to know how much it cost per night.

Evan went to the full kitchen and opened the fridge to pull out a bottle of wine. He didn’t ask if I wanted any, just poured a glass and handed it over. I took it because I needed it, and I knew he had good taste. I kicked off my shoes near the

oversized couch by the windows and collapsed onto the plush cushions. He hadn't spoken a word to me since we got in the car, and I wasn't going to be the one to break the silence. He said it was his turn to talk, and I was holding him to that.

"Dinner should be here in thirty minutes." Evan's thigh brushed mine as he sat beside me on the couch. He scratched the dark hairs dusting his chin and gave me a look I couldn't interpret. "I'm not sure where to start."

"How about you start by telling me why you wanted to have dinner." That seemed an easy enough place to begin.

"Because I've missed you. Because I have a thousand things I need to say to you." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Look, I'm not good at this, Sarah. My relationships always ended before I could really feel anything, so there was never a need to express myself. But with you, well, everything's different with you."

"Why is it different?" I tucked my legs up onto the couch and wrapped my arms around my shins.

"That's not where I want to start." His intense gaze held mine. "I didn't sleep with Amber, Sarah. I won't lie. I considered it because I was hurt, but nothing happened. We didn't even kiss."

"Okay." All I had was his word to go on, and it wasn't enough to believe him, but I'd let him continue.

"I can see the doubt in your eyes, but hear me out. I woke up to her climbing into bed with me, naked. Needless to say, she shocked me. I jumped up and turned on the lights, and she followed, going on about reconciling or some shit. I told her to get dressed and leave, but she wouldn't listen. I was in the process of forcing her toward the door when you walked in."

"Why are you telling me this?" It wasn't a memory I wanted to revisit, much less talk about.

"Because I'm a man of my word, and it really pissed me off when you questioned that."

I snorted. "I walked in on you caressing Amber's naked body, Evan. I think I was within my right to question your

integrity.”

“You should have had more faith in me by that point.”

“Really? And why is that, Evan? Because you were being faithful to me? Only dating me? Oh, wait, no, you were seeing a dozen other women for half of our relationship, right?” I was being a bitch, and I knew it, but he hurt me. Rational words weren’t on the tip of my tongue.

He turned toward me, his gaze intent. “Of all the times we had made love, did I ever throw my pants on right afterward? Did I ever hold you away at arm’s length afterward?”

My anger died with the onslaught of happy memories—him holding me against him after sex, pressing kisses all over my body, worshiping me. He left in the morning each time, never during the night, except those first few times when all we did was kiss. I swallowed. He was right. I should have had more faith in him.

The fact that you’re asking me that tells me how very wrong I was about everything between us. His words from that night by the elevator haunted me. I didn’t understand what he meant, but now I did. He was disappointed that I questioned his faithfulness to me during the show. His actions spoke louder than words. With the exception of France, he was in my room every night. Why would he go through the hassle if he was sleeping with Amber, too? I was an idiot.

“I never slept with her,” he added, his voice quiet. “We kissed for the camera, but never in private. Not even that night. I never wanted her, Sarah.”

“I’m sorry.” The two words were bitter on my tongue and stained with regret. “You’re right. I should have had more faith in you.”

I wasn’t an irrational person, but love blinded me to reason. It made me do and say things that made no sense. My heart was on my sleeve when I went to his room, and it broke when I found him touching another woman. But I missed the obvious. His chocolate eyes gleamed when lost in a moment of passion, and that wasn’t how he looked at Amber that night.

He was pissed. I thought it was at my intrusion, but he was angry before I walked through the door. I didn't notice because I was upset, and I questioned him because I was hurt.

"Our dating wasn't exactly conventional," Evan murmured. "And Amber isn't the reason I wanted to have dinner with you. I just wanted to clear that part up first. I didn't fuck her, and it pissed me off that you thought I could. After everything, I expected more, but I think we've both been operating under some misconceptions. And those started in Iceland."

I frowned. "I'm not following. What misconceptions?"

"You won't take my money because you love me. If that's true, why did you suggest we stop seeing each other after the show?"

"I didn't."

"You said we shouldn't see each other afterward, or at least until the show dies down. Correct?"

My arms tightened around my legs as I tried to hug my knees closer. I didn't like revisiting this conversation. "You told me you didn't want anyone finding out about our arrangement, and I knew how you felt about long-term commitments. I suggested what I thought you wanted to hear."

He stared at me. "And when you did, I assumed that was what you really wanted."

"What? That's ridiculous."

"Really?" He stretched his arms out along the back of the couch and rested his fingers an inch from my knees. "As ridiculous as suggesting we stop seeing each other even though you wanted the opposite?"

"Yeah, but I was doing that ..." *Because that's what I thought you wanted.* "Well, shit." We did the same thing. "Then what did you want?"

"I told you what I wanted—to keep seeing each other and to be discreet about it."

“And I ...” I had no idea how to respond to that. “I’m an idiot.”

“No, we’re both at fault here. I should have been more up front with you. Maybe then my proposal would have gone a little better.”

“Your proposal? How exactly? By reminding me about our contract?”

“Well, yeah. I thought it would make you smile, but it seemed to have the opposite effect.” He ran his hand through his hair and gave me a look. “You did not react at all how I expected.”

“You were reminding me that I had to reject your proposal, like you thought I’d renege on our agreement or something. I know I didn’t stay until the end to say no properly, but it pissed me off that you had the nerve to doubt me. You were mad that I didn’t have faith in you, so I’m sure you know how that felt.”

“Wait, you thought I was telling you to say no?” “Isn’t that what you were doing?”

“No. I was trying to be cute, which clearly failed.” He combed his fingers through his hair and smiled sadly. “Did you even hear what I was saying when you rejected me?”

“Uh, I started to tune you out after you reminded me that you mean what you say.” Our catchphrase that I thought he was using to mock me.

“Then let me tell you where I was. I’d just said, ‘I’ve fallen in love with you, Sarah. I know it’s not what we agreed upon, but ...’ and you cut me off to say, ‘I can’t.’”

RED LACE

“I thought you chose the money over me, Sarah.” His quiet words suffocated me. My mouth was stuck in the open position and refused to close. *He loves me?* “I realized how I felt while we were in Iceland, which is why I suggested Thailand. When you suggested we stop seeing each other, I shut off my emotions and decided on an alternative plan to propose. I knew it was a gamble, but I thought you felt the same way, until you ran off. Then you showed up and asked me about the money.”

I gaped at him. “No, you accused me of being there about the money, and I answered sarcastically that I was.”

He didn’t say anything for a long moment. “More misconceptions.”

“No shit. I’ve never cared about the money. Okay, well, I did at first. It was my primary motivator for saying yes to our agreement, but I also stayed because I liked you. And that like grew into something foreign and scary, and—”

He pushed off the couch and was on me before I could finish. His lips captured mine, silencing anything else I would have said. I spread my knees to bring him closer, but he pulled me into his lap instead. I straddled him on the couch and grabbed his shoulders. *God, I missed this.*

The hand in my hair slid down to my neck as he devoured my mouth. Heat swam through my veins, touching each nerve and lighting my skin on fire. His tongue twisted with mine, reminding me that he was a master of seduction. It wouldn’t

take much to get my clothes off tonight. Seven weeks without his touch left me craving anything he would be willing to give me, but there were things left unsaid between us. *Why now?*

I tore my mouth from his and narrowed my eyes. “If you love me, then why wait to come after me?”

He nipped my lower lip. “I thought you wanted my money, not me.”

“Yeah, but wasn’t it obvious when I didn’t take any of the funds?”

“No, I left my finance guy in charge of it, and he failed to mention that you weren’t using the money. And before you ask, I didn’t oversee the funds, because I didn’t want to think about you. Proposing and meaning it was hard enough. Having you reject me? It sucked, Sarah. Needless to say, I was pissed afterward.” Some of that anger still swirled in the depth of his eyes.

“Okay, so why now?”

“Will.” It was a short answer that had my eyebrows meeting my hairline. “He called me a week ago and asked if I was aware that you were working three jobs and living with Rachel. I was in Japan for work, so it took me a few days to get in touch with my finance guy. When he told me you weren’t returning his calls, I flew to Chicago.”

“When you showed up tonight, I thought you were upset that your investment wasn’t going anywhere.”

“The money had nothing to do with it. I was upset to see you not following your dreams, Sarah. As hurt as I was that you rejected me, I contented myself with knowing you were happy and pursuing your dream career. When I found out you weren’t, I dropped everything to figure out why.”

That was sweet in a way. He cared. *Because he loves me.* I cradled his face between my palms and kissed him. His tongue traced my lower lip before delving into the crevice of my mouth. His fingers tightened against my neck, holding me to him as he took control. Residual anger and passion made him rougher than usual, but it suited my mood. I was furious at him

and myself for our poor communication. *So many misunderstandings* ... They cost us seven weeks together. I should have told him how I felt, but he should have told me, too. We were both idiots.

He cursed when the doorbell to his suite rang. “That would be dinner.”

“If we ignore them, will they go away?” “Not likely.”

“Damn.” I climbed off his lap and admired his ass as he sauntered over to the foyer. He came back with a guy holding a thick pizza box and another pushing a cart with a sundae bar. “Holy crap, Mershano.” The logo on the box was from a local Chicago vendor I knew was closed at this hour.

“Hey, when in Chicago, one must eat pizza. This is the number one chain here, right?”

I licked my lips. “Oh yeah.”

“Good.” He tipped the delivery boys and told them we could take it from here. I eyed the box of cheesy deliciousness.

“You realize this is the kind of pizza you have, like, one slice of and are full all day afterward, right?”

“Yep.”

“Then why did you get a large?”

He grabbed a plate from the cart, put a slice on it, and handed it to me. Then he fixed one for himself and collapsed onto the couch beside me. “I figure this should feed us for at least two days while we figure out what the hell is going on between us. Because neither of us is walking out that door until we come to a mutual agreement.”

I choked on the bite of pizza I’d just shoved in my mouth. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” He flashed those sinful dimples and dug into his slice. It was smothered in pepperoni, cheese, and sauce, in that order. Good Chicago pizza had the sauce on top.

“What about work?”

He shrugged. "I took the week off."

"Okay, what about *my* work?"

"That'll be part of our negotiation, Miss Summers." He took another bite while I gaped at him. "I suggest you eat that, sweetheart. You're going to need your energy in thirty minutes when I take you to bed."

My heart skipped a beat. His gaze was filled with intent as he said those last few words. I took a bite of my pizza in response, because what else was there to say? I couldn't deny the man any more than he could deny himself.

"I haven't been with anyone else," he added, warming me inside. I loved when his voice dropped to that low murmur. It was sexy and filled with dark promise. "In case you were wondering."

"I haven't either." Sex with anyone other than him hadn't crossed my mind. Evan was all I thought about. I set my half-eaten slice down. "I don't need energy." I needed him. I crawled into his lap as he set his plate aside, and trailed kisses up to his ear. "I love you, Evan Mershano." Butterflies fluttered through my lower abdomen. I couldn't believe I was here, in his arms, and saying those three famous words. And he didn't run away.

"I love you too, Sarah Summers." I smiled against his neck and luxuriated in the heat his words inspired. He picked me up and carried me down the hallway into a bedroom with an oversized bed. A marble bathroom, with a shower built for five and a Jacuzzi tub, was adjacent to it. I eyed both with interest, and he noticed. "Hmm, yes, I've missed seeing you wet and glistening."

My body slid against his as he set me down in front of him. His hands went to my hips and then to the hem of my tank top to pull it over my head. My lacy red bra winked up at him, making him grin. "I've missed these as well."

"Yeah?" I returned the favor by removing his shirt and dragging my nails down his muscular abdomen. "Well, I missed this. Because ... abs."

He chuckled, his eyes glinting with wicked intent. He popped open the button on my jeans and slid the zipper down to reveal my matching panties. He ran his thumb over the lacy top. “Hmm, I approve.”

I toyed with his belt buckle and unfastened his jeans. *Black boxer briefs*. “I approve, too.” I pushed them down to expose the well-endowed part of him and palmed his cock. His resulting hiss heightened my lust, making my thighs clench. “*Definitely* approve.”

He tore off my jeans and kicked off his own, leaving me in lingerie and him gloriously naked. The city’s lights poured in from the floor-to-ceiling windows of the room, painting him in a majestic glow. Gorgeous didn’t begin to cover it. I stroked his engorged shaft and wrapped my other hand around the back of his neck to pull him down for a kiss. He grasped my hips and yanked me to him as he took control with his mouth. His tongue sparred with mine, dominating each move. He backed me up toward the bed. I collapsed backward as my knees hit the mattress, and he paused to admire me sprawled out before him.

“Beautiful.” He trailed his fingers down to my knees, pulled me to the edge of the bed, and spread me wider for his perusal. The act left me aching and wet. Even in the dim lighting, I was sure he could see my damp panties. The way he licked his lips told me I was right. He went to his knees, placed a tender kiss on my inner thigh, and draped my legs over his shoulders. Goosebumps scattered down my arms as he licked his way upward, tasting every inch of my bare skin.

My hands fisted in the comforter as he traced the red lace with his tongue. Sensation swirled through my lower abdomen, making me tremble with desire. I fought the urge to thread my fingers through his thick hair and force his mouth to where I wanted it. This was his show, and I wanted him to take the lead. He nibbled my hip bone.

“How close are you?” His deep tenor was a heated caress that left me hot inside and out.

“Close.” It wouldn’t take much to send me over the edge. My hormones were starved without his touch. Nothing else would satisfy me. Only him. Always him.

Evan caught the red lace in his mouth and dragged the panties down my thighs to where his hands were waiting to remove them the rest of the way. Hot air hit my damp flesh, eliciting a moan from deep in my throat. My limbs shook with uncontrollable need. His name rolled off my tongue on a raspy note that made him smile up at me. “Oh, I missed that, too. But you know what I missed most?”

I had an idea. “Show me.”

His mouth closed over my sensitive bundle of nerves. That was all it took to throw me into the realm of ecstasy. It consumed me from head to toe, leaving me light-headed and exposed. He lapped at my core, drawing out my orgasm and making it go on and on and on. I was still shaking when he crawled over me. His hands went to my hips to move me into the center of the bed and then to my chest to remove my bra. He took one of my nipples into his mouth and sucked hard.

“Evan ...” There was nothing kind or gentle about it, telling me his need was as violent as mine. He gave my other breast the same treatment, making me arch into him. I wrapped my legs around his waist and hugged him to me. “Now.”

Arousal curled in my lower belly, bringing me close to orgasm again. This man incited a passion in me like none other. I loved him. Body, heart, and soul, he was mine, and I was his. His mouth captured mine in a kiss that melted my insides. I was a quaking mess when he finished his sensual assault. He nipped my lower lip and settled his hips between my thighs. His erection nudged my entrance.

“I love you, Sarah.” His dark gaze held a mixture of fervor and adoration as he stared down at me. He cradled my face between his palms and placed a sweet kiss on my lips. “I’m never letting you go again.”

“Good, because I have no intention of going anywhere.” I nipped his chin in protest when he entered me part of the way

and stopped. “I love you, too.” It was a whisper against his cheek, which forced him to finish his thrust. We both shuddered at the carnal impact. I clawed at his back as he started to move. There was no finesse or rhythm to it, just an unbridled passion both of our bodies understood. His mouth possessed mine, swallowing my moans as we reacquainted ourselves in the most intimate of ways.

Pleasure hit me hard and fast, bowing my back off the bed. My inner walls hugged his shaft, and fire licked through my veins. This orgasm was more intense than the first, shooting violent spasms down my thighs. They intensified with each thrust, elongating my gratification. His breath was hot and harsh against my neck, my name a prayer in the air, as my climax sent him over the edge. He groaned and convulsed over me, creating aftershocks deep inside of me.

“Shower?” He placed an open-mouthed kiss against my throat. “Or stay in bed?”

“Depends on what you have in mind.” My legs were spent, but I couldn’t unwind them from his waist. I didn’t want to break our intimate connection.

“Talking and sex, sweetheart.” His lips brushed my nose and then my mouth. He grinned. “I told you—I have the week off, and we’re not leaving this room until we’re both satisfied with the results.”

“I have work on Monday.”

“Then we better start talking.”

A NEW CONTRACT

“Chocolate or vanilla?” Evan asked as he wheeled the sundae cart into the bedroom. He stood beside it, naked. His question sparked all sorts of sordid images that had nothing to do with talking or sundaes. I wanted to drizzle chocolate over his defined abs, lick it off, and then continue down that happy trail to the most delectable part of him. His gorgeous cock was meant to be dipped in whipped cream and licked clean.

“Keep looking at me like that, sweetheart, and you’ll miss work Monday.”

I swallowed. *Fair enough.* “Is the ice cream still solid?” The hotel staff delivered it over an hour ago.

“Yep.” He showed me a chocolate scoop before plopping it into his bowl. “It was in a cooler with dry ice.”

“Ah, that would do it.” I eyed all the available toppings and considered making Evan into a human sundae. My creativity spiked with ideas. We would need to keep this cart around for after our negotiation. “Vanilla, hot fudge if it’s still hot, whipped cream, nuts, sprinkles, and a cherry.” I didn’t eat enough pizza, and our lovemaking left me famished.

His eyes crinkled with his knowing grin. “In a bowl or on me?”

“Both, please.”

“That sounds sticky.”

“And delectable.” I went to my knees on the mattress and placed my hands on his shoulders. “Tell me you don’t want to

decorate me in a few of those toppings.”

He set down the bowl and wrapped an arm around my waist to tug me closer. His lips went to my ear. “Why do you think I ordered a sundae bar?”

I shivered. “You better start talking, Mershano. Or I’m going to get distracted by daydreams of you licking caramel off my nipples.”

He nipped my bottom lip. “I plan to alternate between ice cream and hot fudge, Summers. All night. But I want to eat some of it, too.” He tapped me on the ass and went back to fixing the sundaes.

“Tease.”

“Not a tease if I plan to follow through.”

I shook my head and collapsed into the pillows at the headboard. “Now that I’m all hot and bothered, where do you want to start this negotiation?”

He finished adding the toppings to my bowl and handed it over. “Well, I think we need to talk about your career aspirations first. I want to help you with the marketing firm—not because of our previous deal, but because I think you’re good at what you do. I called Stern and Associates, and they sent me your portfolio. If you can produce that kind of work for your less passionate projects, then I can’t wait to see what you’ll do for organizations you care about.”

I pulled the spoon from my mouth and stared at him. “Stern and Associates sent you my portfolio?” That was privileged information in the eyes of my former employer. I wasn’t allowed to use any of my prior work as samples in interviews.

“It took some coaxing, but money talks.” “So you bought my portfolio.”

“More or less.” I noticed his sundae was twice the size of mine as he climbed into bed beside me. “But that’s irrelevant. The point is, I want to invest in your work. So let’s start there. What exactly do you need to do your job?”

“Clients.”

“Those come with word of mouth and won’t be an issue with the work you produce. I’m talking about logistics. Do you need an office?”

I licked my spoon and considered. “Maybe. For meetings with potential clients and any staff I might need, but most of my work can be done from a computer. I specialize in web design more than anything else, but I’ve dabbled in print, too. So I would need access to a printing distributor of some kind.”

“Which can be found anywhere.”

“Yes.” I took another bite before continuing. “But yeah, I mostly need a computer and internet. The company I interned with in college gave me a part-time position after the, uh, show.” I swallowed. “Anyway, I don’t have a desk or office with them, but they issued me a company laptop.”

“Did you go back to Stern and Associates to ask for your job back?”

I laughed. “No, I didn’t. They wouldn’t have taken me back even if I begged, and the truth is, I didn’t want to go back. If I learned anything over the last few months, it’s that I want to make a difference with my work even if it means having to bartend and do other odd jobs to pay rent.”

“Because your dream is to run your own marketing firm and pick the projects that matter.”

“Yes.”

“And you can do that from anywhere as long as you have a computer, Wi-Fi, access to a print shop, and maybe an office for meetings. Correct?”

“Yes. What are you getting at?”

He enjoyed another bite and licked his lips. “I travel a lot for work, but there’s internet on my jet and in all my hotels. The funds set aside for your marketing firm could be used for equipment, like computers and software, and could also be used to contract with printing companies. I believe the only

outstanding item is an office for meetings. Is Chicago your preferred location?”

The innocent question was laced with a hidden agenda. I could see it in his too-perceptive gaze. He wasn't just asking me about work. “I like Chicago, but I told you a long time ago that I would be open to other cities if the opportunity was right.”

He considered that over another spoonful of ice cream. “My headquarters is in New Orleans, as is my primary estate, but I, too, would move for the right opportunity.”

I set my empty bowl on the nightstand and turned toward him. “What exactly are we negotiating here? Where I want to manage my firm from if I agree to your partnership, or where I want to live?”

“We'll start with where you want an office *when* you agree to my partnership.”

“*If* I were to agree, I would be open to options. I want to be in a big city with a popular airport, making it easy to fly potential clients in or travel to meetings.”

“You could use my jet for the latter.”

“Unless you're using it.”

He shrugged. “We would work it out, but I'm holding you to the naked part. That's going in the contract.”

Of course he remembered my promise to forgo clothes on his jet. “I want to update that clause to make your nudity mandatory, too.”

His eyebrows shot up. “I take conference calls from my plane.”

“Well, that'll be interesting for you, then, won't it?” I imagined being on my knees during one of his calls, making it difficult for him to concentrate. *Yes, please.*

“We'll draft a clause that says naked when appropriate.” He pressed a finger to my lips when I would have suggested another edit. “Where do you want to live, Sarah?” His serious tone wiped the smile from my face.

“I’m okay living with Rachel in Chicago.” I wasn’t sure what he meant. “Unless . . . are you asking me where I want to live . . . with you?” It was a stupid question. What else could he mean?

He placed his bowl on the table and turned to me. “Let’s clarify a few things so there are no miscommunications between us. First, I love you. Second, I want to invest in your firm because I think it’s a smart business decision. Third, I want to live with you. And lastly, marriage still isn’t my favorite institution, but I would like to marry you. Maybe not tomorrow or next week, but I’d like to discuss your feelings on it. I’m not proposing again until I know where you are with all this and with us.”

My mouth stopped working. It hung open while words piled up in my throat, but no sound escaped. *Marriage?* He couldn’t be serious. Had we known each other long enough to get married? *No.* But I loved him. No man would ever mean as much to me as Evan did. His devotion to his employees, his passion for his work, the way he praised and valued my career, and his overall care for me as a person were all traits I admired about him.

“Oh, I forgot one stipulation I want to discuss. Your photographer eye is useful for location scouting, so I want you to accompany me on future trips abroad when looking at potential properties. I’m not negotiating this one. Iceland was a unique experience for me, and I have every intention of repeating that experience.”

“Is that even a job?”

“Sure, I can make it one. You’ll be a contractor or something.”

“Aren’t there laws against hiring a spouse or relative as a contractor?”

He grinned. “Maybe. How would you feel if I made it a personal job and paid you with orgasms?”

Heat crawled up my neck. “Uh”—I cleared my throat — “yeah, I think I would be okay with that.”

“Perfect. Garrett’s going to love drafting this contract.”

“We’re not really ... I can’t ... Rachel can’t read this.” I loved my best friend, but there were some things that needed to remain between me and Evan.

The wicked glint in his gaze made my pulse race. “How about we write up the agreement together and sign it without lawyers present.”

“It won’t be legal that way.”

“No, but it’ll be sealed in love and faith. Isn’t that what marriage is about anyway? Trusting someone enough to share your life with him or her forever?”

“You’re serious about this marriage thing.” He kept saying it without cringing or trying to jump out the window. “Who are you, and what did you do with Evan Mershano?”

He brushed his knuckles against my cheek and down my neck. “He fell in love with a girl, and she changed everything.” His gentle tone wrapped around my heart and squeezed. “I spent most of my life watching my father destroy my mother. She couldn’t leave him because she had nowhere else to go, and I always blamed the institution for that. But marriage isn’t their problem; their choices are the problem. My father chooses to cheat, and my mom chooses to ignore it. It’s my decision whether or not I live that way. Marriage has nothing to do with it.”

“Have we known each other long enough to get married? I mean, our entire relationship was on a dating show.” I hated pointing out my concerns, but it needed to be said. Otherwise this would never work.

“Which is why I propose we get engaged, but not get married right away. Couples do that all the time, and I don’t see any reason for us to be different. But I do want to live with you. The show taught me to be more comfortable with delegating responsibilities, which means fewer business trips and more time at home with you. Although, I meant what I said about you accompanying me abroad. You can work from the jet or the hotel, and fly back as needed. I want to support

your work as much as possible, so if you want to stay in Chicago, I'm open to it."

"Did you just somewhat propose to me somewhere in there?" Because that's what it sounded like. *I propose we get engaged ...*

His dimples flashed. "Want me to get down on one knee again, Miss Summers?"

"I'm serious. Did you just propose?"

"I suggested we get engaged, yes. But I didn't propose formally."

"But you want to get engaged, and you're willing to move to Chicago. For my work." It was meant to be rhetorical, my brain computing everything he'd just said, but he nodded in confirmation.

"Yes."

I never in my wildest dreams expected this to happen, but it told me everything I needed to know. He loved me. Not that I doubted his earlier sincerity, but now I knew with every fiber of my being that this man loved me. And I loved him.

I straddled his lap and cradled his face between my palms. "Yes." I brushed my lips against his and smiled. "To all of it except living in Chicago. Your home is in New Orleans. Loving you is more than enough reason to move, and as you pointed out, I can do my work from anywhere as long as I have a computer. So, yes. To everything."

"Care to seal that promise with a kiss?" "Absolutely."

His fingers wove through my dark strands, our lips a hairsbreadth apart. "As always, it was a pleasure negotiating with you, Miss Summers."

"Likewise, Mister Mershano."

EPILOGUE

For three months, we kept our relationship a secret from the media and Evan's parents while the show aired on television. That all ended tonight.

Joseph sat in a plush chair center stage, while Evan, Amber, and I sat on a couch beside him. The final episode of *The Prince's Game* aired last night, and we were here for the final interview. A tell-all of sorts that would floor everyone. Carrie sat with the other twenty-eight contestants off to the side in rows, watching the drama unfold. She was in charge of asking the girls questions, while Joseph interviewed us.

Amber tried to stroke Evan's thigh again, making me bite my tongue. The engagement ring I couldn't wear in public was hiding in his pocket. I placed it there after our make-out session in the limo. He looked so damn sexy in that three-piece suit, I couldn't keep my hands off of him. My sleek red dress seemed to have the same effect on him, as he couldn't stop caressing the slit up my left thigh.

"So what was going through your mind that last night, Sarah? Why did you run in the middle of Evan's proposal?" I could tell these were the questions Joseph wanted to ask most, because his brown eyes glistened with excitement. He was hoping for a juicy story, and tonight, he would be rewarded.

"Well, a lot of things, really. Primarily the fact that I wasn't ready to accept his proposal yet, and that I wasn't sure of his true intentions. Being surrounded by cameras all the

time made it difficult to discern reality from fiction.” Evan fought a grin at my jibe, while Joseph failed to notice.

“But anyone watching the show could see you loved him. How could you turn your back on that?”

“I can say it wasn’t easy.” Truth. “But I wasn’t sure Evan felt the same way, and I didn’t want him to propose for the sake of proposing.”

“Evan, how do you feel about that? The world watched your heart break last night when Sarah turned you down. Tell us what was going through your mind at that moment.”

“A lot of curse words, Joseph.” That earned Evan a few giggles from the girls. They all shot daggers my way with their eyes. With the exception of Amber, none of them knew until yesterday that I’d turned him down. It placed me on their list as public enemy number one. I did not receive a welcome reception in the green room. “But you know, it’s an interesting thing. Sarah’s right. We weren’t ready. There were too many misconceptions between us born by the situation, putting neither of us in the proper mind-set to get engaged at the time.”

“So wait, what are you saying, Evan? That you and Sarah might be ready now? To give it another shot?” The hope was apparent in his voice and seemed genuine.

“I don’t know.” Evan looked at me and smiled. “Would you ever consider it? Doing it all over again without the cameras?”

Shocked silence from all corners of the room met his words while my lips curled up into a small grin. “You know I would.” He went to his knee in front of me and grabbed my hands in one of his.

“I think of you every day,” he murmured.

“I think of you, too, Evan,” I whispered. Tears pricked my eyes as he repeated the words from his proposal last week. This wasn’t the reveal we planned for tonight. *My prince, always full of surprises.*

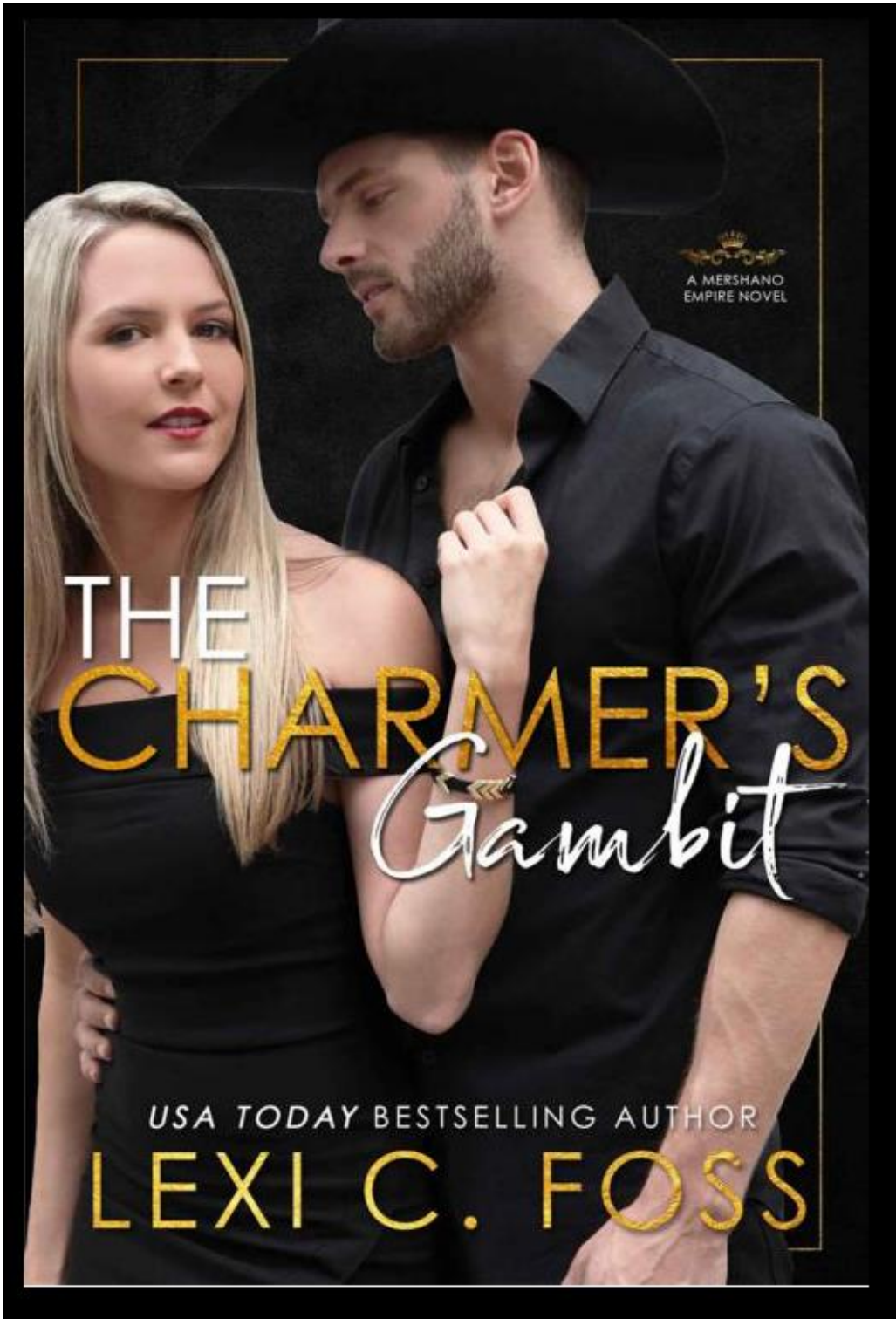
“I wouldn’t change that night. It’s what needed to happen between us to erase all the misconceptions and teach us both to believe in love. Our love. You know how I feel about you now, Miss Summers. You know it was never a charade, never meant for the cameras, and only meant for you. I only ever wanted you, and I’ll only ever love you. Be mine, Miss Summers. Write a new contract with me, one underlined in vows we’ll forever promise to one another.” He pulled the ring from his jacket, making everyone in the room gasp. “Marry me, Sarah.”

It wasn’t the exact wording he used in Iceland when he got down on one knee, but it was close. I smiled down at him. “You already know my answer, Mister Mershano.”

“I do, but I want to hear it again.” Then he whispered so that only I could hear, “Again.” His dimples peeked up at me. “Please.”

“Yes.” I let him slide the rock onto my finger and smiled. “Always yes.” He kissed me while everyone broke out into applause and excitement. “I mean,” I whispered against his lips, “how could I say no to such a fine ass?”

THE END



A MERSHANO
EMPIRE NOVEL

THE
CHARMER'S
Gambit

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEXI C. FOSS

PROLOGUE

A little over four months ago ...

My best friend had lost her mind.

A contract.

To stay on a reality dating show that she never wanted to be part of anyway.

For money.

I still couldn't believe it.

Oh, the terms were straightforward: pretend to date "The Prince of New Orleans" and refuse his proposal during the last episode, and then he would fund her private marketing firm. An easy bargain, sure, except it required her to give up her job and livelihood for a man she hardly knew on the promise that he would follow through in the end.

Okay, so the agreement his attorney drafted was solid, but a billionaire like Evan Mershano could easily find a way out of it. And then my best friend would be left picking up the pieces of a broken life, while he walked away unscathed.

And what was worse, Sarah Summers's involvement with said billionaire had introduced me to his overconfident, sexy-as-sin cousin, who refused to leave my apartment.

"You." I pointed a finger at Will Mershano and narrowed my gaze. "Get off my bed."

"Yes, ma'am." He planted his feet on the floor and stood to his six-foot-whatever height and flashed me an amused look.

“I can’t say that’s ever happened to me before.”

“Happy to be your first.” I cringed. That was the second time tonight I had said that to him. The damn man had followed me home from the office after showing up unannounced with a Mershano-stamped legal contract. One Sarah had requested I personally review. As her best friend, and the only attorney she knew, I was the obvious choice. Much to my chagrin.

“Shouldn’t you, I don’t know, be leaving? There is a Mershano Suites a few blocks over.” And his cousin, the same one propositioning Sarah, owned it.

“There is, but it’s much easier to stay here.” He moved past me to the kitchen, where he started going through my wine collection.

“You’re not staying here.” If *he* found out, there’d be hell to pay, and I really didn’t need to give him a reason to bother me. Not now. Not ever.

Will pulled a bottle from my fridge and eyed the label. “Not a bad brand.” He found the corkscrew in a drawer and started opening it without permission.

“Did you not hear a word I just said?”

He opened a cabinet to pull out two wine glasses. How he found them on his first try was anybody’s guess, but it seemed to fit his personality perfectly. He expertly served the wine while I stared at him in shock.

Who is this man, and why is he in my personal space?

Oh, right. My best friend sent him to me.

I picked up my phone and started typing an angry message, when a generous pour of red wine appeared in my peripheral vision.

“Hint of apple. Nice,” Will murmured after a sip from his glass. “I prefer my personal reserve, but this will do for the evening.” He padded barefoot over to my couch and made himself at home.

“Are you hard of hearing?” I asked. Because that would be lovely. He needed some sort of flaw to detract from his thick blond hair, perfect jaw structure, high cheekbones, and muscular stature.

He kicked his feet up onto the cushion as he rotated to face me. “So what contract amendments does Sarah want you to make?”

I folded my arms. “Is that why you’re still here? Because I think your supervising my work all day was quite enough, don’t you?”

“I promised Evan I would oversee this entire exchange personally.” His chocolate gaze danced appreciatively over my blouse, pencil skirt, and stockings. “And I take my job very seriously.”

My tongue hurt from biting it so hard. Less than twelve hours of knowing this overconfident, sexy-as-sin billionaire, and I wanted to kill him. He ruined an otherwise perfect day by showing up unannounced, and then he followed me home like I couldn’t be trusted. “I already signed the nondisclosure agreement.”

He shrugged. “That means little to me. You could still violate it.”

“And risk my job in the process? No, thanks.” This might be a personal favor for a friend, but it could still hurt my career if I violated any of the terms Evan’s private legal team drafted. Garrett Wilkinson was not an attorney I wanted to piss off. “I don’t require a babysitter, Mister Mershano.”

He eyed me over the rim of his glass. “Oh, I’m well aware of what you require, Miss Dawson.”

I snagged the crystal stem from the counter and took a healthy sip of wine. It felt like heaven against my throat and helped calm some of my nerves. “You’re not going to leave, are you?”

“Not until we’re done,” he confirmed. “As I said, I take my job seriously.”

“I bet you do,” I muttered, rolling my eyes as I snuggled into the oversized chair beside the couch with my laptop and wine. If he was hell-bent on finishing this contract tonight, then I’d stay up as late as he wanted, so long as it meant he’d leave sooner.

“You know, Mershano Vineyards is in the market for a corporate attorney to help with some international acquisitions. It’d be a big job, I think, and would require overseeing a legal team.”

“That’s nice,” I replied as I pulled up the legal document Garrett sent over an hour ago to review the edits I requested earlier this afternoon.

“Someone with your skill set might be a good fit,” he continued.

“You’d need someone with a lot more experience than my four years, Mister Mershano.” My experience qualified me to join the team, maybe, but not lead it.

“I think that’s for me to decide,” he murmured. “And I think you’d be a good fit, darlin’. We should work together.”

I couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled out of me. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen. Ever.”

He cocked his head to the side and rubbed a thumb over his bottom lip as he considered me in a manner that sent a shiver down my spine. *Oh, that look is trouble . . .*

Challenge oozed from him, thickening the air around us. “Hmm, we’ll see, Miss Dawson, won’t we?”

1. THE BUSINESS PROPOSAL

“Didn’t we just do this?” I asked, studying all the boxes in my guest room. All of them were marked “Sarah Summers,” just like last time.

“Yep.” Sarah made a popping sound on the *p* and flashed me a brilliant smile. “But we don’t have to carry them this time.”

“Thank God for that.” Moving my best friend in last month had been a bit of a nightmare. We lugged everything from the third floor of her building to the ninth floor of mine. A truck helped us out for part of the journey, but everything else was a generous balance between the stairs and elevator. “I love you, but I never want to do that again.”

She scrunched up her nose. “Yeah, that sucked.”

The wince that followed wasn’t so much a result of the move as the reason behind it. My best friend had lost everything after her idiot twin sister, Abby, auditioned for a reality show under Sarah’s name as a prank. Instead of suing her idiotic sister for fraud, she chose to go on the show and then struck up a ridiculous contract with the show’s “prince.” Their agreement didn’t go according to plan, but somehow they worked everything out in the end, despite a few misconceptions along the way.

Still ... “I’ll kick his ass if he screws this up again.”

“Duly noted, Miss Dawson.” The murmur came from Evan Mershano, also known as “The Prince of New Orleans.” He

had his shoulder braced against the doorjamb, his dark eyes on Sarah. The adoration in his gaze placated me a little.

“Rachel,” I corrected. Only my clients called me *Miss Dawson*.

He grinned. “Rachel.”

We met last week for the first time in person, and his love for my best friend showed in every move he made. The fact that he supported her career raised him a peg in my book, and he didn’t seem to be a scoundrel. Still, he had money—a lot of it—and in my experience, powerful men like that could not be trusted. To be unsupportive would be an insult to Sarah’s intelligence, so I kept my mouth shut and silently vowed to be here if she needed me.

“Right, I think that’s everything.” Sarah wiped her hands on her jeans after taping the last box, and Evan added it to the growing pile. His fitted white T-shirt stretched over his biceps as he moved, hinting at what lay beneath his clothes. Yeah, I could admit, he was a fine specimen of a man. My girl had chosen well. The curl of her full lips said she agreed.

“Does that mean it’s time for La Rosas?” That was the payment I requested for helping today.

“Oh yeah.” Sarah loved the cute little Italian place more than I did. “Did we decide on getting takeout, or are we eating there?”

“Don’t look at me,” Evan replied. “You know I’m always up for a challenge, Miss Summers.”

“You just want to get caught, Mister Mershano,” she accused, grinning. The reality show they starred in two months ago was about to air, which meant they couldn’t be seen in public together.

He shrugged. “It would make things easier.”

She trailed her fingers up his shirt as he grabbed her hips. “For you.”

“For both of us.” He bent to nuzzle his nose against hers, making me roll my eyes. I was all for budding romance, but

these two needed to get their own room. Outside of my apartment.

“I vote we eat there. Otherwise, you two might come up with some kinky food games in my living room.” I left their resulting laughs behind me as I went to change for dinner. My rumbling stomach kept me from worrying too much about my appearance. I threw on a pair of jeans and a tank top and pulled my blonde hair up into a messy bun. It was a stark contrast to my usual lawyer garb, but I didn’t have any clients to impress tonight.

Sarah and Evan met me in the foyer, both dressed similarly in jeans and wearing matching grins. “You two are starting to look like each other,” I observed. “Evan just needs a better tan and some curves.”

“I rather like his lack of curves,” Sarah murmured, pinching his ass.

“Yeah, yeah, let’s go.” I shooed them out the door and into the elevator. The walk to La Rosas was quick but hot, thanks to the Chicago humidity. Mother Nature wanted everyone aware that June was here. I picked at my tank top, hating the way it clung to my clammy skin, as we entered the restaurant.

“Air-conditioning is ...” I trailed off as my eyes landed on the casually dressed man waiting by the hostess stand. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me right now!” I spun around and glared at the grinning couple. “I hate both of you.”

The warm chuckle behind me made my stomach flip. It always did that in his presence, against my better judgment. Seduction seemed to ooze from Will Mershano, wrapping everyone in the room in his alluring web. Including me. And I despised it. I had my doctorate in turning down men, yet this one maneuvered around each of my denials with the skill of a professional athlete. And his sport of choice was flirting.

“Hello, Rachel,” he murmured.

I ignored the shiver traversing my spine and further narrowed my gaze at Sarah. “This was not what I had in mind for dinner.”

“He insisted,” was her excuse.

“Oh, I just bet he did,” I snapped.

The millionaire playboy redefined the meaning of the word persistent.

I turned to meet his dark eyes, so similar to Evan’s, but with a hint of deviousness. Their familial relation showed in their height and broad shoulders, but Will’s nose had a slight bend to it and his jaw was dusted with fine blond hairs as opposed to dark ones. Both men possessed an aristocratic air, screaming wealth and superiority, but there was a playfulness to Will that Evan seemed to lack. Carefree seemed to be Will’s persona of choice.

“No,” I said in greeting. A word I seemed to say a lot in his presence. Of course, he never listened—just took it as a challenge to change my mind. We’d been playing this game for months, ever since he first showed up in my office with that damn contract that Sarah requested I review on her behalf.

“No?” He cocked a dark blond brow. “But you haven’t even heard today’s proposal yet.”

“I don’t need to.” There was no way in hell I would work for him. First, it required leaving Chicago and living in North Carolina. Which, right there, was a deal breaker. Not because of my love for the city, but because of something, or rather, *someone*, who would never let me leave. And second, it meant joining Will’s staff. Not necessarily a negative, except I would report directly to him. My hormones could not handle short bouts of time with the man, let alone a long tenure of employment.

“The answer will always be no.” He could try to entice me with food and charm all he wanted, but I would never agree.

“How about we discuss it over dinner.” Not a question, just a statement underlined with a hint of demand. Typical Will.

“Are you paying?”

“Naturally.”

I gestured for him to lead the way. “Then after you, Mister Mershano.”

“I’ll keep him in line,” Evan said as he trailed along behind us.

“That’s a tall order,” Sarah said, putting in her two cents.

I snorted. “Please. I’ve got this.” There was a reason I became a lawyer. Winning an argument ran in my blood.

Will held out a chair for me, so I took the one opposite him. His dimples flashed in response, and he sat beside me while Evan and Sarah looked on in amusement. If that simple act entertained them, then they were in for a treat.

When the waiter arrived, I ordered a bottle of the restaurant’s most expensive imported wine and one of each appetizer for the table. “Oh, and I won’t be sharing the wine, so just one glass.”

Sarah coughed to cover her laugh while the waiter jotted everything down. “And for you, sir?”

Will didn’t miss a beat. “Hmm, I’ll take an extra order of calamari and a glass of the Reserve Mershano Cabernet Franc, please.”

The grin slipped from my face as the waiter beamed. “Ah, excellent choice, sir. We just received our first shipment, and the customers love it. I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

“Oh, really? It’s an unknown brand in these parts. What is everyone saying?”

I rolled my eyes as the waiter gushed over the positive feedback and reviews.

“The best they’ve ever had, huh?” Will mused. “Interesting. Did you hear that, darlin’? Maybe you should give it a try.”

“No, thank you,” I replied sweetly.

“We’ll take a bottle,” Evan murmured, handing his menu to the waiter. “And I don’t think I’ll need a main course with

all the appetizers.” He cast an amused glance my way before looking at Sarah.

“Oh, I want lasagna. And if you try to steal any, I’ll divorce you.”

“That requires you to marry me first, sweetheart.” She shrugged. “Semantics.”

“I’ll have lasagna as well,” Will added before smiling at me. “Do you want a main course with all those appetizers?”

“Chicken Alfredo, please. And can you add lobster and shrimp to that?”

The waiter gave me an appraising look, as if to ask, *Where are you planning to put all this food?* I might be a tall woman at five feet ten, but I was on the thin side thanks to my morning workout regimen and genetics. My mother’s Irish heritage paled my skin, while my father’s German side gave me the blonde hair and blue eyes. They were both on the slender side naturally and passed those traits on to me and my brother, Caleb. Although, he seemed a bit bulkier the last time I’d seen him, and not with fat.

“Of course, ma’am,” the waiter said after he finished checking me out. “I’ll be back with your wine.” His parting words had me turning to the arrogant blond beside me.

“You shipped a case of Merghano Vineyards to the restaurant?”

“No, I shipped several cases. Sarah said it was her favorite place in Chicago, and I figured the beautiful clientele might appreciate some decent wine.”

I huffed out a breath. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Why, thank you, darlin’. The feeling’s mutual. Now, would you prefer to hear my proposal while you’re sober or after you’ve had a few drinks?”

“Wine won’t make me say yes,

Will.” “My wine might.”

I batted my eyelashes at him. “Care to wager on that?”

I half expected him to take me up on it, but instead, the businessman peeked out from behind his playful mask. He usually bantered with me for a few more minutes before this side appeared.

Uncertainty settled in the pit of my stomach.

No more teasing.

His expression boasted confidence as he prepared for a new round of negotiations.

This was the part of him I feared, the persona that made me feel inferior. He had no way of knowing this, nor was it something he did on purpose. On a logical level, I understood that, but I couldn't help my knee-jerk reaction to run.

Powerful, rich men always won, no matter the cost. I knew that better than anyone.

“Why are you so adamant against working for me, Rachel? It's a stable position with excellent benefits, and I've already offered to triple your current salary. What more do you need?”

“I don't want to move.”

“I've offered to let you work remotely in Chicago.”

I shook my head. “There's no way I could hire and manage a team of a dozen lawyers from here. What you're asking me to do is nowhere near as simple as whipping up a contract.”

“I know that, which is why I want to hire you.”

“What I did for Sarah and Evan is nothing like an international acquisition, Will. That was a simple contract.”

“Right, one written by Garrett Wilkinson that you shredded.”

The famous name made my heart skip a beat, as it always did. He was the prime example of what an expensive education and inherited contacts could do for a lawyer. It helped that he was brilliant and also good-looking. I'd never actually met the man, but I knew I stood absolutely no chance against a man of his reputation.

“I didn’t shred anything. I just rewrote part of it,” I muttered.

“And impressed the hell out of him in the process.”

I almost laughed. “Doubtful. You should hire him instead.”

“He’s an estate attorney, not a corporate lawyer. Besides, I want you.” Those last three words warmed me in a way they shouldn’t. He said them to me every time we debated his proposal. I should be used to them by now, but I couldn’t shake the giddy sensation that blossomed deep within. Which was precisely why I kept saying no. I refused to allow this attraction to grow between us. Whether he intended to act on it or not remained a moot point. I’d sworn off men like him a long time ago, and I wasn’t about to break my rule now.

“I’m flattered, but I’m not interested.” *In working for you, or otherwise.* “I like working for Baker Brown. They’re one of the top firms in Chicago, and I have no intention of leaving them anytime soon.”

The waiter chose that moment to return with our wine. Excellent timing. I needed a drink, or twelve, to calm my nerves. Will always did this to me, even in the beginning. Men rarely flustered me, but he found a way each time. And he kept sweetening the offer, making it nearly impossible to refuse.

The opportunity itself was a dream job. Mershano Vineyards needed an attorney who specialized in corporate law to lead an international acquisition project. My education and experience tied nicely to the requirements, and managing a team of lawyers would look great on my resume. But there were other, more qualified candidates out there, and Will had to know that. Which was why I suspected he wanted me for the wrong reasons.

Will was the type of man who enjoyed a good game of cat and mouse, and I refused to sleep my way up the corporate ladder. When he finally realized that, he’d lose interest, and I’d be without a job. A harsh train of thought, sure, but realistic.

Maybe there was more to his offer, but I refused to let myself read into it. Because I knew if I found any truth in it,

then I'd be more likely to accept, and I couldn't risk it.

"Tell me about your firm," Will said after the waiter finished pouring our drinks.

I finished half my glass before I gave the usual spiel reserved for potential clients. Not that he was one, but because it was easier. He listened patiently, asked all the right questions, and continued the discussion while we indulged in way too much food. He didn't make me another offer, for which I was thankful, but I knew he hadn't given up. Not by a long shot.

Evan and Sarah busied themselves with talking about a work-related trip and the nuances of the move for tomorrow. He had hired a company to pick up the boxes in the morning, and they planned to meet their belongings in New Orleans. I offered to oversee the move from my apartment so they could head home early, which meant I would be going home alone tonight.

"I'm going to miss you," Sarah whispered as she hugged me tight.

"Me too." And I would. Maybe not as a roommate, because I liked my space, but she was my best friend. I loved her like a sister.

"I'll call you every day."

"You better. And you better visit too." Because I wouldn't be able to visit her very easily. She would assume work was the reason, but it had nothing to do with my job and everything to do with my past. My former fiancé didn't like me to travel, and he had abnormal resources at his disposal to keep me in Chicago.

"Definitely," she promised. "Love you." "Love you too."

Evan opened the door of a waiting car for her, and she slid inside. "You two behave," he said, his gaze on Will.

"I always behave," he replied, smirking.

“Right.” With a shake of his head, Evan joined Sarah in the back seat.

I smiled as they pulled away. My best friend had finally found a man worthy of her. His wealth and stature concerned me a bit, but if anyone could handle an influential man, it was Sarah.

“Let’s go, darlin’.” Will, the forever gentleman, insisted on escorting me home since I’d finished half my bottle of wine by the end of dinner. He didn’t touch me but walked close enough for me to catch his spicy scent. I hated that it made my nostrils flare.

He was potent and he knew it. Every flash of a dimple, the confident way he moved, and the constant taunt in his gaze made for a toxic combination.

That, coupled with the alcohol, and I could admit he was downright attractive. And so not coming into my apartment tonight.

“Still no?” he asked as we paused at my door.

“I’m slightly buzzed, not drunk, so yep. Still no.”

“Good thing I didn’t take that bet,” he replied, grinning that cocky grin of his. “But I have hope, Miss Dawson. We’ll work together.”

“Uh-huh.” I patted his muscular chest and immediately regretted touching him. He radiated a heat that left me feeling so cold. I couldn’t even remember the last time I let a man entertain me. It wasn’t that I disliked sex. Quite the opposite. I loved it. But after the last time, I swore never to take a man to my bed again no matter how much I desired him. I refused to let anyone else get hurt as a result of knowing me.

Will cocked his hip against the wall while I slid my key into the lock. “Have a little faith, darlin’. We’ll get there.”

I stepped inside and turned to face him. “You really don’t know when to quit, do you?”

He braced his arms over the door frame and stared down at me. His pupils dilated as they dropped to my lips and slid back

up. “Evan’s father once called my desire to own and run a winery a ‘pipe dream’ and insisted I give up. Now that ‘pipe dream’ is worth eight figures, and you know why? Because I didn’t quit.”

He dropped his arms and stepped just over the line into my personal space. I had to look up to hold his stare, which put our lips a few inches apart at best. This was a new tactic, and it halted the air in my lungs.

“I never quit when I want something, Miss Dawson.” He pressed even closer, his breath feathering over my parted lips, but still not touching me. “And as I’ve said, I want you.” He stood like that a moment longer, lingering, taunting, and making me wonder what he would do next.

Will he kiss me? Do I want him to?

Maybe ...

But he pulled back and flashed that dimpled grin at me. “Have a good night, darlin’. I’ll see you soon.” He turned away with a playful wink.

Well, hell.

I stood gaping after him as he strode down the hall, hands in his jean pockets, his shoulders straightened with confidence. *Arrogant man.*

“I’ll still say no!” I called after him.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, darlin’,” he returned.

I shut the door with a shake of my head and a smile on my face. This game, or whatever it was, had started out as annoying but seemed to be heading into entertaining territory. As long as I kept refusing him, of course. Once I gave in, the fun would end.

I took two steps toward the kitchen, when a knock sounded behind me. “Oh, good grief. I am not ready for another round, Mershano,” I said as I opened the door. “My answer ...” My smile died as I met a pair of icy blue eyes that were nothing like Will’s dark ones.

“Ryan,” I breathed.

“Hi, baby girl.”

2. POLITICAL ASPIRATIONS

My eyes darted to the chain on the door. I had it installed for moments like this, but being with Will had put my guard down. I didn't even think to check before I opened the door either.

Ryan didn't ask if he could come in. He never did. Just pushed the heavy wood forward and me backward along with it. He looked immaculate in his designer suit, his brown hair styled to perfection and his demeanor intimidating. It used to be a look that made my mouth water. Now all it did was push ice through my veins.

Six months.

We went six months without seeing each other. No calls, no notes, no nasty emails or unexpected late-night visits. I had taken it as a sign that maybe, finally, he was letting me go.

I walked away from him three years ago. It took considerable effort and help from an old friend to do it, but it happened. Ryan had tried for weeks to force me "home," showing up every day at my friend's apartment with a new taunt. It'd been the hardest months of my life, but I'd survived.

Because of Mark ...

If he hadn't been home that day ...

But he was.

The memory of that afternoon elicited a grimace, as it always did. I hated that I couldn't escape Ryan on my own, but I also acknowledged that reaching out to Mark for help was

what empowered me. It gave me back my freedom. Or at least a semblance of it.

But Ryan had it in his head that he was the one who proposed a temporary break, which happened several months *after* I originally left him.

“You focus on your career, baby girl. I’ll be back when we’re both ready.” It’d been a taunt and a promise all wrapped up in one, and it haunted my nightmares.

Because he did, in fact, show up when and where he wanted and contacted me at least once every other week in some shape or form.

Then he vanished around the holidays, and I thought maybe, just maybe, he’d moved on or found someone else to obsess over.

But no.

It was a naive notion.

And I knew better.

Ryan Albertson did not simply forget about the things he deemed to be his property. He gave them space on occasion, but he always came back to check on what he considered to be his.

He didn’t waste any time in searching my apartment, checking my bedroom first, the bathroom, and then the guest room. The words, *Get the fuck out*, lodged in my throat, unable to escape. Standing up to him always made it worse. Playing along worked best. My hand trembled as it slipped into my pocket to find my phone. Two clicks and it would dial Sarah. I waited to see his expression before I made my decision. He might hide behind a mask of handsome perfection for the outside world, but he never hid from me.

“Is Sarah coming or leaving?” he wondered, noting the boxes.

I cleared the emotion from my throat. “She’s moving out.” Lying was only a short-term solution. He always checked what I told him, and the repercussions for a lie were far worse than

the truth. Ryan's political connections were vast and terrifying. He'd threatened to have me disbarred more than once, and I had no doubt he could do it.

"Good. I never liked her." He smoothed a hand down his tie as he turned toward me with an adoring look that made my insides churn. How many times had he used those eyes on me and won?

I'm sorry, Rachel.

I love you.

I'll never do it again. I promise.

Those eventually turned into something much worse.

I own you.

You would be nothing without me.

Shut up, or I'll do it again.

I shivered at the onslaught of memories. They felt so fresh despite being several years old. I barely survived him once, but sometimes I wondered if I ever really did. He seemed to think this separation was temporary. That I would eventually be his again and just needed time to grow my career first.

He called it an experiment, to see how it would help his already prestigious position to date around and build politically favorable relationships. But I was still his *girl*, the one he would wed one day when the time was right. And I didn't have a say in it.

Most days, I wondered who left whom, because I could swear I was the one who broke off the engagement. Granted, I never did say the words. That would have required Ryan to be there the day I woke up alone on the floor.

"I've missed you, baby," he murmured, cupping my cheek. I caressed my phone, debating whether or not to dial Sarah. This close, he would hear it ring. And that would infuriate him. I had too many meetings this week to risk one of his *lessons*. Walking in with a black eye never impressed anyone. "What have you been up to?"

“Working.” I tried to swallow but couldn’t. Not with him touching me. “A lot.”

“Mmm, I think you work too hard. Always have.”

Yes, that was a point of contention between us. He wanted me to be a Barbie doll stay-at-home wife who attended his political functions and looked pretty on his arm.

It didn’t start that way. He used to encourage my studies and even applauded my high marks. We went out to celebrate the day Baker Brown offered me a position after I graduated from Northwestern.

Then things started to change.

The signs were always there, but I didn’t understand them. He showered me with love and affection, and I thought it was the rigorousness of law school keeping me from seeing my friends and family. But it was him. Always him. And when I finally broke and told him I couldn’t take it anymore, he punished me. Severely. After I regained consciousness, I called the only person I trusted to help. *Mark.*

My neck ached just thinking about that day.

Three years ago, I swore never to be that weak woman again, and I’d avoided powerful, high-handed men ever since.

Until Will.

The thought of him sent a chill down my spine.

Did Ryan see us together? Is that why he’s here now?

He always found out about my dates in the past, which was one of the reasons I stopped going out with men. The one time I tried a one-night stand, it also ended badly, hence my vow of celibacy.

I wasn’t entirely sure how Ryan knew so much, but I suspected he had someone following me. Or maybe he used electronic means to monitor my movements. Both alternatives unnerved me and left me in a constant state of caution. I thought twice about every email I sent, and I refused every come-on regardless of whether I wanted the man or not. Sarah

understood more than most, but I never told her everything. Not even close.

His hand slipped to the back of my neck as he tried to pull me in for a kiss. My palms went to his chest, holding him back. The fact that he let me was an indicator of his mood.

“Ryan,” I managed, throat dry. “Sarah will be back any minute.” A complete lie, one that would surely cost me later if he ever found out. “It’s her last night in the city.”

“Ah, girls’ night in, then?”

“Yes.”

That seemed to appease him, which indicated he didn’t know about dinner at La Rosas. Not yet, anyway.

“Well, I suppose I can allow that. But I want to see you later this week. There’s a fundraiser on Friday night, and I need a date.”

I barely suppressed my snort. “We’re not dating, Ryan.”

“So come with me as a friend.” His reasonable tone was one he used often with his colleagues. Not me. Which was why I hesitated before replying. *What are you up to?*

“I’m not sure that would be a good idea,” I said slowly.

His brow furrowed. “Why?”

Because I hate you.

Because you ruined my life.

Because you scare the shit out of me.

If there was a door separating us, I would say any number of those things. But we were both standing in my apartment, alone. And face-to-face. He wouldn’t hesitate to hurt me, and calling the police wasn’t an option. Ryan had too many friends in high places.

“Because I’m not ready,” was my lame excuse.

He sighed and dropped his hand into a fist at his side. “Not this again. You’re not getting any younger, Rachel. When are we going to move past this?”

I bristled a little at that but managed to bite my tongue. Years of experience dealing with him kept me in line. “I’m only thirty, Ryan.” *If anyone is getting older, it’s you.* Though, he still looked the same as he did twelve years ago when we met during my freshman year at Northwestern. He was a senior at the time.

“And,” I continued, “I don’t know if I’m ready to start things up with you again. You’re busy with work, right? It’s been a few months since I last saw you.”

I kept a hopeful note in my voice, encouraging him to talk about his political aspirations instead of us. It worked, as he dove into a fifteen-minute diatribe about his campaign schedule for the US Senate. The current republican in office was stepping down in two years, and Ryan seemed the obvious choice. It chilled me how many people couldn’t see through his pretentious facade, but then I remembered I used to be one of them.

“Okay, baby girl. If you’re not ready for this Friday, then fine. I understand that it’s short notice. But I need you to start attending functions with me.” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “You understand, right?”

I hated those three words. Especially from him.

I didn’t understand why he seemed hell-bent on destroying my life. What did I do to deserve it? But I nodded anyway and bit my lip to keep it from trembling.

It was amazing how I could go from having a mostly fun evening, to torment, in the span of seconds. What would have happened if I let Will in before Ryan arrived?

Nothing good.

“That’s my girl,” Ryan murmured, kissing me on the forehead like I was five. “I’ll call you later this week or have my secretary send you an agenda, okay?”

I nodded again, but I had no intention of following through with anything. And knowing Ryan, he’d forget to call me anyway. He usually did. Then he’d show up again in a month or two, demanding the same thing.

But something was different about the way he looked at me this time. The way he gently brushed his fingers down my cheek to the base of my neck. He usually tried to kiss me now, but instead, he trailed his nails down to my hand and gave it a light squeeze.

“Soon, baby. Soon.”

I didn't like the sound of that. I opened my mouth to tell him, but as always, the words clogged in my throat. I hated how inferior he made me feel, how childish and alone.

My stomach knotted as heat caressed my neck. I faced men like him every day and always held my ground, but Ryan crumbled my resolve with a single look. Maybe it was because I let him inside my heart and allowed him to dampen my fire and crush my dreams. No one else ever came close, a defense mechanism I put in place after picking up the pieces of my life. But the second he waltzed through the door, I went back to that place he left me in, and quivered like a little girl. *His little girl.*

He brushed my cheek once more and let himself out. I stood shivering in the foyer, staring after him with a mix of fury and fear. My fists curled, and my desire to break something took over. I picked up the closest thing to me, a vase filled with flowers Evan bought Sarah earlier this week, and shattered it against the door.

“Fuck you,” I managed, seething both at myself for my weakness and at the man who put me here. Just when I thought my old self had finally resurfaced, Ryan tore it down.

This was why I couldn't say yes to Will's proposal. No matter how much he sweetened the deal, I would never work for him. I already had one dominant man ruling my life. Two would absolutely destroy me.

THE CHARMER'S GAMBIT

He set his sights on the wrong girl.

Me.

Law school taught me a lot of things, but nothing prepared me to deal with this determined, hotter-than-Hell millionaire. Don't get me wrong, I'm flattered. But resisting Will Mershano is harder than passing the bar. He's everything: sexy, confident, intelligent. And he wants me.

When he hires my firm to represent Mershano Vineyards, I'm left with no choice but to work right alongside him—or forfeit my job. There's only one problem. He doesn't know about my past or how it stalks me at every turn. All he wants is a little flirtatious fun, but Will's playing a dangerous game. And there's more at stake than just my heart...

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MUSIC PLAYLIST

THE PRINCE'S GAME

Addicted - Saving Abel

Battlefield - Lea Michele

Body Electric - Lana Del Rey

Don't Let Me Go - RAIGN

Failure - Breaking Benjamin

Hell of a Ride - Saving Abel

I Ran - Hidden Citizens

I'm So Sorry - Imagine Dragons

Rockabye - Clean Bandit

Take Out the Gunman - Chevelle

The Sex is Good - Saving Abel

Way Down We Go - Kaleo

When the Truth Hunts You Down - Sam Tinnesz

Wicked Game - Ursine Vulpine

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling Author Lexi C. Foss is a writer lost in the IT world. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband and their furry children. When not writing, she's busy crossing items off her travel bucket list. Many of the places she's visited can be seen in her writing, including the mythical world of Hydria, which is based on Hydra in the Greek islands. She's quirky, consumes way too much coffee, and loves to swim.

Want access to the most up-to-date information for all of Lexi's books? Sign-up for her newsletter [here](#).

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