

A  
WEDDING  
BELLS  
ALPHA  
NOVEL.

*Two*  
BECOME  
*One*

WESTON PARKER

# **TWO BECOME ONE**

---

A WEDDING BELLS ALPHA NOVEL BOOK 9

WESTON PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

# CONTENTS

Find Weston Parker

Description

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Insider Group](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

# FIND WESTON PARKER



[www.westonparkerbooks.com](http://www.westonparkerbooks.com)

## DESCRIPTION



### **I'm all about the chase.**

Everything that comes after getting the girl?

I'd rather swallow glass.

That's why taken women are my type.

Don't like it?

You don't have to.

However, my newest challenge is full of surprises.

She's temptation poured into a silhouette of dangerous curves.

And she's onto me.

So is HR at the office.

Both quickly become my nightmare as they dare me to change.

Me. The forever bachelor. Can you imagine?

But the only thing that might do that is the secret my office fling is keeping from me—a secret that will change everything and tie us together forever.

A baby.

I've never wanted to "become one" with anyone.

**At least not until her.**

## Introduction



Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot with the best book part in town and let's connect.

Also you get a FREE novel when you join, cause, why not?

See you on the inside...

[Get it HERE](#)

# **DEDICATION**

*To my inspiration, my muse - my wife.*

*-Weston*



**A** *nother weekend, another wedding.* Life on the wrong side of twenty-five seemed to be all about the nuptials. All my friends who I'd previously thought had more sense than to willingly tie themselves to the monotony of monogamy for the rest of their lives had proven me wrong.

At twenty-seven, if I wasn't on my way to a wedding, I was going to a bachelor party, a suit fitting, or a rehearsal dinner. It was exhausting and yet, apparently, I couldn't just bail. My own sister, Victoria, had tied the knot a little while ago, and when she had, she'd made it crystal fucking clear to me that it was important to people who invited you to a wedding that you actually showed up.

Sighing as I stepped away from my dresser, I strode over to the full-length mirror in my walk-in closet and looked myself over, straightening my tie and giving my reflection a smirk to get the full effect. *Perfect.*

After grabbing my phone, restocking my wallet with condoms, and fastening my watch around my wrist, I was ready to go. As I walked out of my bedroom, the intercom buzzed and I grinned. Tristan was right on time.

We could have a pre-game drink or two and then head off to the chapel. I let him up, then unlocked my front door and went to the bar, pouring us each a double shot of whiskey while I waited. A few minutes later, I heard the door closing and then my best friend walked into my penthouse, suited, tied, and ready to get the party started.

*On the other hand, I'm the only one who's going to be getting the party started.* Tristan was more reserved than I was, the polar opposite of me, really. As if he'd heard the thought, his dark, olive green eyes swept across the bar counter as he strode into the main living area, and he sighed before shaking his head.

"You're not getting drunk before we even get there," he said firmly but marched over and picked up his shot, raising it for a beat before tossing it back. Wincing slowly as he swallowed it down, he tapped the little glass against the wood and sat down on a stool, his gaze back on mine. "That being said, I'll have a beer."

"Attaboy." I took my shot, relishing the smooth heat of the whiskey as it traveled down my throat and warmed my stomach. Once it was down, I licked the last of it off my lips and grinned before reaching into the fridge under the counter and coming back with two beers. "One drink isn't going to get anyone here drunk. Just relax. We've got time, and one of the best things about a wedding is those little canapes they serve after the ceremony. It'll be fine. We'll eat a bunch of them to soak up this alcohol and then we'll ply ourselves with more."

He ran a hand through his jet black hair, gripping the strands as he looked back at me. "Good God. Are you ever going to grow up? The ceremony itself is supposed to be one of the best things about a wedding, not the canapes after."

I shrugged. "Everyone is entitled to their own opinion. Mine is that the ceremony itself is a boring time-suck before the party. Besides, how many of these people are actually going to stick to the vows they're making for the rest of their lives? If you ask me—"

"No one asked you."

I rolled my eyes, but I wasn't deterred from the point I was trying to make. "*If* you did ask me, I'd tell you that the traditional vows should be rewritten so that people promise each other all those things until divorce does them part, not death."

“You are so damaged,” he muttered, but I saw the grin trying to break free on his lips before he uncapped the beer and took a long sip. “Thankfully, I don’t have any ties to this wedding other than my cousin, so you’re free to do what you want, which is what you’re going to do anyway. Just stay away from my cousin and his girl.”

“Is she hot?” I cocked my head, trying to remember if I’d ever met his cousin’s girl, but he gave me a sharp glare.

“She’s taken, which I know is like fucking catnip to you, but she’s off limits. They’re not engaged yet, so that should ease some of your longing. He wants to propose to her soon, though. Don’t fuck it up.”

Raising my hands, I showed him my palms and batted my lashes, the very picture of innocence. Or at least that was the picture I was trying to project, but he knew me better than that.

“I’m serious, Jake. Stay away from her. There will be plenty of other women there for you to lead astray.”

“I don’t lead anyone astray.” I scoffed. “All I do is find women who are ready to break the monotony of being in their marriages. It’s a public fucking service.”

“Only you would think of it like that. Didn’t you learn your lesson with Lennon Harris and Hailey Holmes? If anyone was going to be able to show you the error of your ways, I thought for sure it would’ve been Nash and Hunter.”

The mention of their names brought a bitter taste to my mouth. I didn’t do guilt, but I’d pushed things with Lennon a few steps too far. I was willing to admit that I’d been a complete asshole to her and to her friend. They’d gotten me back, though, humiliating me onstage at yet another fucking wedding, but that was beside the point.

I’d gone too far, and although I’d paid for it, I still felt bitter when I thought back to that time. The whole situation had gotten so fucked up and Lennon had been a friend once upon a time. She would never forgive me and neither would my sister.

Victoria had torn me a new one over the stunts I'd pulled back then. It'd left a big black stain on our relationship, and whenever she talked about Lennon and her husband, I saw the way everyone's eyes always darted to mine, wondering what the hell I'd been thinking.

The truth of it was that I hadn't been. I'd seen Lennon again and she'd been wearing another man's ring. It'd set me off in ways I still didn't quite understand, and I'd made mistakes. Ones I'd apologized for but that had also alienated me from my friend, the dick she'd married, and my very own sister.

Narrowing my eyes at Tristan, I picked up the bottle of whiskey and refilled our little glasses. "Thanks for the reminder. For that, we're each having another one of these."

He sighed but nodded and quickly took the shot before grimacing and pushing his glass back to me once he'd swallowed. "Fine, but that was the last one. What I was trying to get to was that I thought you'd change your ways after that."

I snorted. "Nah. Hookups are the only thing that make weddings worth going to. I'm ready to have some fun and break some rules. Life is short, right? Why spend it with only one person and why force someone else to when there are people like me who are willing to help them find adventure again?"

A dark eyebrow arched and his gaze bored into mine. "Adventure? Are you kidding me? The only thing you help them find is infidelity. Why is that, though? Why do you only want the women you can't have for more than one night?"

"Are you seriously trying to shrink me right now?" I looked back at him without flinching. "It won't work, bro. I don't have any hidden commitment issues. I just happen to love the chase."

"Sure, you do, but why? Most people our age are growing up and looking for that one person to settle down with. Even those who aren't into relationships respect the sanctity of marriage and everything that goes along with it. You're the

only person I know who actively seeks out only women who are already committed to someone else and can therefore never be committed to you.”

“Jesus.” I shoved a hand through my hair and squeezed the nape of my neck as I let my head fall back and groaned. “Since when are you interested in psychology? Do us all a favor and stick to your day job. You’re trying to find something in me that just isn’t there.”

“I disagree. We’re all made up of past experiences, and there has to be something in your history that made you this way. I’m not interested in psychology, but I do think the only way to get you to rein it in is by figuring out why you do this in the first place.”

“There’s nothing to figure out. I’m all about fun, man. That’s all there is to it. Women in long-term relationships are in need of a little fun, and that’s why I offer it to them. It’s a win-win.”

“For now, it might seem that way,” he said thoughtfully. “It won’t last, though, especially not now.”

“What are you talking about?”

He sighed. “You’re the CEO of a massive, multibillion-dollar company now, Jake. Grandpa Aspen spent his whole life working to get it to where it is now, and you’re going to dismantle it piece by piece if you carry on this way.”

“No, I’m not,” I said stubbornly before swallowing down half of my beer in one go as frustration coursed through me. “What I do and who I fuck has nothing to do with the company. Every CEO has his hobbies, right? Some people golf, others read. Me? I like to get down and dirty with pretty girls whose husbands stopped eating their pussies the way I do years ago. What’s wrong with that?”

Tristan sighed, looking at me like I was a lost cause. “You need to start straightening up. This whole bad boy shtick is getting really old. One day, you’re going to mess with the wrong woman and there’s going to be hell to pay for it. It’s

going to cost you a shit ton of money, and maybe even the company if you're not careful."

"I *am* careful, though." While I heard what he was saying, I didn't pay much attention to it.

Tristan was one of those guys who believed in happily-ever-afters and was respectful to the point of being a pushover. I loved him like a brother, but he needed to let his hair down and get his dick wet more often.

If he didn't, he was going to die prematurely of one of the many stress-related dangers out there. Glancing down at my watch, I tossed back what was left of my beer and moved out from behind the counter. "Come on, worrywart. We're going to be late if you keep trying to dissect my brain instead of focusing on finishing your drink so we can leave. Jeez. It's a scary day when I've got to be the responsible one."

He chuckled but tipped the rest of the contents of his bottle down his throat and stood up. "You'll never be the responsible one between the two of us. I've been keeping an eye on the time and we've got at least six more minutes before we have to leave. Relax. We'll get there in plenty of time for you to check out the not-so-available women before the ceremony starts."

"That's all I ask for." I picked up my jacket from the armchair I'd slung it across earlier and then strode over to the sliding doors leading out to the balcony and locked them up tight.

Since we were staying over at the hotel after the wedding, my overnight bag was already packed and waiting. I swept it up and slung it over my shoulder, then tossed it in beside Tristan's in his car's trunk before getting into the passenger seat beside him.

As he navigated out of my building's parking lot, I leaned back in my seat and wondered who was going to be the lucky lady I set my sights on tonight. For one night and one night only, I was going to rock her world, show her what she'd been missing out on, and then I'd be gone.

It was simple, and that was exactly the way I liked it.



## MAXINE

If there was one thing in life I could always be sure of, it was that I was going to be late. It didn't matter what I did or how hard I tried to be on time, it never quite worked out that way. Today, it was thanks to missing the subway and then getting off one stop too early.

My feet were aching and I was definitely going to have to shower again before the ceremony, but as I careened up to the bridal suite, I slammed to a stop in front of the door and took a giant breath. *I made it!*

Grinning as I reached for the doorknob, I twisted it and let myself in, practically toppling into the room as I clutched my overnight bag, purse, and the bridesmaids' dress in its protective covering. "I'm here. Never fear when Max is near. Are you guys ready to rock this whole getting ready thing?"

The hive of activity in the suite ceased as everyone turned to look at me. Then Elle, the bride, smiled and clapped her hands together. "Finally! I was wondering if you'd gotten lost."

"Am I the last one here, then?" I asked as I walked in, dropping my bag and purse on the floor but taking care to hang the dress on the empty hook waiting for it.

Elle giggled where she stood on a slightly raised platform in front of the mirror, her mother and the other girls helping her lace up the back of her dress while a makeup artist in front of her seemed annoyed by the fact that she was talking. "Are

you surprised? I'm not. I knew you were going to get here last, but it's still early. We've got enough time."

Cindy, one of the other bridesmaids, laughed and pushed up from her haunches. "I tried to put money on it, but no one would take the bet. It would've been the easiest cash I've ever made, though."

"Next time, just tell me and put money on me being early. I've got your back, girl. We'd surprise the hell out of everyone if I showed up an hour before the appointed time."

"Sure, but we'd have to tell you it started two hours later for you to get there an hour early," Elle's mother chimed in, smiling softly when she met my gaze in the reflection of the gorgeous, ornate standing mirror they were in front of. "It's good to see you, Max. We're glad you're here. Help yourself to some champagne."

"Oooo, you don't have to tell me twice." I flashed her a smile in return, looking around until I spotted an ice bucket with an open bottle of bubbly in it.

As I made my way through the debris that made it look like a bomb had gone off in the room, I said hi to everyone else and grabbed myself a drink. "Anyone need a top off?"

A couple of the women nodded and I carried the bottle to them, filling them up before taking the bottle back to the ice bucket. Once I'd slid it in between the cubes, I looked up to find Cindy coming over to me with a ring perched between her fingers.

"This is for you."

I gasped, clasp my chest as I stared at the simple, faux-diamond on the band. "For me? Why, of course I'll marry you. I thought you were never going to ask."

Rolling her eyes as she laughed, she caught my hand and pulled it away from my chest, sliding the ring onto the second finger on my left hand. "Here, *oh-sarcastic-one*. Keep it on. It's to keep the weirdos away."

"Really?" I eyed the golden band on my finger. "Is it honestly necessary to go to such extremes these days? What

happened to just being a girl, having fun at her friend's wedding?"

"The men happened," Cindy replied without skipping a beat. "That's why I'm giving this to you. It'll allow you to just be a girl having fun at her friend's wedding without being hit on by everything that moves."

"Hey, I'm single. I'm okay with being hit on by everything that moves." I grinned, wagging my eyebrows at her. "Who knows? My soul mate might be coming to the wedding, but if he thinks I'm taken, he'll stay away and I might never meet him."

Elle laughed. "Trust me, your soul mate isn't coming to my wedding. I've met most of the guys on the guest list, even the ones who work with Paul, and none of them are for you. Besides, I thought you weren't interested in a relationship."

"Oh, I'm not. It was just a hypothetical scenario." I winked at Cindy. "Thanks for the ring. I'll keep it on if it will make you feel better, but I think I'm going to be just fine. Now, can anyone point me in the direction of an available shower? I got off at the wrong stop and practically ran halfway here."

"The bathroom is through there." Elle pointed at a set of what looked like cupboard doors. "You're welcome to use the one in here. The room you're in is the furthest one down the hall, so if you want to go drop your stuff off, that's fine too, but the hotel will be sending up a porter for everyone's things later."

"The furthest one down the hall?" I gaped at her, pretending to be offended. "I thought you'd want to keep me close."

"All the groomsmen are down there, too," she teased. "Since you're the only one in here who's single and who will be able to hold her own against them, we thought it was the safest to put you in there."

I grinned. "Well, you're not wrong about me being able to hold my own against them, so I'll take it."

She chuckled. "I thought you might."

After finishing my champagne while rummaging through my bag for my toiletries, I carried the basics to her bathroom and raced through a shower. Once I was done, I put on my underwear along with one of the robes hanging over a rail. Then I brushed my hair before heading back out.

As I did, the hairstylist pointed me to a chair close to the one Elle was in, now that the makeup artist was done with her for the time being. “Sit. You’re up next.”

I saluted her, marching over to the chair and dutifully sitting down. When she’d dried my hair and started on it with a curling iron, I glanced at my friend and noticed that she was sitting ramrod straight, worrying her lip between her teeth as her fingers fidgeted with the bracelet she was wearing.

“What’s up?” I asked. “Where did all this nervous energy suddenly come from?”

She shrugged her narrow shoulders, her eyes darting around until she realized her mother and the other girls were all the way on the other side of the suite, helping each other into their dresses. When she brought her gaze back to mine, she responded quietly.

“I don’t know where it’s coming from, but every time I look at the clock and realize we’re getting closer and closer to the ceremony, it’s like another knot forms in my stomach. What if I’m making a mistake? Have you seen the divorce rate recently? It’s sky high. What if Paul and I don’t make it?”

“It’s just pre-wedding jitters,” I replied soothingly. “Think of me as your spirit guide to get you through them. Tell me about Paul.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Tell me about the man you chose to spend the rest of your life with.”

Elle didn’t seem convinced, but she released a soft sigh and reluctantly started talking. “Well, he’s wonderful. Is that what you were trying to get at?”

“Nope. Tell me why he’s so wonderful that you said yes when he went down on one knee.”

She chewed her lip for another second, then nodded. “Okay, uh, he’s good to me. Loyal. Faithful. Funny. He makes me laugh and he gives me a bunch of orgasms on the regular.”

I laughed. “Good man. What else?”

As she kept talking about him, I saw the light coming into her eyes again as her nervous energy started spilling into excitement. *Fabulous. Onto step two.*

Now that we were past the jitters, I needed to pump her up so she felt super-confident before we headed downstairs. “Paul is a real catch, but so are you, honey. I mean, look at you. Has there ever been a more gorgeous bride?”

When I asked the question, I spoke a little bit louder and it did the trick. Our friends seamlessly caught on to what I was doing, and they plied her with compliments while I put on my dress and sat back down for the makeup artist to do her thing.

Since I wasn’t the bride, she got done with me in no time and even allowed me to speak a little in between. “He’s the luckiest man in the city for you to have chosen him. Seriously. Everything is going to be great. You’re great, and your honeymoon is going to be incredible. We’ll miss you, though, so you’re going to have to send us lots of pictures when you get there.”

She giggled, looking dreamy again as she flushed. “Maybe not as soon as we get there.”

I reached out to swat her arm playfully. “That’s my girl. You guys are such an example to the rest of us. I swear, you’re a couple who’d make even me consider getting into a relationship.”

“Really?”

Nodding without hesitation, I held her gaze and dipped my head in a nod. “Absolutely. You guys are perfect for each other. You always have been. That’s why we’re here, right? To celebrate you two and the shining love you have for each other.”

Tears glistened in her eyes and I felt moisture pricking the backs on mine, too. Overwhelmed with good feels for my

friend, I figured I might as well make the best of the obligatory sappy moment we were having. “I’m so proud of you, Elle. You’ve worked so hard at your relationship and you guys have come so far. I’m honored to be by your side for your big day.”

Stifling a sob, she smiled through her tears and leaned in to give me a one-armed hug. The makeup artist nearly fainted when she noticed the tracks on Elle’s cheeks, sweeping in with her kit and a multitude of brushes to fix it.

I swiped away my own tears, heading over to get another glass of champagne while Elle was restored to her bridal glory. Her mother came up and took my arm, squeezing it as she gave me a fond smile. “I saw what you did there, guiding her through it with such ease. You’re a true friend, my darling. Thank you.”

“That’s what bridesmaids are for, right?” I returned the squeeze, smiling happily as the excitement in the air infused my very blood with joy.

Although I had no intention of walking down the aisle myself any time soon, I loved weddings and what they stood for. When it was finally time for us to go, I played my part in helping Elle with her dress as we walked to the chapel in the garden. Then I took my place at her side before the ceremony began.

Once she was at the altar and the officiant started speaking, we turned toward the congregation and my breath almost got knocked straight out of my lungs when my gaze landed on the bluest pair of eyes I’d ever seen. The guy they belonged to sat about halfway down the aisle, telling me he probably wasn’t family or a close friend.

A coworker of Paul’s, perhaps. Or maybe even a friend from college. Either way, I’d never met him before but he was gorgeous, giving off golden-boy, surfer vibes despite the dove gray suit and white button-down shirt he had on.

One look into those eyes and it was like I could feel sunshine kissing my face and a fresh sea breeze brushing my skin. I sucked in a breath when I noticed he was staring right back at me, a faint smirk touching the corners of his full lips.

With longish, sandy blond hair that curled where it met his collar and tanned, sun-kissed skin, he looked like an enticing mix of fun and trouble. *Two of my favorite things all rolled into one.*

When I smiled at him and he returned it with an almost lazy, knowing one of his own, I knew that it was game on. I hadn't come here looking for a hookup, but the possibility had found me and I wasn't one to let it pass me by—especially not if it looked like *that*.

I lived life to the fullest, grabbing it by the horns and enjoying every second of the ride. And this guy? He definitely looked like he'd make the ride worth my while. As long as he understood that I wasn't one he would ever be able to attach any strings to, I had a feeling we'd have a lot of fun together.

Anticipation zapped through me, and I smiled at him again as the officiant pronounced Elle and Paul husband and wife. When I saw the mystery man cock an eyebrow at me as the ceremony came to an end, my smile turned into an all-out grin.

*Oh, I'm game, hot stuff. The only real question is whether you're going to be able to keep up.*



**H**oly shit. *I almost need a cigarette after eye-fucking that bridesmaid for most of the ceremony.* Surprisingly, the girl gave as good as she got, flirting right back at me subtly and from a distance. She didn't back down once, practically throwing down the damn gauntlet with the radiant grin she shot at me as the happy couple thrust their joined hands into the air.

I went through the motions of congratulating them when they left the chapel, shaking Paul's hand and giving Elle a quick hug as I wondered where she'd been hiding the hot bridesmaid. Seriously, the girl was gorgeous, her eyes the color of new leaves in the spring and her chocolate brown hair curling in waves that hung to the middle of her back.

She had curves for days and a smile that said she was up for anything. And, to top it all off and make it that much sweeter, she had a sparkling diamond ring on her finger. Considering that she'd been ogling me so openly for most of the service, however, her eyes rarely leaving mine, I was assuming that her fiancé or husband wasn't here.

*Really, could she be any more perfect?* Not if anyone asked me. Tristan rolled his eyes at me as we made our way to the stretch tent set up in the garden where the bar was open and the canapes were being served.

"She's one of Elle's bridesmaids, Jake," he said, letting me know that he'd caught on to the intense eye-fucking that'd gotten me rock hard right there in the damn chapel. "There's a

ring on her finger. I know that's like a red flag being waved in front of a bull to you, but Paul is going to be pissed if you fuck her and she might be married to a friend."

"Said friend obviously isn't in attendance," I replied dismissively. "Besides, if you've got a girl who looks like that and you send her to a wedding alone, you're asking for it."

"Or have commitments at work or something and you think that other guys will respect the ring you put on her finger."

"Hey, it's her body," I said. "None of what happened in there was one-sided. If she doesn't respect the ring on her finger—or want it there for that matter—then why should I?"

He sighed. "Paul is my cousin's best friend, which is how both of us know him. It was nice of him to invite us. Let's not cause a scene at his wedding, shall we?"

"Who's going to cause a scene? It's a wedding. Single guys are *expected* to hit on women at a wedding." As I said it, the bridesmaids got done taking pictures with the couple in front of the chapel and started toward the tent. "If you'll excuse me, the poor girl looks parched. I'm going to take her a drink and see where the night takes us."

He didn't look happy about it, but he waved me off and went to the small group of people his cousin was with while I plucked two flutes of champagne from a tray. If she shot me down, then so be it. I'd learned my lesson from what'd happened with Lennon. I didn't push anymore.

If a woman said no, then that was that, but it didn't mean I wouldn't at least try. *Married or not, here I come.*

When she saw me approaching her, she excused herself from the rest of the group and slowly raked her gaze over me, the green lighting up as she smiled when her eyes met mine. She nodded at the champagne in my hand. "Is that for me?"

"Nope. I'm just really thirsty, so I thought I'd make sure I've got another on hand," I joked as I held it out to her.

Soft laughter bubbled out of her as she accepted it. She took a long sip before lowering the flute away from her lips.

“So, he’s funny, too. What’s your name, gorgeous?”

“Isn’t that my line?”

“That depends on whether you’re intimidated by a woman who asks first,” she mused. “Are you? Because if so, it was nice looking at you but I need to go wash my hair now.”

“Well, then I suppose it’s a good thing that what I was going to say is, hi. I’m Jake. You are?”

“Maxine,” she said, extending her hand to take mine. “My friends call me Max. You’re not a friend yet, but I’m willing to give you a trial run.”

“Max it is.” As soon as I took her hand, it was like touching a live wire.

The girl was a ball of energy, and it felt like it all flowed into me when her much smaller palm fitted against mine. Our gazes locked and held, something intangible and as real as it was unfamiliar passing between us. “It’s very nice to meet you, Max.”

Her green eyes dropped to where our hands were still joined before she slowly lifted it back to mine. “Just like I thought. You’re trouble, Jake, which makes it nice to meet you, too.”

I grinned. “A girl who appreciates trouble. I like that. Tell me, Max, how do you feel about tequila?”

She slid her fingers through mine instead of releasing my hand and started leading me to the bar. “Tequila and I are old friends. So old, in fact, that I trust it to make decisions for me on occasion, and since this is an occasion, it feels like as good a time as any to get reacquainted with it.”

Willingly following her, I ordered two shots of tequila and felt like the universe itself had put her on my path for the evening. She was witty, assertive, and wasn’t afraid to go after what she wanted. And unless I was very much mistaken, what she wanted tonight was me.

Our goals for the wedding seemed to be aligned, which was great. We were both here to have fun, and since she was

either married or engaged, one night of fun was where it would stay. It suited me down to a tee.

When our eyes met once more as we toasted with our tequila, I grinned. “To letting Jose make our decisions for us.”

“To bad decisions, then.” She smiled and clinked her glass against mine before taking the shot like she just couldn’t wait any longer.

I laughed. “Bad decisions, huh? I don’t know. Tequila has led me down some very interesting paths, not all of them bad.”

“Sure. They’re not bad while you’re on them, but the next morning? I’ve regretted some of the paths tequila has led me down, and that’s even without the headache. You’re right about it being interesting, though. At least it always makes for a good story.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “We drink tequila because no good story has ever started with the words *‘so, I drank too much water yesterday and you wouldn’t believe what happened.’*”

“That’s very true.” She smiled and held out her hand. “Want to tear up the dance floor with me?”

I took a look around the tent. “There’s a DJ, but I don’t see a dance floor. I’d be happy to do so once we get to the reception, though.”

Green eyes twinkling with mischief as they held mine, she shrugged. “Why be like everyone else? There’s a perfectly good patch of grass in front of the esteemed DJ. I’m sure he’d appreciate the help with getting people in the mood to party.”

“You don’t think the bride and groom will mind? We’re just supposed to be having drinks, eating tiny dishes right now.”

“I know for a fact that Elle and Paul want people to enjoy themselves tonight. Think about it, a wedding is the most expensive party anyone will ever throw. The least the guests can do is to appreciate it.”

“Fair enough.” I put my hand in hers and followed her to the patch of grass in question.

The DJ grinned when I spun her body into mine. Then he blended the song that had been playing into one with a better beat to dance to. Max didn't seem to have any qualms about us being the only two people dancing, looping her arms around my neck and molding her torso to mine as she started moving.

I wrapped my arms around her waist, leaning into her and pulling out my very best moves. Soon enough, other people joined us and the reception was officially off to a jovial start before it'd even begun.

Max laughed a lot, only releasing me to request songs and when we had to make our way into the ballroom. We sat at our separate seats for the speeches and for dinner, but the rest of the time, we were glued to each other's sides.

Once the dance floor was opened, I took her out and we didn't leave it again except for when we grabbed more drinks. Our bodies moved together in what felt like extended foreplay for hours. Most of the night, I was as hard as steel against her, and her cheeks flushed in a way that told me she wasn't immune to this thing happening between us.

Our gazes kept clashing, holding, and then slowly dropping away to rake across the other's lips, our hands roaming as much as they could without the groping being inappropriate for public consumption. The reception was winding down when she suddenly looked up at me again, her voice husky as she asked the question I'd somehow known she was going to beat me to.

“Your room or mine?”

“Yours.” I was sharing with Tristan since I'd forgotten to book on time. “Mine comes with a roommate.”

“Mine comes with, well, me.” She sighed, looking disappointed with herself as we walked off the dance floor together. “That feels like a lost opportunity. There were so many better ways I could've worked *comes* or *coming* into that sentence.”

I chuckled. “It's been a long night. I don't blame your brain for having missed that particular opportunity. God

knows, my brain left the building somewhere around the sixth shot of tequila.”

She glanced up at me as we climbed into the elevator, her eyes dancing with amusement but dark with lust at the same time. “Oh, that’s cute. I could’ve had six more without feeling it tomorrow. We danced *a lot*. I think I’ve sweated out most of the alcohol.”

“You’re trying to convince me that you’re sober?”

“Not at all.” She laughed. “All I’m saying is that we could’ve kept drinking all night without being hungover tomorrow. I think that’s the most physical activity I’ve done all year.”

“You’re about to get more,” I said, just to see what her reaction to the half-joking statement was going to be.

Instead of making a big deal about it, she simply laughed again and then let out an exasperated sigh. “Well, I suppose we can keep getting some exercise. If we absolutely have to.”

I glanced down at her, not missing the insane chemistry between us now that we were alone. “Won’t your husband get mad if we get more exercise tonight?”

“My husband?” A faint frown creased her brow for a moment before she laughed. “Oh, right. No, no one is going to get mad.”

*That’s too bad.* I chuckled, but before I could ask her if she was in one of those new-agey, open type of marriages, we were in her room, and instead of wasting more time talking, I took her hand and spun her into me for the umpteenth time tonight.

This time, instead of just looking at her lips when her body hit mine, I claimed them. My head descended just as she pushed up on her toes, and our mouths met with all the heat of a simmering volcano finally erupting.

*Thank fuck.* I didn’t know why her husband wasn’t going to be mad or why she’d frowned when I’d asked her about him, but in that moment, I didn’t care. We’d been teasing each

other for hours, and right this minute, the only thing I cared about was finally getting her naked and underneath me.



MAXINE

Jake's tongue slid through my folds and I moaned, my hips bucking as my fingers closed around the thick material of the comforter underneath me. "Oh, fuck. Yes. More."

Instead of immediately obliging, he lifted his head to grin at me while gripping my thighs in his big hands and spreading them further apart. "I knew you were going to be a firecracker in bed, but I wasn't expecting you to be so needy."

Something almost like pity flashed in his eyes as they darted to my left hand, and I chuckled as I released the comforter to tangle my fingers into those luscious locks of his. "Are you going to finish what you started, or am I going to have to do it myself?"

The guy was incredibly good with his mouth, but I wasn't kidding. All that dancing had left me hot, bothered, and aching. All night, his body had been rubbing against mine, the impressive length of him grinding into me and making me see stars on the songs that justified—or excused—grinding.

Besides, both of us knew what we were here for and it wasn't to talk. Jake smirked, those beautiful baby blues filled with laughter and desire.

"As much as I'd like to see you do it yourself, I finish what I start. Always. Maybe later, though."

With that, he swept my panties to the side again and tucked into me like I was his favorite meal. In no time, I was right back on the edge and his fingers hooked into my waistband,

pulling my panties clean off just before his lips clamped over my clit and he sucked.

I gasped, my eyes slamming shut as pleasure raced through me. Just like I'd suspected, the man was exactly what I'd needed after the shit storm the last couple of months had been. Work had been hectic and it'd been a very long time since I'd been with anyone. A very long time since I'd had an orgasm at all, actually.

It hadn't bothered me until I'd started moving with him back at the tent, and suddenly, I'd become acutely aware of just how long it had been. Pent up and frustrated, I'd decided to throw caution to the wind with him.

Since I'd known he was trouble when I first saw him at the ceremony, I'd figured he might take me up on it when I invited him back to my room. I didn't make a habit of hooking up with guys I'd only just met, but I was making an exception for *Mr. Beautiful Blue Eyes*.

Jake's fingers teased at my entrance and I whimpered, writhing under his arm slung across my torso to hold me down. As he licked and sucked, working me into a frenzy before finally sliding one finger into me, I cried out, lost to the sea of blissful sensation as an orgasm crept up on me.

When he realized how close I was, he grazed my clit with his teeth and it catapulted me straight to the heavens above. I screamed his name, shaking as my toes curled and my entire body locked up. In the aftermath, he was surprisingly tender, seeing me through before finally lifting his head away from me again and arching a brow when my blurry eyes hooked on his.

"That was fucking awesome," he groaned. "Another one?"

"Are you seriously asking if I'd like another orgasm?" I was too boneless to be witty. "I'm not sure if I'll get there, but if you want to try—"

"I don't try," he said confidently. "I'll get you there."

Although I admired his *little-engine-that-could attitude*, I sincerely doubted it. "Far be it from me to deny you. Go for

it.”

“Hang onto the sheets, Max. I’ll make it a good one, but only if you stop looking at me like there’s a neon green walrus penis growing out of my forehead. I’m not insane, I’m just that good.”

I laughed, surprised that he was managing to get me to do it genuinely even in the heat of the moment. “A neon green walrus penis? Where the hell did that come from?”

“If you saw the way you were looking at me like my face was the craziest thing you’ve ever seen, you’d understand. I’m really not crazy. I’m just confident.”

“And I’m intrigued. Why would you even bother? Isn’t the way this works that you feel obliged to get me off before we end with a dissatisfying bang?”

He frowned, his brows jumping as he groaned. “Are you serious right now? Fuck, who the hell have you been hooking up with?”

I shrugged. “It’s been a while since I’ve done this, but I was pretty sure it still worked the same way.”

“Not with me,” he grumbled, shaking his head. “Right. Now I’m really invested in this. If it’s been a while, then let’s make it worth your while.”

“How very gentlemanly of you,” I teased, but then shivered when he started playing with me again. “Oh, right. You weren’t kidding.”

“I never kid about this,” he murmured as he lowered his mouth again and, true to his word, coaxed another orgasm out of me. It took me longer to get there this time, but the slower build was rewarded with a climax even more powerful than the first.

*If this is what it can be like, then he’s right about me hooking up with the wrong people in the past.* It was an errant thought as I came down, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t true. In this city, if a girl had a one-night stand with a guy who got her off once, she was lucky. Twice was unheard of in my experience.

For some reason, as he rose up and crawled over me while I lay there feeling like a puddle of goo, my body became even more needy than it had been before. I hooked my legs around his hips, trembling as I used them to pull him closer as his mouth sealed over mine.

My nipples tightened to peaks against his chest, and I was so sensitive after what he'd already done to me that just the feel of his warm skin against them was enough to make me moan. He chuckled darkly into our kiss, murmuring against my lips as his fingers threaded into my hair.

“Fuck, Max. You’re amazing. I can’t remember the last time I wanted someone this badly. You’re so fucking responsive.”

I practically mewled, lapping up his praise like a starved kitten purring for him. Instead of responding verbally, I raised my head to kiss him again and folded my arms around his neck to pull him into me. As his tip slid through my slick warmth, I found myself wondering how it was possible for it to be this good when it was our first time together.

I didn’t remember ever having been this mindless during sex, my body primed and seemingly insatiable for his. Jake stroked my hair out of my face, kissing me wildly and just as into it as I was.

He sucked in a sharp breath as he ran his shaft through my folds over and over again, teasing me and really making me feel like I was turning into a savage. Trembling above me, he cussed and murmured my name, holding me close while also reminding me of a bow pulled too tight. He was going to snap, and I couldn’t fucking wait.

When he did, it was a beautiful thing. He dipped into me slowly at first, his blue eyes burning bright as he pulled back and thrust in again like he couldn’t bear to be out of me for too long. When he repeated the motion, he groaned, but then suddenly, his eyes widened and he pulled clear out of me.

“We forgot a condom.”

“Crap.” My heart raced, but then I forced myself to relax as I looked up at him. “Are you clean?”

“Yep. I take a test every month just to be sure.”

*Every month? What the fuck?* I didn’t ask, though. It was none of my business if he was a player. “Great. I’m clean too, and you obviously haven’t, uh, come yet. So we should be okay.”

He nodded. “Fucking fabulous.”

Reaching over, he swiped his pants up off the floor and sheathed himself in a condom in little more than a blink of an eye. Then he was on top of me again and we went at it like animals, lost to a passion fueled by tequila, dancing, and already having had to stop once.

Jake was a thing of beauty like this, an absolute work of erotic art with an extra side of audible porn as he groaned and moaned, his lips parting and his brow furrowing as he swirled his hips and carefully brought me right back to the edge. I was with him every step of the way, finally flying off the handle with him as we both cried out before collapsing in each other’s arms.

There was an intimate moment after when his gaze met mine and he pressed a light, lazy kiss to my lips before getting up to dispose of the condom. When he came back to bed, we were both exhausted. Seemingly without thinking about it, he pulled me into his arms, the big spoon to my little one, and before I even knew what was happening, his breathing evened out.

“Jake?” I said softly into the stillness of the room. “Are you...”

When he didn’t answer, I smiled and allowed myself a few more minutes in his arms. Since I had to be at work early in the morning, however, I hadn’t planned on actually sleeping at the hotel. I hadn’t told Elle earlier, but I wouldn’t be staying for brunch.

Quietly getting up, I sighed, feeling bad about leaving him like this, but it wasn’t like I’d had a chance to say goodbye

before he'd fallen asleep. Tiptoeing to the bathroom, I found the overnight bag I'd brought just so I'd have all my stuff for when we'd gotten ready. Then I freshened up and headed out.

As I opened the door, I turned back to take one last look at the golden god I was leaving behind. In his sleep, he was even more handsome than he was when he was awake, softer and so much less cocky. *It's been fun, Jake with the beautiful blue eyes.*

Part of me wondered if I should've left him my number as I closed the door softly behind me. We'd definitely had chemistry, but it was better that we didn't have any contact again. With a guy like him, contact could've led to feelings and I couldn't afford to have those.

I'd meant what I said earlier to Elle about her and Paul being an example, but what I hadn't told her—hadn't told anyone except my friend Emery—was that I didn't want any part of the institution they set an example for.

Marriages fell apart every day, and while I really didn't believe Elle's would become another casualty of that particular war, I'd lived through the fallout of divorce. I had zero interest in ever going through anything like that again.



JAKE

I woke up to the incessant pounding of fists on the door and excited female voices chattering through it. “Hurry up, Max. We’re all out here waiting for you. Brunch starts in fifteen.”

I groaned, rolling over and shoving a pillow over my head before I realized two things. The first was that my name wasn’t Max. They weren’t here for me. The second was that Max wasn’t here. I knew it as well as I did my own name now that I’d realized my name wasn’t *Max*.

Tossing the pillow down on the floor, I cracked my eyes open and confirmed my suspicions. Max was nowhere to be found. Her room wasn’t huge and I had a clear view into the bathroom from the bed. It was empty, and unless she was hiding in a closet, she wasn’t here.

And neither was my overnight bag. I hadn’t planned on falling asleep with her, but I had, and now I had nothing to wear but the suit I’d had on last night.

*Fuck my life.*

I never did the walk of shame, but it looked like I was going to have to. Grabbing my clothes as the knocking carried on, I got dressed and finally barked out an irritated response. “Max isn’t here, people. She bailed on your brunch.”

When I opened the door, I found myself staring at the entire wedding party. All the bridesmaids were out here with their partners, and so were the groomsmen and all their partners. They peered at me curiously.

“Who are you?” one of the girls asked, craning her neck to get a look into the room behind me. “Are you sure she’s not here?”

“Does she have an invisibility cloak?” I snapped, the humiliation of the walk of shame not sitting well with me. “If she doesn’t, she’s not fucking in there.”

Eyebrows rose at my harsh words, but I didn’t give a damn. Glances were exchanged and a few jaws tightened, but I ignored it all. I didn’t get off on being humiliated and the whole walk of shame thing wasn’t really my bag.

As I marched away from them, my phone buzzed in my pocket, and when I pulled it out, I saw a text from Tristan. I hadn’t seen him since last night, and he’d assumed I’d gone off with some woman, so he’d checked out of the hotel and he’d taken my overnight bag with him.

**Me: Thanks. Meet you at my place. I’m on my way now.**

He replied with a thumbs-up emoji, and I shoved my phone back in my pocket, not stopping until I dropped into a cab downstairs.

*Jesus. That sucked.*

Scrubbing my hands over my face, I shook my head before letting it fall against the seat. *What the hell was that?*

She saved me a lot of effort by taking off, but even married women didn’t usually run out on me. *Maybe she was more worried about her husband being mad than she let on.*

Yeah. That made sense. Fun Maxine had tucked tail and run back to her boring hubby. I sighed. I didn’t want to see her again, but I already knew I’d be remembering that woman for a long time to come. She’d been a breath of fresh air, crazy, in the moment, and keeping up with me every step of the way.

Plus, she really was beautiful. The look in those green eyes when they lit up as she laughed was something that I didn’t think I’d ever forget. Nor would I forget the way they clouded over with lust or darkened when she came.

Having those curves underneath me had been fucking amazing, and while part of me wished I could, in fact, see her again, I knew it wasn't a good idea. It was one thing screwing a married woman, but another thing entirely to get involved with her.

Relationships led to hurt and heartbreak. To broken homes and miserable parents. I had no interest in any of that.

When I finally walked into my house, Tristan was sitting at the breakfast table off the kitchen, sipping coffee from one of my mugs. He lifted his hand in a wave, taking in whatever thunderous expression was on my face before he laughed.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I headed over to the coffeemaker and snapped a fresh pod into place before grabbing a mug for myself, sliding it into the slot, gripping the counter, and leaning back. “She fucking left me alone in the hotel room.”

“Okay,” he said slowly, dark eyes puzzled. “Why is that a problem? The way I see it, it's more of a solution, isn't it? If she was gone when you woke up, she saved you the awkward morning-after chat.”

“She saved me the awkward morning-after chat with her, but instead, I had to have it with the entire fucking wedding party. They came to get her for brunch and obviously, she wasn't there, but I was. Guess who had to do the walk of shame all the way from one side of the hallway to the other? It didn't help that she was in the furthest room from the damn elevators.”

His gaze stayed on mine. Then he suddenly burst out laughing, doubling over and even smacking his leg like the dad in a damn sitcom. “That's hilarious. It's the best thing I've ever heard. That's what you get for being a dick, Jake Aspen. Karma is such an entertaining bitch.”

My lips pursed and my eyes rolled, but I let him get it all out, listening to him cracking up as I watched my coffee trickle into the mug. Once it was full, I pulled it out of the slot

and took it over to the breakfast table, joining him as his laughter finally started subsiding.

He looked at me again, expression still tight with barely restrained laughter. “Honestly? I’m a little bit glad that happened to you.”

“What? Why?”

He chuckled, his head shaking as he took another sip of his coffee before replying. “It’s a good way for you to have gotten what you deserved without anyone getting hurt as collateral. You had to have known something like this would happen at some point.”

“Yeah, well, I’m assuming she started feeling guilty and went back to her husband in the middle of the night. It just would’ve been nice if she’d texted her friends to let them know she wouldn’t be joining them at the post-wedding brunch. It’s the polite thing to do.”

Amusement sparked in his eyes as he looked at me. “You think Max went back to her husband and that’s why she left you there?”

I shrugged. “It makes sense, doesn’t it? How did you know her name?”

“My cousin told me,” he said, the biggest shit-eating grin I’d ever seen spreading on his face. “I hate to break it to you, man, but Maxine isn’t married. Actually, that’s not true. I don’t hate to break it to. I’m loving every second of this.”

A slow frown tugged my brows together. “Excuse me? That’s not possible. She was wearing a ring, so if she’s not married, she’s engaged.”

“No, she’s as single as we are. I had the most interesting discussion with Paul last night after you disappeared with her.” He smirked. “One of the bridesmaids gave her a cheap, dime-store ring to wear so jerks like you wouldn’t hit on her.”

My jaw dropped and my heart raced. I wanted to tell him that he’d gotten it wrong and that Paul had to have mistaken her for another one of the bridesmaids, but Tristan was enjoying this way too much. My friend was detail oriented.

For him to be taking so much pleasure in the fact that I had been duped, it meant that he'd made absolutely sure that there had been no mistake.

Max wasn't married. She'd pulled a fast one on me, and to say that I was stunned was the understatement of the century. Nothing like this had ever happened to me. *I mean, who wears a fucking fake ring at a wedding?*

"That's just wrong," I muttered, glaring at the steam rising from the surface of my coffee like I was trying to weaponize it. "Why would she do that?"

"Why did you hit on her when you thought she was married? That's the better question. Life is full of mysteries, man. This isn't such a big one. The girl wanted to enjoy her friend's wedding without being bothered by any creeps, and instead, she hooked up with the biggest one of them all. If anything, it's ironic."

"Well, I'm glad you're having so much fucking fun with this." I, on the other hand, was not enjoying it at all. "You're never going to let me live it down, are you?"

"Not a fucking chance," he said happily. "For as long as we're alive, I'm going to take pleasure in the fact that you got some of your own medicine back. With the walk of shame and that she's not married? It's a glorious, shining example of just how much karma will always hit back."

"Sure. Sure," I muttered. "Kick a friend while he's down, why don't you?"

"Oh, please." He rolled his eyes in such an exaggerated movement that I was pretty sure he'd gotten a good look at his fucking spine. "You're not down. You had a good time with a woman and she left before you woke up. That's how one-night stands work, Jake. You know that better than anyone. Stop sulking so much. You did have fun with her, didn't you?"

"It doesn't matter. Everything that happened this morning tarnished the memory of last night," I said dramatically, lying through my teeth.

Nothing could tarnish the memory of last night. Sure, I felt like an idiot for it today, but last night had been great. This was the first time someone had gotten the better of me, though, and I couldn't say I loved the feeling.

In fact, I would go out of my way to avoid feeling it ever again, but the fact that it had been her eased the sting a little. I'd known there was more to her than what met the eye, and all of this just confirmed that I'd been right.

Maxine Whatever-her-last-name was had been different from any other women I'd met before. A breath of fresh air in so many more ways than I'd realized. And in that moment, I was more relieved than ever before that I wasn't going to see her again.



**H**uman resources was my life, my job, and my passion. I loved humans. I was a human. *Why wouldn't I want to be a resource for them? Us.*

Statistically, employed adults spent most of their lives at work. Making sure people felt heard and that their complaints were addressed boosted morale, which in turn boosted performance, and if everyone was performing at optimum levels, the company did well and the employees ultimately shared in the benefits of that.

As far as I was concerned, whoever had said *happy wife, happy life* had been wrong. It should've been *happy employees, happy life*. But since that didn't rhyme and wasn't as catchy, it would probably never take over its more popular cousin's spot.

The point, however, was that I took my job seriously. With a healthy company culture, people were happy, and when they were happy and the company turned good profits, we all got bigger bonuses. It was a no-brainer to me.

I knew that not everyone respected my industry as much as I thought they should, but to me, we were the most important department in the entire company. Aspen Pharmaceuticals was huge, taking up an entire skyscraper downtown along with several manufacturing plants, labs, and a multitude of other smaller sites.

Our workforce consisted of thousands of people, and I busted my ass daily for every last one of them. When my

supervisor walked into my office carrying a stack of thin files in his hand, my heart skipped.

“Who did what?” I asked before he could say a word. I extended my hand and motioned for the files.

Adam, my supervisor, didn’t share my passion for the job but at least he had the good sense to trust me to do mine and to do it well. “We’ve got a problem.”

“No shit.” I flicked through the dark red folders, counting six in total. We used this color folder for complaints that constituted serious violations of company policy or even the law. *And six of them at one time?*

It wasn’t unheard of, but in the couple of years I’d been at the company, the most I’d seen at one time had been five. “Who *dunnit?*”

“That’s the problem.” Adam sighed, his knee bouncing as he dropped into the chair across from my desk.

My office was tiny, practically a broom closet, but it was mine and I was damn proud of it. When he started picking at a thread coming loose on the chair, I had the urge to lean forward and swat his hand away.

“What is it, Adam?” I repeated the question. “What are you so nervous about? We’re supposed to make troublemakers nervous. They’re not supposed to do it to us.”

“Well, this potential troublemaker can fire us both, so of course I’m fucking nervous. Those complaints are against our new boss, the CEO. Mr. Aspen himself.”

“I’ve never even seen the guy,” I joked in an attempt to lighten the heavy mood that had suddenly descended on my office. “Come on, Adam. How bad can it be? What can he possibly have done that’s gotten people this riled up?”

“Well, uh, apparently, there are women saying that he’s been talking to them inappropriately. I’ve never seen him either, but like I said, he’s new. He took over from the older Mr. Aspen recently. There was a memo about it.”

“I saw the memo, but I noticed our department wasn’t invited to whatever the higher-ups did to welcome him to the fold.”

He snorted. “We’re the low men on the totem pole, Max. I’m sure the execs would’ve gotten together for scotch and cigars or something, but it’s not like they could’ve invited everyone. There are just too many of us.”

“Fair enough,” I conceded, opening the folder on top of the pile. “Okay, so young Mr. Aspen is sexually harassing his staff. That’s not great.”

“Let’s not label it so harshly,” he said immediately, not even pausing to take a breath. “Sexual harassment gets people in a world of trouble. As far as I can tell, he’s just made some comments that have been perceived as vulgar.”

I glanced down at the complaint form in front of me. “He’s made some comments that have been perceived as *vulgar*? According to this woman, she overheard him telling someone a dirty limerick about a man from Nantucket. *Whose thing was so long he could suck it.*” I sighed. “This isn’t good.”

Sliding the first folder off, I dropped it with a smack on my desk and opened the next one. “Oh, this is lovely. This woman excused herself from a meeting because she’s pregnant and had to go to the doctor, and he told her that maybe she should consider staying home, barefoot and in the kitchen.” My brows arched as I looked back up at Adam. “What the hell is wrong with this man?”

He blew out a heavy breath and shook his head as he shrugged. “I don’t know, but we need to fix it. It’s not really that bad, is it? It’s not ideal, but it’s just a few off-handed remarks.”

Disbelief coursed through me and I picked up the next folder, opening it and turning the complaint form toward him. “This one is a classic. Gina from finance made a mistake on a report, and he called her in to discuss it—and he told her she could stick the report where the sun don’t shine. That’s horrible.”

Adam snapped his fingers. “I saw that one. They were arguing when he said it. I think it must’ve been a heat of the moment thing.”

As I combed through the remaining three complaints, a block of ice formed in my stomach while my blood heated. “This is totally unacceptable behavior. If he was anyone else, he’d have been halfway to the door by now. Why are you defending him?”

Adam put his hands up. “I’m not defending him, Max. Just take it down a notch, okay? I’m not saying what he’s done is right, and if he was anyone else, he would’ve been *out* the door by now, not just halfway to it. The reality, however, is that he’s not anyone else. He’s the boss. That requires... a certain degree of finesse in how we handle this.”

I dropped the last folder with a faint thud on top of the others as I stared at him. “Is that your way of saying that I should be nice when I go talk to him?”

“Yes. Tact is real. You should try it sometime.”

“Why don’t you take this one, then?”

He shot me a smile. “You have the afternoon free and I don’t. We need to move on this as soon as possible. It can’t wait. If it comes out that we knew something like this was happening and we didn’t act, the company will look incredibly bad.”

“And these stories have a way of finding themselves in the press,” I finished for him. “Fine, I’ll do it. I can’t promise finesse, though.”

“I’ll miss you if you get fired.” He was still smiling as he stood up and nodded at me. “Just take it easy on him, Max. He only took over from his grandfather a little while ago. Those are big shoes to fill for a guy who’s in his late twenties. I’m really not trying to defend him, but let’s try to help the guy rather than to go at him or villainize him, okay?”

Breathing out through my nostrils, I agreed. Not because I thought the man deserved a free pass but because Adam was right. He was our boss and I really did love my job. The last

thing I wanted was to get fired for going in all guns blazing from the get-go.

What the guy was doing was so, so wrong, but I needed to find a way to make him see that without jeopardizing my career here. Surely, he had to have a brain in his head, though. There was no way his grandfather would've turned the company over to him when he retired if he was a complete idiot.

And any person with a brain should've realized that saying this kind of thing was wrong. It was as simple as that. Rage coiled deep within me and my eyes narrowed. I hated the idea that in this day and age, some men still thought they could get away with treating women in the workplace this way.

It was even worse because he was in the ultimate position of power, and even my supervisor, a man roughly the same age as Mr. Aspen, was too afraid to go after him. Which was why he was sending me, hoping that a pair of boobs would assuage the guy and make him not fire me if I tempted him with my vagina. I knew that was why Adam was sending me.

He was too afraid of facing the guy himself, and since Mr. Aspen obviously thought of women as lesser beings, Adam was hoping that the whole conversation would be less threatening coming from me. A pair of boobs and a vagina I could wave at him, and Adam probably thought I would be safe.

I wished I could blame him, but I couldn't. If I could've passed this particular investigation on to someone else, I'd have done it in a heartbeat. At the same time, as righteous indignation burned in my veins, the fact that this could cost me my job knocked the wind out of my sails just the littlest bit.

After poring over the complaints and making sure that I memorized every possible detail, I stood up and told the assistant I shared with the rest of the junior HR pool that I was going. It was only after I left our wing that I realized I didn't even know where I was going.

Combing over the directory mounted on the wall beside the elevator, I finally looked all the way up to the top of the

metal sheet. I'd never even looked that far up. Never had a reason to. When my gaze finally hit the very last line, I saw that our esteemed executives occupied the top floor. I should've guessed as much, though.

Jabbing at the call button, I waited for the elevator to arrive and then climbed in, knowing it was urgent to address the issue but also wondering if I should've taken a little while to cool down. On my way up, anger brewed deep inside me.

The audacity of this man was disgusting. *To abuse his power by making other people feel like crap. Who does he think he is?*

By the time the doors slid open in front of me, I was on the warpath. I wouldn't do anything stupid, but I wasn't giving up on this before he realized the error of his ways. The executive floor was damn impressive, but the luxurious carpet, huge windows, and crystal chandeliers were lost on me. They were probably going to remodel now that there was a young man in charge anyway.

All this was old school. If he could tear his grandfather's legacy down by treating his people this way, then I had no doubt that the décor would be next. I strode over to a receptionist with a plaque on her desk that read *Assistant to the CEO*. Impatiently waiting for her to get off the phone, I took a few deep breaths and found that it actually helped calm me a little.

"Hi," I said as soon as the woman tapped a button on her earpiece and brought her gaze up to mine. "I'm Maxine Fowler from HR. I'm here for the boss man."

She nodded and put in a call to him, then grinned brightly when she got off the phone. "Wonderful. Jake will see you in just a minute."

When she said the name, I swore my world stopped spinning. But it couldn't be him, right? No way this was the Jake I'd met at the wedding. It just couldn't be. *There are too many Jakes out there, aren't there?*

There had to be. Of course, there were. He was *a* Jake. Not *the* Jake. Even as I thought it, I tried to come to terms with what was probably about to happen. I was going to meet my new boss for the very first time, and when I did, I was going to realize that I'd slept with him.

That was how life worked. Although I didn't know for a fact that it was going to go that way just yet, I had a feeling that very soon, I was going to be looking into beautiful blue eyes, remembering what it'd felt like when those very same eyes had watched me orgasm just two nights ago.



JAKE

**F**rustrated by the surprise visit from HR, I figured it was better to just get it out of the way. No doubt it was going to be some or other stickler from downstairs, here to read me the riot act about company policy. I'd known it'd be coming at some point, but I'd been hoping to put it off.

If it was up to me, this whole place would be getting a policy and procedure overhaul real soon. *Oh, wait. It is up to me.*

Grinning as I hit the call button on my intercom, I told Abby to let them in. *Let's get this over with. I'll—*

The thought died an instant death when the woman who appeared on my threshold looked exactly like—

*No. It can't be. Can it? How can she work for me and I didn't even know it?*

“Max?” The name came out of me almost involuntarily as she lifted her blazing green eyes to mine, clearly pissed off at me about something.

If anyone had reason to be pissed, though, it was me, not her. I was the one who'd woken up alone and who had to face all her damn friends by myself. “What are you doing here?”

“Jake.” She nodded curtly and walked into my office, her long, curly brown hair tied up in a high ponytail that swayed as she strode purposefully to my desk. “Thank you for taking the time to see me on such short notice. There are some

complaints that have been filed against you and we thought it best to address them without delay. Sir.”

She tacked the last word on at the end as an afterthought, but my dick twitched anyway. *I could get used to her calling me sir.*

Power games weren't really my thing in the bedroom, but that word, directed at me, and said in her voice definitely roused my libido like it'd been a sleeping beast that she'd poked in the side with a sharp, pointy stick.

Evidently, however, she didn't plan on bringing up the fact that we'd slept together. She'd gotten straight to business, which was fine. I was curious about the complaints she'd mentioned anyway, but before she left this office, we would talk about it.

“What complaints?” I motioned for her to take a seat across from my desk and sat back down on my own. “Are you trying to say that someone has supposedly complained... about me?”

“Not supposedly. Someone has laid a complaint against you. Several someones, actually. Six, to be exact.”

“You're kidding.” I waited for her to crack a smile. To give me any sign that she was still the fun-loving, chatty girl I'd met on Saturday night, but there was none of that there.

Instead, there was a storm brewing behind those eyes as she looked back at me. The woman sitting opposite me now was straight-faced, literally covered neck-to-toe in corporate armor, and looking like she took her job very, very seriously.

“No, I'm not kidding. HR has received six very serious accusations against you and I have a feeling that if, or maybe it's a matter of when, word gets out, more will follow.”

I scoffed, leaning back in my seat as I folded my hands on my flat stomach and stared back at her. She was every bit as beautiful as I remembered her being, maybe even more so since her hair and makeup looked much more natural today.

“We need to go over the protocols for appropriate workplace behavior,” she continued, and I nearly fell out of

my chair.

Less than thrilled that she, of all people, wanted to give me rules for office misconduct, I decided to throw a little wrench into her perfectly professional works. Letting my head tilt to one side, I smirked and arched a brow at her. “Okay, let’s talk about the protocols for appropriate workplace behavior, shall we? You fucked the CEO of your company last weekend. You screamed my name and rode my cock. Was that appropriate?”

Exasperation flashed in her eyes, and some of the color drained from her cheeks, but she didn’t avert her gaze. Meeting my stare directly, she let out a soft sigh and shook her head. “What you do on your own time is your business. Same for me. Now let’s get back to business, but for the record, you saying things like *rode my cock* in a professional setting is exactly why we’re here.”

“Excuse me?”

“No, you’re not excused,” she said primly, lifting a small stack of folders in her hand and setting them down on my desk with a quiet *thwack*. “Shall we review the reports we’ve received?”

“Sure. Let’s do it, but this is ridiculous. It’s not my fault if people are oversensitive.”

“Oversensitive?” She repeated the word I’d used, her voice dangerously low. “Did you, or did you not, tell a pregnant woman that maybe she should stay home, barefoot and in the kitchen? Before you answer that, you should know that there are statements attached to the complaint confirming the complainant’s version of events.”

I scoffed, letting out a dry bark of laughter. “That was a joke. She had to leave a meeting early and when she told us where she was going, I teased her about it. If you can leave a high-powered meeting to go see the doc about a kid, you can take a little joke.”

“That’s not a joke, Jake. That’s grounds for a lawsuit.” The storm brewing behind those pretty eyes grew in intensity. “You might think that you’re the all-powerful CEO who can say

whatever he wants, but the courts haven't been kind to that attitude."

I spread my arms out to my sides. "What attitude? I'm serious. I don't think I'm an all-powerful CEO. What I do think is that this is all being blown very far out of proportion. Can nobody take a joke anymore? A little banter? That's all it was. I didn't mean any harm by it."

"Well, whether you meant to or not, you caused harm." She moved from one folder to the next. "We'll go over each one of these in turn. While we formulate a strategy on how to handle these complaints as a whole, we're also going to have to address each one by itself and each complainant by herself. Just don't talk to them yet, okay? Whatever you do, do not approach any of these women, but especially don't do it alone."

"I got it. I got it." I whistled between my teeth, leaning forward to try to catch a glimpse of the names in the folders.

So far, I remembered the incidents she'd referred to, but I honestly didn't even know the women's names. I was still so new that I didn't know many names at all, but Max snapped the folder shut when she saw me trying to sneak a peek.

"No, Jake. I mean it. The less you know about them, the better. I'm here to inform you of the complaints against you and to discuss the accusations before we review the company policies and formulate a way forward together."

"I'll tell you the way forward. This is bullshit, Max. If people were offended by it, then fine. I'm not really sorry, but I won't do it again and I don't think they're going to fit in here long-term under the new leadership."

Her eyes flew wide open. "Are you threatening to fire these women just because they had the gall to come out against you?"

"No, I'm not threatening to fire anyone. Jesus. Can I say anything around here without being crucified for it?"

"Well, you literally just said that they're not going to fit in here long-term under the new leadership. If that wasn't a

veiled threat about firing them or driving them to quit, then what was it?”

“It was the truth, but not because I’m going to make them leave. The fact is that times have changed now that my grandfather has retired. Some people may not feel like they fit in here any longer and those people will eventually leave of their own accord. I’ve looked it up. Legit. It happens when there’s a transition in leadership.”

Her eyes remained on mine, but they started searching, moving slowly from one to the other as she tried to find something she obviously didn’t find. Lips pursing slightly in disappointment, she let out a long, slow breath.

“This is what we need to straighten out with you, Jake. Now that you’ve explained it to me, I understand that it wasn’t the threat it sounded like. When you first said it, however, it sounded very much like a threat. By that same token, telling someone to stick a report ‘where the sun don’t shine’ is also inappropriate. It’s sexual talk with an employee who shouldn’t have to be subjected to that at work.”

“That was a joke,” I protested. “Is that what all these so-called complaints are about? Jokes?”

“Perhaps they were jokes to your mind, but I can assure you that I don’t think of them as jokes and neither do the women who reported you. If you keep going this way, we are going to be getting hit by a hailstorm of lawsuits.”

“Oh, come on.” My voice rose several octaves before I reined in it again. “I’m young. That’s just the way I talk. People take shit way too seriously around here. That’s what we should be investigating, how to get the company culture to yank the stick out of its ass.”

“How old are you?”

“What?”

She cocked her head at me. “How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-seven, why?”

“I’m twenty-four, which means I’m younger than you, and I can promise you that you won’t find me saying stuff like that in the working environment. Being young is no excuse. Immaturity, perhaps, but not your age.”

“I’m sorry. Did you just call me immature?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Why? Are you offended? Would you like to lodge a complaint against me? What if I just say that it was a joke? Does that make you feel better?”

“Holy shit,” I muttered. “What the hell is going on here?”

“What’s going on is that you messed up, but I’m going to help you fix it because that’s my job.” She collected the folders again and stood up. “The first step is that you’re going to have to go and see our therapist to keep from any legal issues that may arise.”

“There’s no fucking way I’m going to see a therapist.”

“Oh, now that’s a funny joke. It’s not a request, Jake. You have to go. It’s required by the company policies, and if the law gets involved too, well, being able to show that you’re so remorseful that you’re already receiving therapy will be a good thing.”

I stared back at her, my teeth grinding as I shook my head firmly from side to side. “I’m not going to therapy, Max, and that’s final.”



“**O**ur fearless and misguided leader is going to be starting therapy with you soon,” I said to Emery when we met up after work.

She frowned. “Who’s our fearless and misguided leader?”

“Jake Aspen. Andrew Aspen’s grandson. He just took over as CEO? Does any of this ring any bells?”

“Oh. Right. I got the email that Andrew was retiring and that he hoped we received his grandson with open arms to continue the legacy. Blah blah. I didn’t really read it, though. I scanned it, at most, looking for details of a retirement or welcome party, but I didn’t get an invite.”

“No one did. That’s beside the point, though. The point is that he refuses to see the company shrink—his words, not mine. I told him he had to, but when I left, he was still stubbornly refusing.”

“He’ll come around,” she said confidently, her warm brown eyes curious on mine. “This is just a question, but why, exactly, did you tell our new CEO that he had to come and see me? I’ve never even met the man.”

“That’s exactly what I said this morning, but now that I have met him, I’m kind of wishing I could go back to not knowing him. He’s not a gem, I can tell you that much.”

“Okay, but I still don’t know why you told him he had to come and see me. We don’t have mandatory therapy for grandsons taking over the reins from their grandfathers.

Honestly, I don't even know what he's been doing since he started. I'm not sure I'd be able to help him even if he does give into your demands and makes an appointment."

"It's not my demands, it the policy's demands. His grandfather's policy requires therapeutic intervention for an employee accused of sexual harassment and derogatory comments in the workplace."

"Oh, snap." Her eyes went wide as she leaned closer to me. "Sexual harassment and derogatory comments? He's been in that office for, like, five minutes. How the hell has he already gotten such a serious complaint against him?"

"It's not just one complaint," I said. "It's six, and they're all from different women so it's not just one person who's making something up because she's got it out for him. This is the real deal. He even admitted it when I spoke to him earlier, but he doesn't seem to think it's a big deal."

Her lashes fluttered. "Excuse me? Did you just say that the CEO of a multi-billion-dollar company doesn't think sexual harassment is a big deal?"

I nodded. "Well, he didn't admit to sexual harassment as such, but he did admit to saying the things he's been accused of saying. According to him, it was all jokes and the complainants are blowing things out of proportion."

"Wow." She poked her straw at her frozen cocktail, a concerned crease between her eyebrows as she pulled her blonde hair out of her face and looked back up at me. "You're right. That is serious. What did he say?"

"All sorts of things," I said. "He's way out of line, but he honestly doesn't seem to realize it. I'll send over the reports before his session. You're not going to believe some of the things in there. Among other jewels, he told one woman in the breakroom who was telling her friend about the yoga class she'd been to earlier that she looked like a downward dog."

Emery's gaze darkened. "He said that?"

"Yep."

Her head dropped to the side, her eyes narrowing in thought. “Were all his comments about women’s appearances? Maybe there’s something there.”

“I get why you might think that, but no. A lot of it is sexual. One assistant has already transferred out of his office, apparently after he told her that if she brought him anything else to sign, he was just going to have to send her home to do the dishes and clean his house.”

She let out a low whistle. “He said it just like that?”

I nodded. “According to the complaint form, yes. Just like that.”

“Well, that’s interesting.” A faraway look came into her eyes, and I chuckled.

“As much as I love you, I need you to stay focused on me tonight. We need to put a plan in place for him from my department’s side, and a big part of that is going to be his mandatory sessions with you. Any idea how many he might need?”

The corners of her mouth pressed in. “No, not before I’ve spoken to him at least once and done an evaluation. From the sounds of things, though, he definitely has issues with women. The most obvious conclusion is that he has mommy issues, but despite Occam’s razor, I’m not willing to speculate just yet.”

I released a deep breath but nodded. “Fine. I respect your process. When you’ve got any indication of how long you’d like to keep him in for, will you let me know? It will have to be filed as part of the formal investigation that you recommended X amount of sessions and that he either attended them or not.”

“Of course,” she said amiably. “Were all the complainants women? There’s not one man?”

“Not a one,” I confirmed. “They’re not just women, either. I noticed something when I was reviewing their files. They’re all *taken* women.”

“Taken with what?”

“No, not like that. It’s not a question of *with what*, but *by whom*. They’re all either married or engaged, and in one case, it’s a girl who has a serious boyfriend. From what I’ve heard, she can’t shut up about the guy, so she might not wear a ring, but he definitely knew about the relationship.”

Emery blinked hard. “How do you know that?”

“It’s just a hunch, but the files support it so far. Every one of the women he’s made moves on in any way has been married or is otherwise committed to somebody else.”

“I won’t lie, but that sounds fascinating. Are you sure? All of them?”

I nodded. “Every last one. I also took the time to ask around a bit on his floor and the ones he visits the most. A few of the women he’s hit on who haven’t lodged complaints are also taken. As far as I can tell, he hasn’t even looked at a single girl. Only the ones who are off the market.”

Although I hadn’t told her that Jake and I had slept together and wasn’t planning on telling her, he’d also thought I was married when we hooked up. If I hadn’t been wearing that fake ring, I was starting to think he wouldn’t even have noticed me.

He even brought it up on our way to the room. I hadn’t thought much of it at the time, but he’d come right out and asked if my husband was going to be mad. Thinking back, I realized that it was almost like he’d wanted me to say yes.

I had no idea why, but I was pretty sure he would’ve screwed me even harder if I’d told him that my husband would’ve been livid. Part of me wondered if it was some weird kink. Usually, I was of the opinion that when it came to kinks, it was a *different strokes for different folks* situation. I didn’t kink shame or really give too much thought to it at all, but with this? I just didn’t know.

*Is it a kink, or psychological thing?*

Emery would be able to tell me, but that would only be once she’d seen him, which meant she wouldn’t be able to tell me after all. As soon as she saw him, he became a patient and

she was legally prohibited from talking about what he divulged in his sessions.

Since these sessions were part of our company mandate, she'd be able to give me *some* information in my professional capacity, but not much. Not enough, in this case. I was so damn curious that I was practically bouncing in my seat, wanting to go back to the office, grab him, drag him to hers, and then plonk down right there to listen to what he had to say.

She turned everything I'd told her over in her mind, then released a soft breath. "This kind of behavior from our CEO could be very bad for the company. The older Mr. Aspen is a real gentleman. I met him a few times. He respected me and my work. He also respected my marriage. Sending in a guy like this to take over hardly seems like him."

"Well, he did it anyway. Maybe he doesn't know?"

"Probably not." Her gaze dropped to her hand and she toyed with the wedding ring on her finger. "He spent his whole life building a reputable company with decent values underpinning it. A guy who does this kind of thing right out of the gate could take the whole place apart from the top down. People will start resigning. Word will start to spread. Women will be scared of going into work, but they'll feel obligated to go anyway because they need to earn a living."

"Right out of the gate?" I asked. "Do you think he'll get worse? I'm not excusing what he's done at all, but he hardly seems like the type who would touch a person against their will or worse."

Apprehension flickered in her dark eyes. "I know, but this kind of thing has a way of snowballing. That's why it becomes so rife in a workplace so easily. Others will see the CEO doing it and getting away with it, and then, even if he's not the type to try to force things, there might be someone else who is."

"Do you think it will help to explain it to him like that?"

She rocked her head from side to side as she considered the question. "It might, but I won't be able to say for sure until I've spoken to him and heard his reasoning. If he really does

think it's all just one big joke, then it probably won't help to explain it to him because he won't think the repercussions we mention will really happen."

"Shit. So basically, I need to come up with a way to make him realize that, regardless of how he may mean the things he says, they're not jokes. He needs to dial it back and he needs to respect the commitment they've made to others."

"Yes, but that could be easier said than done." She twisted her ring around, absently playing with it like the very thought of someone else coming onto her made her need the comfort and safety her husband provided. "Let me think about it. In the meantime, get him to come see me. I can't do much if he refuses therapy."

"He's very much refusing, but if he wants to play hardball, I'll take it to the board. We won't let him take the company down brick by brick. Or lawsuit by lawsuit, to be more specific. Over my dead body will women start quitting or be afraid to come in just because he's an ass who doesn't respect boundaries. It's just not going to happen."

While I was at it, I was also going to have to make damn sure that I didn't say anything to anyone about hooking up with Jake. Our brief adventure could come back to bite me in the ass, and I didn't want that.

Work was my first priority. My one true love. Nothing and no one would derail my career. If there was anything I took seriously, it was that. Jake Aspen wasn't going to get away with any of this on my watch, and if he wanted to challenge me on the rules, he had met his match. He just didn't know it yet.



JAKE

“**Y**ou’re going to get a real kick out of this,” I said to Tristan at lunch the day after my meeting with Max.

One of his eyebrows slanted up as he looked back me. “What did you do now?”

“I didn’t do anything. Well, at least that’s my story and I’m sticking to it. All I did was try to lighten up the mood in my uptight office, and I got written up for it. A bunch of people complained to HR about me.”

“By people, you mean women. Don’t you? A bunch of women filed complaints against you, which means that you didn’t do nothing. You definitely did something. What was it?”

“They’re accusing me of making derogatory comments and borderline sexual harassment. It’s bullshit.”

His brow puckered. “You might think it’s bullshit, but those are serious allegations, Jake. What are you going to do about it?”

I waved him off. “Nothing. I’ll just tone down the jokes for a while until the dust settles. Get this. The HR representative who came to lecture me was *Max*.”

“Max?” His eyes widened. “The Max you slept with at the wedding?”

“One and the same.” I smirked, my head shaking as I thought back to our meeting. “She had the balls to come into *my* office and lecture me about *my* company’s policies.”

Expression growing serious again, he held my gaze and rubbed a hand over his jaw. “I don’t think it’s a matter of her having the balls to do anything. If she works for HR, then that’s literally part of her job. What did she say? What steps are they taking as a result of these allegations?”

“They’re investigating the complaints, but she made it clear that there are confirmatory statements. She came to get my side of the story, but she didn’t seem impressed when I told her I was just joking, so she’s trying to force me to go to therapy.”

“Therapy?” He pursed his lips as he thought it over. “That might not be the worst idea I’ve ever heard. Plus, if it’s coming from HR and not just a random woman you hooked up with, you might not have much of a choice.”

“Fuck that. I always have a choice. She works for me. They’re not going to label me as a creep and make me go to therapy for a problem I don’t fucking have.”

Tristan cleared his throat. “Actually, she doesn’t work for you. HR is a separate company, remember? They’re affiliated with Aspen Pharmaceuticals, but they’re not a part of it. If I remember correctly, HR is one of the number of separate legal entities adjacent to your company. Their offices are with you and all that, but they’re not formally employed by you.”

“I can still fire them,” I pointed out.

He shook his head. “Not directly, you can’t. Plus, you definitely can’t fire them for enforcing your own policies. You need to consider this carefully. There’s a reason for the legal wall between you.”

“I don’t want to go to a therapist, though. I don’t have a problem. Jesus, I was joking. They’re making mountains out of molehills.”

“If there were complaints filed against you, you might be the one trying to see a molehill where there is, in fact, a mountain. In your head, you might’ve been joking, but were you really? When you really think about it, is it that

inconceivable that you may be creating a hostile working environment without even realizing it?”

I scoffed, but I also knew he was right. About everything. HR didn't technically work for me, but on the ground, it was like they did. I wasn't even sure if the people in that department knew how the entities had been put together and, in theory, they weren't part of Aspen Pharmaceuticals.

Either way, I still didn't want to go to therapy. It wasn't necessary and it would be a complete waste of time I didn't have. If I was creating a hostile work environment without realizing it, then so be it. People needed to harden the fuck up and stop complaining about every little thing.

These days, people were too easily offended. They got offended by everything. It was because of them that the whole world was turning into a nanny state where tongues had to be bitten and our very thoughts censored.

I didn't want to have to deal with that kind of culture in my company. If I had to tone it down, I could tone it down, but I didn't need a shrink to help me do it.

“It may be good for you to go to therapy,” my friend said, his voice earnest as it dragged me out of my thoughts. “As long as the therapist isn't a married woman you'd be tempted to hit on, that is.”

My head cocked as my thoughts made a sudden U-turn. “You're right. Therapy won't be so bad if I've got a hot shrink who wants to get into my head, and my pants.”

“Hey, I never said anything about her being good looking. Hot or not, you cannot make a move on the therapist you're seeing because of moves you made and things you said that made women uncomfortable in your office.”

“Nobody's uncomfortable,” I said firmly. “Thanks for helping me see this from a different perspective, though. Spending a couple of hours a week locked in an office with a pretty girl might be good for me after all.”

“How do you even know it's a woman? There are just as many male therapists out there, you know. It could be a guy,

which would be fucking perfect for you.”

“Nah. Where’s the fun in that? Besides, I know the therapist we use is a woman because I looked her up. Like HR, she doesn’t work for Aspen Pharmaceuticals. She’s also just contracted in, so it wouldn’t be a conflict of interest for her if she fucks me.”

“That’s not really the only conflict involved,” he said dryly. “You’d also be her patient, and that’s a definite conflict. Also, you shouldn’t be concerned with what she looks like. It’s more important that she’s good at her job.”

“She doesn’t need to be,” I argued. “I don’t have any issues that need to be therapized. There’s nothing wrong with me.”

“Oh, brother,” he mumbled. “I didn’t take you for one of *those*.”

I frowned, my brows twisting as I tried to figure out what the hell he was talking about. “One of what’s?”

“A guy who thinks therapy is a bag thing. It’s not negative in any way, Jake. You might find it helpful on all fronts. Think of it like spring cleaning. Every now and then, you just have to toss a bunch of old stuff to make space for the new.”

“If that’s another attempt of redeeming therapy in my eyes, it’s not working. Seriously. The way I see it, it’s a waste of time. I don’t do spring cleaning. When I find something that’s broken, I chuck it out, and when I want something new, I buy it. It’s that simple.”

“I’ve been to therapy,” he volunteered meaningfully. “I found it extremely helpful in a lot of different ways. It’s not about what’s wrong with you. It’s about getting an outsider’s perspective from someone who’s trained to unpack stuff.”

“Unpack what?” I laughed. “I don’t have anything packed.”

“Just unpacking some shit, that’s all. We’ve all got stuff packed. If you think you don’t, then that’s the bigger problem you need to overcome. You’ve got baggage, Jake. Just like everybody else.”

I scoffed. “Look, I hear what you’re saying, but I really don’t have any shit to unpack. I don’t hold grudges or let the past get in my way. I’m cool as a cucumber. Just a well-adjusted, billionaire CEO. What could therapy possibly do for me that I can’t do for myself?”

“Help you avoid a lawsuit?” he suggested. “Possibly even make you realize that these complaints aren’t baseless and then help you become a better person? If you were as well-adjusted as you seem to think you are, people wouldn’t be complaining about you so much.”

“I told you, the complaints are stupid. I really was just joking around. Our offices are so damn stifling. Dear old Grandpa ran the place with an iron fist. People just keep their heads down and do their jobs. I don’t want to be a dictator. I want to be a leader that has a rapport with people.”

“You might want to consider what that rapport should be, though. I don’t think he ran it with an iron fist so much as that he steered the company through some pretty big changes in the employment landscape while he was at the helm. If memory serves, he was also one of the first big CEOs who hired female scientists in positions for research and development.”

“Sure, but why wouldn’t he have? Gender doesn’t determine competency.”

“Exactly, but then why are you making the women you work with feel like they shouldn’t be there?”

I blew out an exasperated sigh. “That’s not what I’m doing. How do you know so much about my grandfather and the way he did business anyway?”

He gave me a deadpan look. “We’ve been friends for a decade, Jake. Not only was I there while you were learning about the company you were going to take over one day, I’ve also met your grandpa a lot. I just so happened to have listened to him when he spoke and to you when you were complaining about having to shadow him all those years ago.”

“Those were not good times,” I said as I thought back.

Tristan rolled his eyes. “Imagine a top-tier CEO insisting that his grandson who was studying business and would someday take over his company has to come intern with him. It’s unimaginably cruel.”

I laughed. “It was boring as fuck, but at least I did learn a lot.”

“So act like it. Fuck, man. If you’re not interested in being an actual, respected CEO, then turn the company over to Victoria.”

“She doesn’t want it,” I reminded him. “To some, I might’ve been the heir by default just because I was born with a dick, but that’s not really how things work in my family. Vic had her chance to step up and she didn’t take it because she doesn’t want the responsibility of the company and so many jobs on the line on her shoulders. All she really wants is to be herself, make some babies, and have enough time to raise them while she works.”

“Well, I respect that, but the point is that you shouldn’t be in that office if you’re not going to take it seriously.”

“I do take the job seriously.” My features hardened. “I’ve been groomed for it my entire fucking life. It’s not that I don’t take it seriously. It’s just that I don’t think these complaints require being taken so seriously that I should have to go to therapy for them.”

“You’re a lost cause,” he muttered. “Just suck it up and go to therapy. It’s mandated, and if you don’t do it, you’ll be opening yourself up to a world of trouble.”

“I’ll do it,” I said, grinning when surprise flickered behind his eyes. When I added my stipulation, however, the surprise faded and got replaced with severe exasperation. “If she’s hot. If not, Max is just going to have to come up with another way for me to redeem myself.”

I was starting to realize that I was going to have to give it a try, though. For too many reasons to summarize, I was staring down the barrel of a therapy session. Tristan had made some valid points, given me some hope about what might happen

with my therapist, and made me realize that if I didn't do it, I might just be creating the impression that I wasn't taking the job seriously.

While I fucked around a lot, I did take the job extremely fucking seriously. My grandpa might've started the company, but it was my family's legacy.

*My legacy.*

I'd literally been trained for the role my whole life. But Tristan was also right that I wasn't the sole heir. Victoria had as much of a right to the company as I did, and while she really didn't want it and there had never been any noises made about her taking over if I fucked up, it could happen.

If the molehill *was* made a mountain and people started demanding my resignation or some other bullshit, there was, in fact, another Aspen the board could nominate for my seat. And I wouldn't allow that to happen, but more especially so since I knew full well how Vic felt about it.

*So no.* If I had to go to a session to give the illusion of righting my wrongs, then I'd fucking go to therapy. Once I was there, I could try to make the best of it by convincing the therapist to have a little fun with me.



MAXINE

“**Y**es, sir. I understand that you have a family to support and that there were extenuating circumstances, but you were caught stealing from the company. There really is nothing I can do to get you your job back.”

Tears pricked at the backs of my eyes before I closed them, leaning my head back against my office chair. One of the hardest parts of my job was dealing with the *human* in human resources. The nature of the beast was that people had problems. They had sob stories and reasons for doing what they did, and as much as I felt for them sometimes, there wasn't a damn thing I could do to help them.

At the other end of my telephone line, the man who'd recently been fired for sticking his hand in the cookie jar was practically sobbing. “Tell them I'm sorry. Tell them I'll do anything to prove that they can trust me. It won't happen again.”

The other hard part about it was that I couldn't cry with him. I couldn't commiserate and promise him that I'd at least try to help him get reinstated. It was vital that I appeared indifferent. If I allowed people in this situation to see even a shred of my own *humanity*, I was done for.

A lot of people seemed to think that HR could fix anything if we were inclined to do so, but it simply wasn't true. Rules were rules, and laws were laws. We had as little power over them as anyone. It was terrible at times, but being fired was

what happened if you got caught stealing thousands of dollars from your employer.

Even if it was to settle your child's hospital bills.

“Sir, I have sympathy for your situation, but unfortunately, there really isn't anything I can do. You should consider yourself lucky that they're not pressing charges. That's about the best you could've hoped for.”

It was true, but still. I really did feel for the man. Desperation was a dangerous thing, and I was sure that he wouldn't do it again if he was allowed to come back, but it wasn't a decision I could make. Plus, if everyone thought they could just help themselves to a few thousand bucks if they *really* needed it, not even Aspen's bank account would survive.

Things had a tendency of getting out of hand fast where people were involved. We saw the tip of a finger and took an arm if we thought we could. As I was hanging up the phone a few minutes later, my office door opened and I looked up, expecting to see Adam and frowning when I saw Jake standing there instead.

“Max,” he said as he stepped in without being invited and then shut the door behind him. “Have you got a minute?”

“Do I have a choice?”

He shrugged, blue eyes twinkling with cool amusement. “No, I suppose you don't have much of a choice. I'm already here and I'm going into a meeting that's been scheduled for the rest of the afternoon after this. So...”

“I guess you'd better take a seat.” I motioned him to the threadbare chair he was already moving toward. “What can I do for you, Jake?”

Looking a bit like a supermodel who had just been told that he wouldn't be participating in the next fashion week, the man sighed and conceded. “I've given it some thought, and I'll go see the therapist.”

While he didn't look happy about it, it was good news that he'd come to his senses. I'd noted his reluctance in my file

about the investigation as I was required to do, but I'd really been hoping that he would step up to the plate.

Even so, I couldn't resist twisting the knife just a little bit. "Well, to be fair, you don't really have a choice, right?"

He bristled, and I kind of liked pissing him off. I knew I was handling an open flame here, but I didn't care. The man needed to be knocked down a peg or two, and if I had to be the one to do it, then I was fine with it.

My body reacted to him too much, and it was making things rear up in me that shouldn't have been rearing at work. The fact of the matter was that I remembered all too well how he'd played me like an instrument. I remembered how easily he'd coaxed pleasure from deep within me, and if I was being totally honest, part of me wanted to feel it again.

I felt a little like a kid who'd been taken to the candy store once, and now I had to walk past it every day without being able to go inside. It was a form of cruel and unusual torture, and not in the fun way punishment could sometimes be.

It made me want to get to him just a little bit. Not enough to warrant him filing a complaint against me being on a witch hunt to get him. Just enough to satisfy the urges I had to screw him—in the only way I could now that I knew who he was.

Jake's blond eyebrows rose slowly, arching into perfect half-moons as those pretty blue eyes flashed when he recognized the challenge. "I always have a choice, Max. No one pressures me into doing anything I don't want to do."

"Oh, so you have just come to your senses, then. That's good to know."

He rolled his eyes, seemingly not opposed to a bit of banter and bickering. "My senses were never lost. I didn't have to come to them. They've been there all along. However, in the interest of putting this ridiculous investigation to bed, I've decided to play the game."

"It's not a game. It's therapy. You're going to have to take it seriously. Really dig deep and get well so that we know the women in this company feel safe because they are safe."

He scoffed. “You know exactly how well I take care of women. No one is unsafe with me, unless they ask for it.”

I tilted my head. “Are you saying that these women were asking for it?”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” he retorted sharply, and unless I was very much mistaken, it seemed that he resented me just as much as I did him. I was sure he had his reasons—I just had no clue what they were. “Just tell me where to go, who to see, and when to be there.”

“Actually, that’s not how this works. You’ll just have to find out all that information for yourself. The wellness department’s receptionist will be able to help you with that. They’ll make an appointment for an evaluation and you can take it from there.”

“The wellness department? Who the fuck are they?”

I snorted as I tried to hold back my laughter. “They’re a team of external consultants who specialize in employee wellness. Thirteenth floor. Turn left when you leave the elevator. You’ll find them.”

“Are you being weird because we slept together, or are you always this snotty?”

“I’m not snotty, but I am right. Besides, I’m not being weird. I don’t have anything to be weird about.” I scoffed. “How was the next morning, Jake? Is that why you’re being weird?”

“You’re confusing weird with in charge,” he snapped. “That’s what I am, you know. I’m in charge. Or maybe that’s why you’re being weird. You know I’m in charge and you want me to be in charge of *you* like I was at the wedding.”

“You know, it’s funny you mention that because the way I heard it, you weren’t very in charge that next morning at all. People talk, you know. They said you weren’t a happy camper when you left.”

“Maybe that’s because *I* had to deal with *your* friends waking me up simply because you neglected to do the polite thing by telling them you wouldn’t be attending their brunch.”

“Nah, I don’t think that’s it. I think it’s because you’re used to being the one who leaves instead of the one who gets left behind. Perhaps you should take that up with your therapist.”

“The only thing I’ll be taking up with my therapist is how annoyed I am about people lying to me.”

“Why is that? For the record, I didn’t lie. You made an assumption when you saw the ring I was wearing. If you’d asked about it, I’d have told you it wasn’t real. I actually have a question for you about that, though. Why are all the complaints from women who are in committed relationships?”

“Is the question part of your investigation, or are you wondering if you need to smack another ring on your finger before I’ll look at you again?”

“It’s part of the investigation.”

His eyes narrowed. “You really are a lying liar. We’re done here, Max. You can put that in your fucking report.”

As he turned and stalked his handsome ass right out of my office, I couldn’t hide the small smile that lifted my lips. The thought of him finally getting a dose of what he’d done to all those women was making me feel a little better about the fact that I wouldn’t ever have him again.

Because he was going to get it. Emery would make sure of it, and while our little chat had been fun, I really needed him to pull his head out of his butt. The suit and tie looked good on him, and while I was sure a pair of surf shorts would, too, it’d become obvious when I’d done my research on him that he cared about the company.

It was still true that he looked more like a surfer than a CEO, but if he wanted to stay in his position, then he needed to play ball. He was on a dangerous path and I didn’t want to have to go to the board about him.

If I had to, though, I would. Attraction and a particular enjoyment of bantering with him aside, I couldn’t stand by and watch him harass taken women. Emery had her work cut out for her, but I knew she was up to the challenge.

If he thought his therapy was going to be a walk in the park, he had another thing coming. And I couldn't wait to hear all about it.



A plaque on the door in front of me read *Wellness*, so I was assuming I was in the right place. Sighing and muttering a string of curses under my breath, I pushed it open, and when I walked into their wing, I did a quick doubletake.

Obviously, I'd never been here before. I hadn't even known the old man had taken the employee wellness this far, but when I saw the digs he'd set up for them, I realized that I hadn't known the half of it.

He hadn't just dedicated an entire wing of the building to them—he'd also made it look and feel like a five-star spa. The lights were dimmer in here, natural light spilling in through windows as big as the ones on the executive floor upstairs.

Soft classical music flowed over hidden speakers and the vague scent of vanilla hung in the air. There were also plants everywhere, a thick carpet beneath my feet, and huge, soft-looking sofas with tons of scatter cushions on them.

I didn't recall having seen a budget for them, but they had to have one and it had to be substantial. As I moved through the space, the receptionist saw me and sat up a little straighter, a slightly dazed smile appearing on her lips.

"Mr. Aspen, sir. Mrs. Cole will be with you in a moment."

I nodded, not bothering to hide the grin that started spreading on my lips as soon as she said *Mrs.* Maybe this was going to be fun after all.

When I was told to go into the therapist's office, I left the wingback chair I'd been waiting in behind, determined to find out if I could have it taken to my waiting area instead. All thoughts about the chair were eradicated when I saw the woman I was meeting with, though.

Willowy and tall, blonde-haired and brown-eyed, she was a definite looker. And there was a massive diamond sitting on my favorite finger. *Perfect.*

The woman rose slowly from the chair behind her desk, her gaze intent on mine as she extended her hand, looking at me like she was assessing me already. "Mr. Aspen. It's a pleasure to meet you. Welcome. Please have a seat."

I grinned at her, letting my palm linger against hers for just a second too long. "Call me Jake. We are going to be getting to know each other pretty well, after all."

Releasing my hand immediately, her expression hardened and she offered me no more than a curt nod. "Well, I'm going to be getting to know you a lot better. We won't be talking much about me, though."

"It'll help me share better if I'm not doing it alone," I hedged, pointedly looking at her ring. "For instance, how long have you been married?"

"Eight years next summer."

"Happily?"

"Extremely." She gave me a tight smile. "My husband and I started dating when we were seventeen. We were married at twenty-two. He's the only man I've ever wanted. Don't bother with me, Jake. I won't be having any of that."

"Excuse me?"

Her smile turned serene, her brown eyes sweeping across my features in a way that made me feel like a specimen she was dissecting rather than a guy she might be interested in. "Let's not beat around the bush, shall we? All the women who have filed complaints against you are married or otherwise committed. As am I, and your first instinct was to try hitting on me even though you know that I'm your therapist."

“Wha—”

This time when she smiled, her brows rose. “I saw that smile, Mr. Aspen. Saw the way you immediately noticed my ring and how your eyes lit up when you walked in. Those are some of the things I want to talk to you about, but first, would you like some tea?”

Shocked didn’t even begin to cover it. Not only was she having none of my flirting, she’d called me out on it right off the bat.

One minute in and I already knew that this was going to be nothing like I’d been hoping it would. “No, I don’t want tea. Let’s just get this over with.”

She gave a curt nod, then opened a slim folder on her desk and pulled a little spiral notebook closer. “Let’s move to the sitting area.”

Standing up before I could protest, she slid the notebook onto the folder and carried it to the cluster of sofas in the corner. She sat down on a trendy-looking armchair, getting comfortable before she took a pencil out of the spiral binding of the notebook and smiled as she motioned me closer. “Join me. We’ll be more comfortable here without a desk between us.”

Realizing she was going to insist even though I’d have been much more comfortable with the desk between us, I got up and strode over to the sofa directly across from her chair, flopping down before I looked at her.

“Now can we get this over with?”

She regarded me carefully, her gaze moving over my face like she was already busy evaluating me. “You don’t want to be here.”

It was a fact, not a question, but I nodded anyway. “I don’t need therapy. I’m only here because our HR policies require me to be. In fact, we don’t need to talk about me at all. I’d like to hear more about you.”

She chuckled softly. “How about this? I’ll ask the questions and you’ll answer them. For every answer I’m

satisfied with, you get to ask me a question in turn.”

Emery was a tough cookie to crack, looking almost amused by my attempts to hit on her. Changing tack, I figured I’d try to impress her instead.

“Ask me anything. I’m an open book. A man in my position has to be. I’ve recently been handed the keys to the castle. This multi-billion-dollar, global empire is mine now. You’re not the first person who’s had questions for me and I’m sure you won’t be the last. Just yesterday, I was contacted by a journalist about the *most eligible* feature in her magazine. She had a bunch of questions about what it feels like to be me right now.”

More amusement flashed in her eyes as she nodded, but she didn’t respond immediately. Instead, she just kept looking at me, her gaze holding mine for so long that eventually, I started to squirm a little before she finally spoke.

“Is this how you usually interact with women you’ve just met?” she asked.

I frowned. “Is what how I usually interact with women I’ve just met?”

“Is it always your first instinct to come onto women, I mean? And when just a smile and some brief flirtation doesn’t work, do you usually jump directly to trying to impress them by reminding them of who you are?”

“You really don’t pull any punches, do you?”

“No, I don’t make a habit of pulling punches. I’m frank and honest, Jake. I’d never get anywhere with my patients if I wasn’t. In order for this to work, you need to open up to me.”

“Yeah, I don’t open up well.”

“Clearly, which is why I’m pushing you much harder than I usually push patients who’ve just walked into my office for the first time. Something tells me you’re going to need to be pushed, and I’m trying to meet that need.”

“You want me to be honest? Fine, then. I don’t need to be pushed. I need to be pushing into you. Is that better?”

“Do these strategies usually work for you?” she asked curiously. “The impression I’m getting is that you seem to feel like you need to defend yourself from me. If you think being blunt and making sexual passes are going to shock or offend me into taking it easy on you, you’re wrong. It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“These *strategies* always work for me,” I gritted out as frustration locked my jaw up tight. “I don’t want you to take it easy on me. I just want you to stop with this bullshit line of questioning.”

“Very well.” She surprised me when she backed off. “Why don’t we start by talking about your parents? What are they like?”

“My parents?”

She nodded. “Your parents. Your childhood. The home you grew up in. Tell me about it.”

“Why?” I asked skeptically. “Do you think I treat women badly because of my mother?”

“Not necessarily, but I also never said that you treat women badly. That just came from you.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s what I’m here for, isn’t it? Women made allegations that I treated them badly.”

“Yes, that is what you’re here for,” she said, eyes glazing over with thought for a moment. “How do you feel, though? Do you feel like you treat women badly?”

“No.” I crossed my arms. “I love women.”

She smiled and scribbled a note in her little book. “What do you love about them?”

Their bodies. “Everything.”

Her eyes narrowed like she’d heard the thought I’d had before I’d answered her. “Is there anything you recognize as valuable in women besides their willingness to sleep with you?”

“Jesus.” As I stared back at her, I realized that this definitely wasn’t going to be something I was going to get laid from. Plus, her questions were unanswerable unless I wanted to look like a total jerk.

I hadn’t signed up to be belittled or treated like a damn child who didn’t know what was going on. This was garbage.

“We’re done here.” I pushed to my feet.

Her head slanted to one side. “Why are you shutting down on me? What have you realized?”

“That this isn’t going to work.” I put my hands up and started walking backward to the door. “I’ll be going now. Send me a bill. Or don’t, since I’m the one who pays your salary as it is.”

Undeterred, she looked up at me with that serene expression still on her face. “Sit down, Jake. The session won’t count if you leave early.”

“Oh well,” I said. “I need to get back to my office. I’m not doing this shit.”

I meant it, too. I spun around and headed for the door, yanking it open and striding out. I didn’t plan on ever going back. I’d been there, at least.

She could say what she wanted about the session not counting, but I’d make sure it reflected on the record that I *had* attended. I’d been to therapy, and that’d been quite enough of it. I didn’t need her digging around in my head or in my past, trying to blame my mother for the fact that I’d made a few jokes with women around the office.

And those questions? It was like they’d been designed to make me admit to things that, if I did, would make me look fucking terrible. Was that what she was after? To make me look bad in her report? It seemed likely, but I didn’t really understand why she would.

For someone who’d come right out and said she was frank and honest, she’d certainly struck me as being nosy instead. Nosy and pushy. I didn’t mind being pushed. In fact, she’d

been right about that one thing. I'd much rather be pushed than to be molycoddled or tiptoed around.

But she'd been way off base about everything else. Whatever her intentions had been with those questions, I wouldn't be coming anywhere near that woman ever again. She and her superiority complex could go fuck each other.



MAXINE

When the legal department called, it was never good news. Their number flashed on the screen of my landline in the office, and I sighed. Getting a call from them first thing was not a good omen for the rest of my day.

“This is Max Fowler,” I said when I picked up.

“Max,” a deep voice said at the other end of the line. “This is Franklin from legal. Have you got a minute?”

“Sure.” It wasn’t like I had a choice. “What’s up, Franklin?”

“We received a copy of your file on Jake Aspen. I’m calling to follow up on the steps you’re taking for him. It goes without saying that we need these complaints to be handled thoroughly and quickly.”

“Yes, it does go without saying, so why are you saying it?”

He sighed. “We’ve received word that there could be more complaints coming. We need to get on this, Max. As soon as possible. I’ve reviewed the existing allegations, and my team and I are sure that we’re going to be served with a lawsuit at some point. Sooner than later, unless we can assuage the complainants. What are you doing about him?”

“Everything we should be,” I said firmly. “We’ve followed the letter of the policies in place with his case. He’s receiving therapy, and while I haven’t gotten a report from Emery for my file yet, I’m sure they’ve been working together to address these issues.”

Franklin paused for a beat. “Is he attending his therapy sessions? How many has he been to? Have they spoken about him issuing an apology? We need to get out ahead of this, and the only way we can do that is by giving satisfactory feedback to the complainants.”

“They’ll get satisfactory feedback when we have it. I understand that we’re facing the possibility of a legal minefield, but I really don’t have the information you’re after.”

“We need to confirm that he is, in fact, receiving therapy. It will go a long way to show how seriously the company is taking this if we’re making sure that our CEO is getting the help he so clearly needs.”

“Look, I’ll follow up with Emery and make sure he’s going to his appointments. He does need help, but please tell me you haven’t been going around speaking about him like that?” Unease tightened my gut because of the defensive tone my voice had taken.

Jake was in the wrong and he should be paying for it, but Franklin was making him out to be some kind of sexual predator with the way he was speaking.

“No, Max. We haven’t been speaking about him that way to anyone but the people in our own department. He’s a problem and we need it taken care of. The company is open to massive liability on this and we can’t defend him if you don’t give us the weapons we need to fight these complaints if and when the time comes to go to court.”

*Must be nice to have a huge legal team and such an enormous company to protect you when you fuck up.* “Do you really think any of the complainants will take him to court? I mean, they’ve lodged their complaints and we’re investigating them. I’ve interviewed the people who were named as witnesses and I’ve spoken with the complainants as well. No one mentioned going to see a lawyer.”

“Whether they mentioned it or not, they’ll be stupid not to see the possible dollar signs flashing in neon green over his head. All of this happened at the office, while he was acting in his capacity as CEO. It’s no secret that the company is doing

better than ever. Even if we settle, the hush money the complainants could be getting out of this is more than you and I see in a year.”

“Hush money?” My jaw nearly dropped. “Are you serious?”

I couldn’t see him, but I was pretty sure he shrugged before he replied. “We’ll do whatever it takes to make this go away before it gets to court, Max. If that means paying them and making them sign NDAs as a condition of their settlement, then that’s what we’ll do. However, we obviously don’t want to have to pay, which is where you and the plan you’ve formulated for him come in.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. This whole situation was starting to feel like it was getting away from me. If they were already talking about lawsuits and settlements, that meant they didn’t believe he was accepting the help and protection the company was offering him.

Frankly, I wasn’t sure if I believed it anymore either. The guy’s entitlement was next level. I had zero doubt that he would throw some of the company’s money after the problem to make it go away rather than face the actual issues that caused it.

“Okay, Franklin. I hear you. Let me follow up with Emery and get back to you. We are working with him, though, so don’t start drawing up any NDAs just yet.”

He snorted softly. “It’s cute that you think we still need to draw them up. We’ve had them drafted and ready to be signed since we learned about all of this. We’ll do whatever it takes to protect the company and its CEO. Nobody wants this thing to get out of hand. We need to keep it quiet and in-house. Bigger companies than ours have taken serious knocks because of these kinds of accusations.”

“Yeah, okay. You’re right. Everyone wants to keep it quiet and in-house. Let me make a few calls. I’ll let you know where we’re at before the end of the day.”

We hung up a few seconds later, and I immediately pressed the phone to my ear again and dialed the extension for the wellness department. Emery's assistant answered, made small talk with me for a minute, and then put me through.

"Hey, Max," she said. "Are you calling about lunch? I was thinking we could try that new Mexican place around the corner for our weekly catch-up. I'm craving tacos and hot sauce."

"Are you pregnant?"

"No." She laughed. "Not yet, anyway. So, Mexican at noon?"

"Sure, but that wasn't why I was calling. I just spoke to a guy from legal and they're worried about Jake. They're convinced we're going to be hit by a lawsuit soon and they're circling the wagons preemptively. We're one of those wagons, though. They need to know how he's doing with therapy and if there's any feedback for the complainants yet."

"Jake Aspen?" she asked, then sighed. "No, I'm afraid we don't have any feedback for the complainants yet. At least, not any feedback we want to give them. Especially if legal thinks there might be a lawsuit coming. If the complainants find out how it's really going, there will definitely be a lawsuit soon. Six lawsuits, in fact."

My stomach sank. "Why? Is it going that badly?"

"No, it's not going at all. It's been a week since my first meeting with him and I haven't seen him again. We've been calling his office and we've put a session on the books for him every day after making sure with his assistant that he was available at that time, but he hasn't shown up. I think he's a lost cause."

"Fuck."

"Yep. I'm sorry to tell you this, honey, but it might be best if legal takes it from here. I'm not sure HR or Wellness is going to be able to help him."

I sucked my lips into my mouth, chewing them as I thought it over. "How did the first meeting go? Did you make

any headway? If I could just give legal something, we should be able to play for a bit more time to get him back to you.”

“We don’t need to play for a *bit* more time. We’d need to play for a lot of it. Our first session was a complete waste of time. He shut down almost as soon as I started asking him questions. Even if he does come back, I’d need months with him.”

“Crap. Months? Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. That man has some serious issues. Even if we can get him back to the table and into an actual session, I’m not sure he has the capacity for self-reflection and growth in his current state of mind.”

“I thought you said you didn’t make any headway? It sounds like you might’ve made some, even if it was just enough for you to come to that conclusion.”

“We didn’t make any headway. I got all that from what he said while he was coming onto me and the way he handled it when I made it clear that it wasn’t going to happen. He’s not ready for real change in his life, Max. A year in my office won’t be enough if he’s not willing to put in the work, and he’s not.”

“He came onto you?”

“Sure did. I think he only came to the meeting in the hopes of being able to distract me by getting into my pants. My read of it was that he planned on charming me and flirting his way through that first meeting, and then that I’d forget all about talking about what he’d done and focus the rest of our sessions together on having a good time instead of therapy.”

“You think he wanted to go to his sessions, fuck you, and have you sign off on him having put in the work?”

“That’s exactly what I think. He sure as hell didn’t come to my office that day for therapy. I can guarantee you that much.”

“Fuck,” I repeated, shoving my free hand into my hair. “He fooled me. I really thought he was conceding. It seems I was wrong, though.”

Wrong and a little bit upset about the fact that he'd hit on my best friend so soon after sleeping with me. I knew we couldn't hook up again and I didn't want to feel the irrational stab of jealousy in my gut, but that was what I felt. An irrational but real stab of jealousy.

"Look, Max. Don't take it personally, okay? Anyone would've thought he was conceding when he said he'd go to therapy. It's not like we could've anticipated that he had such warped intentions. I really don't think he even realizes that he's got more issues than all the other people in this building combined. Give it over to legal and meet me at the Mexican place at noon. There's nothing we can do for him if he's not willing to do it for himself."

"I'll take care of it," I said, but I wouldn't throw in the towel just yet. I wasn't ready to just pass it over to legal and let them offer the hush money.

If we did that and Jake kept doing what he'd done, like he would if the issues weren't properly addressed, then we'd be on a slippery slope. We'd end up paying off or losing a lot of the women who worked here and that wasn't an eventuality I was ready to accept.

The man had fucked up. He needed to own up to that. After promising Emery I'd see her later, I hung up and thought about it for less than a minute before shoving my chair back. The boss and I needed to have a little talk, and he wasn't going to like what I had to say.

As I went up to his office, everything I'd learned this morning swirled through my head. My conversations with Franklin and Emery had made me realize that Jake was going to get off the hook without even losing a second of sleep over it.

But not if I had anything to do with it. The people in this building were mine to protect, and I was going to damn well do it. Jake couldn't be all bad. No one was. Somewhere in him, there had to be something good. All I had to do was figure out how to find it.



JAKE

**M**y teeth ground together when Max marched into my office unannounced, looking as beautiful, pissed off, and self-righteous as ever. Today, her brown curls were held off her face with a simple clip at the top of her head, the rest of it hanging down her back.

She was wearing a navy suit jacket with a matching pencil skirt, a white blouse underneath it, and sky-high heels on her feet. If she wasn't such a pain in my ass, I'd have considered throwing another orgasm or two at her right here and right now, but she was a pain in my ass.

The way her green eyes flashed with indignant fire when they met mine told me she felt the same about me. She shut my door behind her and then folded her arms across her chest, her chin held high as she attempted to stare me down.

“Why haven't you been going to your appointments with Emery?”

I released a long breath through my nostrils, then forced a smirk to my lips. “Hi, Max. I'm doing well. Thank you so much for asking.”

Her eyes rolled, and a flare of annoyance shot through me. “Cut the crap, Jake. I know you haven't been going to therapy and I know you didn't even try to take it seriously when you were there. Why?”

“I don't need therapy. That's why. How many times are you going to make me say it? I thought you were smart, but if

I have to keep repeating myself, then clearly, you're nowhere near as smart as I thought."

"Wow. Insulting my intelligence already? I haven't even been in here for five minutes yet. It's no wonder there are so many complaints against you."

I scoffed. "Let them come. I'm not scared of anything and I'm sure as fuck not worried about a few complaint forms. People will get over it and then we can all move on with our lives."

"That's not what is going to happen," she said firmly, moving forward until she was standing behind the chair across from my desk. Finally releasing her hands, she placed them on the back of the chair and gripped it so hard that her knuckles turned white. "People aren't just going to forget and move on. That's not how life works. They're going to sue the shit out of you."

"Like I said," I repeated slowly. "Let them come. If they want to sue me, they'll sue me. Going to therapy won't change that."

"Maybe not, but it will show that we're working on your flaws."

"Flaws?" I arched a brow at her. "I don't really have any flaws to work on, so you're shit out of luck."

She gave me a long look, her throat working as she searched my eyes before her jaw literally dropped. "Hang on a second. You're serious. You really don't think you have any flaws?"

"I don't." I shrugged, still smirking. "Sure, nobody's perfect, but I'm pretty damn close."

"Are you insane?" she breathed before clearing her throat. "How can you actually think that? I mean, let's review just the flaws I know about, and I've only known you for a few weeks."

"Go for it." I waved my hand graciously. "Try to name my so-called flaws, Max."

“You’re a player,” she said like it was obvious. “Worse than that, you’re a player with a thing for taken women and no respect for them or the commitments they’ve made to others. That’s a pretty big flaw.”

“I don’t agree. It’s not a flaw, it’s a type. If I wanted to change the type of woman I’m attracted to, I would, but I don’t want to. Just like you don’t want to change the fact that you’re attracted to incredibly good-looking, tall, blond men with blue eyes who are in positions of power.”

She rolled her eyes again, and annoyance slammed into me once more. Before I could tell her to stop doing it, she leaned forward and looked right at me. “Don’t kid yourself. That’s another flaw you seem to have, extreme vanity. You are not my type, Jake Aspen. What happened between us at the wedding was as much of a mistake on my part as it was on yours. You thought I was married and I thought you were a nice, normal guy, not an ego-maniac with a perception problem.”

“What perception problem?”

“Well, you seem to perceive your actions as nothing to worry about and the complaints as a mere nuisance. That’s a problem.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree on that point as well, then. I don’t think I have a perception problem. I think you’re the one with the problem.”

“My biggest problem right now is you. How is it possible that you don’t think you have any flaws? Better yet, how is it possible that you don’t see how wrong it is to be attracted only to that which you should not have?”

“I’m not only attracted to that which I should not have, and again, if I thought it was wrong, I could just change it. Do you believe me?”

“No, I sure don’t and I think it’s outrageous that you believe yourself. There’s a reason you’re wired the way you are. You can’t change that you’re attracted to taken women until you figure out why you’re attracted to them. Is it because

you're afraid of commitment? That's the only thing that makes sense."

My features hardened. "I'm not going to these sessions with Emery and I'm not having one with you right now. I don't have to answer any of your questions, Max."

"You'll have to answer them at some point, but they won't be coming from me. They'll be coming from angry lawyers hired by the other side and you'll be on the stand when you have to answer them, sworn to tell the truth."

"I pay my lawyers a lot of money to deal with my problems," I said dismissively. "You can butt out now. Thank you for your concern, but I don't need to take this from you. Let the grownups handle it."

Fury simmered behind her eyes, but then she dragged in a long, slow, deep breath and let her head drop for a moment. When she lifted it back up, her expression was blank and the fury was gone.

"Contrary to what you might believe, I really am trying to help you, although God only knows why. We need to talk outside of the office. Maybe if we can get away from here, we'll be able to speak more freely. Be more open."

"Are you asking me out?" Amusement crashed into me when her lips twisted in a disgusted sneer and she shook her head.

"No, I'm not asking you out. I'm telling you that we're going to dinner and we're going to talk like normal people. All this posturing isn't going to get us anywhere and we got along okay before. I'm hoping I can appeal to that side of you if we get out of the office."

I smiled, batting my lashes at her. "Of course, I'll go to dinner with you. I thought you'd never ask. You're going to have to pay, though. Since you're the one asking, it's only fair."

"Cut it out," she snapped. "I'll pay, but stop acting like a teenager who just got asked out on his first date. It's not a date. It's a business dinner on more neutral territory. That's all."

I sighed, leaning back and placing my elbows on the armrests of my chair, trying to maintain the illusion of being calm and relaxed. In reality, irritation was making me feel like I was on fire, my blood burning me up from the inside out.

The only reason I was agreeing to go to dinner with her was because I needed to convince her to back the fuck off. From the way she was acting, I knew that agreeing to her stupid plan was the only way to get her out of my office, and once she was gone, I'd be able to formulate an argument that would get her to butt out.

I knew she was only doing her job, but her job was starting to annoy the shit out of me. She was like a dog with a bone, intent on reforming the bad boy CEO and making him see the error of his ways. What she didn't realize was that there was no error in my ways.

I simply was who I was, and I liked what I liked. I refused to apologize for any of it or to get painted as an asshole in some therapist's report. Meeting the green fire of Max's gaze, I wondered what had caused the flames that were flickering there now. I hadn't even said anything in response to her last statement.

"Okay, Max," I said. "If you want to tell yourself that it's not a date, then do that. Where are we going on this date?"

"Luciano's." The name of the restaurant came out of her so fast that I wondered if maybe she'd come in here with the intention of asking me out.

A grin formed on my lips. I lowered my head to the side, looking back at her with amusement no doubt lighting my eyes. "Luciano's it is. Seven?"

"Sure."

"Good. I'll meet you there tonight. Is that all?"

"For now," she said reluctantly. "Just do me a favor?"

"I already am. I said I'd come to dinner with you, didn't I?"

She pursed her lips. “That’s not the favor. The favor is meeting me there in a better mood than you’re in right now. I don’t really care what you have to do to make yourself stop being a smug ass, but just try, okay?”

“Anything for you,” I said, knowing it would piss her off if I did. “One more thing.”

Max had already started turning, but she looked back at me over her shoulder. “What is it?”

“Are you going to be wearing that bullshit, fake ring of yours again tonight? You looked so hot with it on your finger.”

“Nah,” she retorted without skipping a beat. “Clearly, that thing is cursed because if I hadn’t been wearing it that night, you wouldn’t even have looked twice at me.”

With that, she marched out of my office and left the door hanging wide open behind her. As I sat there, watching the spot she’d disappeared from for a long minute, I decided it was too bad that ring of hers had been fake.

Max was every bit as fiery as I remembered her being at the wedding, and despite my severe annoyance with her, she still turned me on. Maybe even a little bit more because of my severe annoyance with her.

If that ring had been real, I could’ve had a lot of fun making her beg for my forgiveness. I could’ve taught her so many of the fun ways I’d learned to channel my rage. Sighing as I shook my head at myself, I went back to work but Max was never far from my mind.

She’d asked me out to dinner so we could talk for real, but what she didn’t know was that I had no intention of doing that. She could talk until she was blue in the face, but the only talking I’d be doing would be to get her to understand that this was no longer any of her concern.

I didn’t need Max in my face all the time, scolding me about what a bad person I was. She had her opinions on the matter and I had mine. Unfortunately for her, mine were the only ones that mattered. After tonight, she would understand

that, and if she refused to, she was going to find out just how big of a problem I could be.

She'd said the only problem she had right now was me.  
*But you ain't seen nothing yet, baby.*

If she kept coming at me, I was going to start coming back at her. And if she thought she didn't like me now, she was really going to fucking hate me if that happened.



## MAXINE

**L**uciano's was one of my favorite restaurants. It was a real family outfit, every meal an Italian feast and the atmosphere laced with love and warmth. Usually, when I walked in here, I felt so happy and at home that I'd considered asking them if they had a back room I could move into so I could live here.

Tonight, however, my stomach was heavy with dread and I felt slightly sick. This wasn't going to be the easiest dinner I would ever have to have, and I really just hoped that he did me that favor I'd asked and arrived here in a better mood.

The Jake I'd met at the wedding had been so different to the one I'd been speaking to for these last few weeks. He'd been funny and fun, carefree and easygoing, not an egotistical nightmare of a chauvinist who couldn't get through a single conversation without saying something he could get written up for.

If he could just be the other guy, there was hope that this could work. If he wasn't, well, I was wasting my time and my money. *At least I'll be getting a delicious meal out of it, though. I guess I should just focus on that.*

Proud of myself when I was only ten minutes late when I arrived, I inhaled deeply as I walked in, hoping that the mouth-watering scent of woodfired pizza and creamy pasta would soothe my nerves. As I made my way across the dining room to my regular table that I'd reserved for the evening, my steps faltered when I realized Jake was already here.

Sipping at a tumbler filled with amber liquid, he appeared to be deep in thought. *I wonder what he's thinking about.*

Whatever it was, it seemed to be troubling him greatly. On the upside, he was here. Not even just here, but here early and dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. If he'd gone home to change out of his suit, I was really hoping that he'd made the effort as part of an attempt to improve his mood and remove the corporate barriers between us.

*Maybe we'll be able to talk for real after all.*

"Hi," I said softly as I joined him at our table, pulling out my chair and sitting down with a hopeful smile on my lips. "You're early."

"You're late." He smirked, and the cool indifference in his eyes was like dumping a bucket of dirt all over my bright and shiny hope. "Are you really that surprised that I wanted to get this over with as soon as possible?"

I sighed, then reached for his tumbler that he'd put down on the table while he'd been speaking. I tossed the rest of the whiskey that'd been in it back. For the first time since the wedding, he looked at me with genuine, not derisive, laughter in his eyes.

"That was mine," he mused, then shrugged and signaled for the waiter to bring another round. "Ah well, I guess it's okay since you're the one paying for it anyway. Word to the wise, though, that's not the kind of whiskey you want to be taking as a shot. It's not swill. It's the good stuff, and the price reflects that."

*Of course he'd order the most expensive fucking drink on the menu.* I couldn't be sure that was what he'd done, but I sure had my suspicions all of a sudden.

When I narrowed my eyes at him, he shrugged. "What? You wanted us to talk openly. I was being honest. It really is the expensive shit."

I sighed. "Do you have to try really hard to be so much of an asshole, or does it come naturally to you?"

“I’m a natural.” He smirked. “By the way, I’ve also ordered appetizers for us. I hope you don’t mind. Actually, that’s not true. I don’t really care if you mind. I ordered them anyway.”

“Lucky for you, I eat everything on their menu and I’ll never complain about needing to eat more. Appetizers are fine.”

He seemed slightly disappointed, but then he accepted his next drink from the server and looked at me as she walked away. “Okay, Max. I don’t have all night. Talk. Say what you wanted to say.”

Since I’d been wondering how to ease into it, part of me was glad he’d just shattered the ice so boldly. “Fine. Let’s talk. Six women have come to HR about you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Legal is talking about settling with them and paying hush money.”

He shrugged. “Sounds like a plan. Why am I only hearing about it now?”

“Because it’s not a plan.” I looked into those blue eyes and tried to appeal to that part of him I knew wasn’t an asshole. “Think about it, Jake. That’s six women in only a couple of months since you’ve taken over. At this rate, if you don’t tighten it up, you’re not going to be able to keep your grandfather’s company afloat for even five more years, let alone for the fifty it will be until you’re his age and turning it over to your own grandchild.”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your concern,” he said flippantly. “Also, in order to have grandchildren, one needs to have children. I don’t intend on fathering any, so the only children I’ll be turning the company over to will be my sister’s.”

“If there’s a company left to turn over to them.”

As I kept looking in his eyes, I realized that I wasn’t going to get through to him this way. If I wanted to stand any chance, I needed to change my approach. He had too much money, and

I was sure his sister did, too. She might not be running the company, but I was willing to bet she was still getting a financial benefit from it and that she probably had a trust fund the size of a small country.

Trying to make it about the company's future and success wasn't going to fly because he didn't understand what it would be like to fail. He didn't know what it was like not to have any money, and as a result, the thought of the company running out of it was simply too abstract for him.

Thankfully, I'd already come up with a different approach. After speaking to Franklin and Emery this morning, I'd realized a few things. Things he needed to realize, too.

"Okay, how about this, then? Have you ever thought about the position these women have been left in because of you?"

"What are you talking about? They haven't been left in any position because of me. They're all still in the exact same position they were in before I spoke to them."

"They're not, though," I argued, but I made sure to keep my tone as reasonable and calm as I could. "All of them are either happily married or engaged, or at the very least, they're in long-term, serious relationships."

"So?"

"So now, they have to come into a workplace every day where their boss, who holds all the power, is making passes at them. Or he's making comments that are making them question their own worth."

When I finally saw something other than arrogance flicker in his eyes, victory and confidence surged through me. I was still a long way from convincing him to go to therapy, but at least he was listening.

Somewhere in there, something I was saying was clicking with him. "I've spoken to all of the women, and while you might not think they're any worse off because of whatever you said to them, it has led to a lot of internal conflict on their parts."

He didn't say anything, but since that also meant that he wasn't trying to defend himself right now, I pressed on. "Some of them are talking about walking away from their jobs entirely. That's benefits and money to support their families that they'll lose. None of them are billionaires like you. This job is stability and security for them."

I took a deep breath, keeping my eyes on his and hoping that he'd see that I wasn't kidding or lying. "To walk away from their jobs would be a huge sacrifice, especially in this economy and with the state of the job market right now. Are you really okay with being the root cause of all this turmoil?"

Jake had no answer for me, but he sipped his drink, clearly at least giving some thought to what I'd said. "Despite everything, I know that there's a decent guy somewhere in there. Knowing what you know now, what's it going to take to get you into the therapist's office?"

It took him another beat to answer. "If you take me to dinner on the nights I have to go to therapy, I'd be willing to do it."

Internally, I rolled my eyes, but deep down, there was a little voice whispering that maybe, just maybe, this guy deserved redemption and the opportunity to change his ways. If nothing had changed in a month's time? Well, then I'd give up.

I'd walk away and let his legal team figure out his mess. A payout of hush money wasn't a good, stable job with a good, stable salary for the foreseeable future, but it was better than nothing.

"Okay," I agreed reluctantly. "I'll do it, but I have some conditions."

"Other than me going to therapy?"

I nodded, then waited for the waitress to drop off our appetizers before turning my attention back to him. "If I'm going to be taking you to dinner on the nights when you've had therapy, you have to actually go to the session. You have to go, put in the work, and stay for the entire time. If I find out

that you bailed early or that you're not putting in the work, the deal is off."

"Obviously," he said, but he didn't sound quite as cocky as he had before. "I thought all that was a given."

"Just checking."

"Anything else?"

"No, that's it. I'll take you to dinner after your sessions as long as you go to them and stay for the whole time."

His blues locked on mine, something uncertain in them for the first time since I'd met him. But then he ruined it by tapping out a drum beat on his thighs, smirking, and getting up. "Awesome. You've got yourself a deal. I'll see you on Tuesday. Same time, same place."

When he started walking away, heading for the exit instead of the bar or the bathroom, my brows rose and my heart stuttered. For a minute, I wondered if this was his idea of a joke or maybe even if he just needed a bit of space to think, but no.

The next thing I knew, the little bell above the door rang and then he was gone, leaving me with the check, all the damn appetizers he'd ordered, and his words still ringing in my ears. I'll see you on Tuesday. Same time, same place. I had bitten my tongue when he'd said it, but now I mentally yelled my retort after him.

*Looking forward to it, asshole.*

I had no idea why he'd even want to have dinner with me at least one night a week, but I was in for it now. I had a feeling it was his idea of punishing me for pushing him into going, but as long as he went, I could take it. Just as long as I could get him hooked on cheaper whiskey. If not, I might be helping him save the company in the long run but my savings wouldn't do nearly as well.



“Mr. Aspen, I’m glad you’ve decided to give this another chance,” Emery said when I showed up for the appointment. She stood up from behind her desk before I sat down across from it, inclining her head toward the sitting area. “I must say, I was very surprised to see your name on my calendar. We didn’t get off to a very good start, did we?”

“No, we didn’t. I’m getting something out of being here now, though, so here I am.” I dropped down on the sofa and kicked my feet up, reclining and hooking my arms behind my head on the armrest. “Do your worst. I’m ready.”

Her wide eyes were filled with curiosity and surprise, but she nodded. “Since you brought it up, let’s start with that. What are you getting out of being here?”

“For every session I attend, Max from HR is buying me dinner. She humiliated me at a wedding a while ago, and this is my way of getting her back.”

“Making her go out to dinner with you is your way of getting her back?” Her brows swept up. “Would you like to explain that to me?”

“I’m not making her go out to dinner with me. *She’s* taking *me* to dinner, which means I’m getting a free meal out of the deal and I intend on making it a good one.”

Her head tipped, her gaze searching mine. “How so?”

I grinned, wondering if I should rub my hands together to give her the full effect of hatching an evil plan. “I’m going to stretch her budget to the breaking point. I have my eyes on a starter Casuarina, a filet mignon steak as my main, and a cheesecake for dessert.”

Deciding to take it one step further, I lifted the hem of my shirt, flashing my abs and patting them. “A few extra calories won’t hurt, right? Maybe you should come with us too, gorgeous. You could sure do with a bit of padding and it’d all be for free.”

Her lips pursed, her features tightening. “I don’t think the offer of a free meal extends to me. As for the padding, thank you for the backhanded compliment, but I have dinner with my husband and he likes me just fine the way I am.”

I shrugged, giving her another grin. “Have it your way, but I bet I could talk Max into extending the offer to you. So if you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

Nodding once, she leaned back and opened her notebook again, sliding the pencil from the spiral and poising it above the paper. “We’re going to approach this from a different direction today. What I’d like is for you to tell me something real about yourself. It can be anything, but it has to be true and it has to be real. Telling me that you like filet mignon steak, for instance, isn’t going to cut it.”

“You want me to tell you something real about my relationship with women?”

She shook her head, waving a dismissive hand. “No, it doesn’t have to be about anything in particular. As long as it’s about you, I’ll be happy.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.” She glanced down at her notebook, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear before looking back up again. “Before the last time you were here, I was told that you preferred straight shots and that you liked to play hardball. I incorporated that into my strategy for your session, but I didn’t realize quite how resistant you are to the idea of therapy. I

think it'll be better from now on if we take it slow. We've got time. There's no need to rush anything."

I looked her over, noticing things I hadn't before. Like how she was incredibly confident and at ease, but in a way that was deliberately nonthreatening. There was a sharp intelligence in those brown eyes and maybe even some calculation, but she tried to tone that down, too.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked. "Something seems off about you telling me your therapeutic strategies. Do you always do that?"

Intentionally turning the tables on her, I waited to see how she would respond. Her gaze held mine for a beat. Then she shook her head. "No, I don't always divulge my strategies, but I have done it before on occasion. You've made it plenty clear that you don't want to be here, and I know you were wondering about my angle the last time. Why I was asking those questions specifically and what I hoped to get out of you. I think that perhaps, if I'm honest with you, you'll realize that I have no ulterior motives. I'm here to help you. Nothing more, nothing less."

"You're also hoping that if you're honest with me, I might return the favor." I didn't phrase it as a question because it wasn't one.

Emery dipped her chin regardless. "You're right. Honesty is a two-way street. We'll never get anywhere if you're constantly questioning why I'm doing what I'm doing or asking what I'm asking."

"What were you hoping to get out of it that day?"

She shrugged a shoulder, but her gaze never left mine and there was no trace of deceit in it. "All I was hoping to get out of it was the truth. The allegations that have been made against you are no laughing matter. I thought that maybe, if I pushed, you'd snap and tell me the truth, and then we would've had a real starting point."

"And now? Where are we going to start now?"

“With you,” she said like it was the simplest thing in the world. “You talk, and I’ll listen.”

“I can talk about anything?”

“As long as it’s honest and real, then yes. You can talk about anything.”

“Are you going to be asking any questions?”

“If I feel like I need clarification, yes, but I won’t interrupt otherwise.”

I gave her a long look, trying to find any sign that she wasn’t telling the truth. Her demeanor hadn’t changed though, nor had the relaxed way she was sitting. There was absolutely nothing about her that made me think she was hiding anything.

“Fine,” I finally said. “Let’s do it your way. I should warn you, though. I’m still cynical to the whole idea of therapy. I’m not magically going to change my mind, open up, and spill my entire life story to you.”

“I’m aware, and that’s okay. Like I said earlier, there’s no rush. We’ll take it slowly, session by session, and see how it goes. This is your show, Jake. It’s all about you. Where we land with it is completely up to you.”

“Let’s get started, then,” I said, but I meant what I’d told her. I wasn’t planning on slicing myself open and bleeding my life all over her pristine floor.

Some of the things Max had said the other night had made sense to me, though, and that had made me realize that I at least had to be seen addressing the *problem*. “Where would you like me to start?”

“Wherever you want,” she said. “Or, if you prefer, I can ask you some questions to ease you into it.”

Well, I wasn’t going to do all the work while she just sat back and doodled in that fucking notebook. “How about you ease me into it?”

“Alright. Let’s talk about Aspen Pharmaceuticals. You’re young to be in charge of such a big company. It’s an

exceptional achievement at your age. Are you happy here, to be in the big corner office?”

I shrugged. “Sure. Everyone keeps talking about my age like it’s a bad thing, though. The way I see it, I’ve been waiting twenty-seven fucking years to have that office. That’s a long time to have had to wait.”

“It sure is,” she agreed, which surprised the hell out of me. “Does it bother you that people keep talking about your age?”

“Does it bother you?” I knew I was deflecting, but since she’d indulged me earlier when I’d turned the tables, I was curious to see if she’d do it again. “You can’t be thirty yet and here you are, the head therapist for that big company you mentioned. Surely, some of your patients have been older. They must’ve been at least a little bit uncomfortable coming to therapy with someone so young.”

“There have been occasions on which my age has been a factor,” she admitted bluntly. “On those occasions, I’ve had to work a bit harder to get my patients to open up and to help them come to terms with speaking to someone so much younger than them. It’s not an unsolvable problem, though, as I’m sure you know.”

“I do know that, yeah.” I grinned, then let out a heavy sigh as I studied the blocks on her ceiling when I turned my head up instead of keeping it facing her. I was putting on a show, but since she was still indulging me, I wondered if my charm was chipping away at her tough exterior.

She’d been quick to mention her husband again, but now? She seemed to be settling in with me. I loved a good chase and a fight, and since we weren’t clashing head on this time, I had a feeling there might be a bit of a chase here for me yet.

“We’re in agreement then that our ages have played a role in some instances while we’ve been trying to do our jobs,” she said. “What I don’t know yet is whether it bothers you when it comes up.”

“To be fair, I don’t know whether it bothers you yet, either.”

She chuckled. “It doesn’t bother me. Back when I was first starting out, it did. It bothered me a great deal because I knew I was qualified and capable, and yet, a lot of my patients couldn’t seem to see past my youthful face when they were speaking to me. Some even offered me life advice instead of letting me help them.”

I let out a low whistle. “That must’ve sucked.”

“It did, but I also learned from it. What about you? Have you learned anything from being questioned simply because of your age?”

“The only thing I’ve learned is that some people are dicks, but that it doesn’t matter. They can think whatever the fuck they want about me. It doesn’t change the fact that I’m in charge now. They don’t have to like it, but if they work for or do business with Aspen, then they have to accept it.”

“Have you taken any steps from your side to help them accept it?”

“No.” I laughed dryly. “Why would I? It’s not my job to help people get comfortable with me. I’m here to stay, baby. They’ve just got to learn to live with it.”

To my surprise, the session went much faster than I’d expected. Before I even knew it, she told me that our time was up and to make another appointment on my way out.

After I left, I was in a much better mood than I’d been the last time and I was pretty excited to go have dinner with Max. Therapy was my punishment, and dinner was hers.

If my sessions kept going the way that one had, though, I was definitely getting the better part of the deal. This might not be a bad tradeoff for some therapy after all. Emery wasn’t as tough a cookie as I’d thought, and if I could buy myself some time with this new approach of hers, I was pretty sure I still had a chance of hooking up with her.

I just had to be patient and keep chipping away at *Mrs.* Cole. In the meantime, I got to watch Max sweat while I ordered whatever the hell I wanted and know that she couldn’t stop me if she wanted me to keep going to therapy.

*Yeah. This really might not be so bad after all. In fact, it's actually starting to feel like it's going to be fun.*



MAXINE

**T**he thought of dinner with Jake didn't set me on edge as much today as it had before. I'd already checked with Emery to make sure he'd gone to his appointment and that he'd stayed for the whole session, and I'd been surprised to learn that he had.

While she hadn't divulged anything they'd talked about, she *had* told me that she was working on changing his views about therapy before she got into the fleshy bits. She'd explained that she needed to gain his trust if they had any hope of working together, and although she'd mentioned that they hadn't had any therapeutic breakthroughs, she was a lot more confident about getting through to him eventually than she had been before.

All things considered, it felt like a win. Smiling when I found him sitting at our table again, I slung my light jacket across the back of my chair and sat down. "You're early."

He shrugged, again already dressed in jeans instead of a suit. "At least that's one flaw you can't accuse me of having, not being punctual. You, on the other hand, seem to have difficulty with the time."

"Nah, it's not that. I can read the time just fine. It just seems to get away from me easier than it does with other people. Tonight, for example, I took what I thought would be a quick call from my mother, but I couldn't get her off the phone."

“You do know the phone moves, right? We’re not stuck to landlines anymore. It’s pretty easy to hold your mobile phone in your hand and be, well, mobile with it.”

“That’s a good point.” I laughed softly as I waved him off. “I don’t really like being mobile while I’m talking to someone, though. I prefer to give them my full attention.”

His brows twitched. “You? Not be mobile? That doesn’t sound right. You always seem to be on the move. Take right now, for example. You’re sitting still but I can still see the slight movement of either your foot or your knee bouncing.”

I stilled, but it felt too unnatural, so I stopped fighting it and shook my head at him. “That’s not what I meant. I’ll still walk around and stuff while I’m on the phone, but I don’t like getting in a cab, or on the subway, or whatever.”

“I haven’t been on the subway for ages, but I guess it would be difficult to carry on a conversation while you’re on it.”

“Tons of people manage just fine. It’s just not ideal for me.” I smiled at the waiter when he came to take my drink order, and I glanced at the tumbler of whiskey Jake had in front of him. “I’ll have whiskey too, but you don’t have to bring me the expensive stuff. I’m fine with bottom shelf.”

The waiter frowned. “So you want the same he’s having?”

“Uh, sure.” I turned to Jake once the waiter was gone. “What happened to your expensive tastes?”

“The price tag needs to be justified by the whiskey itself, and it wasn’t last time.”

He said it nonchalantly, but there was something in those deep blues that told me differently. In fact, unless I was very much mistaken, he was being considerate by not ordering the most expensive stuff in the bar.

For fear of having him change his mind, I didn’t call him out on it, choosing instead to be grateful that he wasn’t breaking the bank. “So, how did it go with Emery today?”

“It was fine.” He smirked and waggled his brows at me. “I think she’s a little scared of me after our first session. She was a lot tamer today, which was great. As long as she keeps signing off, both you and legal can pull those fucking carrots out of your asses about this shit.”

I sighed softly through my nostrils. Clearly, he still wasn’t taking it seriously but at least he was going. That was what I needed from him, and since I knew Emery was working with a plan, I wasn’t about to interfere but I did want to try to help.

There was a side of Jake I’d only seen glimpses of at the wedding, and I was still determined to get that part of him to come out again. Back then, I hadn’t realized how rare it was to see it but now, I knew better.

I knew that he didn’t show it to many people, and that seemed to include Emery. Somehow, though, I wanted to get him talking, even if only to help him process after his sessions. I still didn’t really know why he’d made these dinners a condition to his attendance, but he had, and since he had, I was going to make the time I had with him count.

While I knew I risked having him shut down on me if I said anything too direct or intrusive, I’d been coming up with ideas of how to bring out that part of him in a disarming way. Emery had told me that she was approaching him from a total honesty perspective, and I had a feeling that if I revealed some of my personal history with therapy, it could help him become more comfortable with his.

“It’s not shit,” I reasoned calmly, looking back at him and showing him my cards. “Look, I know it’s not for everyone and that you hate the idea of going to speak to Emery, but I never would’ve made it through my late teens and early twenties without it.”

The faintest flash of interest brightened his eyes. “You’ve been to therapy?”

I lifted my brows at him, letting out a soft chuckle as I nodded. “Oh, I’ve been to therapy. I practically lived in my therapist’s office ages eighteen through twenty-three. I’ve also

been known to pop into Emery's whenever we've both got some time on our hands."

"Seriously? You go there for the fun of it?"

I shrugged. "Well, it's not really for the fun of it. I just believe in going to clean out the closet every once in a while, so to speak. It's like spring cleaning."

"That keeps coming up," he muttered but then inhaled and fixed his eyes on mine. "Since you know what I'm in therapy for, do you want to tell me why you went?"

"Sure, I'm not shy about it. There's no shame in going to therapy. I'm kind of proud of the fact that I went and that I saw it through."

"Do all therapists drill that into former patients so they can convince the rest of us to buy in as well? You're sounding a hell of a lot like my friend right now."

I chuckled. "They don't drill it into us, no. I do think they all teach similar principles, though. Like not being ashamed about going. There's still a stigma to it that they're working to minimize."

The waiter brought my drink and Jake and I ordered some pizzas before we kept talking. "If you really want to know why I was there, I'll tell you but you have to promise not to be a jackass about it."

He scoffed. "According to you, I'm always a jackass. Why ask me to make a promise you don't think I'll be able to keep?"

"Let's just say I'm trying to believe in you," I said honestly, watching him wrestle with it before he nodded.

"Yeah. Okay. I'll bite." He held out his pinky finger. "I swear to try my best not to be a jackass about it."

The truth was that I didn't really care if he was a jackass about it. I was completely comfortable with my past these days, and while everyone had their own opinions when they heard about it, I was okay with everything that'd happened. It

no longer threatened to break me whenever it came up and I no longer felt the need to hide it from people.

“My dad was a wonderful man,” I started, allowing the fond smile that always appeared on my lips when I spoke about him nowadays to make its appearance. “When you hear what I’m about to tell you about him, you might doubt that it’s true, but it is. He was a wonderful, loving man who gave my mom and me so much.”

Jake’s fingers curled around his tumbler and he brought it slowly to his lips, taking a small sip but not interrupting me. “He had a rough upbringing, though. Raised on the wrong side of the tracks by a fantastic mother but a mean drunk for a stepfather. His own dad died when he was very young, and my step-grandfather loved my grandmother, but he despised her children and the fact that she’d had them with another man.”

“Whoa,” he said softly. “Okay. I’m not sure I like where this is going.”

“It’s not going anywhere good, but I’m still standing, aren’t I? I’m still standing, and despite it all, in general, I had an incredibly happy and blessed childhood. As you can imagine, however, my dad’s own childhood haunted him in many ways. He was forced to stand up for his brother and sister against their stepfather from a young age, and he was the one who took the beatings and eventually started working much too young just so that he’d be able to give them little things that would make them happy.”

As he listened, Jake’s cocky demeanor slowly started shifting. “The older he got, the worse his stepfather treated him. Eventually, he left home at sixteen and made his own way in the world, but the demons were there, inside of him. He never got any help to banish them, and although he was never diagnosed, I’m convinced that he suffered from severe depression for most of his life.”

I took a long sip of my drink, swallowing it slowly and savoring the slight bite of the burn in my mouth as it slid down my throat. “When he met my mom, he managed to hold it together for a while, but he was already drinking. It wasn’t so

bad yet, though. After I was born and as the stress from work and providing for it became more, so did his drinking. By the end, he was a full-fledged but functioning alcoholic.”

Jake’s blue eyes were as round as I’d ever seen them, but he was engaged. Listening closely, he even managed to appear empathetic. I was starting to see some slivers of humanity in him here, and while I wasn’t sharing my story to gain empathy from him, it was nice to know he had it in him.

“My mom tried to help him for as long as she could, but he lashed out at her for it often. When the abuse became physical, she tried to get him into therapy. She even read those books about how to help people who don’t want to help themselves, but when it became a regular thing, she left him.”

“Good God. Of course she did.” His eyes were shimmering now, but not with tears. Instead, it appeared to be with a much deeper understanding than I’d have expected from him. “Did she go through with the divorce?”

“She did, but I was old enough by that point that I chose to split my time between them even though she had custody. Despite everything, I loved him so damn much and he’d never raised a hand to me. I knew he needed help, though, and I refused to give up.”

“So that’s where it comes from,” he mused with a surprisingly soft smile playing on his lips. “I happen to have personal knowledge of how difficult you find it to give up.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I guess that’s true. Anyway, we had so many happy times, but the demons were always there, lurking right beneath the surface. In the end, it was almost like he just chose to succumb to them. He was precious to me, and I lost him tragically and unexpectedly when he drove into a bridge one night. Ironically, it was during a spell when he was trying to dry up.”

Jake let out a hiss of surprise and tossed back a good amount of his whiskey before looking at me again. “Do you think he did it on purpose?”

“No. There were skid marks on the road and his tire had burst. All evidence said it was an accident, but just like that, he was gone. My mom felt guilty as hell for leaving him in the first place and I was angry with her at first, too. I was angry with everyone and everything. It took me years and years to accept it all and then to come to terms with the fact that he was gone.”

“Holy shit, Max,” he breathed after a beat. “I’m so fucking sorry you went through all that.”

After breathing through the pain that always rippled through me when I spoke about it, I managed a watery smile. “Thank you, but that’s life, you know? None of us have much control over it, but what we can control is how to deal with what happens while we’re living it. I was on the edge of spiraling out of control when my mom made my first appointment with my therapist. I’m honestly not even sure if I’d have been here if it hadn’t been for that.”

“Yeah, I hear what you’re saying.” Our waiter brought our pizzas and we spoke about lighter things while we ate, but something had definitely changed in him and the way he acted toward me.

We even laughed a little, and I found myself not totally hating his company. After dinner, when the waiter asked if we wanted dessert, he shook his head and looked back at me instead of speaking to the server. “Do you want to go get some ice cream and take a walk?”

It didn’t feel like he was making a move on me, so I nodded my agreement. Maybe he just wanted to keep talking, and if that was true, I was all for it. It sure felt like we were getting somewhere, and since it was what I’d been hoping would happen, I sure as heck wasn’t about to pull up the handbrake now.



JAKE

**M**ax and I strolled down the street to an ice-cream truck down the block, a strangely comfortable silence between us as we walked. In the back of my mind, I couldn't stop thinking about everything she'd shared with me and I was honestly trying to figure out exactly *how* therapy had helped her.

The shit she'd been through was hectic. I wasn't sure how years of sitting on a sofa and talking it over would've made any difference whatsoever and yet, she sure seemed to think it had.

After a few minutes of walking, she nudged me in the side and when my gaze snapped to hers, I found her smiling up at me. "If you've got questions, you can just ask. I can practically hear you thinking and you've got this constipated look on your face. What's bugging you?"

"Nothing is *bugging* me, so to speak." Although it felt borderline unnatural to be so honest with her, I pushed through the discomfort. After everything she'd told me, I figured it was the least I could do. "I just can't see how therapy helped you get through all that. I mean, that's some heavy stuff. Obviously, I'm no expert, but I guess I just can't imagine how sitting somewhere and talking about it would've pulled you through."

Her smile became sadder, but there were no tears in her eyes. While it was very fucking clear that it wasn't easy for

her to share all this stuff, it was also plain to see that it didn't hurt her as much as it would just about anyone else.

I'd suspected that she was strong, but this had confirmed it for me. Maxine Fowler had to be one of the strongest women I'd ever met.

"Talking about stuff helps us work through it. It helps us process and it helps us see things as they really are. It just takes a while to get there. My therapist gave me a different perspective on a lot of things. He also helped me channel my rage, to stay positive during my depression, and to accept the things I couldn't change. I know it can feel like just talking won't get you anywhere, but if you do the work, you'll be surprised at how much better you can feel."

Part of me wanted to tell her that I didn't have anything I needed to feel better about, but I just couldn't seem to get the words out. Instead, I bought her an ice cream and when she gave me a questioning look, I shrugged it off.

"Don't look at me like that. I can afford to buy you an ice cream. The deal was that you got dinner, but this is dessert. It's different."

"I didn't say anything. Thank you, though."

"You didn't have to say it. I know you were expecting me to make you pay, but I'm not a total asshole."

"No, you're not." She'd hesitated for a beat before she said it, but then she elbowed me playfully and smiled. "You're just mostly an asshole, but it's starting to look like there might be more to you than just that."

"Wow. That's glowing praise from my biggest detractor at the office."

"Hey, I might not be your greatest supporter there, but I'm not your biggest detractor, either. I try to stay neutral."

"*Try* being the operative word in that sentence," I teased, surprising even myself. "You're not doing a very good job if even I know how much you hate me."

“I don’t hate you. I just happen to love the company and the people in it, and I think you owe them better than you’ve been giving.”

“What do you mean?” A trickle of the old defensiveness ran down my spine, straightening it as I arched a brow at her. “I’m there early almost every morning. Most nights, I leave way after everyone else does. I’ve been hitting it at a run ever since my grandfather handed me the reins.”

I expected her to argue but instead, she surprised me again. “Have I ever told you why I took the job at Aspen Pharmaceuticals?”

“No.” I frowned. “Is it relevant?”

“Sort of,” she said, her gaze holding mine as we stood on the sidewalk next to the ice-cream truck. “Your grandfather came to talk to my class back when I was in college. I really liked him. He spoke with such authority but at the same time, he was so down to earth. It was my freshman year and apparently, he went to give a guest lecture every year. When I sat in that class and heard him talking about how important his people were to him and how much he valued every single one of them, I knew he was running the kind of operation I wanted to be a part of.”

“The old man does have a way with words.”

“Sure, but it wasn’t just the fact that he spoke from the heart. To be honest with you, it wasn’t until I started working for the company that I fully believed he’d been telling the truth that day. Everything was exactly the way he said it would be.”

The penny dropped in my head. “Until I started there.”

She nodded, her green eyes shining. “Exactly. It hurts me to know that you’re hurting the people I’ve sworn to protect. You’re also going to cost the company I’ve come to respect and be proud of being a part of a ton of money in legal fees if you don’t straighten up. That’s money that could’ve been put to much better use, and I can’t stop wondering what it would do to your grandfather’s legacy if word gets out.”

For a long minute, I didn't say anything because I couldn't. *How the fuck am I supposed to respond to that?*

Especially since the way she was looking at me wasn't judgmental. Her features weren't hard with hatred and her tone wasn't sharp. This was simply her being honest. It was how she felt and she was completely open about it right now.

Since I wasn't stupid or completely tone deaf, I paused for a beat to consider what she'd said, and as I did, the weight of my grandfather's legacy came to rest heavily on my shoulders. I'd always known that he went to give guest talks at various colleges in and around the city.

In fact, I'd already started fielding requests from the administration about taking over from him with those as well. I'd told them all to fuck themselves—in a more diplomatic way.

Now that I knew one of those lectures was what had led Max to the company, I was starting to realize it might've been a mistake to turn them down. After she'd first come to my office, I'd requested her file. At first, it'd been to get some ammo I could use against her, but I soon realized her record was exemplary.

She had a reputation in her department as being one of the best, and I knew better than to think talent like hers was growing on trees. If he'd inspired someone like her to come work for us with one of his talks, then maybe I should reconsider doing my own rounds at the colleges.

I didn't have his passion, but I'd been known to inspire people here and there. On the other hand, maybe I'd need to have her write a speech for me if I did decide to do it. I doubted the inspiration I had to give was the kind they'd appreciate at colleges.

*Drink while you can. Fuck the girl you want to fuck and make sure she comes. Experiment with everything at least once...* Yeah. They'd probably kick me out and ban me from ever going back to campus again.

“You’ve given me a lot to think about tonight,” I said as we started walking back in the direction of the restaurant. My car was parked there and since she’d mentioned the subway, it occurred to me that she could probably use a ride.

“How are you getting home?” I asked.

She glanced up at me, confusion furrowing her brow. “The same way I do every night. I’m taking a cab.”

“Want to split it?”

Her brows rose. “I don’t know where you live, but I doubt it’s anywhere near me. We should probably call it a night, though.”

“Yeah. Wouldn’t want to be late and get reported to the big boss,” I joked. “Seriously, though, we can split a cab. I have a driver on standby since I’ve been drinking, but I can tell him to take the car back to my place and make sure you get home safe, or he can give you a ride.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be okay.” She winked at me. “I’m a big girl. I’ve learned how to navigate my way around the city at night.”

When we got back to the restaurant, we’d both finished our ice creams and she smiled up at me, her features soft in the orange glow of the lights on the quiet street. “That was surprisingly fun. I’m kind of glad we’re doing it all over again next week.”

“So am I.” Before I could think better of it, I took a step closer to her and reached up, sliding my hand around the back of her neck and going in for a kiss.

Max leaned away from me and shook her head, stopping me in my tracks. “We work together, Jake. There’s also no way this could work. These dinners and the time we’re spending together isn’t about fulfilling our wants or desires.”

“What’s it about, then?” My voice was edgier than it had been so far tonight, but I forced myself to bite back any of the things I wanted to say but already knew I would regret.

She looked into my eyes. “This is about the big picture. The deep-rooted stuff.”

Since she was diplomatic about it instead of being cruel, I nodded and fought against the urge to revert to my default asshole setting. “Fine, but this doesn’t get you off the hook for our dinners. Same place next week?”

“Sure.” Reaching out, she gave my forearm a quick squeeze before withdrawing and starting to walk away from me backward, her eyes not leaving mine just yet. “I meant what I said, though. This was fun. Thanks for not being a jerk when I told you my story.”

Before I could respond, she spun around and threw her hand up in a friendly wave, heading back to the main street we’d just left behind. For just a minute, I considered following her to make sure she was okay even if she *had* assured me she’d be fine.

But then I let it go. Max was right. She was a big girl. She didn’t need me suddenly getting all protective of her for no good reason. Nothing had changed between last week and now, and yet, it felt like everything had started to. I just wasn’t sure why.



“Hey, hey, it’s Friday,” I cheered when I met Emery for coffee at a mall not far from the office.

My friend smiled and handed over the takeout cup she had waiting for me. “I had them add an extra shot because I knew you’d want one even though it’s the very last thing you need.”

“Every time I start wondering why I love you so much, you go and do something to remind me.” I accepted the coffee gratefully and dropped into the free chair at the little round table she’d chosen. “Is it just me, or does it feel like this week was seven years long?”

She laughed. “You say that every Friday and yet, you’re always the one looking forward to getting back to work on Monday morning the most.”

“I know, but I can’t help that I love it so much. Regardless of how long every week is, I don’t need more than a weekend to recharge.”

“Of course, you don’t. You’re the only person I know who never runs out of energy. Speaking of which, how is your investigation into Jake shaping up? I got a call from Franklin at legal to make sure he was attending his sessions.”

“What did you tell him?”

She shrugged. “That he was there. Honestly, I’m still not convinced we’re going to get anywhere, but he showed up. Apparently, only because you promised him a free meal.”

“He told you about that, huh?”

“Oh, yeah. He made sure I knew right from the get-go that it was the only reason he made the appointment. I have no doubt that he wouldn’t have come if you weren’t buying him a fancy dinner after every session.”

“Well, it’s hardly fancy,” I said, wondering why she’d have thought that. “How did his session on Tuesday go? He didn’t say much about it when I saw him after and you didn’t say much about it when I spoke to you before.”

She lifted her hand and waved her finger at me, chuckling as she shook her head. “Nice try, but I’m still not discussing it any more than I already have. You have the information you need for your interim report on your investigation, and that’s all you’re getting from me.”

I pouted, but I hadn’t really expected her to tell me anything, so I didn’t push it. “Well, whatever you did, he’s still not taking therapy seriously but at least he wasn’t downright, openly negative about it again. In fact, he seemed to be in a pretty good mood after. We even managed to enjoy ourselves at dinner.”

Her shoulders stiffened and worry suddenly clouded her eyes. “Be careful with him, Max. He’s only out for one thing.”

“That’s what I used to think, too, but I’m not convinced anymore. On Tuesday night, I felt the subtlest of shifts in him when we were together. I’m not optimistic that he’s going to become Gandhi overnight, but I’m hopeful that he does have it in him to change after all.”

“Just because he has it in him doesn’t mean that he will change. In order to change, he has to want to and at this stage, I’m not sure he’s capable of wanting to be anything other than the playboy he is.”

I shrugged. “Time will tell. I’m feeling better about it now, though. A lot of water still has to run under the bridge and I know he’s got a long way to go, but even between this week and last week, something is different.”

“What could be different is that he’s decided he wants to get into your pants even though there isn’t a ring on your

finger. Maybe he's justifying it to himself by thinking that you're married to your job, which you are."

I still didn't tell her that he'd already been in my pants. Or that he'd tried to kiss me, for that matter. "Did he say anything during his session that made you think that? I know you can't discuss it with me, but all I'm asking is if it's confirmed or one of your very accurate gut feels."

"Just a gut feel," she said. "Watch your budget with all this, though. Dinner every week could get very expensive, very fast."

"We're meeting at Luciano's, which isn't exactly street-food cheap, but it's not expensive either. I can afford a few whiskeys and a pizza. Last week, he ordered a bunch of appetizers and then took off before he ate any, but I had them wrap what I couldn't finish and then ate the leftovers the next night, too."

"A pizza?" A faint crease appeared between her brows, but she didn't say anything and I didn't ask since I suspected it wasn't something she could talk about, considering that she didn't volunteer any information. "That's interesting, but you should still be careful with him. That man has more issues than the world's longest standing magazine and you already know from your own dealings with him that he doesn't realize it. It's going to be a very long time before he'll be in a position to be anything more to a woman than a hookup. Even longer before he'll be able to be a partner in a healthy relationship."

I scoffed. "The last thing I want from him is a relationship. I love you and your marriage. I love *love* and weddings. I just don't want any of it."

"Which is another reason why you, especially, need to watch yourself with him. The two of you together would be an absolute disaster right now. You'd hurt each other so much because of your own stuff that neither of you would likely ever recover."

"I'm not that bad," I teased. "I'd never hurt anyone that badly, least of all my boss. Although I know he technically

can't fire me, I have a feeling he'd know exactly how to get it done, anyway."

She rolled her eyes, trying and failing to hide an amused smile. "You wouldn't hurt anyone that badly intentionally, but don't underestimate yourself, Max. You have as much power as anyone to wreak havoc on that man's life. You're both fragile where romantic relationships are concerned. Do I need to be worried about all this time you're spending together?"

"No," I said immediately. "All we're doing is talking. I'm trying to use our dinners as an opportunity to speak to him openly about therapy in an attempt to get him onboard with the idea. It's all about business, but out of the office."

Inhaling deeply as her eyes searched mine, she nodded, but she did it so slowly that I didn't think she really believed me. "Okay, Max. Just promise me that we'll talk about it when the time is right. We're going to need to."

"If we do, I'll let you know." I really would.

If there was one thing I'd learned from my own years in therapy and now having a therapist as a best friend, it was that keeping stuff in when it wanted out was the worst idea a person could have. A lot of us liked thinking we could deal with everything ourselves, but we couldn't always and we shouldn't feel like we had to.

"Okay, well, now that's out of the way, how are you otherwise?" she asked. "It's been a while since we've really been able to talk."

I thought it over instead of just glibly answering her. Once I had, though, I nodded. "I'm good. Thanks for the check in, but I really am doing okay. There's nothing going on with me that even warrants mentioning. How are you?"

Although she was the therapist, I always made a point of checking in, too. She was a therapist, but I was a friend and that also required reciprocity.

She chuckled. "Well, Aaron and I have started talking more seriously about trying for a baby. We're not exactly where we wanted to be when we have kids, but we're closer

than either of us thought we'd actually get before it happened."

I squealed. "Yay. I'm so happy for you guys. You're going to be the best parents ever and I'm going to be such a great auntie."

"Relax." She dropped her head back and laughed. "I'm not pregnant yet. Who knows? It might not happen very fast. If it happens at all. We've both been for all the checkups, but that doesn't guarantee anything."

"I'm an optimist, so I'm going to choose to believe that I'm going to be a godmother very soon."

Still laughing, she dropped her chin and rolled her eyes at me at the same time. "Way to steal the thunder of us actually asking before you accept. Thanks for that. Now we might have to reconsider just so we can do the asking properly."

I pointed a finger at her chest. "Over my dead body. Let's just forget I said anything. I won't tell Aaron if you don't. He'll never even know."

"I will," she said but then smiled and nodded. "You got it, though. We'll just pretend the last minute or so never happened. Are we still going shopping when we're done with our coffee?"

"Definitely. My work clothes are in desperate need of some replenishing and I'm lusting after this pair of heels I saw advertised the other day."

"Lead the way, then." She shook her empty cup at me. "I'm done."

I swigged the last few sips of my cooling coffee and got up. "Let's go. You're going to love these heels. They're so damn sexy."

"I can't wait to see them." She followed me to the store I'd seen advertising the shoes, and sighed when I saw them in real life.

"They're so gorgeous." And the pair on display was my size. Glancing at Emery, I scrunched up my nose. "Even on

sale, they'd be a splurge.”

“Try them on,” she said encouragingly. “When was the last time you splurged on yourself?”

“Uh...” I trailed off because I really couldn't remember. “Well, it wasn't recently.”

A saleslady came to help us and talked me into trying the sparkly black heels. They were killer, and as soon as they were on my feet, I felt like I'd be able to take on the world in them.

When Emery saw the look on my face, she nodded at the sales assistant. “She's taking them, and if she doesn't, then I'll get them for her.”

Bringing her gaze back to mine, she smiled. “You deserve shoes that make you look the way you just did.”

“Fine.” I pretended to be exasperated, but she just laughed and followed me to the counter to pay.

As I swiped my card, thanking God for the fact that plastic was patient before sending me the bill, an odd thought rushed through my head. *I wonder if Jake will like them.*

Shutting it down before it went any further, I couldn't help thinking about our night together after the wedding. It'd been a while since I'd really let myself think about how good it'd been to be with him, and as hard I tried to shut that thought down too, I just couldn't seem to get there.

So instead of wondering if he'd like my new shoes, I was now wondering if we'd ever be together again. At this point, I couldn't deny that I wanted it to happen—

*No, Max. No. No. No. NO.*

Emery had just told me how bad of an idea it'd be for Jake and me to happen, and I agreed with her. One night had been good, but if I got used to hooking up with him, we'd both be screwed and she was right. We were both romantically unavailable, and that was what I had to remember from here on out.



JAKE

**M**ax smiled when she got to the restaurant and found me waiting. I glanced at my watch discreetly, suppressing a grin when I noticed she was only twelve minutes late this time. Although I knew she would be late, I still always arrived early.

Tonight, however, there was a different reason for it. As soon as she walked in the door, I stood up and tossed a bill down to pay for the drink I'd been having while I waited. Intercepting her halfway across the dining room, I pointed back to the door.

“We’re going to do something different tonight.”

She frowned. “Like what? Luciano’s is our thing now, isn’t it? If you want to go somewhere more expensive—”

“First, we don’t have a *thing*. Second, the place we’re going isn’t going to cost you anything, so relax.” I took her arm and led her out to the car waiting for us, waving her in ahead of me. “After you.”

“Where are we going?” She glared up at me from the backseat, scooting over so I could get in beside her. “Are you kidnapping me? My mom doesn’t have money to pay a ransom.”

“It’s a good thing I have enough money, then,” I replied cheerfully.

“What do you want, sexual favors?”

I laughed, getting in and buckling up before turning to her. “Well, if you’re offering.”

Her eyes rolled. “I wasn’t offering, but seriously. What do you want?”

“Just relax, would you? Luciano’s is great, but I’m in the mood for something else tonight.”

“I don’t know whether to be scared, worried, or curious,” she mumbled but fastened her seatbelt and, from the looks of things, settled on curious.

“What could be better than Luciano’s?”

“Homemade,” I said nonchalantly, not letting her in on the fact that I didn’t do this very often. “We’re going to my place.”

“Into the belly of the beast, huh?” she joked, but her eyes were so filled with curiosity now that I could practically feel it pouring into me. “Are you going to be making this homemade meal, or do you expect me to cook for you?”

“No one cooks in my kitchen except me,” I growled protectively on instinct. Then I realized I’d done it and forced myself to relax. “It’s my kitchen and my idea, so I’ll cook while you drink. How does that sound?”

She let out a dreamy sigh. “Honestly? That sounds pretty perfect. I didn’t think you’d be able to cook. Unless you’re planning on making the one meal you whip out of your sleeve to impress married woman?”

I shook my head, but I couldn’t help the grin tugging at the very corners of my lips. “Not everything I do is to get married women to sleep with me, you know? If I remember correctly, I didn’t have to use any fancy lures or techniques to get you into bed.”

For once, she didn’t balk at the mention of the night we’d had together. Instead, she chuckled and shrugged one of her shoulders. “You’re right. That was the tequila and the wedding vibes.”

“Well, if you’re allowed to say you didn’t take me for someone who’d be able to cook, I guess I’m allowed to say

that I didn't take you for one who gets sucked in by the wedding vibes."

"Oh, no. I love weddings. The wedding vibes will do me in every time."

"If you think it's the wedding vibes that did you, then I did something wrong."

She laughed softly, shaking her head before glancing up at me from behind a sheet of her loose hair. "Don't worry. I know it wasn't the wedding vibes that did me. They just did me in and you did the rest."

I smirked. "Yeah, I did."

As she laughed some more, she settled back in her seat and I wondered if she was one of those girls who loved weddings so much because she desperately wanted her own one day. She was definitely fiercely respectful of the institution and yet, I honestly hadn't ever gotten the feeling that she was a commitment junkie.

"Do you have a little notebook in your purse at every wedding to take notes of what works and what doesn't so you don't make the same mistakes when it's your turn?"

It'd only been a half-joke and her laughter had subsided, but it didn't start up again. "No, I don't have a notebook, or a spreadsheet, or even a scrapbook for that matter."

"Neither do I," I volunteered, but before I could ask her if that meant that she, like me, wasn't interested in marriage, the car pulled up outside of my building and we got out.

On our way up to the penthouse, she was quiet, which was unusual for her. I let her have her moment, though, and by the time the doors slid open in front of us, she seemed fine again. As she stepped out of the elevator and got her first look at my place, she let out a low whistle between her teeth.

"Wow. This is nice. Have you always stayed here, or did you spoil yourself when you got appointed as CEO?"

I took in the high ceilings, the massive windows, and the city view beyond them. It'd been a while since I'd taken notice

of any of it, but it was a nice place. Spacious, light, and decorated in a minimalist but warm style. That last part had been on account of my sister.

“I’ve lived here for about five years,” I told her as I motioned for her to follow me and led her to the kitchen. “Being an Aspen comes with a lot of perks even if you’re not the CEO of the company.”

She looked around as we walked. “It’s very different to what I thought it would be. I mean, not that I’ve really thought much about what your place looks like, but I guess, in the back of my mind, I expected bachelor-a-la-mode. You’ve got rugs and runners on the floors, pictures and paintings on your walls, and the place actually feels lived in.”

“When my sister found out I’d bought a penthouse in a recently renovated building, she nearly fainted. She told me places like this never had any soul and that she’d be damned if I had to spend my nights somewhere *soulless*. I’m surprised you picked up on it so fast, though. It takes most people a while to put their fingers on what’s bothering them about it.”

She snorted. “It smacked me in the face as soon as we walked in. No offense, but I really wasn’t expecting color or warmth, so it’s kind of hard to miss.”

“If I’d have left it to her, the colors would’ve been yellow and pink. We compromised on navy and red. I’d have left the red, too, but all the rugs we looked at had red in them, so it kind of became part of the package.”

“Well, I like it,” she said decisively when she finally looked back at me. “So, cooking, huh? How did that happen?”

“My grandfather.” I didn’t miss the softness underlying my tone when I mentioned him in this context. “Victoria and I spent every Sunday afternoon in the kitchen with him when we were growing up. He insisted on old school, family lunches that were homecooked and everyone pitched in to make them happen.”

“Your grandfather taught you how to cook? Shit. I didn’t see that coming, either. Where did he have time to learn how

to cook and to actually do it while he was building a pharmaceutical empire?”

“He learned from his mother. It’s a whole family tradition, I guess.” I waved her into a seat at the dining table in the kitchen and poured a glass of wine from the bottle I’d opened before I’d left to give it time to breathe.

After handing it to her, I poured one for myself and kept talking while I started on the food. “At first, I thought it was bullshit. My grandfather’s side of the family is Irish, but he came here when he was three. He doesn’t even remember much about living there, so I couldn’t understand why he kept hammering on about tradition and roots.”

“But here you are, cooking me a meal when I could’ve just bought you one at Luciano’s. I’m assuming you don’t think it’s bullshit anymore?”

“Nah. As I got older and learned more, I realized that I actually enjoy cooking. It’s the one thing I can do where I can’t be distracted, or the meal will be ruined.”

“Huh? How therapeutic,” she mused.

Turning away from the stove, I gave her a playful glare and pointed a spatula at her. “Don’t ruin one of my favorite pastimes, Max.”

She laughed, putting up her hands. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m not ruining anything. I was just mentioning it. What are we having? Can I help?”

“We’re having a classic shepherd’s pie with a soda bread I made the dough for earlier and a salad. Basically, all that’s left to do is to heat the pie, bake the bread, and make the salad. There’s nothing I need help with right now, but I’ll shout if I do.”

Even as I said it, I slid the tray with the dough on it into the oven and then got started on the salad. While I chopped the ingredients and tossed them into the waiting bowl, Max sipped at her red wine and watched me closely.

“How was your session with Emery today?” she asked. “Are you making any progress?”

“I don’t really know.” My brow furrowed. “I know therapy was great for you, but I’m just not sure it’s working for me.”

“Why not?”

I shrugged, not veering away from the subject like I would’ve a few short weeks ago. Now that I knew her story, I was more comfortable talking to her about therapy. Not in a direct or productive way, but enough that she didn’t have to try to pull it out of me.

“Look, I’m sure Emery is a fantastic therapist, but I just don’t know what to say to her or how to act. I feel like I’m on an island surrounded by shark-infested waters when I’m in her office. It’s like I’m going to make one wrong move, trip, and fall straight into Jaws’s mouth.”

Max chuckled. “I know exactly what you mean. I used to feel that way, too. When I first started going, my mom insisted that I stay for the whole session because she was paying for an hour and she refused to waste her money.”

“How did you go from there to where you are now? It just... it still feels like a gigantic waste of time to me. Tristan, my friend, said I should unpack whatever I need to unpack while I’m there, but I don’t have anything to unpack.”

When the salad was done and I’d put the pie in the oven with the bread, I went to join her at the table. I’d already set it earlier, so now all I had to do was bring the salad and light the candles, and we’d be all set.

She watched as I did those things, her gaze tracking my every move with a soft smile on her lips. “You feel like you’re just going through the motions?”

I nodded. “That’s it, yeah. I’m only there because I have to be, but being there is taking me away from other places where I also have to be where I could actually be achieving something.”

“I know it doesn’t feel like you’re getting anywhere, but I’m sure you are. You’re doing everything you have to do. Just stay on the ride and see what happens.”

I sighed, glancing at the timer on the oven and seeing that we had about ten more minutes before we could eat. “Just stay on the ride. That’s the best advice you’ve got for me?”

Her green eyes were soft with what appeared to be understanding as her gaze locked on mine. Before I even knew what was happening, she slid her hand forward to cover mine on the table, then gave it a light squeeze.

“Yes, Jake. That’s all you can do right now. Trust Emery, and trust the process. I know it’s frustrating, but these things take time.”

Chemistry I hadn’t felt this intensely since the night at the wedding charged the air between us, and she quickly pulled her hand away and averted her gaze, glancing at the salad instead. “That looks delicious. I’m assuming you don’t think of salads as bunny food, then?”

I chuckled, shaking my head and trying to shake the lingering chemistry away with it. Max wasn’t here for sex and she’d made it pretty clear last week that she didn’t think it was a good idea. Yet, as we made small talk while we waited for the timer to go off and then ate our meal together, it sure as fuck felt like there was something brewing beneath the surface.

There was more going on behind her eyes when they met mine, and somehow, we kept accidentally touching. Our knees under the table. Our fingers when we reached for the same things. Our feet. Our arms.

It was driving me insane, and from the way she kept getting tenser and tenser, I had a feeling it was doing the same to her. Which wasn’t helping my situation at all.

Once we were finished eating, she helped me carry the dishes to the sink and then rinsed them before handing them to me to load the dishwasher. In an attempt to distract myself from the heat of her that I shouldn’t have been so acutely aware of, I cleared my throat and asked the first question that came to mind.

“What would you have been doing tonight if you hadn’t come over?”

She smiled, biting her lip like she was trying to decide how to answer. The movement of her teeth sinking into her lower lip and then sucking it into her mouth were small ones, but my eyes attached to them like it was the greatest show I’d ever seen. I didn’t even try to help myself.

“If I wasn’t here, I’d have had nothing going on,” she finally admitted, her own eyes glued to my mouth before she yanked them back up to mine. “My life has been pretty quiet these days. Most of my friends are happily married and they’re not up for going out every night anymore.”

“Are you?” I asked. “Still up for going out every night?”

“God, no.” She laughed softly, taking the tiniest of steps closer to me, almost like she couldn’t help herself, either. “I’d probably have been reading a book or I’d have thrown on a movie. And then I wouldn’t have gotten very far with either because I would’ve fallen asleep. How about you?”

“This is probably where I should say that I’m out on the town every night when I’m not with you, but I’m not. Most of my friends are married too, and apart from that, everyone is beat after work. So am I, so it sounds like your nights are just as empty as mine right now.”

As I looked into those eyes, seeing how they’d darkened just a touch while we’d been talking, I allowed myself to drift closer to her just like she had when she’d taken that step. Max had been right last week. We wouldn’t work together and what was more was that I wouldn’t even try to make us work, and yet, I wanted her.

My cock was testing the strength of my zipper and my lungs felt like they were too small. Max might not be committed to someone else, but she was off-limits all the same. “We’ve already slept together once, though. Where’s the harm in doing it one more time?”

My own murmured question broke through my resolve to keep my hands off her, and this time when I leaned in to kiss

her, she didn't shut me down. Instead, as I closed the gap between us, she moved to do the same, her arms looping around my neck as mine snaked around her waist.

Our lips met with an almost brutal crash, and Max moaned into my mouth, pressing up against me and sliding her fingers into my hair to hold me in place. I didn't know what'd changed between last week and now, but obviously, something had.

Max didn't stop me once. Didn't even hesitate. Not when I kissed her. Not when I picked her up with my hands at the backs of her thighs, and not when I carried her to my bedroom and laid her down across my mattress.

As I crawled onto it after her, she even hooked her legs around my hips and pulled me closer, laughing into my hair when I stopped at her chest to nip at her breasts through her shirt. It was only our second time doing it, but there was something easy about it. Something light and fun now that we'd both stopped fighting it, and since light and fun was what I was all about, I stopped thinking and started doing instead.



MAXINE

**I** *should not be doing this!* my own voice screamed at the back of my mind, but I ignored myself. It felt too good, and besides, he was right. We'd done this before. What was one more time?

It was a no-strings-attached sort of deal, and we knew where we stood with each other now. This was nothing more than a good, old-fashioned hookup. One where we'd blow off some steam, work each other out of our systems, have some fun, and then we'd go our separate ways.

"You're still an asshole," I murmured between kisses when his mouth sealed back over mine. "This doesn't change anything."

He laughed, reaching between us to undo the button on my jeans. Since he always came home to change before meeting me at Luciano's, I'd decided to do the same tonight. A move I was regretting now, since the skirt I'd had on earlier would've given him much easier access.

"Yeah, I know." He popped the button and lowered my zipper, hooking his finger in behind the material and running it over my panties before sucking in a sharp breath. "It doesn't seem to matter, though. You're so fucking wet already."

I squirmed under him, my hips straining up to get more of his touch when he withdrew his hand again. "Tell me something I don't know."

He laughed again as he sat up between my legs and pulled his T-shirt off, revealing tanned, smooth skin and all those

delicious lines of his gently ripped abdomen. Fire burned behind those blue eyes when he looked down at me again, drinking me in before nudging me to lift my shoulders so he could get my shirt off.

“Fine. You want me to tell you something you don’t know?” he teased as I did what he asked and raised my arms so he could free me from my top without having anything slowing him down. When I nodded, he smirked, dragging a finger from the hollow at the base of my throat across the bare skin of my torso until it hit the rough fabric of my denim waistband. “I’ve been fantasizing about doing this again.”

Gaze dropping away from mine, he lowered it to my breasts as he cupped them, brushing the pads of his thumbs over my nipples. My bra was still on, but the black lace didn’t leave much to the imagination, nor did it prevent me from feeling the heat of his fingers on my aching peaks.

I arched my back, reaching for him as I ran my fingers along the ridges of his abs before looking back up into his eyes. “Are you just saying that because you think it’s what I want to hear?”

He smirked, shaking his head and rising up on his knees to undo his own jeans, lifting them and his underwear over his raging erection before pushing them down. When his dick sprang free, it was hard as hell, thick and fully erect, the velvety tip of him shimmering with wetness of his own.

“Does it look like I’m just saying it because I think it’s what you want to hear?”

I grinned, propping myself up on my elbows and circling him at the base with my thumb and index finger. “Tell me about these fantasies.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I swirled my tongue around the head of his cock and my heart skipped at the hiss of air he released. He shuddered when I sucked him in deeper, then lifted my gaze to meet his as I stopped moving, hoping he got the idea.

If he kept talking, I kept going. I'd have done it anyway, but I was too curious to hear about his fantasies. I'd been having many, many of those myself lately about him, but he didn't need to know that just yet.

Jake's eyes were like twin flames on a Bunsen burner set to full strength as he looked down into mine, his hips rocking so slightly I didn't even know if he was aware of it. Jaw tight, he slid his fingers into my hair and nodded.

"Okay, if that's what you want to hear, I'll tell you," he gritted out. "This is a fucking good start, though. I can't tell you how many times I'd thought about having your mouth on my dick while I fisted your hair."

I hummed, pulling back slightly before sucking him in again. He groaned, clearly enjoying the reward of telling me the truth. "Okay, Max. Just remember, you asked for this."

I nodded, daring him silently to do his worst. An almost evil smirk appeared on his lips as his head dipped in another nod and his hips started moving more intentionally. "If I'm in my office, I think about you doing this right there where we can get interrupted at any time. I've also wondered if the panel in front of my desk would be enough to hide you if you're going down on me when someone walks in."

His voice was tight and strained, but when the question popped into my head, I didn't need to voice it before he laughed and shook his head. "No, naughty girl. I haven't jerked off in my office. I've wanted to, but even I'm more restrained than that."

A flash of disappointment seared through me, and he arched a knowing eyebrow. "You wanted me to have done it, huh? Tell you what. I'll do it sometime, but only if you're in there with me."

My heart thundered in response, but I couldn't deny the rush of heat between my legs or the way my slit ached when I tried to imagine it. Jake's fingers tightened in my hair, his hips moving faster and his head dropping back when I picked up my pace.

“Fuck, Max. Fuck. You’re going to have to stop real soon, baby.”

Instead of slowing down, I sat up and wrapped my arm around his hips, holding on to him while I started working my hand still on his shaft along with my mouth. Curses spilled from his lips and he swelled between mine, so incredibly sexy in that moment that I moaned, wishing I had a free hand to touch myself but also strangely turned on by the fact that I had to wait.

Jake’s teeth snapped like he was some kind of animal when he realized I had no intention of stopping, and he came with a roar, giving me everything he had as his muscles tensed until his hips finally stilled. Without taking so much as a beat, he pushed me back by my shoulders and hooked his fingers into my jeans and panties, tugging them off so violently that it almost hurt when they got stuck on one of my ankles, but I didn’t care. Even the brief bite of pain made me hotter.

Practically mewling for him, I lay down and spread my legs, half wishing I could keep them closed just for that little bit of friction. Thanking my lucky stars that I already knew he’d be able to quell this raging inferno inside me, I dug my fingers into his bedding and cried out when he held me open and licked through my core.

Jake chuckled against my slick flesh when my entire body started shaking, holding me down with one hand while sliding a finger into me. “You sucked me so fucking good, Max. Don’t worry. I’ll return the favor.”

*You better.* The words echoed through my head, but I didn’t seem to be able to speak them. Thankfully, I didn’t need to.

He played me like a fiddle, building me up expertly before he sent me careening over the edge and into a wonderland of bliss and euphoria. I came with a shout of his name, my body still quaking when he started up again.

Seeming as insatiable as I felt, he didn’t seem at all interested in backing down despite my mind-numbing orgasm. Not wanting to be outdone, I reached for him, sliding in

beneath him in an awkward kind of sixty-nine position until he finally chuckled and moved properly into place.

We lapped at each other like ravenous wild dogs that hadn't eaten for weeks, neither of us letting up as my world narrowed until I knew only Jake, exquisite sensation, and pleasure. Rolling around, we ended up making out again, our bodies slick with sweat and arousal, the air silent except for our moans and intermittent pleading.

When I finally couldn't take it anymore, I pulled back to look into his blazing eyes. "You need to be inside me."

"Yeah. No arguments here." He sat up and pulled a condom from his nightstand, rolling it on and sinking into me in almost one smooth movement.

I twined my fingers into his hair, my gaze hooked on his as he slid in and his eyes almost rolled back in his head. "Shit, Max. This is too good. I'm too close."

"Right there with you," I bit out, slightly surprised by how *not* awkward it was to be doing this with my *boss*.

When I walked into the office tomorrow, he'd have seen me naked *twice*. I didn't let the thought trip me up, though, meeting his thrusts eagerly as he slammed into me. Since neither of us looked away from the other, even while we were kissing, it was weirdly intimate, but even that felt good.

Jake seemed to be getting off on the honesty of the moment too, groans vibrating through him as he swept my damp hair off my face and planted sloppy kisses on my lips until eventually, neither of us were focused on kissing anymore. Our bodies moved together as wildly as before, and it wasn't long before I felt that familiar pressure bubbling up inside me, my body tensing before pleasure overwhelmed me, exploding out from the core of my being to the very tips of my fingers and toes.

He wasn't far behind, seeing me through before he trembled, his thrusts becoming uneven until he groaned and collapsed on top of me. We both lay there panting for a long time. Too fucking long.

“Jake,” I murmured into his hair as I stroked through it with my fingers. “The condom.”

“Oh, right.” Moving slowly, he rolled off me and went to take care of it before coming back to bed.

As he was climbing into it, I summoned strength from God only knew where and sat up. “I should go.”

“No, it’s okay. Stay. You can sleep here tonight. I don’t mind.” He gave me a lazy smile. “We can even cuddle if you want.”

Sensing the joke in his offer, I tossed a pillow at his head and got up. “No, thanks. I’ve got to go to work tomorrow and I’m not showing up in my jeans.”

“So you wake up early and go back to your place to change.” He shrugged as he watched me get dressed. “It’s up to you, but I’m okay with you staying here tonight.”

Now that the lust had died down, I wanted—no needed—to get out of Dodge. “Again, thanks for the offer, but no thank you. We shouldn’t get too comfortable and I’d have to get up way too early if I had to get home before going to the office.”

“Suit yourself,” he said easily, puckering his lips as I jumped a little to get into my jeans. “Do I get one last kiss before you leave me here, naked and used?”

When I glanced at him again, he was clutching the sheet to his chest like a helpless damsel as he batted his lashes at me. I laughed. “Look on the bright side. At least no one will be coming to collect you for brunch in the morning.”

His eyes narrowed in a playful glare. “Thanks for the reminder, but you’re right. About everything. Let me walk you out.”

As he said it, he got out of bed again and grabbed a pair of sweats from his dresser, not bothering with putting on underwear underneath them. I finished getting dressed, half wishing that I’d taken him up on his offer, but I’d meant what I said.

We couldn't get too comfortable. This wasn't a budding relationship or the start of some great love story. Sleeping in his arms would only lead us to territory we shouldn't be venturing into. Neither of us really did relationships and actually sleeping together felt like it would send the wrong message.

Not only to him, but to myself as well. So instead, I grabbed my purse once I was dressed and gave him a smile when we got to the door. "Thanks for dinner. It was great. You're a very talented cook."

"Thanks for coming." He waggled his blond brows at me, then suddenly leaned in, wrapping his large hand around the back of my neck as he kissed me like he was about to drag me back to bed.

I leaned into it for just a minute, kissing him back and fighting the urge to give in and stay. When he broke the kiss just as suddenly as he started it, he pulled back and reached for the door.

"Good night, Max. I'll see you tomorrow. Maybe, anyway. If HR has any issues they'd like to discuss in my office."

I heard the offer in his tone. He was talking about fulfilling all those fantasies he'd mentioned before, and I shook my head. "It would've been fun, but we probably shouldn't."

"And you're *probably* right, but I'm not too worried about what we should or shouldn't be doing. If you change your mind and you feel like having some fun, you know where I'll be."

"I do." We both recoiled when I said the last words either of us wanted to say to or hear from another person, and I laughed before heading to the door. "Good night, Jake."

With that, I spun around and fled before I said anything else that was stupid. Jake and I had had our fun, but enough was enough. We could try our hand at friendship now that things had shifted between us, and I'd keep supporting him with his therapy, but that was where I drew the line.

Anything more than that and we'd start running into trouble. My life was quiet right now, but I liked it. The last thing I felt like inviting in was trouble, and just like I'd known that first time I'd seen him at the wedding, that man was trouble with a capital T. I was staying far, far away from it from now on.



JAKE

When I got to the office, I was weirdly disappointed about not running into Max in the lobby or the elevator. We'd never run into each other there before, but still. Part of me had been hoping we would.

As soon as I started wondering why I'd have been hoping to run into her, I shut down the train of thought immediately and focused on the day ahead. It wasn't a super busy one, but I needed to go into it with a clear head nonetheless.

I'd barely sat down behind my desk when my phone rang and I picked it up without even checking who it was. It didn't really matter. I needed to be distracted, or I'd go back to thinking about Max.

After she'd left, I'd taken a shower and then crashed, but somewhere in the middle of the night, I'd woken up with her on my mind. I didn't remember dreaming, but I'd been hard as fuck and aching to sink back into her, but she hadn't been there.

She'd turned me down when I'd told her she could stay. *What the fuck was up with that, anyway?*

I really wouldn't have minded and—*Stop. Fucking. Thinking. About. Her.*

"Hello?" I said into my phone when I remembered I had it pressed to my ear.

Tristan's voice came over the line. "Jake, are you there now? I think I lost the connection there for a minute."

“I’m here.” I didn’t tell him he hadn’t lost the connection, only my attention. “What’s up?”

“I had a meeting with a client in the building next to yours, but they canceled at the last minute and now I’m already here. Do you want to grab breakfast?”

“Yes.” At least if I was with Tristan, I wouldn’t be thinking about *her*. “Where do you want to go? There’s a diner down the block that makes mean eggs. It’s called Fred’s.”

“Fred’s it is,” he agreed. “See you there in a few?”

“I’ll see you there.” Getting up, I put my phone and my wallet back in my pockets and breezed right back out again.

My assistant gave me a funny look but didn’t ask me where I was going or when I would be back. I’d checked my calendar before I’d come in, though. I knew I had no early meetings to postpone, and I’d be back soon enough.

Tristan was already at the diner when I arrived, and he grinned when I sat down across from him. “Just the smell of grease in this place is enough to give me heart disease. I fucking love it. I ordered you a coffee.”

“A big one?”

He rolled his eyes. “A mega. They said it’s the biggest one they’ve got.”

I groaned happily. “Thank fuck. Why do they even make regular-sized cups? I really don’t get it.”

“Because not everyone runs on caffeine and sex,” he said dryly. “Speaking of which, you’re in a good mood this morning. How was therapy? You had your session yesterday, right? It seems to be having a positive effect on you.”

“Nah, it’s not the therapy. That’s still a waste of time.” I made a face. “The only real benefit to it is going out with Max on a weekly basis.”

“Max?” He frowned, looking puzzled before the light went on in his eyes. “Oh, right. That Max. The girl, not the one who went to college with you.”

I laughed. “Nope. Definitely not him. I’d shoot myself in the knee if I had to, just to have an excuse to get out of going to dinner with him on a weekly basis.”

“She’s really still buying you dinner every week? It still sounds like she’s getting the raw end of the deal to me. I honestly thought she’d have bailed on that arrangement by now.”

“I made her dinner last night,” I said. “Technically, that means I bailed on the arrangement since I didn’t make her pay for anything. I even got the wine.”

Tristan’s dark eyes flashed with surprise. “You took an unmarried woman to your place, made her dinner, drank wine, and what? You actually talked to her?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I did. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. It’s just not really... you.” He picked up his coffee when the waiter brought it, but barely nodded his thanks before looking back at me. “What are you doing with this girl, Jake?”

“Well, last night, I fucked her, if you must know. Why?”

He let out a long sigh, his lips pursing in disapproval as he peered back at me like a parent waiting to lecture a child. “Why? Because there has to be more to it than that. Not the fucking—that sounds exactly like you—but how is inviting her to your place for dinner fucking *with* her even if it meant you got to fuck *her*?”

“I’m not fucking with her,” I said honestly. “We’ve been talking and getting to know each other, and it’s been nice.”

“Nice?” His dark eyebrows inched up. “Explain.”

I laughed, rolling my eyes at him. “You know what I mean. Seriously, it has been nice. We have fun together. She’s funnier than I expected and clever as hell, but she also calls me out on my shit and she’s completely open with me. It’s refreshing.”

“Refreshing?” If he frowned any harder, his eyebrows were going to fuse together.

“Are you going to keep repeating everything I say?”

His eyes went wide. “Sure, if it means getting an actual explanation from you.”

“An explanation about what? There’s nothing to explain. I just told you everything there is to know. She’s different than the other women I’ve spent time with and I’m enjoying it, which is the only reason I’m still going to therapy.”

Tristan gave me a long, curious look, and I frowned at him this time. “What was that about?”

“Nothing.”

I cocked my head at him. “It didn’t look like nothing.”

He shrugged. “It was nothing. I didn’t say anything.”

An amused grin tugged at his lips, and he hid it by taking another sip of his coffee and keeping the mug in front of his mouth until he got a grip. To me, none of what he was doing looked like *nothing*.

In fact, if I hadn’t known any better, I’d have thought that he was thinking that it sounded like I was enjoying dating, even if I didn’t realize that was what I was doing. It wasn’t something I’d ever really done because I was always only pursuing the hookup, so it was possible that I’d have missed it.

But that wasn’t what Max and I were doing. Even if Tristan thought that it was and he just didn’t want to say it because he didn’t want to ruin it by pointing it out.

Instead of asking him if I was right about what he was thinking, I flipped him off. “Go fuck yourself. It’s not that, bro. We’ve been having dinner once a week and we ended up in bed once. That’s it. I’m not proposing to her.”

His brows swept up slightly, but then he exhaled and changed the subject. “How’s therapy going? I’d like a real answer this time. I know you, Jake. If you won’t talk about it, it’s because you’re either really making progress or because you’re really *not* making progress. Which one is it?”

“Neither. I’m telling you, there’s nothing going on at therapy. It’s just... going. Emery, I think, is a friend of Max’s, so I haven’t said this to her, but I don’t think she’s a

particularly good therapist. We're just wasting time talking about nothing."

Tristan gave me another long, disbelieving look before he nodded. "Sure. Okay. If that's your story, but just stick with it, okay?"

"That's what Max said, too. She told me to stay on the ride and see what happens. The thing is that nothing is going to happen, which again, I didn't tell her, but I really don't see any value in these sessions."

"You're aware of the fact that you keep bringing her up, right? No matter what you're saying, you're finding a way to bring Max into the conversation."

"No, I'm not. It's just that Max is part of the whole therapy thing, to my mind, since I see her right after, so everything you're asking about, I've already discussed with her. I'm not bringing her up so much as that she keeps coming up."

In the back of my mind, I suspected that he was right, though. Putting the theory to the test, I started asking him about his work, and with all his answers, my mind immediately jumped to something Max had said or wondering what she would've thought.

Eventually, Tristan chuckled and stared at me with restrained laughter shining in his eyes. "You want to talk more about her, don't you?"

I scoffed. "No, I'm telling you, you couldn't be more wrong about what's happening between us because there's nothing happening between us. She's just becoming a friend, and it's surprisingly nice having a girlfriend."

He nearly choked on the bite of his breakfast he'd just taken, and I backpedaled so fast after that word popped out of my mouth that I almost fell off my damn chair. "I meant that it's nice having a girl who is a friend, not a girlfriend. Obviously. She's not that. Max and I aren't dating."

He laughed silently as he swallowed, his shoulders shaking before he caught himself and nodded. "Of course you're not dating. Not at all. You only see each other once a week, have

fun together, spend most of your time talking and laughing instead of screwing, but no. You're not dating."

"Exactly. I'm glad you're finally getting it." When he glanced down at his plate and shook his head, I glared daggers into the top of his skull. "What?"

"It's nothing. Really. I'm glad you have a girlfriend, and by that, obviously, I mean a girl who is a friend. She's making you much more pleasant to be around."

"She's not making me more pleasant to be around." I narrowed my eyes even more. "I've always been pleasant to be around. You should know. You're my best friend."

"Yeah, I am, which means I know when you're more pleasant to be around, and it's nice seeing you this way. You're happy, Jake. Happier than I've seen you in a long time. Whatever you're doing with her, even if it's not dating, it's good for you. You should keep doing it."

"Planning on it, but you stop looking so excited. I'm only this happy today because I had fucking fantastic sex last night. It was with Max, but this happiness has nothing to do with her. It's physiological, man."

He huffed out a sigh. "That's not it, but if that's what you need to keep telling yourself, then so be it."

"I'll do that. Thanks." As we ate, Max kept jumping into my head. I'd thought breakfast with Tristan would distract me, but since we kept talking about her, it didn't work. At all.

When I saw a girl with long curly brown hair standing at the counter to pay, my heart almost seized because I thought it was her, but as she turned and I realized it wasn't, disappointment rushed through me again. It was fucking useless to try to stop any of it.

Tristan finally gave up on asking me about her and about therapy, choosing instead to tell me about a girl he'd hooked up with a few times. I listened to him, but I kept comparing his casual fling to Max as he told me about her.

If anyone had asked me, I'd have said that my casual hookup girl was better than his, but that sounded juvenile even

in my head. I didn't really know why, but I was almost giddy today. *It must've been the blowjob.*

She was fucking good at it, and she didn't even flinch when I came down her throat. It'd been hot as shit and I was pretty sure that was what was going on with me today. As the memories faded, I was sure that this strange fascination I seemed to have developed with her would go right along with them.

By the time we were done with breakfast, however, the memories weren't fading. In fact, I had half a mind to go to her office when I got back to our building and then, when I got there, to bend her over her desk and make her scream my name.

I resisted, though. Only because she'd asked me to. When I'd sort of brought up having sex at the office last night, she hadn't been very keen on the idea. I'd get her there, but it wasn't going to happen today.

Still, I thought about her when I walked back to my office instead of going to hers, and I wished I didn't have to wait until next Tuesday to see her again. Max had put some fucking spell on me with that blowjob, and right now, all I wanted was more.



MAXINE

**M**y investigation into the cases against Jake was heating up, and it was overwhelming to be dealing with the allegations against him less than twelve hours after he'd been inside me. The contradictions between the man I'd spent time with and the one he'd been here at the office when he'd done these things was so astounding that it was even giving me a headache.

Honestly, I didn't think he was realizing how much therapy was already helping him. Either that, or he'd been schizophrenic all along. Because the man I'd been getting to know these last couple of weeks in particular and the one he'd been that day when I'd gone to him about these cases for the first time were not the same person.

Not even close.

This Jake—*my* Jake—was playful and funny, sexy as hell, and earnest when he opened up. He had hidden depth and this fond smile in his eyes when he spoke about cooking with his grandfather and his sister.

With all of that and his incredibly chiseled features, that tanned skin, blue eyes, and blond hair, I'd even go so far as to think of him as a little bit dreamy. The way he was when he was with me was a lot of women's fantasies come to life. He'd make a lucky girl who wanted to spend the rest of her life with him very, very happy.

It wouldn't be me, of course, but if he stuck to the path he was on, he was eventually going to be the kind of husband

material that would have women lining up outside his door. At the thought, possessiveness tightened my insides and I glanced down at the paperwork in front of me to remind me that he wasn't quite there yet.

I sighed when I read over the statements I'd taken from the complainants and the witnesses. I couldn't understand how the hell they could be talking about the same man. It had been bothering me all damn morning. When my phone rang, it was such a welcome distraction that I'd have kept even Franklin on the line for hours just so I'd have an excuse not to have time to think about Jake.

In the end, though, at least it wasn't legal. Instead, it was Emery, and I smiled when I heard my friend's voice. "Hey, you. Are you free for lunch? There's a new soup and sandwich place around the corner that I want to try this week."

"Sure, that sounds good. I've seen the place you're talking about. It's that trendy one with the plants hanging from the ceiling on the terrace, right?"

"That's the one. I can get away in about an hour. Should I meet you in the lobby then?"

"I'll be there," I promised before hanging up and wishing it was time to meet her already.

The hour dragged by, and eventually, I gave up on trying to work and went downstairs early to wait for her. While I was there, I grabbed a magazine from the waiting area and lost myself in the glossy pages, making mental notes of some styles I might want to try the next time we got together for dinner.

*There I go again.*

When Emery finally got off the elevator, I grinned and rushed over to her. "Finally. It feels like that took forever."

She gave me a curious frown. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing much," I lied but then laughed when she gave me a look that said she didn't believe me. "Okay, fine. I was just

overwhelmed with work and I couldn't concentrate anymore. How was your morning?"

As we left the building, she told me all about it. "To be honest, I've had a rough morning too. Don't ask, though. You know I can't divulge any information, even if I feel like I really need to debrief."

I gave her a sympathetic smile. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"You're already doing it," she said. "Being a therapist can just be really, really hard sometimes. Self-regulating my own emotions can be difficult. That's why I need to change up my environment some days before my afternoon sessions start."

I blew out a heavy breath. "Are you sure you can't talk about it? Because it sounds like you've had a hell of a day and really need to get it off your chest."

She sighed, smiling as she shook her head. "I'd love to tell you about it, but I really can't. I'm too tired to try to talk around the actual detail while telling you about it. Let's just say that I'm very happy to see you and I'm excited for an hour out of the office."

"You and me both, sister," I said.

We made it to the restaurant soon after that, and we both took a good look around before finding a table in the packed space. As we snagged two of the last available chairs, I inhaled deeply and smiled. "We're going to have to start reserving a table if we want to keep coming here. I predict this place is going to be a hit."

"You won't hear any arguments from me. If they're going to have the fireplaces roaring once we get into the swing of the winter, it's going to be impossible to get in here."

"Yeah. Part of me hopes the food sucks so we don't want to come back," I joked, but Emery laughed and winked at me.

"That's not true because if the food sucks, this will be just another of the line of places that won't make it. I know you. You're not really hoping someone's business will fail."

I snapped my fingers, pretending to be disappointed about being busted. “Damn it. You caught me.”

She snorted. “Nah. You never got away from me. I didn’t catch you because I’ve been with you all along. What you’re really hoping for is that the food will be awesome and that the place will do great but that we’ll make friends with the hostess so she’s always willing to keep a table for us.”

“Wow. You really do know me. Must be because you’re such a great therapist.”

She groaned. “Don’t remind me of my day job right now. I really just need to take a step back and clear my head. Why is it that when things get busy, they get so out of hand that we end up feeling like we’re running around like headless chickens trying to keep up?”

“I don’t know, but I feel the same way. Things at the office are not easy right now, and in between, I keep having to field calls from legal about Jake. They’re really worried and it doesn’t matter what I say to placate them. They keep wanting more from me.”

“Jake again, huh?” Her brown eyes were soft on mine, not a hint of judgment in them. “Do you want to talk about him a little bit? How are your post-session dinners going? Has he ruined you financially yet?”

“No,” I said. “Last night, he even took me to his place and cooked me dinner instead of making me buy it. We don’t have to talk about him, though. You want to get away from work and he’s work.”

“Sure, but we’re not talking about my work with him. We’re talking about my best friend having dinner with a man who seems to be getting under her skin. Do you know that you talk about him every single time we get together these days?”

“Yeah, but only because we both work with him. He’s everywhere.”

“No, honey. He’s not, but his name seems to be on your mind constantly, so it’s no wonder you’d think he’s

everywhere. What did he cook? Also, did he really cook or did he get takeout and put it on his plates?”

“He really cooked.” Before I could even think about stopping myself, I was telling her all about dinner and how he’d learned from his grandfather. I even told her that we’d kissed, but I didn’t go into detail about what happened after that.

Once I was finally done talking about him, she paused for a long minute. “Are you aware of the fact that your feelings for him are starting to catch up with you?”

I nodded. “I’m beginning to realize that they are. He’s taking up a lot of my brainpower these days, but I’ll be careful. Don’t worry.”

Emery smiled. “Good girl.”

Something else I was aware of was that I had to step up and be a good friend to her. When she kept asking about Jake, work, and how things were going with me, I answered her questions but changed the subject as soon as I got the chance.

“You have to listen to people vent, complain, and dissect their lives all day, every day. Let’s talk about you. What’s going on? Any news on the baby front?”

She lit up as she nodded, her eyes positively glowing with joy when she spoke about it. “I do have news, actually. We’ve gone to see the doctor and he gave us both the all-clear. Neither of us have any problems that should affect reproduction and he gave us some vitamins to take to boost our chances.”

“That’s amazing news,” I squealed, clapping my hands as warmth filled my heart. I listened to her in rapture while she told me about their visit to the doctor and how they’d even started talking about possible baby names.

I loved that she had the floor for a change, and I was super excited for her. “How do you listen to other people going on and on about their own stuff all the time when you’ve got something like this to talk about?”

She giggled. “I’ve learned how to separate my life from my job, but I’ve been bursting to tell somebody. I just can’t believe that we’re actually really going to try to start a family. We’ve been talking about it for so long that I can’t believe the time is finally here.”

“I can’t wait for you to get pregnant. You’re going to be the most beautiful whale in the city.”

“Oh, screw you.” She laughed and chucked a crouton at me. “On the other hand, I can’t wait to be a whale, so I’ll forgive you for it. Have you ever thought about what it feels like to have a baby kicking in your stomach?”

“No, not really,” I admitted. “I imagine it’d be a pretty weird sensation, though. If I’m being totally honest with you, I haven’t even felt someone else’s baby kicking. I’ve never had the guts to ask if I could.”

“Well, when I get pregnant, you can feel it as much as you like.” She beamed at me. “If it’s a boy, we’re going to have a spaceship-themed nursery, and if it’s a girl, it’s going to be rainbows and we’re going to paint the walls sky blue regardless. What do you think?”

“I think I’ve been itching for a reason to buy some new paintbrushes. Do you guys need any help with it? I’m volunteering my services.”

“We’ll definitely take all the help we can get, but we’re only going to start when my first trimester is over.”

“Whenever you’re ready, I’ll be there,” I promised, already excited for when it happened. For the rest of lunch, I encouraged her to talk about her hopes and dreams for a family as much as she wanted, and when we got back to the office, she hugged me with stars in her eyes as we said goodbye.

It was so good to see her happy. I couldn’t wait to see how overjoyed she was going to be when she got pregnant.

In the back of my mind, however, I still hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Jake. For just a few brief seconds, I’d even wondered what *our* baby might look like.

Obviously, I wasn't about to try to make it happen or anything, but the odd thought had gotten stuck in my mind and I smiled, shaking my head at myself.

Emery had been so right. My feelings really were catching up to me, but just for today, I wasn't going to try to stop it from happening. Jake and I had had a really good time last night. That was why he was on my mind so much today.

It was normal. Natural. We'd just slept together again, and since we'd been getting to know each other these few weeks, it was completely fine that I hadn't just been able to forget about him this morning. He wasn't just a random hookup or anything. So, I indulged myself.

Soon enough, he'd go back to being his cocky asshole self and I'd go back to thinking he was a chauvinistic pig. In the meantime, all I had to do was keep my wits about me and not do something stupid like fall for him.

Because that? That would be a damned disaster.



JAKE

**F**inally, it was fucking Tuesday. I never thought I'd be excited about leaving my office to head to Emery's, but I was. It'd been a hell of a long week waiting for the day to come, but in just a few more hours, I'd be seeing Max.

*Who I still haven't stopped thinking about.* It had been a hell of a blowjob, though.

I also hadn't even really looked at another woman in the months since the wedding for some reason. Which meant that all my sexual experiences for the last couple of months had been with Max. To my mind, it made sense that my brain was suddenly so hung up on her. So I'd stopped trying to fight it.

When I arrived at Emery's office, she smiled and motioned me to my usual sofa. "How are you doing today, Jake?"

To my ever-loving surprise, I returned her smile as I strode over to my spot. "I'm really good. Glad to be here. How are you?"

She blinked a few times in rapid succession. "I'm very well. Thank you for asking."

We got settled in the same seats we always chose, and she watched me curiously. "You seem to be in a good mood. What do you want to talk about today?"

"I was thinking we could talk about my grandfather," I said, surprising even myself when I started opening up. "Have I ever told you that he practically raised us? My sister and I, I mean."

“Did he? No, you haven’t told me.” She took a very subtle, almost passive interest in what I said, almost like she was trying not to scare me off in the hopes that I wouldn’t shut down again.

I wasn’t a baby deer staring at a hunter, though. She didn’t have to be so worried, but I also appreciated that she was. I hadn’t been the easiest person with her in the past. It just kind of felt like there were less sharks in the water today than before.

After telling Max about how my grandfather had taught us to cook last week, she wasn’t the only person on my mind. My grandfather had been there too, and by Sunday, I’d realized that I wanted to talk about him. I’d called Victoria, but she’d sounded pretty confused, and after reminiscing with me for a few minutes, she’d asked me if I had a fever. When I’d said no, all she’d said was to go get checked out and then she’d hung up.

I forced myself to stop wondering why Vic had been so weird about it, focusing my attention on Emery again, and I nodded. “Yeah, he did. Victoria and I spent almost every weekend at his house. Our parents got off on being socialites, so when they hit the town, they just used to drop us off and they never knew when they’d be back, so we didn’t know either.”

“Oh?”

I chuckled. “You don’t have to walk on eggshells around me, Emery. I know we got off to a rough start, but I want to talk about him. I don’t think I’ve ever said this out loud, but I grew up idolizing him. He’s my hero.”

“That’s high praise,” she said encouragingly. “You enjoyed the time you spent at his place, then?”

“Absolutely. Those weekends we spent with them are some of my best fucking memories. My grandparents rarely allowed anyone at their house while we were there, and they kept their weekend engagements to a minimum. All that time belonged just to us.”

“What did you do while you were there?” she asked lightly, and I would only realize after the session that she’d been guiding me all along. I didn’t mind it, though. That was kind of the point of it, from my perspective.

“What did we do?” I repeated the question back at her as I thought about it, then grinned as I lay back on the sofa. “Shit. We were always busy. When we were much younger, my grandfather would do arts and crafts shit with us and my grandmother. Like, he’d sit down on his butt on the carpet and stick pompoms to pipe cleaners so we wouldn’t get the glue on our hands.”

“That sounds wonderful,” she said. “Is that what he was always like with you? Hands-on and warm?”

“Definitely. He read to me in my bedroom at their house while our grandmother was with Victoria. We talked about the company and stuff when I got older, but he kept it fun. He never got all deep and serious about it.”

“What about your parents? Did they get all deep and serious about it?”

I snorted. “My dad was jealous and my mom only ever wanted the money she got from being an Aspen. Whenever they talked about the company, it was only in terms of how much richer they’d get if my dad took over. I think that’s why my grandfather hung on so long, to be honest. He worked until I was ready to take over just so he wouldn’t have to turn it over to my father.”

“What else did your grandparents do with you?” She backed off the subject of my parents almost immediately, which I appreciated immensely.

I shrugged, a little thrown by having thought about the people who spawned me, but as I answered her question, I started relaxing again, loosening up as I told her about that part of my childhood.

“We went on long walks every afternoon. On the weekends when we stayed at their place in the city, we’d go to Central Park and pretend to be tourists. They’ve got a house a few

hours upstate too, and when we were there, we'd just walk around the grounds. We played hide and seek, played in the mud, and caught fireflies at night. We'd only get to keep them for a few seconds before we'd set them free again, though. When we finally went to live with them for good, we weren't allowed to catch them anymore."

I smiled. "Victoria was so grossed out by them the first time she saw what they actually looked like, but my grandfather finally made her realize that their natural light was what attracted people to them. Don't get me wrong, my sister is a beautiful woman, but I think she's got that natural light, too. I think it's because she took that lesson to heart."

"What about you?" Emery asked. "Did you take it to heart?"

I shrugged, but the question made me sting a little inside. "Nah, I don't think it buried itself as deep inside me as it did with her. I don't need natural light. I'm beautiful on the outside, so people are attracted to me just for that."

"You said your sister is beautiful on the outside too, though. Yet you also said she has that natural light."

"Yeah, I know, but hearing Grandpa talk about being like a light in the darkness to other people struck a chord with her that it didn't for me. I had Victoria's light to bring people to me if my looks didn't. We always had a lot of friends, but it was mostly because of her."

A strange pang I'd never felt before hit me. I'd never really thought about the impact that being Victoria's twin had had on me. If it hadn't been for her, I wasn't sure I'd have had any real friends back in high school or college. I'd been an asshole even then.

Absently scratching my jaw, I shook my head and turned back to the memories instead, focusing on the good times we'd had. "When I got older, my grandfather taught us how to golf and my grandmother taught us how to sew. My grandfather also taught us how to cook, which is still one of my hobbies, and over the holidays, they always took us on vacation with them."

“What sort of things did you do together over the holidays?”

I grinned. “Jesus. We were like a picture of the perfect family, except for the fact that they were our grandparents and not our parents. We went to Christmas markets and helped them put together gifts to donate to less privileged children. We went caroling, chose and decorated a tree together every year, and then we’d roast chestnuts and bake cookies.”

“Where were your parents over the holidays?”

I laughed dryly. “I have no idea. Not with us, though. That’s for sure. Mostly, they went away with their friends. I think they went on cruises and shit, but I never really asked and neither did Victoria. I think we were both too scared that if we drew their attention to it, they’d decide they wanted to spend the holidays with us and then we probably wouldn’t have been able to go to our grandparents’.”

“What else?” she asked. “Do you have any other special memories of him?”

“So many,” I admitted. “He’s the one who taught me how to tie a tie and fasten my shoes. He talked to me about girls and crushes, and he even gave me my first box of condoms when I was old enough.”

“Did your father ever talk to you about any of those things?”

“Fuck no.” I rolled my eyes. “Well, actually, that’s not true. He did talk to me about women and sex. Told me to enjoy myself as much as I wanted, but to make sure I always kept it wrapped or I’d end up like him. With two kids who’d only ever cost him money. And then he left us before I even finished high school.”

“That’s... discouraging. What did your grandfather tell you?”

I chuckled. “To find a woman like my grandmother, marry her, and have as many babies as she’d let me put in her belly.”

As I spoke about them, a sense of the boy I used to be lingered close to the surface. At the time, I’d been hellbent on

taking my grandfather's advice, but then I'd grown up, life had happened, and I'd learned that that kind of love only hurt.

"Where is your grandmother now?" Emery asked like she'd read my mind.

Before we could properly turn to that subject, I felt like someone had dunked my feet in a bucket of ice. They didn't only get cold. I nearly got fucking frostbite. Changing gears, I shook my head and sat up, scowling as I thought about the reason I was even in here.

"All these complaints against me really are bullshit," I said as frustration coursed through me. "I love my grandfather. I have mad respect for the man. I have no intention of dragging his company's name through the mud. I was just trying to loosen things up around here."

Emery let me vent despite the fact that we'd turned back to more surface-level stuff. I liked that she didn't push me, though. My parents and my grandparents were both subjects that set me off, albeit for very different reasons.

After talking to Emery about nothing important for the rest of the hour, I got up and thanked her for her time. She smiled warmly at me. "That's the first time you've thanked me."

"Is it?" I frowned. "That doesn't seem right. I'm sorry. Thank you, Emery. I should've said it before."

"You're welcome. Thank you for being here. I feel very good about our session today."

I didn't say it, but so did I. "See you next week."

"I'll see you then," she agreed, then shut her door softly behind me.

Instead of going back to my office, I headed straight home to change before going to the restaurant. It was finally time to see Max again, and I was excited about it. I didn't have any surprises up my sleeve for tonight, but I was looking forward to it anyway.

When she'd said that Luciano's was our thing last week, my immediate instinct had been to say that we didn't have a

*thing*. It wasn't true, though. These meals, wherever we had them, *they* were our thing. And our *thing* was fast becoming the highlight of my week.



MAXINE

“**H**ow was your session with Emery?” I asked as I dropped into my chair at Luciano’s. Jake was already there, as always, waiting for me, but this time, he had a drink for me already, too.

He smiled. Not a smirk and not a grin, but a genuine, warm smile. “It was really good. She thinks so as well. We had a good talk.”

“Yeah?” I felt a real, happy smile tugging at my own lips in response to his. “That’s great news. Thanks for the drink, by the way.” I inclined my chin toward the beer on the table. “How did you know I was going to want that instead of whiskey or wine?”

“You’re always thirsty when you first get here. My leading theory is that it’s because you’re always late, so you’ve rushed to get here. Every time you arrive, you finish your first drink in no more than a few minutes.”

“Wow. You’re more perceptive than I am. That’s for sure.” I picked up the beer and drank so much of it that I laughed. Some of it shot up the back of my nose when I did, and I sputtered, laughing even harder and rubbing my nose at the same time. “Damn it. You were so right. I think I’d have drunk half of that in one go if you hadn’t brought it to my attention.”

He snorted. “I hate to say it, but I told you so.”

“If you hate to say it, why do you look so proud of yourself?”

“Okay, I lied. It felt pretty damn good to say it. As it turns out, I like knowing things about you. Even if it is just that your insane amount of energy doesn’t have *no* effect on you.”

My cheeks flushed. “You like knowing things about me?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, well, I like knowing things about you, too. So tell me about your session with Emery. If it was a good one, what did you talk about?”

Hesitation crept into those bright blues, but then he blew out a slow breath and took a sip of his whiskey, knocking back a decent amount of it before lowering the glass with a slight thud when he set it down. “We talked about how my grandfather practically raised me. He taught me everything worth knowing, and when my dad left, he literally raised me. Although I didn’t tell Emery much about him leaving.”

“Your dad left?” I knew I shouldn’t be gaping at him, but I couldn’t help it. “How did I not know about that?”

“No one does,” he admitted after pausing for a beat. “I think you’re the first person I’ve ever personally told. Tristan, my friend, eventually straight up asked, but I never just came out and told him like I just told you.”

“Why tell me, then?”

He looked back at me, suddenly seeming uncertain. “I don’t know, but it felt right, so I went with it.”

“Does it feel right to tell me when he left or why?”

Jake’s eyes took on a faraway kind of gleam. Then he refocused and nodded. “Strangely, yes.”

“So it wouldn’t bother you to talk to me about it?”

“Strangely, no.” He looked as surprised to be saying it as I was to hear it, but I wasn’t going to point it out to him. “I don’t know the real reason why he left, but I think it has to do with the fact that my grandfather told him he wasn’t going to retire until I was ready to take over. My father...”

He shoved a hand through the longer hair at the top of his head and dropped his gaze to glare at his drink before taking another long swig of it. “Fuck, I know it’s easy for you to talk about shit after you’ve been through therapy, but the words are kind of...”

“Sticking in your throat?” I offered, and he nodded. When he did, I smiled and opened my menu. “Take your time. I’m not going anywhere.”

I was looking through the pasta varieties on the second page when he started speaking. “It was when I was thirteen. I woke up one morning and my mom told us he was gone. She said he’d met someone else and that he’d taken off to retire with her on some tropical island. I thought she was joking. It would’ve been a shitty joke, but the reality was even shittier. It sounded like something that only happened on TV shows, and suddenly, it was my real life.”

“I’m so sorry. Wow. That really sucks. Did you ever see him again?”

Pain radiated from his eyes, but he shrugged his shoulders instead of admitting to it. “I’ve seen him a few times, but it mostly happens when he wants something. The first time I saw him after he left, I was eighteen and he wanted me to come to his wedding.”

“Are you serious. Why?”

Jake let out a very humorless bark of laughter. “His fiancée wanted it to be a family affair. She didn’t have any kids of her own and she wanted to make us feel like she was a loving stepmother. She’s only three years older than I am.”

“Holy fuck,” I breathed.

He nodded. “Yeah, I know. Meanwhile, my mother decided that it was too hard raising two teenagers by herself, so she took off, too. She told us we were going to my grandparents’ for the weekend, told us to pack our bags for an extended stay just in case, and then called a week later to say she was at a retreat and didn’t know how long it’d be before

she came back. Two years later, she showed up for my birthday and told us she and my dad had gotten a divorce.”

“How on earth did you guys deal with all that?”

“My grandparents,” he said. “They took us in and raised us like we were their own. Honestly, I was glad to be living with them permanently. It felt like things were finally looking up, but then my grandmother died and my world fell apart again.”

“I can’t even imagine,” I said softly. “Having both of your parents walk away from you and losing the best mother you’ve ever known is awful.”

“It was awful,” he admitted, vulnerability shining in his eyes for the first time since I’d met him. “I think that’s why I wouldn’t ever want kids. What if I decided to leave because it was too hard? I was lucky to have had a grandfather who stepped in to raise me, but I’m scared as fuck that I wouldn’t be able to handle the responsibility of fatherhood.”

“You have good reasons to have those fears,” I said. “They’re very similar to mine in some respects. Like you, I’m scared to bring a child into this world because of what it might go through in its life.”

He raised his glass. “Here’s to not having kids and talking about it like actual grownups.”

I smiled, clinking my glass against his. “Grownups in therapy, you mean. I don’t know if a lot of people ever have this kind of conversation this way if they haven’t spoken to a professional in their lives.”

“Fair enough.” He sighed, taking a sip of his drink before his expression became contemplative again. “I’ve only ever really looked out for myself. I didn’t even have to look out for my sister much. She’s always had tons of friends, she met the guy she’s now married to when we were pretty young, and she sees life very differently.”

“People experience things differently, though,” I said. “You avoid opportunities to connect with people, whereas it sounds like she goes looking for connection.”

I knew I had to handle this gently. It was sensitive subject matter, and I sort of wished I could have *a phone a friend* lifeline right now. Emery would know how to deal with all this much better than I did, but if I even suggested calling her, I was afraid he'd shut down.

So it was up to me. Thinking it over for a second, I looked him right in the eyes. "That being said, I don't think it's true that you only ever looked out for yourself. You're the CEO of a massive company. The moves you make in the business have a direct impact on everyone who works for you. Your work ethic and drive have benefited the whole company, including people like me."

"Yeah, I've benefited them so much that they all want to fucking sue me."

I held his gaze, steadfast and determined to make him see himself the way I was starting to see him. "You're not as wayward as you think. In fact, you're being very hard on yourself. You have a staff of thousands, and only six of those people have complained about you. Sure, they're serious complaints and you do need to do better on that front, but let's not pretend that you never consider anyone else."

"I don't, though. If the company does well, so do I."

"Yes, but so do all the rest of us. It's about job security, but it's also about bonuses and perks. You're putting more money in people's pockets with the moves you've been making. That's a very real impact on a lot of lives. All you really need to work on is how you treat some of the women at the company, and you're working on it."

He blew air into his cheeks and puffed them up, releasing the air slowly as he stared back at me. While giving him a minute to process everything I'd said, I did some introspection of my own. I never thought I'd be trying to prop him up or that he'd be down enough that I needed to, nor did I expect to have to make an argument about him not being all bad.

At the end of the day, though, I didn't think he was all bad. Not anymore. I was growing very curious about who he really was as a person, and I was beginning to believe that the Jake I

had known had been just a charade—an act to keep himself walled off and safe.

Once again, I was struck by just how different he was nowadays. Every time I saw him, another part of the mask slipped away, and the man it revealed behind it was vulnerable and hurt, but very real.

“Let’s talk about something else,” he suggested a few minutes later.

Our food arrived and we ate while falling into a natural, almost domestic kind of conversation about our respective days. I made sure not to talk about the cases against him at all, choosing instead to tell him about the positive parts of what I was busy with at the office. Charity fundraisers and collection drives and the funny themes we were coming up with for our office parties later this year.

Jake eased into it, but soon, he was smiling and asking questions about how he could help or get involved personally. We worked on some ideas, and when the check came, I was surprised when he waved me off.

“No,” he said, shaking his head and pushing my wallet back across the table. “Let me get it.”

“Thank you.” I watched as he paid, then grabbed my proverbial balls and took the leap once the waiter left us alone. “I’ve been to your place, but would you like to see mine? I’ve got ice cream in the freezer. You got dinner, so let me take care of dessert.”

I swore that the pull I felt to him was undeniable. Clearly, he’d had a rough day and I didn’t want him to be alone after scratching at all those old wounds. More than that, I wanted to be the person who was there for him. Not because I wanted to fix him or anything quite as juvenile as all that, but because he’d opened up to me and I wanted to support him.

At my invitation, his brows twitched in surprise but he nodded. “Sure. That sounds good. Ice cream happens to be my favorite. There are so many fun things you can do with it.”

When I saw the lusty, mischievous glint in his eyes, I groaned through my laughter but pushed back my chair and didn't rescind the invitation. "There he is. Welcome back, dirty Jake. I was wondering when I'd be seeing you again, but for the record, the only fun you'll be having with the ice cream is eating it."

He gave me a look, and I laughed again, shaking my head. "Out of a bowl. You'll be eating it out of a bowl."

I wasn't so sure whether I'd be sticking to that, but I wasn't putting anything on the table right here and now. Jake and I were growing in whatever this was. We couldn't be in a romantic relationship, but there was plenty of ground to cover between being coworkers and dating each other. We just needed to find a little piece of that ground to make ourselves at home on.



Walking into Max's place, I was hit with a strange sense of home. Her apartment wasn't tiny, but it was much smaller than mine. The entrance hall opened up to a kitchen which, in turn, opened up to a living area.

She waved me in, smiling at me over her shoulder as she headed straight to her fridge. "I'll get the ice cream. Would you like something to drink with that?"

"Sure," I said. "Anything you've got."

"Coffee?"

I nodded. "I'd never turn down an offer like that."

She giggled, shrugging out of her light jacket and hanging it over a chair before starting to rummage around her cabinets. I moved deeper into her living space, noticing the pops of color everywhere. Green plants in pots and flowers on the windowsill. Herbs growing in her kitchen and sunshine yellow cushions on her sofas.

I looked around unashamedly, watching her from the corner of my eye as she pulled out two bowls and two mugs with some kind of wording on them. Turning my focus back to her place, I drifted toward the pictures mounted on her walls.

"Who are all these people?" I asked as I studied the faces smiling back at me. "Is that Emery?"

"Yeah. That's her. The other people are mostly relatives." There was a soft clink of the ice-cream scoop hitting the side of a bowl, and I heard liquid being poured into the mugs.

“Okay, we’re ready. Ice cream and coffee at the same time. Our teeth are going to hate us for this.”

“Thankfully, you work for a company that provides pretty good dental,” I teased, exploring the row of pictures on her fireplace mantel before turning away and going to join her in the kitchen.

She was rinsing the ice-cream scoop when I passed behind her, and I smacked her ass when she leaned forward to shut off the faucet. She yelped, then laughed as she turned to give a playful glare.

“What was that for?”

“It was right there,” I said, holding up my hands like there was nothing I could’ve done about it.

She pretended to sigh, chuckling as she motioned toward the coffee and ice cream on the counter. “I feel like we should get comfortable for this?”

“Living room?”

“Living room,” I agreed, picking up the coffees to carry them while she brought the ice cream.

We settled on one of her sofas, both leaning against one of the armrests and turning to face each other. I hooked my one knee up to nestle it into the side of the sofa while her legs were short enough that she stretched both of them out ahead of her.

The move brought her feet dangerously close to my balls, and I cocked an eyebrow at her. “Careful there. If you so much as sneeze, I’m going to be in a lot of pain.”

She smirked and waggled her brows at me. “You best not say anything that might give me the urge to sneeze then.”

“That’s not really how sneezing works.”

She shrugged, batting her lashes innocently. “I happen to be allergic to bullshit, so it could happen.”

I laughed, deciding to start on my ice cream first. After setting down my coffee, I brought the bowl to my chest and

looked into her clear green eyes as I scooped up my first bite. “You’ve got a big family.”

Her gaze flickered to the pictures on the walls, and a fond smile touched her lips as she nodded. “My dad was one of three kids and my mom is one of four. I’ve got tons of aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews, but it would’ve been nice to have a sibling.”

I waved my spoon in the air. “Siblings are overrated. Anyone who has one will tell you that they’ll happily have been an only child.”

“Oh, really?” She flashed me an amused, disbelieving smile. “It’s easy to say it, but can you really imagine your life without your sister?”

I thought it over before I sighed. “No, not really. Although if you’d asked me the month before her wedding, I would’ve said absolutely. The bridezilla syndrome exists. I’ve never seen Victoria like that. It was terrible.”

A shudder traveled down my spine, but not only because of the memories of what my sister had been like. The time around her wedding hadn’t brought out the best in me, either. It had almost been like knowing that she was about to settle down had thrown me into a tailspin of my very own, and I wasn’t proud of some of the things I’d done.

Max chuckled but then frowned when she looked at me again. “What just happened? You’ve been a teasing, playful little shit since we got here, and now suddenly, you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I blinked, surprised that she’d picked up on my darkening mood that fast. “It’s nothing, really. Just some stuff I did back when Victoria was about to get married that I’ll never forgive myself for. Stuff I shouldn’t have done, and I lost a good friend because of it.”

Her expression softened with understanding. “I’m assuming the good friend you lost was a girl?”

“Sometimes, I think you can read my mind,” I said honestly. “Yes, it was a girl. I hadn’t seen her for a while, and

when she showed up for the week we spent at the venue before the wedding, she was engaged. Although it turns out that she wasn't really engaged then. She's married to the guy now, but it was a whole thing of them pretending to be engaged for some reason. Anyway, I lost track of myself for a while there."

"Have you apologized to her?"

I released a slow breath, inhaling again deeply before I nodded, but then also shook my head. "I have apologized, but I'm not sure I really meant it and I'm pretty sure she didn't buy it. Does that still count as an apology?"

"No, I don't think so," she mused, dropping her knee slightly to nudge it against mine. "Maybe you should try again. I saw the look on your face just now. Clearly, you feel really bad about whatever you did. Maybe if you explain it to her and really apologize, she'll become your friend again."

I snorted. "That's not fucking likely. Her husband detests me. There's no way Nash will let me get anywhere close to Lennon again. Then there was her friend, Hailey. The guy she's married is huge and his brother owned a gym. Hunter will snap my neck like a twig and Parker would've taught him how to do it."

"They sound like good people," she said thoughtfully. "Their names all put together sound familiar. Why is that? Lennon and Nash, Hailey and Hunter, Parker... do I know them?"

"I don't know if you know them, but you probably know *about* them. They've all been featured in the tabloids from time to time, especially around the time they got married. Nash is Nash Harris, the talent agent guy. His family is practically royalty in the entertainment industry. Hunter is Hunter Holmes. He was a Physical Therapist until he invented some kind of therapeutic device that he sold for billions. Parker's story is similar. He started a gym and ended up selling it as a franchise for a figure with a lot of zeroes."

A light went on in Max's eyes while I spoke, and she snapped her fingers. "Oh, right. I think that's why their names

rang a bell somewhere. I've read about them. Hunter and Hailey were on a talk show as well, weren't they?"

"They sure were." Bitterness crept to the back of my tongue. "They're all happily married now, but there was a lot of drama before then. If I'm being completely honest, a lot of that drama was because of me. Especially for Nash and Lennon."

"When you're ready to make amends, set up an appointment with them and apologize. You'll feel better if you do. I can see how much this is bothering you. If you hurt them and it's weighing you down, do something about."

"Yeah, maybe I will," I mused, but I didn't plan on doing anything about it anytime soon.

She was right about it bothering me. What happened with Lennon was one of the few things in my life I felt genuinely guilty about, but I was now starting to realize just how much of a jackass I'd been to them.

As I sat back and looked around her place while finishing my ice cream, I allowed myself to come back to the present. All of that was in the past, and I'd had enough of dredging that shit up today. "I like your apartment. It feels very much like you. It's cozy but practical. Clean. Organized. Homey."

"Thank you." Her gaze followed mine as I looked around, but it stopped moving when she reached the photos. "You know, I have such a big family but none of them live close by except for my mom. It's not my fault that they don't live in the city, but I feel bad about not making the time to see them more often."

When I lifted a questioning brow at her, she chuckled and shrugged. "What? You told me something you feel bad about, so I told you something I feel bad about in return. It's called give and take."

"Right, but like you said, it's not your fault they live far away. The thing I feel bad about is definitely my fault." I set my empty bowl down and picked up my cooling coffee. "What's your mom like?"

A radiant smile spread on Max's lips instantly. "She's wonderful. There was a time when I didn't think so, but I've heard all kids go through a phase when their mother is the worst person ever. Once I got over that phase, I realized that she's the best anyone could ask for. She's one of my best friends, and if I don't speak to her at least three times a week, I get all achy inside."

"She sounds great."

We talked more while we sipped our coffee, but when mine was done, I wasn't quite ready to leave yet. I enjoyed spending time with Max. She made me feel like a different version of myself, a better one, and if I was going to have to wait a whole week to see her again, then I wasn't in a rush for tonight to end.

"How about a tour?" I asked, turning to slide my leg off the sofa and stretching it out. "I haven't even seen the rest of your place yet and I've been here for over an hour."

She laughed, a happy brightness in her eyes as she stood. "Is there any specific part of the place you'd like to see? All that's left except for this main room is my bedroom and bathroom. Oh, and there's a hall closet, but that's not very exciting."

I pushed to my feet, reaching for her hand, and was a little surprised when she actually gave it to me. "It shouldn't take us very long to see that hall closet then. Let's go."

Chuckling, she drew up ahead of me before dragging me along behind her. Then she stopped in the short hallway that led off her main room and opened an oddly long door in the wall. Behind it, there were small shelves with bedding and a few other things folded into neat piles on them.

She grinned at me over her shoulder. "Well, that's it. I told you it wasn't very exciting."

"Hey, it's exciting to me to know that it's possible to fold a fitted sheet so well. It's something to strive toward."

"Come on." She laughed. "If you think that's exciting, wait until you see how well I fluff my pillows."

I followed her into her bedroom, clapping my hands when she proudly swept her arms out toward the top of her bed to show off said pillows. As she took a little bow, I caught her hand again, spinning her into me so she landed against my chest.

She smiled, not resisting at all, and even looped her free arm around me to toy with the hair at the nape of my neck. Dipping her head back, she looked into my eyes. “We really have to stop doing this.”

“Sure, but do you want to stop tonight?” My voice was already huskier than before, my cock already hardening even though I’d only been holding her for a few seconds.

Without even pausing to think about it, she shook her head and started moving us back toward the bed. “Nah, let’s not stop tonight.”

“Good plan,” I murmured as my head descended. Then I sealed my mouth over hers just as we started lowering ourselves down onto her mattress.

I didn’t know what the hell was going on with me when it came to this girl, but I couldn’t get enough of her. I’d stopped trying to fight it, though. Eventually, we would have to stop, but since she agreed that it didn’t have to happen tonight, I shut off my thoughts and just went with whatever felt right. And with her, that was everything. Everything felt right as long as it was happening with her, which was a problem, but it was one for another day.



## MAXINE

Jake's kiss seared into me, hot, urgent, and filled with pent-up desire. I didn't know if he was sleeping with other people or if he, like me, hadn't yet looked at anybody else since the wedding. As soon as the thought hit, a lump appeared in my stomach, getting heavier and heavier until I stopped moving completely.

He pulled his head back when I went immobile, frowning as he gently brushed a lock of hair from my face. "What just happened?"

I tried to shake it off, hooking my legs around his ass to keep him there, although I didn't know if it was because I wanted to carry on or because I just didn't want him to run if I decided to ask him about it. As I thought it over, staring up into those blue eyes I'd come to look forward to seeing every week, I threw caution to the wind. "Are we still being honest with each other?"

"Always," he said firmly, propping himself up on the elbow of the arm not cradling my side. "What's wrong, Max?"

"It's just..." My teeth sank into my lower lip and I tugged at it until he reached for my mouth and tenderly pulled my lip free. "Okay, I know this is going to sound clingy, but it's not that. I'm just, well, it's about safety."

A smirk touched the corners of his mouth. "Are you trying to ask me if I'm fucking anyone else?"

"Uh, yes. How did you know?"

Chuckling quietly, he pressed his lips to mine in the softest kiss we'd shared so far. "I'm no rocket scientist, but considering the circumstances, it wasn't such a leap. I'm not, by the way. Fucking anyone else. There's been too much other stuff going on."

The last sentence was tacked on sort of like a surprised explanation to himself as much as to me. Or maybe a justification instead of an explanation, but I saw the truth of the words twinkling in his eyes, and I decided not to care if he was explaining or justifying.

"I haven't slept with anyone else, either," I said, just to clarify in case he was wondering. "It still doesn't mean anything, though, right?"

"Nah," he murmured against my lips. "We're just two busy, single people who have been working too hard to go out on the prowl."

"Yeah, that's exactly it." It wasn't it.

I didn't know about him, but every other night except for Tuesday, I did have time to go out on the prowl. I just hadn't done it, which wasn't unusual for me, but it was easier to just go with what he'd said rather than offer yet another explanation. Or justification. Or whatever.

"Are we good?" he asked, lifting himself slightly off me. "I can go if—"

"No." The word came out of me like a shot, and I tightened my arms and legs around him. "Don't you dare go anywhere right now, Jake Aspen. You've got business to attend to here."

"Yeah?" He grinned, those blues positively sparkling in the low light of my bedroom as he looked back at me. "What business?"

"The business of mutual satisfaction. We started something here, and I'm all about finishing what I start. Seeing it through."

"I guess we better see it through then," he said lightly before his expression became more serious again. "You sure

you're okay, though? You went solid as a rock there for a minute."

"I'm fine. It just occurred to me that we've been making this a bit of a habit and I wanted to be sure that I didn't have to go get tested or something."

He stroked my cheek, his eyes still on mine as he thought it over for a second. "How about this? If either of us need to go get tested, we'll tell the other one. Deal?"

"Deal." I was already dreading the day he was going to tell me—albeit not directly—that he'd hooked up with someone else. And it was going to be him telling me instead of the other way around.

I seemed to have lost all interest in other men for the time being. Even when I was alone in my bed, it was him I'd been fantasizing and dreaming about. While I knew that he didn't belong to me and that he was free to do whatever he wanted with whomever he wanted, it was going to suck when he finally went out and did it.

Jake dragged his fingertips over my jaw, slowly lowering his mouth back to mine, and when he kissed me again, his lips and tongue worked hard to chase all my worries away. Soon enough, I was back in the moment and happy to be there.

This man did things to me that no one else ever had, and before long, I was burning for him. My nipples were so tight that it was bordering on being painful and I was aching everywhere. He didn't seem to be in any hurry, though, even if I could feel that he was as hard as concrete whenever he pushed up against me.

Taking his time to undress us both, he sat back on his heels once we were naked and gave me a long, excruciatingly slow onceover. Blue flames flickered in his eyes again when they finally reached mine, and he ran his hands up and down my sides.

"You're so damn beautiful, Max. I think we should make it a rule that you're never allowed to wear clothes again."

My breathing came in sharp, fast pants. “You want me to go to work naked?”

His jaw tightened, and I swore I saw possessiveness streaking across his gaze as he shook his head. “Fuck no. Let me amend that statement. I think we should make it a rule that you’re not allowed to wear clothes when we’re alone, and in private, together.”

“Fine.” I dropped my gaze and raked it over all the hard, delicious lines of his body. If I could get paid to just lick him like a lollipop for the rest of my life, I’d never go to work again. And that was saying something since I loved my job. “I’m willing to agree to that, but only if you are too.”

A low chuckle rumbled through his chest before he kissed me again. “I’m sure I’ll find a way to live with that.”

He dragged his lips away from mine, but instead of zeroing in on any of the places where I wanted him most, he started by kissing my eyelids and my jaw, the patch beneath my earlobes and even the tops of my shoulders before he moved lower.

I arched my back, my eyes falling shut as he did his thing, teasing but at the same time, proving that he remembered exactly what I liked and when. After making me fall apart twice, he finally rolled on a condom and settled back over me, his eyes intent on mine.

“Max...” he whispered but didn’t finish the thought.

Instead, he kissed me deeply as he sank into me until his hips met mine. I cried out when he withdrew, straining to get him back inside me when he held himself up for just a second. He waited until I looked back up into his eyes before slamming into me again, taunting me like that a few more times before he really got going.

I was done for, so sensitive and primed that every small touch brought me closer to the edge. I felt him everywhere, dragging across every part of me just right. Tensing and trembling underneath him, I felt my brow furrow and my lips pop open when he thrust into me again and I went off like a firework.

Before the pleasure subsided, he followed after me, swelling deep inside me before moaning my name and holding me tight as he rode it out. We collapsed together, both breathing heavily as we clung to each other like sailors who had been shipwrecked in a storm and were each other's last chance of survival.

Once again, we stayed that way for much too long, and when Jake finally got up to dispose of the condom, he was only gone for a few seconds before he climbed into my bed and pulled me back into his arms.

"Do you want to stay over tonight?" I murmured against his chest before glancing up at him.

One of his arms was hooked behind his head, his defined bicep bulging softly despite the fact that he wasn't flexing it. He really was built like a freaking demigod. It was no wonder my body couldn't get enough of his.

With his blond hair all messy from having had my hands in it and a lazy, relaxed gleam in those blue eyes when they came down to meet mine, he paused for a beat before he nodded. "Sure. Yeah, I'll stay. I'm suddenly beat after today."

"You had a big one," I said, my lips softly brushing against his skin as I spoke. "Be kind to yourself, Jake. You've come further than you think in a very short amount of time."

He breathed out heavily, not saying anything but tightening his grip on me as his eyes closed. Somehow, I didn't really need to hear the words from him anymore to know what he was thinking. He didn't agree with me that he'd come very far, but at the same time, he was glad to hear that I thought he had. Somewhere deep down inside, he appreciated hearing good things about himself.

After everything I'd learned about him, not only tonight but over the last few weeks, I knew that he needed to hear those good things. Jake had been hurt by the people who were supposed to have nurtured him the most, and although his grandparents tried to make up for it, it just wasn't the same. I'd known all along that there was a reason he was the way he was, and I now knew that reason.

His father. Maybe both of his parents. They'd done a real number on him and now he chased what he couldn't have precisely because he couldn't have it. He could taste it and sample it but never keep it.

I was the exception to that rule, and while I wondered why, I knew I wasn't going to figure it out tonight. Or by myself. Emery would certainly have some valuable insights, but whether I wanted to hear them was a different matter.

When my heart started running away with me, I took a deep breath and forced myself to shut it down and focus only on the here and now. On the deepening, even sound of Jake's breathing and the soft rise and fall of his chest beneath my head.

We both had issues, but as I lay there in his arms, they didn't feel as insurmountable as they had before. Maybe we wouldn't work long-term. I doubted either of us would ever even give it a try anyway, but that didn't matter.

What we had right here and right now was what mattered. It was good. We were good. I wouldn't let any of the uncertainties about the future ruin it. I liked having him here, holding me as he drifted off to sleep, and when I eventually followed him, I liked knowing he was still going to be here when I woke up.



**I**nstead of going home to change after my appointment with Emery, I went back to my office and fired off a text to Max. I wouldn't be able to see her tonight, and I fucking hated that I had to cancel, but I didn't have a choice.

**Me: I'm going to have to take a rain check on dinner. Make it up to you sometime? J**

As I was settling in for a long night behind my desk, my phone clattered on the glass top and I glanced down at the screen, smiling when I saw her name on it. I really needed to get to work, but I knew I wouldn't be able to focus for shit if I left a text from her unread.

**Max F: Sure. Don't worry about it. See you when I see you.**

A giant sigh came out of me as I stared at the screen. This was the first time I had to miss our weekly dinner, and although there was no way around it, I felt like I really needed to see her. My session with Emery had been a ball-breaking one.

She'd started right back up with where we'd left off with my family last week, and this time, instead of just letting me talk about whatever I wanted, she'd delved. Picking at wounds I'd opened myself last week, she'd scratched at the scabs that had barely started to form. I hadn't minded it as much at the time, but now I was feeling raw.

Plus, I'd been thinking about it for a week, and I wanted to talk to Max about the sleeping with other people thing that had

come up. The fact was that I didn't want anyone else right now, and while I would let her go if she wanted me to, I had a proposition for her about the friends-with-benefits or whatever the fuck this thing was between us. Basically, I wanted to keep it going. To stop talking about stopping for now. But only while she wasn't fucking anyone else either.

So lost in thought that I hadn't even replied, I jerked when there was a knock at my door. Dropping my phone, I straightened up and wiggled my mouse for my screen to come on so it wouldn't look like I'd just been sitting here, wasting time.

"Come in," I called when I was ready, mentally pulling up my to-do list for tonight. "You'd better make it fast—"

I cut myself off when the most welcome sight I'd seen all day appeared in my field of vision as the door opened. Max stood at the threshold, wearing a green dress that was the exact color of her eyes, and her dark waves tumbled past her shoulders.

Instantly, my mind took a swan dive right into the gutter as I imagined pushing that dress up and—

"Uh uh." She laughed, stepping into my office and closing the door behind her before she wagged a finger at me. "Don't look at me like that. I didn't come here to make your daydreams come true. I just wanted to check on you."

I let out an exasperated sigh, motioning her into the chair across from my desk instead of getting up and pulling her into my arms like I wanted to. "Are you sure? We could make it quick. Most people are leaving for the day, and since I generally don't come back at this time on a Tuesday, the only person who even knows I'm here is my assistant."

A warm smile graced her lips as she sat down, but she still shook her head. "Down boy. We're not going there. How was your appointment with Emery?"

I pouted, but frankly, although I'd have loved to fuck her right then, I was also just glad to see her. If she'd only come here to talk, then talk I would. "It was okay. She's getting

pushy again, though. Not about the complaints and stuff, but about some of the subjects I've brought up."

Max chuckled, giving me a nod that said she knew exactly what I was talking about. "That happens. Therapists catch on to the things we try to gloss over, and then they latch onto those things with all their might. It's good, though, because those are mostly the things we really do need to talk about."

"Fair enough, but it's not fun."

She gave me a sympathetic smile. "No, it's not, but sometimes, a wound needs to be professionally drained before it can heal properly."

I exaggerated a shudder and changed the subject. "Sorry about tonight. I've got a ton of work to get done in the next few hours, so I can't even get away for a little while before my meeting. We're closing a deal with a new manufacturer and I need to prep for the conference call I've got with them later. It was the only time their CEO had available this week."

"It's okay. If you've got to work, you've got to work. I understand. I'm actually considering staying late myself tonight. We've got a seminar scheduled for next week and I have to do a four-hour presentation to my department on legislative issues."

"Wow, that sounds like fun," I joked. "I love it when you talk legislation to me, baby."

When I winked at her, she laughed, leaning back in her chair and looking at me like she wanted to crawl into my lap as much as I wanted to have her there. "So, uh, we'll just grab dinner again next week. Unless you want to hang out this weekend. Only if you want to, of course. We don't have to." A flush crept up to her cheeks as she said it.

I chuckled. "I'd like that. Does Saturday work for you?"

"Saturday is good. I'm taking my mom out on Friday, but I don't have any plans for the rest of the weekend." The rosy hue on her skin became darker. "Not that I'm saying we have to spend the whole weekend together. It's just..."

When she trailed off, I finished for her. “You were just saying. I know. If it makes you feel any better, I was just going to work this weekend. It’s nothing urgent, but I didn’t have any other plans, so I thought I’d get ahead. Hanging out with you is an infinitely better option.”

“Okay. Good. Saturday it is, then. I’ll let you get back to it.” She waved at my computer as she stood up, giving me one last smile before she left.

As soon as she was gone, I sighed. *Goddamnit. Why did Gary have to choose a fucking Tuesday for this meeting?*

Part of me wanted to call Max back. If we were both going to be working tonight, we could always do it together, but if we did, we probably wouldn’t get much done. Letting go of the thought, I turned to my computer and opened up the document I had to work my way through before the conference call.

About an hour later, there was another knock at my door. For a second, I thought she’d come back after all, but when I looked up, it was a delivery guy instead. He glanced down at the name on the piece of paper stapled to the paper takeout bag.

“Jake Aspen?”

“That’s me.” I frowned. “I didn’t order anything, though.”

He shrugged. “Well, this is still for you, man. Where do you want it?”

I got up, striding over to him and taking the bag out of his hands. “Thanks. What do I owe you?”

“Nothing. It’s been paid for.” He grinned at me. “It came with a pretty good tip, too. Enjoy it.”

With that, he turned and left my office, and when I opened the bag, there was a handwritten note inside from Max. Part of that pretty good tip must’ve been for him to swing by her office before he brought the food up to me.

*Jake,*

*We had a deal that I buy you dinner after your sessions. You went to your session, so here's your dinner. Didn't want you to starve while you worked tonight.*

*Yours,*

*M*

I stared at the note, the weirdest warmth I'd ever felt rolling through me. She'd known I was going to be working late and she'd taken the time to order me food. And not just any food, my favorite basil chicken pasta from Luciano's.

Nobody had ever done something that thoughtful for me in a long time. *Probably because I didn't deserve it, but still.*

As I carried the delivery back to my desk, inhaling the delicious scent wafting from it now that I'd opened the bag, I couldn't stop thinking about her. Okay, well, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about her recently anyway, but this made me see her in a slightly different light.

She really was good. A good friend. A good support system. Definitely a great lay, but that wasn't what this was about. This made me feel like she cared about me. As more than just her boss or the guy who'd made her have dinner with him once a week.

I hadn't been expecting her to do anything remotely like this for me. She hadn't had to, and yet she'd done it anyway.

I opened the container and tucked into my food, not even having realized how hungry I'd been before I'd smelled the pasta, and I desperately wanted to see her. Sure, we were going to get together this weekend, but it felt like that was way too far away.

In fact, any time away from her was starting to feel too long. While I ate, I tried to get back into the work I had to do, but instead, I opened my internet browser and started trying to come up with an idea for what we could do on Saturday.

She'd done this nice thing for me when she'd had no obligation to do it, and I found myself wanting to do something nice for her in return. Not because I had to but because I wanted to. That weird warmth was still filling my

chest, and it drove me to keep dismissing the obvious ideas that came up first.

What I wanted was to find something special. Something that would make her feel the way I was right now. It took me a while, but when I finally came across a better option than all the rest, I grinned. It was elaborate, and it was going to cost me a bundle, but I didn't give a shit.

I had the money and I wanted to spend this on her. Besides, the meal she'd ordered might not have been elaborate, but it meant more to me than anything had in a long time. I already knew I was going to remember it for years to come, and I wanted to give her something to remember me by, too.



## MAXINE

**F**inally, it was Saturday. This past week had dragged by like it absolutely refused to give up the weekend. When the clock had eventually struck five yesterday afternoon, it felt like I'd been waiting for it to happen for years.

I'd left the office faster and more enthusiastically than I probably ever had before. Then I'd picked up my mother like I'd planned, but as much as I loved her, it wasn't her I'd been looking forward to spending time with so much. Jake and I had been texting off and on since Tuesday night, and I was super excited to see him today.

Mom and I had gone shopping before we'd gone to dinner, and she'd helped me pick out the perfect outfit for our date. Well, she'd called it a date. I knew that wasn't what it was, but I hadn't been able to convince her that it was just spending time with a friend.

Looking myself over in the mirror after I finished showering and getting dressed, I was glad we'd made the effort to pick out these clothes. The dove gray tights were soft and comfortable, perfect for any activity, and the cream knit sweater was oversized but still fit perfectly where it was supposed to. It left one of my shoulders open but emphasized my chest, and it hung to mid-thigh, elongating my waist while my low-heeled ankle boots did the same for my legs.

I'd pulled my hair back into a high, messy ponytail, and the brand-new hoops in my ears were large but not obnoxiously so. Since I had no clue where we were going or

what we'd be doing, I'd applied my makeup carefully, not wanting it to be too dramatic for a potential walk in the park while we ate a burrito, but also not so light that I'd look out of place if our day together turned into night.

It was a delicate balance, but I thought I'd done well enough. After adding a few rings to my fingers and fastening my watch around my wrist, I was ready to go.

As if he'd been waiting for the perfect time to knock, he rapped his knuckles across my door as I emerged from my bedroom. An excited grin I couldn't seem to contain at all spread on my lips as I raced to the door. "Coming!"

He smiled when I opened it, then let out a low whistle as his gaze dragged all over me, drinking me in with appreciation shimmering in his eyes. "Fuck. I know I've said it before, but I'll say it again. You're gorgeous. Come on out here before I keep you to our deal about being naked whenever we're alone together."

I laughed, shrugging as I went back in to grab my purse. "Well, if you want, we could just hang out here. I bought some more ice cream and there's a marathon on of one of my favorite shows. I wouldn't object if that's what we do today. Naked, of course."

When I looked back over at him, he seemed pained to do it but he shook his head. "As much as that sounds like the best day I've had in a long time, we've got plans. Now come out before I have to come in to get you because, if I do, our plane will have to leave without us." He cocked his head, eyes narrowing in thought. "On the other hand, we're the only passengers on the jet today, so it wouldn't leave without us. Maybe we could—"

I gaped at him, cutting him off when my brain finally caught up to what he was saying. "Our *plane*? What jet?"

Smirking as he reached for my hand, he pressed his forefinger of his free hand to his lips. "Shh. Forget I said that. It was supposed to be a surprise."

“No, but seriously,” I said as I laced my fingers through his and locked up behind me. “Where are we going? Why are you talking about a plane?”

“Nope, I’m not telling you. I’ve already said too much. How was the rest of your week?”

“Long,” I admitted softly, surprised when I saw a car and a driver waiting for us downstairs. “Holy shit. We’re not just grabbing a burrito in the park, are we?”

“Nope. Have I thanked you for the food you sent me on Tuesday night?”

“Yes, you have. About a dozen times. Are you really not going to tell me where we’re going?”

“I’m really not going to tell you where we’re going,” he repeated dutifully. “Why was your week so long?”

“I, uh—” *I missed you.* “Just work stuff. That presentation nearly killed me. The content is just so boring that no matter what I do with it, it’s going to be a snooze fest.”

He chuckled, pretending to be surprised. “Are you serious? A presentation about legislation is going to be boring? You have got to be kidding me.”

I squeezed his fingers a few times. “Hey, watch yourself. Before you know it, we might decide to invite our CEO to join us.”

His mouth snapped shut before he made his eyes big at me. “I’ll be good, I swear. Just please don’t invite me. Why don’t you just have legal do it? This sounds like their thing. I’m pretty sure it’s the kind of stuff Franklin dreams about. Probably even gets off to.”

My nose wrinkled. “Ew. I don’t want to think about that, but no. As much as I’d love to pass it off, this is HR specific. I’m sure he’ll know all about it, but it’d be better explained coming from me than a lawyer. Our focus areas are on very different aspects of the stuff we need to go over. We don’t need him lecturing us on technicalities.”

“Yeah, okay. That sounds about right.” We climbed into the car, and he told me about his meeting with the manufacturer and how excited he was about acquiring the company.

A little while later, I jerked in surprise when the car slowed down outside an airstrip. My gaze shot back to his and I arched a brow at him. “You were serious about the plane.”

“Was that a question?”

“No.” I turned to the window and stared as the driver chatted to a security guard before the gate opened and we were let in. “Where on earth are we going?”

This time, he took my hand and stroked his fingers across the back of it as he finally answered the question. “Seattle. We’re going to have dinner at the Space Needle. I thought it would be fun, and we’ll have some time to explore the city a bit before we go up.”

My heart nearly stopped beating, and I felt totally dizzy for a second before an unexpected squeal came out of me as I spun back around to face him. “We’re going to the Space Needle? What the hell, Jake? That’s not just fun. That’s, like, a once-in-a-lifetime kind of experience. Going to Seattle for dinner at the Space Needle on a private jet? I feel like I’m literally dreaming.”

He chuckled, catching me when I launched myself at him and threw my arms around him. I should’ve been buckled in, but I’d undone my seatbelt as we’d driven into the airfield to get a better look around.

“You’re welcome. Thanks again for sending that food. You saved my life.”

“Hang on a second,” I breathed as I pulled away from him. “You’re doing all this just because I had Luciano’s delivered?”

He shrugged. “It’s not just because of that, but it meant a lot to me.”

Absolutely reeling as I tried to believe what was happening, I held on to his hand. Then we left the car and boarded an honest-to-God private jet. Giddy and feeling

playful, I joked around with him once we got airborne and even made him do a body shot with me from the bar.

Our flight was fun but over too fast. None of the seriousness or jabs that usually came up when we were together happened today, and for a few hours, it almost felt like Jake and I were *together*. And I didn't totally hate it.

In fact, it felt so damn good that the entire experience felt like a romantic whirlwind in someone else's life. When we touched down after traveling together for the first time, I smiled at him and he tucked me in under his arm.

"This is incredible. I can't believe we're actually in freaking Seattle." I stomped my foot on the runway. "This ground is in Seattle. We're in Seattle."

He chuckled, dropping a quick, unexpected kiss on the top of my head. "Do you want to say Seattle one more time, or are you good now?"

"Oh, no. I'm not good. I'm going to say it at least a hundred more times. We're in fucking Seattle. Have you ever been here before?"

"A few times," he said nonchalantly, and I rolled my eyes before he added, "but never with a woman. My grandfather and I came for a couple of meetings and I've been here once or twice by myself for a weekend. I've never been to the Space Needle though, so that'll be a first for both of us."

"We'll have to take a picture," I joked, but I also wasn't really joking.

I wanted a picture with him to memorialize this day. It felt like I needed one for my wall. As we got into the waiting car, Jake kept me close, taking the seat next to mine and putting his arm back around my shoulders once we were buckled in.

Leaning over once we left the airstrip, he pointed out some of the sights and I tried my best to take it all in. The masculine, rich scent of him so close to me and the heat of his body against mine didn't make it any easier, though.

I relaxed into his side, resting my head against him while we drove, and he kept pointing things out to me. I realized

how comfortable I'd gotten with him. Although it made it a little difficult to focus with him so close, I was comfortable enough that as soon as I stopped fighting the draw and leaned back into him, it was like everything just clicked together.

Suddenly, I could really look at what he was showing me while enjoying his proximity all at the same time. It was a fantastic feeling, and while I was still in awe of the fact that we were really here, it was shaping up to be a pretty good day.

I breathed him in, turning my head to brush a kiss to his cheek on instinct. He smiled just as my gaze hit his face. His smile widened as he glanced down into my eyes. "What was that for?"

I shrugged. "I just felt like it. You smiled, and it was too tempting not to kiss it."

"Remind me to smile more often around you." As he said it, he seemed to realize how much he smiled around me anyway, and he tensed up before I saw him ease up. "Life is interesting with you in it, Max. That's for sure. We have a few hours before dinner, so is there anything you'd like to do or see that we should try to fit in?"

"Um." My teeth sank into my cheek. "I don't really know all that much about the city other than that it's got a lot of water, ferries, the Space Needle, and that it's known for its music scene. It'd be pretty cool to take a ferry, though."

"Then we'll do that," he promised. His eyes lit up and he sent a pointed look at the window. "There it is. Your first full view of the Space Needle. What do you think?"

I lowered my head back to his shoulder and he squeezed his arm around me. "I think this is the greatest non-date I've ever been on. Thank you, Jake. This is awesome."

"Anything for you," he murmured so softly that I wasn't sure he'd meant for me to hear it, but I did.

A strange, soft feeling crept through me at the words, and it just made me want to hold on to him tighter. I'd never felt anything like it before, but whatever it was, I freaking loved feeling it.



JAKE

**O**ur day in Seattle went by like a rollercoaster ride. Exciting and fun but over before I could even process it all. The sun was dipping low on the horizon and I pulled Max closer to me where we stood at the front of a ferry. “It’s almost time for dinner.”

The cool breeze rustled her hair, but I didn’t pull away even though it was tickling my neck. In fact, it only made me hold her tighter. She did a half turn in my arms, smiling as she peered up at me through those thick black lashes.

“Is it bad that I wish we had more time?”

“No, I don’t think it’s bad. I wish we had more time, too. What’s bad is that we didn’t bring overnight bags. We could just go shopping for clean clothes for tomorrow, though.”

She giggled but shook her head too firmly for my liking. “No way. We’re not staying over. This has been a magical day so far. Let’s make the best of what we’ve got and then head home before we ruin it.”

I scoffed. “We wouldn’t be ruining it, simply extending it.”

“That would be ruining it. You know what they say about too much of a good thing.”

I sighed. “Fine, but when we come again, we’ll plan to sleep over so it doesn’t risk ruining it when we do.”

“When we come again?” Max gave me a long look, and I saw the gears turning in her head. “Let’s not ruin it by saying

we're doing it again, either. Let's just enjoy the time we have here."

I nodded. "That seems reasonable."

Pressing up against her back, I held her all the way, only reluctantly letting go because we had to get to the Space Needle in time for our reservation. When we arrived, even I was blown away by the views.

We were lucky that it was a clear evening. We could see for fucking miles, but somehow, the most enchanting sight as far as I was concerned was watching Max while she checked out the views.

She was in absolute ecstasy. I'd never seen her look so happy or so captivated, and I was ridiculously proud of myself for having brought her someplace that was giving her so much joy.

After we looked around, we sat down for dinner and we spoke about our favorite parts of the day before I mentioned something that'd been bugging me for a while now. "How's your investigation into those allegations against me going?"

Just mentioning it made the back of my neck burn with shame. Max seemed taken aback that I'd asked her about it, but she recovered quickly. Blinking hard, she swallowed a sip of water and nodded.

"Yes, the investigation. It's going well. Fine. I've pretty much wrapped it up for now until I can include an update from Emery confirming that you've attended the mandatory therapy sessions."

If she had been anybody else, I wouldn't have told her what I was about to. I'd grown comfortable talking to Max about stuff I didn't usually speak about, but this had been a point of contention between us before, and also, bringing it up was not light and easy like the rest of the day had been.

*Plus, the shame.*

"I've been thinking about what you said." I picked up my drink but didn't take a sip of it just yet, letting it hover in front of my mouth instead. "I never thought about how my advances

might make women feel potentially unsafe at their place of work. I also never realized they felt so unsafe and so uncomfortable that they had to seek out HR's help. It's not just a witch hunt, is it? That really is how I made them feel."

Max listened patiently and without judgment, then gave me a soft smile as she nodded. "Yes, that is how you made them feel. I've spoken to all of them multiple times, and none of them wanted to cause any trouble for you. They didn't band together to bring down the new CEO or anything like that. They came to HR out of genuine concern about their safety and job security."

My teeth ground together, but there was no running away from this or waving it off anymore. I'd learned a lot over the last few weeks. Between Max and Emery, they'd made me see from a different perspective and this particular perspective of Max's was the reason I'd agreed to go to therapy in the first place.

That night at Luciano's when she'd framed it from the women's point of view, I'd been shocked. I didn't think I'd let on how I felt, but I'd been horrified when she'd explained to me the position I had put those women in.

Our waiter brought the appetizers I'd ordered online in advance, and Max blinked in surprise before shaking her head at me. She was smiling when the waiter left, but before she could comment on it, I jumped right back in.

"I don't want anyone quitting over this and possibly not being able to find another job," I admitted. "You were right about the state of the job market and that there's no guarantee of them finding anything immediately if they quit. It's not just about that, though. I don't want to be the reason people feel so unsafe or uncomfortable coming to work that they'd just rather not come back, regardless of the personal consequences of that decision."

"I'm glad to hear it," Max said quietly, still not a lick of judgment in her tone. Her eyes were also wide and earnest on mine, the light green of her irises shining with something that might even have been pride. "I wasn't sure you'd listened to

me that night, but I'm glad that you've been thinking about it. All of the complainants have also noted that you haven't said or done anything else that was inappropriate after they made their complaints, so they've definitely taken notice of the change in you."

"Do you think they might still quit?"

She shook her head but then shrugged halfway through. "Considering that you didn't continue with that kind of behavior, I doubt they'll resign but I just can't be sure. It all depends on what happens from now on. On whether you've truly seen the error of your ways, or whether you'll go back to doing that stuff as soon as the investigation is over."

"I'm not going to lie to you. At first, I thought I'd get all this shit over with and then things would go back to normal. I'm starting to realize that my idea of *normal* may not be the best thing to go back to, though. I never intended to create a hostile work environment and I sure as shit don't want people feeling unsafe around me."

"I didn't think you would." Max smiled, reaching across the table to give my hand a quick squeeze. "You're really not a bad guy, Jake. What you did was wrong, but I've come to believe that you honestly didn't realize the impact your words had on those women. I've also come to believe that you will treat them more respectfully from now on."

"That's what I want to talk to you about," I said. "What do you think I should do moving forward? Can I make it up to them, and if so, how? Anything I can do now could be misconstrued as being disingenuous. That I'm only doing it to avoid a lawsuit or to get HR off my back."

It was a problem I'd been wrestling with for a while, and I expected Max to agree with me. Instead, she pushed up halfway to lean across the table and give me the sweetest, most unexpected kiss of my life.

I wasn't the type to melt or feel anything but a purely physiological reaction in my chest to being kissed, but this was different. My heart fucking stammered before it started pounding, and I felt like I just wanted to grab her and crush

her to me. I didn't do it, but I wanted to. I wanted to grab and hold her. Hold on to her as tight as I could for as long as she'd let me.

Her lips left mine much too soon, and she sat back down, her gaze on mine and that beautiful fucking smile still in place. "An apology goes a long way. Accountability and acknowledging harm without making excuses or deflecting is probably way more than any of the women expect. It would be a great start."

My head was still spinning from the kiss, and frankly, it'd left me feeling rattled. Like I wanted to claim the hell out of her right here and right now. It was almost like I felt my inner caveman tearing down the bars around a cage I hadn't even known I'd put him in.

Max didn't seem to realize what she'd done to me, leaning back and popping an appetizer into her mouth, chewing slowly before she swallowed and smiled some more. "My suggestion is that you think of a way you can express that to them in a genuine, safe way. Let them know that you are honestly sorry and that it will never happen again. I'm here if you'd like to bounce ideas off me, but I think it'd be best if it came from you."

I nodded as reality crept back in. *Focus, Jake. This is important.*

"Yeah, I agree. If it doesn't sound like it came from me, they'll never believe any apology I try to make." I paused, scrubbing my hands over my jaw as I sighed. "Now I just need to come up with something they will believe. Fuck, I never actually thought I'd feel bad about it or that anyone could possibly be hurt by what I said."

"Hey, you'll figure it out," she said confidently. "Honesty is the best policy, Jake. Just be honest and sincere, and you might be surprised by where it gets you."

"Honest and sincere. Right. I can do that." I couldn't. Or at least, it wouldn't come naturally to me. "Anyway, that's enough of that. I just wanted to run it by you, but I've got it from here."

“You sure do. Admitting that you need to apologize is half the battle already won.” She glanced at our waiter when he approached our table again, arms laden with the restaurant specialties that I’d also ordered online.

Max’s eyes went wide. “Are you expecting company? The entire army perhaps? Who is supposed to eat all that?”

I laughed. “We’re going to eat as much of it as we can. I wanted us to get a taste of all the best stuff they’ve got, but whatever is left will get donated to a feeding scheme nearby. I’ve already organized it all.”

“My, my, what a big heart you have,” she teased, and I winked at her.

“My heart isn’t the only thing that’s big about me.”

Max flushed and then cracked up, finally dipping her head in a nod of agreement before she tucked into the dishes that’d been set out on our table. For the rest of our dinner, we went back to joking around and having fun, leaving all the heavy stuff behind.

Hours later, we boarded the jet and I was seriously kicking my own ass about not planning an overnight trip from the get-go. The pilot had been ready for us and we were cleared to take off soon after we settled down in our seats.

He dimmed the cabin lights, and the wheels were turning, taxiing us down the runway and back to reality. Max took my hand during take-off like it was the most natural thing in the world, resting her head on my shoulder as she gazed out the window when the city lights raced past us and finally disappeared from sight.

Once we were airborne, the hostess came by, but we told her we were stuffed and not to worry about us during the flight. As she left, closing the cabin door behind her, Max turned her head and smiled up at me. “There’s really nothing you want to eat? She did say they had chocolate cake onboard.”

“Did you want some cake?”

“No. I couldn’t eat a thing.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” I lowered my head to hers, my lips brushing against hers when I spoke. “There is one thing I’d like to eat. Have you ever joined the mile-high club?”

She giggled, winding her arms around my neck as she shook her head. “I’ve only ever flown cattle class. I don’t know if you’ve ever been in economy, but it’s not exactly made of the stuff that turns me on. Plus, there are always way too many people around to get away with it.”

“No one else around here,” I murmured, kissing her as I snaked my arm around her waist. “Want to give it a try?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. Just that one word. “Have you joined the mile-high club?”

“No.” My heart did that weird stuttering thing again when she smiled like she’d won the lottery, but then suddenly, Max let go of me and stood up. “Where are you going?”

“To lock the door.” She winked at me over her shoulder, a mischievous smile on her face. “It turns out there might be something I want after all. It’s not the chocolate cake, though, and I don’t want to share it with the hostess if she decides to come back.”

After sliding the locking mechanism into place, Max sashayed back to me, her hips swaying as her eyes locked on mine, her slow approach cluing me in that she was planning something. When she reached me, she slowly lowered herself down on her knees and spread mine apart, gaze burning into mine when she looked back up.

“I’ll take my turn first today. Don’t even try to argue and don’t hold back. If we’re only going to get one shot at joining the mile-high club, we’re doing it right.”

*Only one shot?* I wanted to tell her that I had access to this jet at all times, but then she cupped her hand over my package and all thoughts flew right out of my head.

She’d told me not to argue, so I wasn’t going to, but at some point, I was going to have to make it clear to her that while she was with me, she would never only have one shot at

anything. Especially not when what she was talking about was going down on me.



## MAXINE

**S**ucking dick had never been one of my favorite activities, but like with so many other things, that seemed to have changed after I'd met Jake. With him, I didn't mind it. In fact, I kind of liked it. A lot.

It helped that he wasn't shy about what it did to him when I touched him, and even though I'd only placed my hand over his crotch while it was still covered by his jeans, he was already groaning.

"Fuck, Max. Yes." His hips arched and he undid his belt for me, flicking open his button right after and unzipping his fly.

With that done, he lifted his sexy ass and allowed me to get him naked from the waist down. His cock sprang free, already hard and reaching proudly for his belly button. I eyed it appreciatively, taking in all the smooth, shiny skin and the vein that roped around his thick length.

Reaching up slowly, I ran the fingertips of one hand very lightly across his cock, using my free hand to undo the buttons of his shirt from the bottom up. He was faster than me, starting at the top and sliding all the plastic disks free by the time I'd only done two.

I chuckled, tearing my gaze away from his junk to look up into his eyes. "Someone is eager tonight."

"Are you kidding?" He smirked, brushing his fingers into my hair with his gaze intent on mine. "I've been waiting for

this all day. Actually, that's a lie. I've been waiting for this for almost two weeks."

My pulse spiked, and although I'd been into the idea of the mile-high club since he'd brought it up, I suddenly started aching for him. "If it makes you feel any better, I've been waiting, too."

Jake's blond head dropped slightly to one side, his full lips parting as he slid one of his fingers under my chin to make sure I kept looking at him. "Does that mean you haven't been taking care of that pretty pussy for me when I haven't been able to?"

*Ah, there's that filthy mouth of his.* I'd grown to absolutely love it when he got like this, but since we'd been playful all day, I wasn't quite done toying with him. While we spoke, I kept up my whisper-soft stroking, noticing it every time his breathing hitched or his hips rolled.

"I think I might have to make you work to get that answer," I teased. "How badly do you want to know if I've been taking care of myself?"

"So fucking badly." He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "What's it going to take to make you tell me? Name it, and it's yours. I've got a pretty awesome jet you can have."

*Is he serious? He looks serious.* My eyebrows inched up, but I shook my head. "Keep your jet. All I want is some information in return."

He moaned when I closed my fist around his shaft. His head dropped back but his eyes stayed on mine. "If this is how you go about getting information you're after, I'll tell you anything you want to know. Just don't fucking stop."

Heat pooled between my legs. *God, the things this man can do to me without even touching me are ridiculous.*

"As long as you tell me the truth, I won't stop." I moved my head forward to plant kisses to the insides of his thighs, slowly working my way up. "What I want to know is if you've been taking care of this for me."

A breath of laughter came out of him. “Is that it? You want to know if I’ve jerked off in the last two weeks?”

I shrugged. “Yep. That’s it.”

I also wanted to know if he’d been thinking about me while he did it, but I didn’t want to sound too needy. Whenever we were together, I was well aware of the fact that I wasn’t his usual type. I was still waiting for the other shoe to drop when he finally realized for good that I honestly wasn’t taken.

It hurt me just to think about losing him, but I was going to. What I wanted to know was if it had already started happening.

Jake’s thumb joined his finger still under my chin, and he tipped my head up so I was looking at him again. Those blue eyes pierced into me, making it so I wouldn’t be able to look away even if I tried.

“It’s been, what? About eleven days since our last dinner?”

I nodded, and he stroked my cheek before leaning down to speak against my lips, pulling me forward gently so he was able to reach them. “In that case, I’ve jerked off about eleven times in the last two weeks. Either before I close my eyes at night or right after I open them in the morning, I think about you and I can’t help myself. I’ve stopped even trying to fight it.”

Just like that, he’d answered the question I hadn’t even asked. Relief and heat coursed through me, mingling deep down inside and leaving me wanting him more than ever before. Without questioning him, I leaned in and took him into my mouth, not stopping even when his hips bucked, his thighs trembled beneath my palms, and he tried to pull out.

“Max,” he growled. “I’m going to—”

And then the warning he’d been trying to give cut off when he found his release. I swallowed every last drop, then looked up at him with what felt like a plea shining in my eyes. “Jake...”

I trailed off because I couldn't bring myself to actually beg, but he didn't need me to. Sliding off the luxurious armchair, he laid me back right there in the aisle and made quick work of my clothes. I moaned as just the friction of him removing the fabric from my chest and core made sparks of pleasure travel through me, and he sucked in a breath when he saw the evidence of how much I wanted him once I was naked.

"Fuck, Max." His pupils were so dilated by now that the black had consumed almost all of the blue, leaving only a faint ring of it around them. Bending over, he pressed his lips to my skin, kissing me everywhere as his fingertip dragged over my clit.

"You never gave me the answer I earned," he murmured.

I writhed underneath his hand and lifted my hips in an attempt to tempt him to touch me properly. "What?"

"Did you take care of this for me?"

It was only when he asked the question again that I even remembered what we'd been talking about, and I nodded, not giving a damn that I'd usually be way too humiliated to admit it. "I have, but not quite as much as you. Sometimes every day, but I have skipped a few."

He smiled against my skin, finally sliding a finger into me as his lips continued kissing a path down. "Next time, I want you to call me. Got it?"

"Uh, okay? Why?"

"Because I'm telling you to," he said before sealing his lips around my sensitive bundle of nerves and making me cry out as sheer pleasure and relief sped through me. He didn't let up until I'd come apart for him twice, and then he only left me to get a condom from his wallet.

For a moment, there was absolute panic on his features when he couldn't find one, but then a brilliant grin touched his lips when he pulled the foil package out. "I must have slipped it into the wrong compartment. I was in such a fucking rush to get to you this morning that I wasn't paying attention."

“You were?”

His eyes burned into mine as he tore into the foil with his teeth and rolled on the condom without breaking eye contact with me. “Yes, Max. I was. I always am.”

He crawled over me and I hooked my legs around his hips, pulling him into me as he sealed his mouth over mine. He sank into me, kissing me deeply and holding me tight. We moved together seamlessly, both of us knowing exactly what the other liked.

I’d thought it earlier, but as he moved inside me, his mouth never leaving mine, it felt like our relationship was becoming real—and I had absolutely no idea what to do about it.



JAKE

“**Y**ou took her to Seattle?” Tristan’s eyes were huge as he stared up at me.

I was spotting him at the gym, and it was a good thing I’d grabbed the bar before he’d dropped it on his head for as surprised as he was. “Yeah.”

“How has it been a whole week since you took her and I’m only finding out about it now?”

I shrugged. “I could share my calendar with you in the future to avoid a repeat of my mistake.”

He laughed and flipped me off before flexing his fingers and motioning that he was ready for me to hand the bar back over. “Fuck you. I’m just surprised, is all. What’s going on with you and Max now?”

“I don’t really know,” I admitted, keeping an eye on him while also looking around the floor. Soft grunts and clinks rang out as people set equipment down or strained to do just one more rep. The familiarity of the scene was comforting, but at the same time, I’d rather have been back in Seattle with Maxine like I’d been last Saturday.

Tristan was staring up at me when I glanced back at him. “How can you not know? Last time we spoke, you were absolutely sure that you weren’t dating her. Has that changed?”

I thought it over before shrugging again. “Honestly? I really don’t know. All I know is that I enjoy spending time

with her and that I haven't even thought about another woman in months."

After staring at me for another long minute, he exhaled deeply through his nose. "You're not going to leave her then?"

"Leave her?" I frowned. "No. Why would I? I'm getting to know her better than I've gotten to know anyone in a long, long time. What's more is that I'm really liking the process. It's different with her. Why would I leave her? If she's even mine to leave, which I'm not sure she is."

With his dark eyes still boring into mine, he gave me a pointed look. "She's not married, Jake. That's why I'm asking. For as long as I've known you, you've only ever been interested in the chase. It sounds to me like the chase is over. You've caught her. Are you seriously telling me that you're not getting bored of her now that you potentially have her?"

The question caught me way off guard. He wasn't wrong, though. I'd always enjoyed the chase more than anything else. Never before had I even considered what I might do with a woman if, once the chase was over, I still had her.

For a moment, I felt like a dog who'd been chasing a car, and now that I'd grabbed hold of the bumper, I had no idea why I'd even done it. As I thought about it, though, I realized that while it was true that I'd only ever been after the thrill of the chase in the past, that wasn't true with Max.

Not at all. In fact, it was the complete opposite of how I felt with her. The chase had been fun, but everything that was happening now was even better. For me, right now, getting to know her was more thrilling than any chase had ever been. So was being able to really speak to her about anything, opening up to her about whatever I wanted to, and making plans to see her as much and as often as I could.

"No, I'm definitely not getting bored of her." It was possibly the truest thing I'd ever said, and while it threw me to know just how true it was, it also felt strangely good to admit it.

Tristan didn't seem to believe me, though. "Are you sure? If you're not, you need to let her go, man. You two are getting into it too deep now for it to be just another random fling. Aren't you missing the knowledge that there's another dude out there you're screwing over?"

My head was shaking before the question was even all the way out. "It's a new challenge that it doesn't involve betraying a woman's husband, but I've always liked a challenge. It's hardly going to start scaring me off now."

Surprise flashed across his features, his lips parting before they closed again, eyes widening before he blinked a few times. "Are you... are you actually admitting to dating her and enjoying it?"

I barked out a laugh, but it sounded forced even to my ears. "I'm still not dating her. What is this, junior high? I haven't given her my varsity jacket or asked her to go steady with me."

"Yeah, none of those things are necessary to be able to say that you're dating someone. You could also just speak to her and tell her that you want to be exclusive."

I waved him off. "We've already had that talk. Neither of us are screwing anybody else right now. I told you about that."

"Sure, but she could be seeing other people even if she's not sleeping with them."

"She's not," I replied confidently. "Trust me, she'd have told me if she was."

"And you're not seeing anybody else either," he mused. "You really haven't even thought about any other women?"

"Nope. Not even a single, errant thought. She's the only one I want, man. She's more than enough for me right now. She's so layered and complex that I still learn something new every time I'm with her. I've never even started getting bored while we're together."

Tristan hesitated for a beat before he started grinning, and it was the widest grin I'd ever seen from him. "That sounds awesome, man. I'm happy for you. Genuinely. I've been

waiting for fucking ever for the right girl to come along and snap you out of your downward spiral. I'm glad she's finally showed up."

"I wasn't in a downward spiral." I scoffed. "I was merely having fun while I didn't have any reason not to."

"What about now?" he asked. "Is she giving you a reason not to?"

"Yeah, I think she is. Right now, she's it for me. I feel like a different person when I'm with her. In a good way."

"So you're really not thinking of tucking tail yet?"

I shook my head. "The thought hasn't even crossed my mind. There's nothing that would make me leave her right now, unless she has a child."

I chuckled at my own joke, and Tristan rolled his eyes. "Is that something that could happen?"

"Fuck no. We've been careful. I know that nothing except abstinence is totally foolproof, but I think we'll be alright."

He laughed. "That's really the only thing that would send you running for the hills at this point?"

I shrugged. "I was just joking. I haven't thought about what could make me run for the hills. There's nothing about her that I don't want in my life. At the moment, I don't want to think about stopping and I don't want to consider what might make me leave her because I don't want to lose her."

"This is fucking amazing. I never thought I'd hear you talk this way. How long do you think it's going to last?"

"I don't know. It doesn't feel like it's ever going to go away, but it probably will. It's not like I'm thinking about popping the question or anything quite as insane as that. I just like her and I like hanging out with her. I also like making out with her, and thankfully, she seems to like it as much as I do."

"It's that good with her?"

I nodded, making my eyes as big as they could go. "It's that good with her."

Just thinking about how good it was made my pants feel a little tighter. Luckily, my shirt was long enough to hide the evidence and then Tristan changed the subject. Soon enough, my dick and my heart had calmed down, but my head was still on Max.

As tended to happen as soon as I started thinking or talking about her, she lingered in my mind long after I left the gym. When I got home, I decided not to resist the urge to call her. If she couldn't talk or didn't want to, she wouldn't pick up the phone.

"Jake?" she said when she answered the call less than one whole ring in. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine. Why? You sound worried."

She chuckled. "That's because I *was* worried. Are you sure everything is okay? You don't usually call for no reason, so what's up?"

"Well, nothing is up at the moment, but it could be if you want it to be," I joked. "I just got home from the gym, so I was going to take a shower anyway. I could be convinced to work up even more of a sweat before I go get cleaned up, though."

"Normally, I'd take you up on that, but I'm exhausted today." As if on cue, she yawned. "Sorry, big guy. If this was a booty call for phone sex, I'm afraid you're on your own today. Although if you want to switch to a video call, I could always just watch."

I laughed. "Thanks for the offer, but that wasn't why I called. I just, uh, I was thinking about you and thought I'd check in. Why are you so exhausted?"

"I have no idea, but I'm really beat. Thank God we went away last weekend. If we tried to do it this weekend, I'd probably have ended up sleeping on the plane while you explored by yourself."

My brows furrowed. "Are you okay? Maybe you should take some time off. You've been working really hard lately."

"Nah, I don't need time off. I probably just need to sleep a bit. I've been staying up too late too often, I think. I started a

new book and it just sucked me right in.”

“You’re sure that’s all it is?” My chest felt a little heavier than usual, like there was a weight of worry pressing down on it. “Maybe you should take a few days off just in case.”

“I’m fine, Jake.” I practically heard the smile in her voice as well as her rolling her eyes. “So, you really just called to check on me?”

“Yeah. I missed your voice.” I nearly stopped breathing when the admission popped out of me, but then I let go of the surprise. It was true, after all. I had missed her voice. “I know we don’t really say stuff like that, but I hope you don’t mind that I did.”

She hesitated. “I don’t mind. I missed your voice, too. How was the gym?”

“It was the gym. What I talked to Tristan about while we were there was interesting, though.”

“What did you talk to him about?” she asked curiously, but I could also hear how tired she was.

“We talked about you, but I’ll tell you about it later. Go have a nap. You sound tired. If you’re feeling better by tomorrow, do you want to hang out tomorrow night?”

She yawned again. “Sure. I will be feeling better. I’m going to go crawl into bed right now and stay there until tomorrow morning. Good night, Jake.”

“It’s not even noon yet, but good night, Max. Sleep well. Get some real rest, yeah?”

“I will.”

Something else was on the tip of my tongue, but I bit it back, sure that it was just a fluke that it was even there. “If you change your mind about the booty call, let me know. I don’t have any other plans today, so I’ll be at home.”

“Don’t wait by the phone, but I’ll keep it in mind.” She went quiet for a beat like she was holding something back, too. Then she said goodbye and hung up.

Tossing the phone on my bed, I shed my clothes and headed for the shower. All this thinking about Max had made me really want to see her. If she hadn't sounded so damn exhausted that it was like she was struggling to keep her eyes open, I'd have suggested seeing her today instead.

Since she did sound so damn exhausted that I was pretty sure she really *was* struggling to keep her eyes open, I hadn't wanted to push. Still, I really did miss her, and it wasn't the type of longing I could ease by myself in the shower.



MAXINE

**W**hen I woke up, I felt sick to my stomach. *Ah, shit. Maybe I am coming down with something.*

I'd told Jake yesterday that I would be fine, but now I wasn't so sure. After I'd spoken to him yesterday, I really had gone to get in bed and then I had stayed there until this morning, just like I'd said I was planning on doing.

When I'd woken up early in the evening to grab something to eat, I'd considered taking him up on his offer. My reasoning at the time had been that perhaps the endorphins that would be released if I had an orgasm would give me some energy, but in the end, I hadn't even had enough energy for that.

And my vibrator would've done all of the work.

I had no idea what was going on with me, but those days off Jake had mentioned sounded pretty damn good to me right now. Either way, I drank some water, took a nice long shower, and then got ready.

Emery and I had made an appointment to get our nails done this morning, and I was damn well going to have them done. A spot of color and some pampering sounded like the exact right medicine.

Regardless, I couldn't shake the exhaustion or the nausea as I headed out. Emery was already at the salon when I got there, sitting with one of the technicians and chatting up a storm.

As I walked in and the fumes assaulted my nostrils, my stomach rolled and I nearly gagged. Emery smiled when she spotted me, but then her face dropped and she looked at me more closely.

“You look like death. Are you feeling alright?”

“No, not really.” I closed my eyes and swallowed the sudden flood of moisture in my mouth. “Is it just me, or is the chemical smell in here really potent today?”

Emery frowned, exchanging a glance with the technician before getting up and offering me her seat. “Here. Sit down. I’ll take the one next to this one.”

“I’ll get you some water,” the technician, whose nametag read Belle, said as she stood up. “Will you excuse me for a minute?”

I nodded. “Please and thank you.”

Emery’s brown eyes swept over my face, and she stuck out her hand, pressing it to my forehead like a mother checking a child’s temperature. “It doesn’t feel like you’re running a fever. How long have you been like this? What are your symptoms?”

“I’ve been tired as hell the last few days, but that’s just work. When I woke up this morning, it was the first time I felt sick, too.”

Something flashed in Emery’s eyes, and she leaned in closer to me, gaze intense and questioning on mine. “So, your symptoms are that you’re feeling nauseous, you’re tired, and you’ve obviously got a heightened sense of smell? The scent of chemicals isn’t any stronger in here today than usual.”

She studied me carefully, and I pulled back a little. “Why are you looking at me like that, weirdo?”

“Max, do you need a pregnancy test?” she asked quietly and calmly, the therapist taking over from my friend.

I blinked at her. A lot. My eyelids were the only part of my body that could move—and that included my mouth for once. And my lungs.

Breath caught in my throat, I just sat there staring into her wide, soft eyes, wondering if I'd misheard her.

*That makes more sense.*

My body unlocked as excitement spread through me. "Oh, you mean *you* need a pregnancy test? That's awesome, Em. Finally."

"No, honey. That's not what I meant. I'm not pregnant. I've started tracking my cycle and—" She cut herself off this time, giving her head a quick shake as she reached for my hand. "I've been doing a lot of reading on the symptoms of early pregnancy, and everything you're describing is exactly what you can expect for that."

I froze again, shook my head, and felt the little bit of blood that had made it to my face again drain right back out of it. "They're also the symptoms of flu."

Emery gave me an understanding smile. "I know. Sometimes, it can be hard to tell the difference, but a heightened sense of smell doesn't come with the flu. How are your breasts?"

"What the hell, Em?"

She inclined her head toward my chest. "Your tatas. Are they tender? What about your nipples?"

"Ugh, don't say *nipple*." I shuddered.

She shrugged. "Some women report sore nipples in the early stages."

As she spoke, it was like my soul left my body and I was watching her have this conversation with me, but not *me*, me. This wasn't the conversation we should've been having. She was the one who was ready to start trying for a baby. She had it all planned out, had been to see the doctor to ensure that she was healthy, and was taking all the vitamins and stuff.

*Me?* I hadn't done any of that, nor did I want to. I loved kids, but having my own was *not* a part of my plan for my future. And especially not with *Jake*.

*Oh, fuck. Jake.*

The man was an even hotter mess than me. Sure, he'd made a lot of progress and things had been going well between us, but if what Emery suspected was true, he'd be gone like the wind. I knew how he felt about having children.

Some of his deepest fears were related to the subject of fatherhood. There was no way he'd take it well.

I rolled both of my lips into my mouth, chewing on them as I tried to even imagine having *that* conversation with him.

"Max?" Emery's voice broke into my thoughts. "Should we go get you a test?"

Belle appeared in front of me, holding out a glass of water. For a second, my gaze snagged on the condensation clinging to the glass, and I wondered if somewhere inside me, there was a tiny little bundle of cells clinging to me that way.

The thought made my stomach lurch, and I reached for the glass, braving a small sip before setting it down on the table beside me. My head was all over the place, but first and foremost was the question of how it might've happened.

Jake and I had used protection every single time. But then I thought about all those times we'd stayed together for so long after, with him still buried deep inside me. I thought about all those times when we'd fooled around before he'd put the condom on. As far as I knew, it was highly unlikely that I'd have gotten pregnant from that, but if Jake's swimmers were as doggedly determined as he was and my eggs had welcomed them the way I had let him into my life, then we were fucked.

*No, we have fucked, which is why this is a potential possibility.*

My head felt heavy when I turned back to Emery, barely managing to dip my chin in a nod. She gave me one in return, standing up immediately to speak to Belle. "We need to postpone our appointment. I'll make a new one when Max is feeling better."

She turned to leave, then realized I was sitting right where I had been. She took the few steps back to me, took my hand,

and pulled me gently to my feet. I got up on weak legs. She hooked her arm tightly around mine, guiding me out of the salon and helping to hold me up at the same time.

Once we were in the main corridor of the mall, she paused briefly to look up and down, obviously finding what she'd been looking for when she suddenly started dragging me off to the right.

“Where are we going?”

“The drug store,” she said patiently, even though I realized how stupid the question had been now that she'd answered it.

We rushed as fast as my leaden legs would allow us, and when we got to the store, Emery easily located the right aisle and studied the shelf we stopped in front of. All the boxes in front of me had the word *pregnancy* written on them in either fancy or bold font, and it jumped out at me like it was going to wrap itself around my neck and choke all the air from my lungs.

Desperation swirled through me, twisting in my gut. *This can't be true. Emery can't be right.*

As Emery glanced at me, she let out a soft breath and adjusted her grip on my arm. “Okay, I'm going to choose a few of these. We'll take a couple of different brands just to be sure. Can you stand? I need to let go of you now.”

I nodded numbly as it occurred to me that the results of these tests could change my entire life. Everything I'd ever known—or thought I knew—about my future would be turned inside out and upside down. All with just a few drops of pee on a stick.

The stakes had never been higher for me, and my heart seemed to realize it at the same time as my brain, both racing in an attempt to keep up with what was happening. Emery plucked a bunch of the boxes off the shelf, then led me to the cashier. I paid for the boxes containing the sticks that might as well have been dynamite, about to explode my life as I knew it.

Emery smiled reassuringly as we left the store. “Do you want to do these here or at your place?”

“Like here in the store?” I asked, confused.

“Well, not in the aisle. I’m sure they have a bathroom.” She glanced around, trying to locate it. “I’d just figured you might want to know sooner than later.”

“I’d rather do them immediately, but if they’re positive...” I shook my head.

“Your place it is,” she agreed. “Just take deep breaths, Max. Regardless of what happens, everything is going to be fine.”

I wasn’t so sure, but I nodded anyway.

The cab ride back to my apartment passed in a blur, and the next thing I knew, I’d taken the tests and they were all lined up on the counter in my bathroom while we waited for the results.

As it turned out, we didn’t even need to wait as long as the boxes had said. Almost immediately, lines that shouldn’t have been there started appearing, and I slumped back down on the closed toilet seat, unable to believe what I was seeing.

I was going to have a baby.

With Jake.

*This is not how I pictured things going.*

With all his baggage, there was no way he was going to accept this. It was too much for me, even, and I didn’t have nearly the same deep-seated issues about it.

Emery came to kneel in front of me, her eyes finding mine as she took my hands in hers. “I know it doesn’t feel like it, but it really will be okay, Max. I can’t imagine what you’re going through right now, but I’m here for you. I will always be here for you.”

Tears burned the backs of my eyes, and I let them flow freely, hot as they raced down my cheeks. “Thank you, but it’s going to be a long time before it’s okay, Em. Jake...”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. For now, let’s focus on you. I’m here for you, Max. Whatever you need, whenever you need it, I’m right here and I’m not going anywhere.”

She lifted herself up on her knees, wrapped her arms around me, and held me tight when the sobs finally came. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I couldn’t believe that inside me, there was a baby that was growing into either a mini version of me or a mini version of Jake.

Visions of a little girl with my hair and his eyes flashed into my head, quickly swapped out for an image of a little baby boy with my eyes and his features.

This hadn’t been my plan, but already, through the fear and the shock, the surprise and the numbness, a fierce protectiveness hatched deep inside my soul. I’d never felt anything like it, and it occurred to me then that I was already changing.

Jake just didn’t know it yet.



JAKE

**M**y therapy sessions had become a part of my weekly routine, and strangely, I'd come to enjoy them. At this point, I had no problems opening up to Emery, even if it was only her and Max that I ever spoke to this way.

As I dropped down in my spot, Emery was already seated in hers. She had her notebook open on her lap as always, but there was a distant look in her eyes as she stared out her window. When she finally seemed to realize she wasn't alone anymore, she blinked herself out of her thoughts and turned to me, but her smile was tight and she seemed distracted.

"How are you, Jake?"

"I'm great." I grinned. "How about you? Are you okay? It looks like something is bothering you."

Her lips pursed, but her head shook. "I'm fine. Just thinking. Let's talk about you. What's going on with you?"

"A couple days ago, I was speaking to a friend of mine and I realized a few things that I think I need to just put out there. You're a good sounding board, so I was hoping we could talk about Max."

"Max?" Weird, unexpected tension tightened her features for a moment, but then she took a deep breath and nodded. "Sure, let's talk about Max. What have you realized?"

"That I'm not just fucking her anymore." I tried for a smirk, but it wouldn't come. As much as I'd grown comfortable with Emery, being vulnerable didn't come

naturally to me. “I’m not sure when it happened, but I’ve developed feelings for her. Real, deep, scary feelings, and I have no fucking idea what to do about it.”

I sensed relief coming from her, but she didn’t address it. Instead, she lowered her head slightly to one side and looked me right in the eyes. “What would you like to do about it? First thought. Don’t overthink it.”

“I want to make her mine.” The words were out so fast that it was like I’d been planning them, but I hadn’t. I’d simply gone with my first thought, and that had been it. I blinked hard. “Well, that’s a surprise.”

Emery chuckled softly. “Yes, it is. When you say these feelings are scary to you, does that mean you’re indecisive about whether you want a future with her? Do they scare you so much that you’re tempted to run?”

“No. That’s the thing. She’s shaken up my life in a big way, and for once, I don’t want to turn and run into the arms of another woman. I also don’t want something superficial from Max. All I really want is to see where this goes.”

“Have you spoken to Max about it?” she asked, her eyes searching mine intently. “If you’re serious about wanting a future with her, then you’ll need to see if she’s on the same page. Relationships are hard work, and sometimes, life throws curveballs at us when we least expect them.”

I mimed gripping a bat and swinging it. “I’ve never been afraid of a few curveballs. In fact, I’ve been known to knock them out of the park. It’s not really the curveballs I’m worried about. It’s Max. She’s not feeling well, and these last couple of days, I feel like she’s been pulling away from me. She did say she was tired, so it could just be that, but she’s also the first woman I’ve ever been with who also didn’t want this to be anything more than what it is.”

Emery’s eyes glazed over with thought before she focused on me again. “Are you going to dinner with her tonight?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Well, then I would suggest simply being honest with her. If you fear she’s pulling away, perhaps it really is just because she’s not feeling well or perhaps it’s because there’s something going on with her that she needs to be honest about with you, too.”

“You mean that maybe she’s developed the same kind of feelings for me?”

I knew I sounded eager. Too eager. Like a puppy who was being taught to heel with his favorite treat being dangled in front of him, I was willing to do anything to get her at this stage.

Emery’s expression remained stoic, and she didn’t give me a direct answer to my question. “Talk to her. If this is really how you feel, then she needs to know about it. What’s more is that the longer you wonder what’s going on with her, the more worried you’ll become. A little honesty goes a very long way in avoiding miscommunication in any relationship.”

“You sound just like her.” I smiled. “You’re right, though. If I don’t just talk to her, I’ll drive myself crazy and I’m not a fan of feeling that way.”

For the rest of my session, Emery spoke to me a little bit more about Max and then gently eased into the discussion we’d been having about my parents during my last appointment. She asked pointed questions about my father and the failings I’d explained to her last time, digging a little deeper into the fears I had about turning out to be just like him.

When my time ran out, I got up and grinned. “I’m feeling good about all this. Thanks, Emery. Apart from the fact that I still don’t want to be a father like mine was, I think we’re making progress.”

“Excuse me?” Worry flitted across her features. “Why would you say that?”

I shrugged, winking as I walked to the door. “It’s just something my friend said last weekend. I joked about only leaving Max now if she got pregnant. God knows, I’d be a shit

dad with my genes, don't you think?" The joke didn't seem to land, so I blew past it. "Anyway, I'll see you next week."

"See you," she murmured absently, still worried as she walked back to her desk.

I didn't ask her about it again, though.

If she said she was fine, then she was fine. She'd probably just had a tough session before mine. It happened sometimes. Because mine was her last appointment for the day every Tuesday, I often saw the strain the day had on her.

The poor woman needed inspiration like mine to get through her days. If I got to see Max for coming to therapy and it got me all pumped up to get through it, maybe I'd suggest next time that Emery set up a date with her husband every night.

Although I supposed living together probably made it feel like they had a date every night anyway, but hey, what did I know?

For the first time, I was curious about what it felt like to be married, though. To live with someone and to know whether people got this pumped to see their significant other every day. I'd never even thought about it before, but now, with Max, I didn't think I'd mind going home to her every day.

On the other hand, I was getting way ahead of myself. When I walked into Luciano's, I was surprised as hell to see her already there and waiting for me.

"Hey." I smiled, bending over to smack a quick kiss to her lips. "You're early. How did that happen?"

Her cheeks were pale and her eyes a little red as she looked up at me, a watered-down smile barely ghosting across her lips. "I came straight from the office. I was afraid if I went home first, I'd fall asleep and stand you up and I didn't have the energy to run any of the other errands I usually try to fit in."

I stroked my fingertips across her beautiful face, frowning when I realized it looked like she'd also lost weight. "Maybe you should've gone home. You're always going to be

gorgeous to me, but it looks like you feel like shit. How about we go back to your place and I'll order us in some soup?"

"Nah, that's okay. We're already here." She took a sip of the water she must've ordered before I'd arrived. "How was your session with Emery?"

"Do you really want to talk about that? I'm serious, baby. You don't need to force yourself to be here."

She managed a full smile this time, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Just distract me. Tell me how it went with Emery."

"Well, if you must know," I teased, trying to lighten the mood and distract her at the same time. "It went really well. We talked about you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you." I sat down and reached across the table for her hands. She gave them to me willingly, and something inside me felt like it could breathe again now that I was touching her. "I told her all about the girl who bewitched me and made me feel things for her even when I didn't want to."

"You feel things for me?" she asked, then rolled her eyes. "You mean that I make you feel horny, don't you?"

I laughed. "No, but it's good to see your sense of humor is still intact. Although it's not that you don't make me horny. It's more that I'm starting to feel other things for you in addition to constant lust."

"You are?"

"Yep." I squeezed her hands, looking into those green eyes and taking a breath before I took Emery's advice and just said it. "This isn't just a hookup thing for me anymore, Max. I know that neither of us wanted a relationship when we started this, but I want to see where it goes. I'm beginning to feel things I've never felt, and I want to be honest with you about it."

Max smiled properly. "You never would've said anything like that back when we first met."

"I know, but it feels good to say it now."

A beat of silence passed between us, and I realized that she wasn't going to say it back. Feeling a bit thrown, I looked into her eyes and searched them, attempting to figure out how she felt about all this.

It definitely looked like she felt the same way, but something seemed to be worrying her—holding her back. In fact, she seemed almost nervous, like she was afraid that if she admitted anything, it would all come crashing down around us.

“You know,” she said finally, abruptly pushing her chair back and reaching for her purse. “I think you were right. I shouldn't be out tonight. I don't think I'll be able to eat anyway. You should stay, though. Have your usual and I'll settle the check on the way out.”

“No, that's okay. You go. I'll have them box up a pizza for me and pay for it while I'm waiting.” I got up to hug her goodbye, not pushing the issue even though I was disappointed that she was effectively running from me.

Max hugged me back, but something felt off about it. I just didn't know what it was.

All I knew was that it felt one hell of a lot like goodbye.



MAXINE

Sitting in my office, I stared absently out ahead of me, thinking about all of Jake's revelations last night. He had feelings for me, and I'd heard the honesty and the vulnerability in his voice when he'd said it.

It killed me not to say it back because I felt the exact same way. My feelings for him were deep and very real, definitely not of the casual hookup variety anymore. But how was I supposed to tell him while keeping such a big secret?

*Hey, Jake. I have feelings for you, too, but that's not all I have. I also have your baby growing inside me, so there's that.*

I scoffed into the quiet air, sighing as I ran my hands through my hair. *This sucks.*

Even as I thought it, though, my palm went instinctively to my stomach. It'd been happening all the time, and I hadn't actively decided to do it even once. It just happened.

When my office door opened, I wrenched my hand away and looked up, hoping that whoever it was hadn't seen me doing it. Emery appeared in my doorway, and I blew out a sigh of relief.

"Hey," I said. "What are you doing here? I don't usually see you for impromptu visits in the middle of the day."

Worry darkened her eyes as she shut the door behind her and crossed the floor to my desk. She stopped behind the chair across from me, her fingers gripping the back of it so hard that her knuckles were as white as her face.

I cocked my head, panic seeping into my bloodstream like poison. “Em? What’s wrong? Did you get bad news?”

“Sort of,” she said, slowly lifting her gaze back to mine after glaring at the chair for a moment. “Look, I shouldn’t tell you what I’m about to tell you, but I’ve been going back and forth about it all night and I can’t *not* tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

She ground her teeth like she had to force herself to say the words. “If anyone finds out about this, I could get fired. I could even lose my license, but you need to know.”

“What do I need to know?” My heart was thrumming like a hummingbird, and it wasn’t doing anything to ease the low-grade nausea I was struggling with. “What happened, Emery?”

“Jake talked about you a lot during our session yesterday.”

Relief thundered through me. “Oh, I know. He already told me. You don’t have to worry about losing your license. You’re not sharing anything I don’t already know.”

“Did he also tell you that the only thing that would make him leave you at this point was if you were pregnant?”

It felt like I’d been kicked in the gut. My insides iced over and my hands started shaking. “No. No, he didn’t mention that.”

She sighed, looking torn but nodding anyway. “Then I do still have to worry about losing my license. He only mentioned it in passing as he was leaving, and it sounded like he might’ve been joking, but in my experience, people only joke about that kind of thing when they’ve thought about it.”

“Many a true word is said in jest,” I mused, feeling like the fight was draining out of me. “You still don’t have to worry about getting fired or losing your license. I appreciate that you took a massive risk by telling me, and I won’t betray your confidence.”

“Thank you,” she said softly, but then she came up to me and put her hand on my shoulder. “I meant what I said before.

I've got your back, Max. Always. You will get through this, and I will be by your side every step of the way."

Tears gathered in my eyes again, but when my landline started ringing and *legal* flashed across the screen, Emery took a step back. "You should take that and I need to get back."

"Sure. Thanks again for telling me, Em. I really do appreciate it. You're an amazing friend and I don't know how I'm ever going to thank you."

She gave a small smile. "No thanks necessary. This is what friends do for each other."

As she left, my phone stopped ringing and then immediately started again. Dread sank like a stone to the bottom of my stomach. Something was clearly going on at legal, and if they were calling me again already, it meant it wasn't going to be good news.

"This is Max Fowler." I cleared my throat and swiped underneath my eyes as I sniffed, trying to regain control of my voice along with my emotions.

"Max, this is Franklin. We've got a problem."

*Fuck.* "What is it?"

"I'm looking at the first lawsuit against Jake. It just came in. In cases like these, it's usually a snowball effect. Once word spreads about the first one, the next ones drop."

My chest grew tight and my mouth dried up. "I've spoken with all of the complainants and I didn't get the sense that any of them were considering legal action."

"Yeah, well, according to the letter from the attorney that landed in my inbox around the same time as I got the paperwork, the plaintiff doesn't feel like the company is holding Jake Aspen accountable. They're alleging that we're allowing his position to drag the matter out and that action should've been taken against him by now."

I floundered, immediately wondering if it was true. Were we dragging it out? Was *I* dragging it out?

I didn't feel like I had been, but considering how much he'd come to mean to me, it wasn't impossible. If I thought about how angry I'd been at first and how the indignant rage had driven me to his office that first day, then maybe I had let the investigation drag as my own feelings for him had slowly changed.

"Jake is doing everything he's required to do," I said, but I didn't sound very confident even to my own ears. "He's staying away from the complainants. To my knowledge, he hasn't approached them and there haven't been any further incidents in the meantime. He's attending his therapy sessions and he's made a lot of progress."

"Well, the plaintiff doesn't share that view. As far as she's concerned, nothing has changed. Just because there haven't been any further incidents thus far doesn't excuse the incidents that happened before. Surely, you must understand that."

"I do." I closed my eyes, my mind stammering as I tried to come up with a solution. "Can we ask her to come in to discuss the case and what her terms are? Jake is also planning an apology."

"Nothing happens in a vacuum, Max. We realize that therapy takes time, but while he's been planning his apology and working through his feelings or whatever, the wheels have been turning on the other side as well. To them, it looks like we've been cooling our heels and doing the very minimum with him, hoping that they would just go away. If he was going to apologize, he should've done it by now. Progress or no, if he apologizes now, it's going to look like he's only doing it to avoid getting sued. So unless he comes up with the best apology known to mankind, I'm just not sure it's going to matter anymore."

"Fuck." I hadn't even realized I'd said it out loud until Franklin chuckled.

"You can say that again. I'll see what I can do about getting her in. A settlement conference is appropriate at this point anyway. I'll keep you updated. Meanwhile, you need to talk to Jake. He needs to be extra careful from here on out.

We'll coach him before the settlement meeting, but you'll need to keep working on that apology you mentioned with him."

Franklin hung up before I could tell him that I wasn't working on it with Jake, and I sighed. Jake was the last person I could face right now, and yet I had to. Just after learning that he was probably going to leave me if he found out I was pregnant. I had no idea what to do about the baby thing and if he left me, I'd have a broken heart on top of everything else.

It was all such a damn mess, but it was mine. Some of it anyway. I had to clean up the parts I'd made as well as the parts he'd made, and I had zero energy to do any of it. Once again, my palm went to my stomach, and once again, my door flew open as soon as I did.

This time, however, it wasn't Emery. It was my baby daddy in the flesh, and he looked worried as fuck about something.

My laidback surfer dude had changed so much these last couple of months. Still blond haired and blue eyed and built like Prince Charming in a fairy tale, he now seemed far less laidback and way more intense.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly after closing my door behind him. "I was thinking about you all night, so I wanted to come check on you. Our dinner ended kind of abruptly, but I didn't want to push you while you weren't feeling great. Are you feeling better today?"

As he walked further into my office, he opened his arms and waited to see if I'd walk into them. Those eyes were filled with so much concern that even though I knew I should start weaning myself from him, I got up and sank into him.

Alone in my office, in the circle of his strong arms and with his heart beating steadily against my ear, it felt like Emery might've been right about everything being okay after all. What we had was so very real, and maybe we still had a chance.

The problem, however, was that we weren't alone. There was another tiny person in the making with us, and he was

going to flip the hell out when he learned about that person. As soon as he did, the walls were going to give in and the floor was going to give out, and the healthy relationship we'd started building despite both of our own issues was going to come crashing down all around us.

It was inevitable, and it was only that knowledge that made me strong enough to pull away from him. "I'm fine. I still feel like I could sleep for the next ten days, but other than that, I'm feeling much better. I'm sorry our dinner ended so abruptly. I know we had a deal and I know I welched on it. I'll pay you back."

"Max—"

"No, really. It's okay. I want to pay you back." I spun on my heels and turned my back on him, breathing deeply in an attempt to stem the tears that wanted to flow. I really didn't know what to do, but none of the options I could see felt right.

"Max," he said again, and I heard the undercurrent of pain in his voice. It ripped me to shreds inside to imagine what he was thinking this was about. "Can you just look at me please?"

I squeezed my eyes shut and walked toward my desk, only facing him again when I had to turn in order to sit down. "Sure. Have a seat."

He glanced at the chair I motioned him into. "Why? And why are you all the way over there?"

My heart started pounding and I felt ill, but what choice did I really have? *None. Not that I could see anyway.*

"I'm all the way over here because we need to talk, Jake."

I saw the moment when my words blew a hole through his heart, and frankly, they did the exact same thing to mine. Jake's expression hardened, and suddenly, I was looking back into the cool blue eyes of the CEO instead of the warm, sparkling sapphires of just a minute ago.

"Okay, Max. Talk. I'm listening." He crossed his arms but didn't sit down. Instead, he glared at me like he was bracing himself for the blow he knew was about to come.

I wished things were different, but they weren't. So instead of beating around the bush, I delivered the news.



## JAKE

Something was very wrong with Maxine Fowler. Not only was she looking even sicker than she had last night, but she'd also lied to me when she said she was fine. She was a lot of things, but fine wasn't one of them.

Looking at me like she was seeing a stranger, she cleared her throat. For some reason, her eyes seemed more watery than usual, like she was fighting tears, but I didn't know why. I couldn't have upset her, and yet, she was most definitely upset.

"The first lawsuit against you has come in," she said, her voice wavering. "I'm so sorry, Jake. I really didn't think they were going to sue, but I just got the call from Franklin a few minutes ago. It seems we've created the impression that we're not doing much about the complaints and they've decided to go ahead."

I sighed. At least that explained some of her strange behavior. "You don't have to be sorry, baby. None of this is your fault. I understand why someone is taking these steps. I'm past the point of deflecting and I'm taking ownership of what I did. I did it, and I'm willing to accept whatever punishment comes down the line for me."

She didn't seem surprised, even managing a small smile as she nodded. "I'm so proud of you. No matter what, I really mean that. I'm so very proud of you and you really are a better man than you give yourself credit for."

"No matter what?" I bowed my head, taking a deep breath. "Just lay it on me, Max. What else is going on? Is this because

I told you how I feel? If it's not the same for you, you don't have to be worried about sparing my feelings. I'm a big boy. I can take it. We don't even need to stop seeing each other."

"We do need to stop seeing each other." There were definitely tears in her eyes now, but she blinked hard and cleared her throat as if that would make me forget about it. "I also can't do this job anymore."

"What are you talking about?" I licked my lips, worry and confusion slamming into me as I stood there, positively fucking reeling. "You love your job. Why wouldn't you be able to do it anymore?"

"I'm officially putting in my two weeks' notice," she continued without answering my questions. "I'll let Franklin know that you're ready to take responsibility. He said something about coaching you before the meeting, and I'm sure you'll be in good hands to help you ride out this storm, but I can't be here for it."

"What? Why? Did I do something wrong?" *Holy shit. Fuck.* "Did I cross a line somewhere or ask too much of you? Did I stretch you too thin? Was it the dinners? We don't need to keep doing them if you don't want to."

She smiled weakly and shook her head. "You've changed so much. I know what this is going to sound like, but it's not you. It's me. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Look, Max, if you didn't want this relationship with me and you feel like I pushed you into it, I'll back off. I swear. We can go back to working in the same building and never even seeing each other. I'll keep my appointments with Emery regardless. Just don't do this. Just don't quit."

After all the selfish things I'd done and the ways of my past, I couldn't get it out of my head that this was somehow my fault. And if it was, I needed to fix it. "Tell me what I can do to make you stay. If you don't want to be with me, that's fine. I can deal with it. I never should have told you how I felt. I'm so fucking sorry, Max. I'll fix it. I'll do whatever it takes to fix it."

She stood up, putting her palms flat on the desk and visibly fighting back tears. “This is not your fault, Jake. You haven’t done anything wrong. In fact, you’ve only done everything right recently. I’ve honestly enjoyed every minute we’ve spent together and I’m going to miss you. I just can’t do it anymore.”

“Then don’t. You don’t have to keep being with me in order to keep working here, but don’t quit because of me. I know how passionate you are about what you do. The company shouldn’t lose someone like you just because I fucked up.”

“That’s the thing, though. You didn’t fuck up. Far from it.” She exhaled and then dragged in another deep breath that made her chest rise and fall.

Although she was the one taking a scalpel to my insides, everything she was saying seemed to have the same effect on her. I saw the pain of it in her eyes, the flinches, and the hurt. I heard it in her voice, and yet, she just kept going.

“There’s nothing you can do to change my mind. Consider this my two weeks’ notice. I’ll go through the proper channels as well, but I wanted to give you a heads-up. You’re a wonderful CEO. Keep on this path, and you’re going to be even greater than your grandfather.”

“Max—”

“No, Jake. I really am sorry, but I’m afraid I have to ask you to leave now. There’s a lot of work I need to get done before I leave, and I need to call Franklin back. Again, I’m so sorry. Please don’t blame yourself. You didn’t do anything I didn’t want you to do. I can’t even tell you how much I wish that I didn’t have to do this, but I do.”

My jaw clenched so hard that my teeth almost cracked. “You’re adamant then? About breaking up with me and quitting all without any explanation whatsoever except that you clearly feel like you need to do it? I know you don’t owe me anything, but if it’s not my fault, then why won’t you tell me what this is all about?”

“It’s just something that I need to do for myself. That’s the best I can offer you. You’ve been good to me, Jake. These last few months since I met you have been an experience I’ll never be able to regret. Or forget. Don’t let this get in the way of your progress, and for God’s sake, don’t go back to screwing married women. You’re better than that, and I think you know that now.”

My brows rose. “Is that honestly what you’re worried about right now?”

She blew out a breath. “I’m worried about you, Jake. I will always be worried about you. I’ve always been completely honest with you, which is why I’m begging you not to let this derail you from the path you’re on. You found the good man inside. Keep working on him with Emery. She’ll be there for you.”

I stared at her, honestly not believing what I was hearing. None of this made even a lick of sense, and yet, it was happening. Confused and feeling defeated, I threw my hands up in the air and left her office, knowing that nothing I said was going to change her mind right now.

My chest hurt like I’d been sliced open by a hundred razor blades and even breathing was painful right now, but I pushed through it and headed back up to my office. There were things that needed to be done. Right now. Today.

Later, I’d lick my wounds and try to figure out what the fuck had gone wrong, but for right this minute, my head needed to be in the game and I knew it. As the CEO of a multi-billion-dollar company, I wasn’t Jake who’d just had his heart ripped out and stomped on. I was Jake Aspen, and there was an active lawsuit against me by one of my own people.

If the plaintiff was doing this because she felt nothing was being done about her complaint, then it was time for me to take action. I couldn’t let any more grass grow under my feet. My relationship with Max had clearly spun out of my control, but this was still my company and I needed to be seen being in charge of it.

As soon as I sat down behind my desk, I opened my emails and started drafting one to the legal team. In it, I explained that I wanted to accept full accountability and that I also wanted to offer apologies to the women in whatever capacity they felt comfortable with. I didn't mind doing it over the phone or in person, doing it one-on-one or to the group as whole.

Whatever the women wanted, I'd fall in line with. Before I hit send, I added that I was offering reparations for the stress I'd caused in the form of payouts—from my pocket and not the company's—and vacation time.

I tried to think about what else I could offer, but my head was still on Max and I just couldn't come up with anything good. In the end, I told legal to offer them anything else they might ask for, and then I punched the send button with my thumb.

Leaning back in my chair, I drew in a shaky breath and scrubbed my hands over my face, still trying to come to terms with Max's sudden change of mind. Although she'd told me multiple times that it wasn't my fault, I couldn't help but wonder what had brought it on.

Max loved this company as much as me, if not more. For her to have resigned in addition to breaking up with me, something big had to have happened, and yet, nothing had. Nothing I knew about anyway.

The shrill ringing of my landline yanked me out of my thoughts, and I grabbed the receiver without checking who was calling. "Jake Aspen."

"Mr. Aspen?" A confused-sounding voice came over the line. "This is Franklin from the legal department. I just got an email from someone claiming to be you, sir. I suspect you might've been hacked."

"No, it was from me. I meant every word. Contact the complainants and let them know what I'm offering. Anything within reason is theirs, no questions asked and no argument."

"I, uh, okay." Evidently, he was so shocked that he couldn't speak properly. "We'll do that and get back to you,

sir.”

“Thank you.”

I hung up and stared at the phone in my hand for a long beat. So many thoughts and emotions swirled through me that I felt sick to my fucking stomach. *What went wrong?*

When the thought hit to call Emery, I didn’t second-guess it. Instead, I pressed the receiver to my ear and dialed her extension, then waited impatiently for her assistant to put me through.

“Jake?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Sorry for bothering you, but I need an emergency appointment today. Any time. Do you have room to fit me in?”

She was silent for a second, but I heard a computer mouse clicking in the background and assumed she was checking her calendar. “I’m jam-packed during office hours. My appointments are back to back for the rest of the day, so I can’t even squeeze you in between patients. Did something happen?”

“Yes, but I’d rather talk to you about it in person.”

“Breathe, Jake,” she said calmly. “You sound... never mind. My last appointment ends at five thirty. Be here then and I’ll stay late so we can talk. It sounds like you need it.”

“Thank you,” I murmured gratefully. “I’ll see you then.”

When I set the receiver back in its cradle, another shaky breath rattled out of me. It was going to be a long-ass day until five thirty, but I appreciated that I wasn’t the only one who needed Emery. I could hardly force her to see me right away.

In the not-so-distant past, I’d have done it. I’d have marched up to her office and insisted that she give me an appointment immediately, but I wasn’t that guy anymore. Although right this minute, I was kind of wishing that I could’ve gone back to being him.

Because this new guy Emery and Max had turned me into wasn’t bulletproof. He hurt. Being him was fucking painful,

and all I wanted was for the pain to go away.



## MAXINE

Laughter and chatter filled the air, and the nostalgia that rolled through me as I looked around was almost as potent as the nausea I'd been living with for the last couple of weeks. For years now, the people gathered at the rooftop break area had been like family to me. My coworkers but also my friends.

As I watched them enjoying themselves, I mentally catalogued each face and wondered for the ten thousandth time if I'd done the right thing. I was going to miss each and every one of them so damn much, and I honestly would've given anything to have been able to keep working with them.

But I couldn't. I'd made up my mind and what was done, was done. Even as I had the thought, though, my gaze moved unwittingly toward the elevator and part of me wished it would just slide open and Jake would be there.

That same part of me, the part that was and always had been an incurable romantic, wanted him to appear here, at my going-away party, and to make some big romantic gesture that would convince me to change my mind. Maybe even literally sweep me off my feet and tell me that he wasn't letting me go, no matter what I'd said the other day.

Realistically, I knew it wasn't going to happen, and thankfully, my realism had always been the bigger, stronger part of me. The realism was why I'd never hoped for a relationship and why I'd resigned myself to never having children.

The latter, obviously, was about to happen six months from now, give or take, but the former was still accurate. That romantic part of me would only get me hurt in the long run if I listened to it or let myself lean into the idle fantasies that part of my brain cooked up. Hell, it had gotten me hurt already.

My heart was still bleeding over Jake, but the realistic part of me knew he wasn't going to show up and that it was better that way. He was nowhere to be seen now, and I hadn't laid eyes on him or talked to him since I'd put in my two weeks' notice.

The distance hadn't been comfortable. I missed him terribly every minute of every day. Last Tuesday night, I'd cried myself to sleep, wondering if he'd even gone to his appointment with Emery and if he had even given more than a passing thought to the fact that we weren't meeting up at Luciano's after.

I worried that he'd returned to his old ways, and it slayed me to think about him flirting with some married woman and sleeping with her after. Even now, tears prickled at the backs of my eyes, begging to be set free.

It wasn't only because of the pregnancy hormones, either. The day I'd broken it off with him, I'd torn myself to shreds. I hadn't expected it to hurt as badly as it did, and I knew it would only get worse once I started feeling our baby moving inside me all hours of the day.

While I hadn't planned for it to happen or even considered that it might, I'd fallen for him so hard that it was like I'd tumbled all the way from the stars. Jake, the real Jake, not the man his pain made him pretend to be, was everything any girl could ever hope for and more. I'd seen sides of him I doubted anyone else ever had, and I was hopelessly in love with all of him.

Now that I knew why he had been the way he had, I even loved the absolute asshole that he could be. The asshole he only used to be because he hadn't known any other way to cope with the trauma he'd endured.

If there was any doubt in my mind about how he felt about kids and parenting, I'd have spilled the beans. I'd have told him what was happening and then I'd have hoped that we might be able to work through it together.

But there wasn't any doubt. I knew exactly how he felt and I knew exactly why, and if he'd gone so far as to tell Emery that he'd only leave me if I was pregnant, then staying with him would only have prolonged the inevitable. If it was possible, it would only have made it hurt more when the end finally came.

At least this way, I'd severed all ties. Clean cuts were supposed to heal faster and better, so now all I had to do was fucking pray that it was true.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Emery's voice came from behind me a fraction of a second before she slung her arm around my waist and pulled me into her. "How're you holding up? For the guest of honor, you seem awfully sad and lonely in this little corner of yours."

I hugged her back, resting my head on her shoulder as she stood steadily beside me. "I'm not doing great."

"Well, your last day is a big deal. It's natural to feel down about it. This was your first job. You got close to all these people and they got close to you."

"Yeah, I know, but I wasn't expecting to be so torn up about it. It's my last day, but that doesn't mean I won't see any of them again, right? I mean, I could always still meet up with them after work and over weekends."

"Sure, you can, but you probably won't," she said evenly. "Subconsciously, you already know that you won't be seeing a lot of them again. Even if you're consciously telling yourself that you will, deep down inside, you know you're not going to go for drinks with Pam from accounting or Franklin from legal. That's part of what makes it so hard. They might not be your best friends, but they've been in your life for a long time. Knowing they won't be there anymore, at the other end of the line or standing in the line for coffee outside, is hard."

I sighed, trying my best to blink back the tears that were threatening to fall. “You’re right. Some of them have just become part of the furniture of my day-to-day life, but I love my furniture.”

“Have you decided what you’re going to do now? I was so shocked when Jake told me what happened, I nearly fell off my chair. I know we’ve spoken since, but I feel like I’ve hardly seen you.”

“I’m sorry. I just needed some time to myself to lick my wounds and process stuff.”

She made an understanding noise in the back of her throat. “How’s that been going for you?”

“Honestly? Not good. I’m just feeling so overwhelmed. I know I have ten thousand things to get done, but it’s like I don’t know where or how to start.”

“One step at a time. There are months before the baby will be born. You’ll get everything done. There’s a reason that gestation takes us so long, and it’s not just for the fetus to grow. It’s also for us to have enough time to adjust, prepare, and be ready by the time they’re born.”

“I guess you’re right. The first thing I need to do is to find a new job and to figure out where I’m going to live. My place is too small, so we can’t stay there. Once that’s done, I suppose I’ll go from there. It’s all I can really do, right?”

“Right,” she agreed. “Have you started looking for a new job?”

I shrugged, lifting my head to glance at her before I shook my head. “Every time I try to, it’s like my insides seize up and there’s this voice in back of my mind screaming at me that I’ve made a mistake by resigning. I love this place, but I needed to get away from Jake. If I’m going to be a single parent, I don’t want to have to deal with him every day.”

“That makes sense. You haven’t told him about the pregnancy yet, have you?”

“No. I’m not going to, either. I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and I will tell him one day, but I need time to get over him

first. On the off chance that he wants to be part of the baby's life, obviously I'll let him be there for him or her as much as he wants to be, but I need to have moved on before it happens."

She gave a long look. "While I do understand, I don't know if I agree with that approach. The longer you wait to tell him, the harder it will be on the both of you. He's in love with you, Max. Very much so. I know he can't imagine being a father, but I think that, if given the chance, he might surprise you."

"You could be right, but it's just not a risk I'm willing to take. He's a wildcard. He might surprise me, but he might also go full asshole and accuse me of getting pregnant on purpose or of being after his money. I wouldn't be able to take that right now."

"Okay," she said, not pushing the issue as she gave me a reassuring smile. "You're going to be a wonderful mother, Maxine. I know this next chapter is starting in a way you didn't foresee, but that doesn't mean you're not going to be incredible at it. And I'll be the dotting auntie who will be there whenever you need me. It will help me prepare for a baby of my own in the future. Except with snot. I don't do snot."

I laughed for the first time in weeks. "Thank God for you, my friend. I don't know what I would've done without you, but it wouldn't have been good."

She pretended to buff her fingernails on her collar. "You would've been fine. You're stronger than you realize. I know you've been giving Jake this same pep talk, but it's true for you, too. Just hang in there and remember that it doesn't matter what you would've done without me because I'm always going to be here."

"You're too good to me," I said, then straightened up and took a deep breath. "We should mingle a little bit, right? The party isn't going to last forever and there are a lot of people I need to say goodbye to."

"Good luck. I'll be around if you need me. I have a session starting in about forty minutes, but you can always come by

my office if you want to talk before you head home.”

“Thank you.” I shook my arms out at my sides and gave her another hug before I went to join my party.

It was surreal to think that this really was my last day and that I would never be coming back here. Not as an employee anyway. Maybe every so often to see Emery, but other than that, Aspen Pharmaceuticals and I were officially parting ways.

As the afternoon wore on and the party eventually ended, I said my goodbyes and made promises about keeping in touch. I didn't know yet if I'd keep all those promises, but I wanted to try once I was feeling less overwhelmed.

Every so often, I glanced at the elevator again, but Jake didn't show. Not for the party. Not at my office while I packed up the last of my personal things, and not when I left the building for the last time.

*Well, I guess that means things really are over between us.* Although I'd known it before, it felt more final now than it ever had, and my heart crumbled to pieces all over again.



“**H**ow are you feeling?” Emery asked as she leaned back in her chair and put her elbows on the armrests on either side of her. She had a serene smile on her face, and for once, there was no notebook on her lap. “It’s our last appointment and I have to say, I’m impressed with you for seeing it through. I honestly didn’t think you would.”

I chuckled, but my heart wasn’t in it. “I didn’t think I would, either. When I walked into your office for the first time, I had no intention of sticking with it and I definitely didn’t expect to get anything out of it.”

“And have you?” she asked.

“Fuck yes. So much so that I’m not sure I’m ready for our appointments to end. I know the investigation has been concluded and everything is settled, but I think I might keep coming anyway.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You’re more than welcome to, obviously. Have all the cases been settled? Catch me up. When we spoke last week, the negotiations were still ongoing and I haven’t received an update from HR, so I don’t know what’s happened in the meantime.”

I felt like she’d kicked me in the shin. “Yeah, the new HR rep is no Max. I’d have thought that he’d have kept you in the loop, though.”

She shrugged. “It’s not a requirement for him to do it. All that’s required is for me to provide progress reports to HR, not

vice versa. They just needed to know that you were still attending your sessions.”

“Sure, but still.” I wanted to fucking pout about it, but there was no point. Max was gone and she wasn’t coming back. “We didn’t receive any more lawsuits after that first one, but we sent settlement proposals to all the complainants anyway. All the paperwork has been signed and it’s all been put to bed.”

I felt drained after it all, but I was also lighter. It felt good, even if it had been exhausting. Emery nodded slowly. “Okay, so the legal side of things have been finalized, but what about your apologies? Did you get to make them all?”

I nodded. “We set up a meeting with each complainant individually and they all agreed to hear me out. I apologized to all of the women my behavior had an impact on and I heard them out in turn. It was painful and uncomfortable, and I struggled with a lot of shame and regret, but I’m glad I did it.”

“So am I,” she replied. “It was a lot to take on in just one week, though. You could’ve spaced it out a bit for your own mental wellbeing.”

“I could have, but they’d already waited long enough for it to happen. Frankly, I feel like I deserved the hard and fast hits. It made me realize a lot of things that otherwise might’ve gone over my head if it hadn’t been so fresh in my brain when they said the same things at every meeting.”

“Such as?”

I sighed and screwed my eyes shut. “Such as that I made them feel powerless and scared of what would happen next. I hate that I made them feel that way and I never want to make anyone feel it again, but more especially so not with women I’m obligated to protect.”

“How are you obligated to protect them?”

“My staff are important. It only occurred to me after Max left just how important they are. They keep my business running and every one of them has a role to play in the

company. Needless to say, I'm never crossing that line again. I can't even really believe that I did it in the first place."

"You've come a very long way, Jake. That's what matters. You've put in the work and made slow, sustainable changes to yourself. It's taken some time, but that's a good thing. Nothing worth having mentally comes overnight."

"I realize that now, and I can't believe I'm actually saying this out loud, but you've made me a better man. Thank you."

"I'm proud of you." She smiled warmly. "You should be proud, too. I think this is a great note to end our scheduled sessions on, but we can keep seeing each other regardless. It wouldn't have to be every week anymore, and even if you choose not to continue coming on a regular basis, I'll always be here in case of a crisis."

Something flickered behind her eyes, but she blinked it away as she stood up. "Thank you for working with me instead of against me in the end, Jake. Come here. I have something for you."

She walked over to her desk and I followed her curiously, but then my heart jerked when my gaze landed on a picture of Max. "What the fuck? How have I never noticed that before?"

Emery glanced at me. "You've never been on this side of my desk before."

"I didn't realize you guys are so close that you'd have a picture of her in your office," I murmured as I stared down at her smiling face. I had plenty of pictures of my own with her, but part of me wanted to snatch this one up, too. "Isn't it a conflict of interest for you to have listened to me carry on about her for hours if she's the only person aside from your husband who made it to your desk?"

She shook her head. "No, nothing we discuss in our sessions leaves this office. It's entirely confidential. She's my best friend, though, which is why I have a picture of her here. Does it bother you? You've known all along that we're friends."

“Sure, I did, but I guess I just didn’t realize how close you are.” I smiled wistfully at the picture. “If she’s your best friend, I bet you must have hated that I was spending so much time with her when we all knew she deserves someone better.”

Emery sighed, and I saw the conflict playing out behind her eyes before she shook her head. “I won’t lie to you. I was very worried about the both of you when you started seeing each other, but I think that you ended up being much better together than I’d expected.”

“Too bad she doesn’t feel the same way,” I said, turning away from the picture to look out the window at the clear blue sky instead. “Fuck, I miss her. I know she doesn’t feel the same way I do, but I really wish she’d have considered giving us a chance.”

Emery put her hand on my shoulder. “It’s not that she doesn’t feel the same way, Jake. She cares about you very much, even after everything that happened and with all she’s going through right now with her appointments and—”

“Appointments? What appointments? Is she okay?” Concern slammed into me like an out of control freight train as I spun around to face my therapist.

Emery floundered, her eyes wider than I’d ever seen them. “She’s fine. I slipped up. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Why not?” My heart thundered in my chest as I searched her gaze, instantly realizing she was hiding something from me. Something big. So big, that perhaps she even knew what Max’s sudden change of heart had been all about. “What is it, Emery? What appointments are you talking about?”

“You need to speak to her about it,” she insisted. “I’ve already said more than I should have and I don’t want to get in your business.”

“You’re already in our fucking business,” I snapped, the worry gnawing at my insides as I looked back at her accusingly. “All along, you’ve been in our damn business. You know everything about both of us, so tell me what’s going on.”

Hesitation clouded her eyes, but then she exhaled deeply and took a few steps back, sitting down in the chair behind her desk and looking up at me with a mask of calm back on her face. “You should sit down.”

“No.”

“Sit down, Jake,” she said it more firmly this time. “Trust me, you’re going to want to sit down for this.”

I breathed in, annoyed as fuck, but did what she said. As soon as my ass met the seat, I cocked my head at her expectantly. “Well, what is it? What’s going on with her?”

“Before I say anything, you should know that there’s a reason she hasn’t told you herself and the reason doesn’t have anything to do with you. It’s entirely about her, and I need you to keep that in mind. It’s about her needs and her feelings rather than about any failures on your part.”

The warning gave me pause, but it wasn’t difficult for me at all to put her above myself. For once, my thoughts were entirely about someone else, even if I had a feeling I was about to get heartbroken all over again.

“Maxine is pregnant,” Emery said quietly but clearly, her voice even and her gaze unwavering on mine. “Before you even ask, yes. I am sure. She did a few of the drugstore tests, all of which were positive, and she’s had blood tests done since. She is definitely pregnant and the baby is yours.”

Everything I thought I knew came crashing down around me. My jaw dropped open. My heart stopped. And my palms instantly became sweaty. “Fuck. Is she okay? How can she face doing this alone? I was too weak to even go say goodbye to her at her farewell party and she’s been going through something like that all by herself?”

Emery nodded. “Yes, she has. Like I said, though, you really should talk to her about it. Before you do, I just need you to promise that whatever you decide to say to her or to do, you need to be sure. She’s willing to raise this child by herself and the last thing she needs in addition to everything else is for

you to go charging in with accusations on the one hand or promises you don't intend to keep on the other.”

“I *am* sure.” This was the very, very last thing I'd expected our breakup and her resignation to have been about, but it sure as fuck made everything snap into place. “Fuck raising the child alone. If she'll have me, I'm going to be there every step of the way from now on. I love her, Emery. So thanks for the suggestion, but I am sure.”

I'd never been more sure of anything in my life. It broke me to know that Max hadn't been sure about me in return, but I knew why she'd have felt the way she obviously did. I'd made no secret of my feelings on the matter, but in that one heartbeat when Emery had said the word, everything had changed. And I was going to make damn sure that Max knew it before she wrote me off for good.



## MAXINE

**A** lone in my apartment with another empty day stretching out ahead of me, I scrolled through the available job opportunities on a recruitment website. Nothing caught my interest, but I needed to apply for something.

At this rate, I was going to be broke as well as broken hearted. Absently, my hand dropped to my stomach again and I stroked my thumb across it. “What do you think, little bean? Do you think mommy will like doing nothing but conflict resolution? I’m pretty good at it, but to only do that sounds too tiring. Maybe I’m just too picky. I’m going to need the savings I’m currently blowing through for you someday soon.”

A loud knock at the door made me jump. For a second, I didn’t even realize it’d come from my own door. Not until it came again. It was definitely at my front door, though, and whoever it was, was getting impatient.

“Max?” Jake’s voice called from the other side, and my heart skipped before it took off, racing like a horse trying to win the Derby. “Are you in there? Please open up. We need to talk.”

*We do?* I got up, already fighting back tears and I hadn’t even seen him yet. This was only from hearing his voice again after so long.

As I walked to the door, I dragged in deep breath after deep breath, willing myself to gain control of my emotions before I could even think about opening the door.

“Max? Please let me in. I spoke to Emery. It was my last appointment today. She told me everything. Please, Max? Can we please just talk?”

My chest tightened so much that it was hard to breathe and my stomach dropped to the floor. *She told him?*

Forgetting all about my need to regain control, I grabbed the door handle and yanked it open, my head spinning when I found myself only half a foot away from him. “What did she tell you?”

Blue eyes staring imploringly into mine, he ignored my question and said the last thing I ever expected to hear from him. “I love you, Max. I was joking about leaving you if you were pregnant. I was talking out of my ass. It’s something I should probably work on in more therapy appointments, but I swear to you, it wasn’t true.”

Right there in the hallway, without even coming into my apartment first, he sank down on his knees and took my hips in his hands, his focus now fully on my still mostly flat stomach. “I’m sorry I said that, little one. It was yet another in a long line of bad jokes. Daddy’s going to work on it. I promise.”

My fingers reached for my thigh and I pinched myself. *I have to be dreaming, right? That’s the only explanation.*

When a sharp pain shot through me and I yelped, Jake shot back up to his feet, concern consuming his eyes as he looked into mine. “Max? What happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said, sounding just as dazed, shocked, and confused as I felt. “I think I need to sit down.”

“I’ll get you some water,” he volunteered immediately, following me into the apartment and heading straight for the kitchen while I went to the sofa and sank down on it.

As I watched, completely dumbstruck, he took a glass out of my cabinet and filled it with cold water from my fridge. Then he brought it over to me and sat down on the floor in front of me. Deliberately placing himself at my feet wasn’t something he’d ever done before, but when I looked down to ask him what the hell he was doing, he started speaking.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Max. I never meant it when I said I would leave you. I want to be with you. With both of you. And hey, if I’m going to keep working on my bad jokes in therapy, maybe we could even have some sessions together to help us prepare for parenthood as a new couple.”

I gaped at him, then reached out and poked him in the shoulder without even deciding to do it. “Are you real? I mean, are you really here? It hurt when I pinched myself, but I have to be dreaming. Or hallucinating.”

He chuckled, then caught the hand I’d poked him with and placed it firmly over his heart, covering it in his own. “Feel that. Feel *me*. I’m here, Max. This is real. You’re not dreaming. You can feel my heart beating. This is really happening.”

I frowned, but before I could say anything else, I burst out crying. Like real, heaving sobs and tears streaming down my cheeks like rivers that had broken their banks. Jake’s lips parted, but instead of asking what was going on, he stood up on his knees and pulled me into his strong arms, scooting forward to hold on to me as tight as he could.

“It’s okay, Max. I’m here. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere unless you tell me to. I’m sorry about the shitty joke. That’s what this was all about, right? Emery didn’t tell me that part, but I figured it out on my way here. She’s your best friend. She was trying to protect you, so she told you about it.”

“Uh huh,” I managed to get out between sobs, allowing myself to melt into him even if it was just for a minute. “You really weren’t going to leave me?”

“No, baby. Of course not. I love you. These last couple of weeks without you have been torture. It felt like I was stuck in purgatory. I love you. I want to be with you. Always. No matter what.”

“But you don’t want kids,” I wailed as I clung to him even tighter, scared that if I let go, he’d disappear. “Why can’t I stop crying?”

“Because you’re pregnant, love. I’ve heard that adjusting to the hormones can be rough. Victoria was either sobbing or horny for three months straight.”

“I didn’t even know she was pregnant.”

He chuckled into my hair as he smoothed it with his large palm. “Neither did I. They didn’t tell anyone until last week. That’s not the point, though. What’s important right now is that I love you and that, if you only broke up with me because you didn’t know what to do because of the baby, then our breakup is over. I’m here, Max. I’m right here.”

I cried some more. For the longest time. And Jake just held me, murmuring about how much he loved me and how sorry he was.

When my tears finally started subsiding, I pulled back to look into his eyes. “I desperately needed to hear you say all that. It feels so good not to be alone in this anymore. I missed you so much. I love you, too.”

“You do?” he asked, and when I nodded, he took my face in his hands and kissed me like I’d never been kissed before.

It was like we were sealing vows we hadn’t even made to each other, but I drank in every second of it. Winding my arms around his neck, I pulled him as close as I could get him, and when the kiss became wild and sloppy instead of just being soft and meaningful, I moaned.

Jake suddenly slowed the kiss to a stop, a wide grin breaking out across his lips when he looked at me. “Let me guess. That made you horny as hell, right?”

I tugged my lip between my teeth, nodding as my gaze dropped down to his mouth. “How did you know?”

“Well, for starters, I knew it because when I went in for that kiss, I didn’t mean for it to turn into anything more, but I’m starved for you. I’ve missed you so much that I couldn’t help myself and you were kissing me like it was the same for you.”

“It was, but what are you not saying?”

He smiled, pushed to his feet, and held out his hand. “Victoria’s husband warned me. I called him on the way over here to ask him what to expect, and he told me to be careful about touching you if I didn’t want to get jumped on.”

“It’s one of the more pleasant side effects I’ve experienced so far,” I admitted quietly, feeling shy around him for the first time in a long time. “Unless you’re not planning on staying, in which case, it’s really not going to be so pleasant.”

“I’m planning on staying,” he said immediately. “For as long as you’ll let me. I’ve got you from now on, Max. Let me take care of you.”

When I took his hand, he pulled me up and led me to my bedroom. Once we were there, he slowly undressed me until I didn’t have a stitch of clothing left on my body. Then he laid me down and quickly shed his own clothes before crawling over me.

Without any further ado, he claimed my lips in passionate kisses that made me tingle all over. Then he sank into me and made love to me like he was never going to stop. I was so sensitive all over that every touch felt like a bolt of lightning right to my core, and I writhed underneath him, hanging on for dear life as he made good on his promise to take care of me—and then some.

Since I was already pregnant and we’d already talked about not sleeping with anyone else, we made love with nothing between us for the first time, and it was incredible. I didn’t know how long he worshiped my body for, but by the time he finally found his own release and moaned my name as he came deep inside me, I was more sated than I’d ever been.

Once the wild lust wore off, however, it dawned on me that we still had a lot to talk about. Things were far from settled between us, and now that I could think straight again, I sat up, still naked but not caring. We needed to talk right now.

“Do you really want to do this with me?” I tucked my loose hair behind my ear.

Jake propped himself up on his elbows and nodded. “I don’t even just really want to do it with you. I *am* going to do it with you. If you’ll let me.”

“You really want baby cribs, throw up, dirty diapers, sleepless nights? It’s a long way from glamorous hookups. Especially for a person who’s never wanted it.”

“You never wanted it, either.”

I shrugged. “That only lasted until I found out I was pregnant. It was a shock at first, sure. I’m still processing it, to be honest, but I do want it all now. I am going to be a good mother to our baby, so you don’t have to worry about that if you—”

“You are going to be a good mother, and I am going to be a good father,” he said vehemently. “We’re going to be better, do better, than our own parents. And look, I didn’t want it, but now that it’s happening, I can’t even start telling you how excited I am.”

“You are?”

He nodded, finally sitting up and sliding his arms around my waist. “There’s no one else I could imagine myself doing this with, but you’re not someone else. You’re Maxine Fowler, and I love you. I’m happy about this, Max. Happy and excited. It’s just another challenge, but I’m starting to like new challenges and you’ve been my favorite one of all. There’s no question that I want to do this with you. The only real question is whether you’ll let me do it with you.”



“If you’re still sure you don’t want to know the sex of the baby, you should look away now,” the doctor said, pausing with the ultrasound wand on Max’s round belly. “How’s my favorite couple doing this week? Did you manage to get the nursery all sorted out last week?”

“We did,” I said proudly, my eyes on hers instead of the screen. “The only thing we still need in there is the baby. How’s everything looking?”

“You can see for yourself again now. I’m past the part that would’ve ruined the big surprise.”

As soon as he said it, my gaze snapped to the screen and I grinned at the grainy, black and white image of our baby sucking his or her thumb. “Look at that. Isn’t that just the cutest child you’ve ever seen?”

The doctor chuckled. “Only a few more weeks and then we’ll finally get to see Baby Aspen for real.”

Max laughed, tears in her eyes as she stared at the image of our baby for another long moment. “See, honey? I told you everything was fine. We can’t keep coming in for an ultrasound every week.”

“Oh, yes we can, and we will. You get so worried when we don’t come in, and this is one worry I can do something about.”

“He’s right, you know,” the doctor agreed. “If you’re feeling worried and there’s something you can do about it, it’s

always better to just do it. Besides, I like monitoring my patients very close for the final few weeks, which is where you are now, obviously. You're not coming in any more regularly than the other moms who are almost there."

Max breathed out a quiet sigh of relief and I took her hand, giving it a soft squeeze. "You hear that? We're not the only parents who are already overprotective. Even the doctor likes to keep a closer eye on the babies at this point."

She turned her palm into mine, winding our fingers together and glancing at me before gluing her gaze back to the screen. "So we're not weird?"

"You're not weird," the doctor confirmed with a soft smile. "You're parents. First timers, at that. You're both doing great."

"Thanks, Doc," Max said, then smiled at me when he handed her a wad of paper to wipe the gel off her stomach. "We'll see you next week?"

He nodded. "I'll see you two next week. There's absolutely nothing to worry about for now, but remember to call my office if you experience any kind of pain. It could be Braxton Hicks but at this point, it's not impossible for it to be real labor. Trust your gut and let's try to keep that kiddo in there for just a little while longer."

"What he means is that you should just lie down all the time. Get me to run around and do stuff for you."

She rolled her eyes, but I saw the love in them just like I always did these days. "As good as that sounds, my maternity leave only starts in three weeks and I have a ton of work to get done before then."

I glanced at the doctor and jerked my thumb at my girlfriend. "She refuses to take advantage of the obvious benefits of dating and carrying the baby of the big boss. Can you talk some sense into her?"

He chuckled and raised his hands. "Hey, I just work here, but what I will tell you is that if I was working for my wife and she made me an offer like that, I'd take it. Especially if I'd known before the kids were born what I know now."

“Exactly.” I grinned, but Max rolled her eyes again. At both of us this time.

“I’m going to be at home for six months after the baby is born. If I start staying home all day from now, I’ll be climbing the walls before the poor child even gets here. Trust me when I say that it’s better for everyone that I keep busy at work.”

I sighed but admitted defeat. The truth was that Max didn’t have to work and she knew it, but she wanted to. Six months ago, the day after we’d gotten back together, I’d re-hired her at Aspen Pharmaceuticals and everyone had been thrilled to have her back, but no one had been happier that she was there than she was.

We’d talked a lot about it, and she wanted to keep working. Which was fine by me as long as she knew that she didn’t have to. If she changed her mind after the baby came, she knew that all she had to do was say the word.

In the meantime, my bundle of energy was mellower now than she had been in the second trimester, but she still had a hard time keeping still, and since it was my job now to indulge her, that was exactly what I did. All day, every day.

We said goodbye to the doctor and made our next appointment. Max looked up at me with pleading in those big green eyes. I laughed, taking her hand and nodding my agreement before she’d even asked. “Yes, we can stop at the taco place on our way home.”

“I knew there was a reason why I love you,” she said happily. “I wonder if I’m finally going to stop craving tacos every damn day once the baby is out.”

I shrugged. “Probably, but said baby is also going to come out smelling like salsa at this rate. I’ll be sorry if the cravings do stop, though. I’m enjoying having tacos every day.”

She laughed and elbowed me playfully in the ribs. “We’re going to be too tired to even think about tacos or any other food soon. Which is why I’m enjoying it while I can.”

“I can’t wait to be so tired that we’re not even thinking about tacos,” I confessed, winding my arm around her waist

and resting it on the side of her belly. In response to my touch, the baby kicked, or rolled, or punched. I wasn't sure which, but I loved it all. "Yeah, I know, buddy. I'm looking forward to meeting you, too."

Max's arm snaked around my waist in return, and she rested her head against my shoulder as we walked to the parking lot. "Can you believe we're almost going to get to hold him or her?"

"No, not really. It's been a whirlwind, huh? On the one hand, it feels like it's all passed in the blink of an eye, and on the other, I feel like I've been waiting for the baby to be born for seventeen years. At least."

She laughed. "How do you think I feel? I look like a whale and I'm getting *whalier* every day, but yet, I don't know if I'm quite ready for this part to be over. I really can't wait to hold the bean, but I'm also really enjoying the pregnancy just as much as I'm hating it."

I cocked an eyebrow but didn't ask. When she said she was enjoying it as much as she hated it, I knew she was telling the truth. I didn't quite understand it, but I didn't have to. I was only here for moral support and orgasms.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, you're the sexiest whale I've ever seen."

She poked me in the ribs again. "No, I'm not. I look like a blimp. And don't look at me like that. You're going to turn me on."

"I have zero problem with that," I said truthfully. "Who knows how long it's going to be before I can make love to you again after the baby is born? It's better to just keep doing it now. As much as possible. While we still can."

She chuckled. "It's not that long. Only, like, six weeks."

"I feel all panicky suddenly. Six weeks? Are you sure it wasn't six days?"

"I'm sure," she said, but then sighed as her brow furrowed with worry. "At our next appointment, remind me to ask if it's still safe. I've heard that—"

“Baby, we asked last week and we were just given the all-clear. There’s nothing to be worried about.”

We talked a bit more, although mostly Max voiced her worries and I reassured her. When we got to our favorite taco place, we loaded up our plates. As we were sitting down, her phone chimed.

She glanced down at it, then smiled at me. “I love you.”

“I love you too, but why do you love me now?”

“That was the email letting me know that your brand new, zero tolerance for workplace harassment policy has been signed off on. Why didn’t you tell me it was finalized today?”

“I wanted it to be a surprise.” I grinned, then chuckled as she practically inhaled her first taco. “Have you gotten the weekly progress report from the outreach program yet?”

She glanced back down at her phone. “Which one of the programs? It’s beginning to feel like you start a new program every month.”

“I don’t.” I scoffed. “There are only two new ones. I just keep adding different facets to them as the needs arise.”

It was true. After everything I’d done, I’d realized that I wanted to start solving problems and do my part to make the world a better place for our child. So I’d contacted a few of the departments within Aspen and we’d put together several teams dealing with two new outreach areas.

One offered resources to women in need and the other was working on trying to remove the stigma around therapy in the eyes of young men. I was the poster child for that. The reformed, former bad boy who had held true to his word and had become a role model CEO with no tolerance for any disrespect or bullshit whatsoever. It’d been hard at first to go public with everything, but now that I’d done it, I was glad I’d grabbed my balls and taken the plunge.

Max chuckled as she shook her head. “Different facets, huh? Soon, almost half the workforce is going to be involved in one of those facets. You’re already a great father, though. Have I told you that yet today?”

“Yes, and you told me yesterday, too.”

“I’ll keep telling you every day until you believe me.” She smiled, then paused to inhale another taco. “Have you spoken to Lennon and Nash?”

I nodded, my heartbeat temporarily throwing itself out of whack before returning to normal. “I’m meeting with them tomorrow.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

I shook my head. “No, this is one thing I have to do alone. If it goes well with them, Hunter and Hailey are next on my list.”

“I love you,” she said again. “Just speak from the heart and let them see how much you’ve changed. It’s going to be fine, even if your friendship with Lennon never quite returns to what it used to be.”

I didn’t reply because there was nothing to say. We’d been over it all a hundred times. She knew all about how sorry I was for what I’d done to them and how much I wanted to apologize. She also knew how worried I was and how eager I was to get it done.

Once we were done with our tacos, we went back home to my place—which was now their place, too. Max’s and our baby’s. She’d moved in with me months ago, and it still gave me a rush every time we got home together.

That rush chased away some of my tension about the meeting tomorrow, and as we sat down on the sofa, the last bit of tension melted away when I saw how uncomfortable she was. Her discomfort was visible these days, but luckily, I knew just how to help her.

“Lean over the sofa, baby. On your hands and knees. I’ll give you a pressure-point massage. It might help relieve some of the pain.”

A dreamy sigh escaped her as she moved into the position, and she smiled at me over her shoulder. “Thank you, Jake. You’re a godsend.”

Bending forward, I gave her a sweet kiss on the lips and murmured against them. “You’re the godsend, baby. Always have been. Besides, maybe if I try to make this last bit of the pregnancy as easy for you as possible, you’ll let me put another baby in there soon.”

She gave me a fake glare. “Don’t even think about it, Aspen. Let’s get the first one out before you start trying to seduce me into another.”

Easing back, I started the massage instead of kissing her again. “Fine, but would you like to practice later? We wouldn’t want to forget how to do it.”

She groaned and dropped her head between her shoulders. “As long as you keep doing what you’re doing, you can ask me for anything you want and I’ll give it to you. Even another baby.”

What I really wanted to ask her for was *her*. Her and our baby. For the rest of our lives. But now wasn’t the time. I had the ring ready and I was definitely going to ask her to marry me, but she’d told me when we’d spoken about it a few months ago that she didn’t want the time surrounding the baby’s birth to be made even more hectic if we got engaged.

And since I really was a changed man, I was respecting her decision regardless of how much I wanted to make her mine. And I’d never wanted anything as much as I wanted a happily ever after with her.

*Yep. You heard it here, first. Jake Aspen wants a happily ever after with just one woman. As long as that woman is Maxine Fowler, I’d spend this lifetime and at least two more by her side.*

# EPILOGUE

One Year Later

“Elizabeth Aspen, you are the most beautiful little girl in the whole wide world, but you need to listen to your mommy now. I love you with all my heart, but you need to let Mommy and Daddy sleep tonight. I know your toothies are hurting you, but I promise it will be over soon, baby.”

Jake’s blue eyes stared up at me from the sweetest little face I’d ever seen, and she offered me a gummy smile. I sighed, wondering if I could take it as a sign that she agreed to my request. I held her in my arms in the rocking chair in our bedroom, willing her to go to sleep.

After the fussy night she’d had last night and fussier day today, it was more likely I was going to fall asleep than her, though. I was dog tired and all I wanted was to have a hot shower, but I didn’t dare put our little Lizzy down just yet.

Her eyelids were drooping and her eyes were rolling back in her head. She was so close, but she kept giving me these sleepy little smiles that melted my heart at the same time that they broke it. Mainly because I really, desperately needed that shower, and if she was still smiling, it meant she hadn’t dropped off yet.

Sometimes, it was hard to believe that she was almost ten months old. Jake and I had been together, officially, for almost

a year and a half, and I'd been living with him most of that time.

Yet every afternoon when he walked in the door and his eyes found mine, my heart still skipped a beat. For a while there, I'd worried that he'd get bored of me eventually, but that hadn't even almost happened.

In fact, it was the complete opposite. It was like he fell more in love with me and more in love with his daughter with every passing day. He was the best father and boyfriend I could've asked for, so loving and doting that I still wondered sometimes if he'd been body-snatched.

It felt almost impossible that he was the same man I'd met at that wedding nearly two years ago. He looked the same, although in my humble opinion he'd become even more handsome, but other than that, he was a completely different person.

As the door opened and he walked in, my gaze snapped up to his, and after my heart did its usual skip, I gave him a stern look. He chuckled softly, striding right over to me and pressing a kiss to my lips before whispering to me.

“Fuck, you're beautiful.”

I rolled my eyes, murmuring quietly in reply. “Yeah, I'm beautiful alright, all covered as I am in milk and spit up. It's a wonder I haven't been hired by a fashion magazine to do a shoot for them.”

Elizabeth stirred in my arms and those beautiful eyes that'd just fallen shut looked like they were about to open again. “Please don't wake her up.”

I mouthed the words to him before bringing my finger to my lips. Eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled, he nodded his understanding and mouthed his response. “I need to talk to you.”

I shook my head sternly. “We'll talk later.”

If I put Lizzy down now, she was going to wake right back up. As desperate as I was for that shower and as much as I was

curious about what Jake wanted to talk about, it could all wait. I just wasn't willing to risk her waking up again.

Jake snapped his fingers, grinning at me before motioning that he'd be back in a minute. I nodded, but my eyelids were as heavy as Lizzy's had been a minute ago before she'd finally succumbed. Chances were that in the minute it took him to go do whatever he wanted to do, I was going to doze off.

Elizabeth was both the best and the hardest thing I'd ever done, and although I'd questioned my sanity about the decision about a hundred times just in the last hour, I hadn't gone back to work after my maternity leave was up. Instead, I'd opted to stay home with her for six more months. As it was, I didn't know if I'd be able to bear going back and leaving her all day after she turned one, but for now, I wasn't thinking too much about it.

Jake was adamant that it was my decision and that he'd support me regardless of what I decided. Although I knew that he was secretly hoping he'd knock me up again before going back to work came into the picture for real.

He'd also offered to get me a full-time nanny, to buy a kindergarten, and to open a day-care center at the office. Well, the latter he was doing anyway—whether for our children's care during the day or others. It'd been in the works for months and it was looking great so far, but he wasn't done yet.

Everything was going to be state of the art, but he wanted it to have an old-school feel. My boyfriend was convinced he could make it happen, and if anyone could, it was him.

Once the center was completed, it was also going to be free to his employees. Another benefit he was adding to the growing list for keeping his staff as happy as could be.

The humans I'd once represented were raving about him to anyone who would listen, and they'd nominated him for a bunch of awards. He'd done a complete one eighty since I'd first met him, and sometimes, I wondered if my entire life right now was a dream.

A gentle squeeze to my knee made me wrench my eyes open, and I frowned when I saw Jake was holding a stack of post-its and a pencil. “What are you doing?”

I whispered the words softly, but he still brought his finger to his lips to shush me this time. Smiling as he dropped his gaze and scribbled something on the paper, he blew me a kiss when he handed the first post-it over.

**I love your big heart**, it read in his elegant script. My eyes filled with tears, and I motioned to his heart, mouthing the same thing back to him.

He brought his finger to his lips once more, even though I hadn’t made a sound. His eyes sparkled with humor and were soft with affection as he looked at us. **I love your dedication to our daughter.**

When he handed over the next note, the tears started rolling down my cheeks. He was so damn sweet that I was getting all emotional. Then again, I was always emotional these days.

As I watched, he wrote another note. **I love your steadfast loyalty and that you had the ability to see past all my selfish ways when we first met.**

I cocked my head at him, mouthing, “What are you doing?”

He shrugged, then jotted the answer down on another post-it. **Telling you all the things I love about you.**

Smiling through my tears, I gave my head a small shake but he just chuckled quietly and carried on. **I also love your butt. And your kisses.**

I laughed without making a sound. “Same here.”

He wagged his eyebrows at me, then swiped his tongue across his lips like he was nervous. **I love the way you’ve always stood up to me and how you challenged me to be a better person.**

The next note took him a bit longer to write, and when he handed it over, he adjusted his position so that he was on only

one knee instead of both. At the same time I read it, he pulled a jewelry box out of his back pocket and flipped it open.

### **Will you marry me?**

It was then that I realized that he'd just proposed to me all in complete silence just to keep the baby asleep. I let out a delighted squeal, and all his efforts were in vain. Elizabeth stirred awake almost immediately, and since I was going to have to put her back to sleep anyway, I decided to answer him with the one word I'd been wanting to say to him for months now.

“Yes!”

We surged toward each other, falling into each other's arms with our little baby snug between us. She started cooing as he laid a kiss on my lips, and then he chuckled and pulled away to brush a kiss to her little forehead.

Contentment and joy unlike anything I'd ever felt before filled me, and my tears started flowing faster. “How are my girls doing today? Did you give Mommy a hard time, Liz? It looks like you gave Mommy a hard time.”

I kissed him again as he gave me the ring and slid it onto my finger with me. “I love you, Jake. That was amazing.”

“Good.” He grinned, blue eyes glistening with tears as he glanced between us. “Daddy has a surprise for you both. How would you like to see the place where Daddy first realized that he loved Mommy, Lizzy?”

“We're going to Seattle?” I asked, my voice several octaves higher than it should've been. “We can't go to Seattle. I haven't even showered yet today.”

He pushed up to his feet and opened his arms for Lizzy. “You go shower. Or take a nice long bath. Whichever you prefer. Daddy and Lizzy will pack her bags, and we *are* going to Seattle. You deserve a vacation and so do I. Oh, and Max?”

“Yes?”

“This time, we are staying over.”

I laughed. “Whatever you say, Jake. But it doesn’t matter where we are. We’re still not going to sleep while Lizzie is there.”

“I’m one step ahead of you, baby. Emery and her husband are coming with us and they’ve agreed to take her. Tonight, you will be sleeping. Or not sleeping but for a different reason this time.”

As I handed over the little person we created together and caught a glimpse of the shiny ring on my finger, I flashed him a coy smile. “You know, I’ve been thinking about what you said about having another one. Maybe next time we go to Seattle, it’ll be to take the next one to the place where they were conceived.”

“Are you serious?”

I nodded. “How do you feel about eloping?”

He grinned. “I’ll marry you anytime, anywhere, baby. And then to celebrate, we can make another baby after.”

I danced out of his reach when he tried to slide his arm around me, shaking my head and wagging my finger at him. “If today does end up being our wedding day, then no more kisses until the deed is done.”

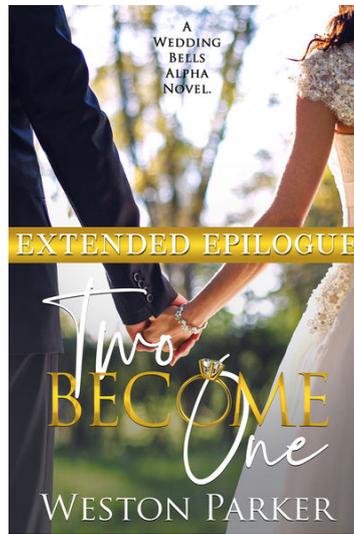
He laughed but nodded and spun around, taking Lizzy to her room with him so he could pack her bag. While I thought it sounded a little bit crazy to elope, the more I considered it, the more tempted I was. Emery was already coming with us, and if we could swing by and pick up Mom and Tristan on our way to the airstrip, then who knew?

I might come back home tomorrow as Mrs. Aspen. And that was all I’d wanted for such a long time that I didn’t need a fancy wedding to make it happen. All I wanted was the man. And the baby he’d already given me.

With them in it, my life was like a fairy tale and it was one that was about to get its happy ending.

\*\*\*

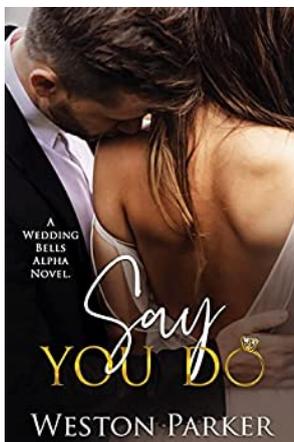
Did you just love Jake and Maxine? I've got a special extended epilogue to show you them in the future. [Get your copy HERE!!](#)



\*\*\*

**If you loved this book, don't miss out...**

Check out book 1 in the Wedding Bells Series, [Say You Do!](#)



**My brother is an idiot—he's getting married.**

And I'm in charge of getting things together since our folks are gone.

Lucky me. The guy who thinks love is for the birds and worn-out 80s songs.

I honestly don't have time for this drama. I run a billion-dollar company, have women to entertain, and am working on my plans to rule the world.

No, seriously.

And yet, when you least expect it, life kicks you in the balls.

The beautiful, snarky woman that runs the flower shop is perfect to help me pull off this wedding.

Just seeing her sends my head spinning with possibilities.

She's perfect. To play my fake wife for an event I have coming up as a side deal.

My ex-wife will be at the event, and I sure could use someone to show her how well I've done since she ripped out my soul.

So my curvy new friend gets my ring and a chunk of my wallet before agreeing to the deal.

Funny thing is, I'm not so interested in taking it back by the end of the adventure.

I'm willing to go all in on what might be the best decision of my life.

And I'm demanding the same of her. No maybes. No I-don't-knows.

No fear of what might be or might not be.

Open your pretty pink lips and utter the words.

**Say you do.**

I gotta have this!

## Insider Group



Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot with the best book part in town and let's connect.

Also you get a FREE novel when you join, cause, why not?

See you on the inside...

[Get it HERE](#)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, my daughter, a dog, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

You're going to find Billionaires, Bad Boys, Military Guys, and loads of sexiness. Something for everyone hopefully. I'd love to connect with you. Check out the links below and come find me.

**[Amazon KU ~ Insiders Group](#)**

**[Website ~ Facebook ~ Instagram](#)**

**[The Parker's Wicked Playground](#)**

## **Two Become One**

A Wedding Bells Alpha Novel Book 9

Copyright © 2022 by Weston Parker

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

The novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and plot are all either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons – living or dead – is purely coincidental.

First Edition.

**Editor:** Eric Martinez

**Cover Designer:** [Ryn Katryn Digital Art](#)