



A Sexy Romantic
COMEDY

**BREAKING THE
BILLIONNAIRE'S**
Rules

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ANNIKA MARTIN



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~Wickedly Sweet and Synful Book Blog



Breaking the Billionaire's Rules

Max Hilton is my high school nemesis turned billionaire. And tomorrow I deliver his lunch order.

In a cat costume.

You know he's going to love it. He'll smile that smirky smile, sitting there all superior in his gleaming tower, the wealthiest and most notorious playboy in all of New York, the king of everything.

Turns out it wasn't curiosity that killed the cat—it was mortification.

I'm almost ready to quit my lunch delivery job, but then my roommate tosses me a copy of *The Max Hilton Playbook: Ten Golden Rules for Picking up the Hottest Girl in the Room*.

It's the book that catapulted him to stardom. And it's my new bible.

I'm going to use his own techniques against him. I'll wrap him around my little finger, bring him to his knees, and crush his steely heart. Call it payback for all the single girls who had to endure legions of losers wielding his legendary tactics.

But seeing Max every day, I'm discovering a side of him I didn't even know existed--he's not the jerky guy I thought he was. He has this smile he shows only to me, and it melts my heart. His touch sends shivers down my spine. And those forbidden kisses are driving me wild.

Falling for him was not in my plan.

Am I breaking his rules or will his rules break me first?

Never ask a woman what she wants. Tell her what she wants.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

My roommate Kelsey swings open the door to our apartment before I can finish unlocking it. “Oh my god, I nearly dropped my phone when you texted,” she says. “I can’t even imagine!”

“Right?” I throw my hat and scarf onto the couch. “Don’t bother to hide your horror, because it’ll be ten times worse than you think.”

“Uh!” She pulls me into a quick hug.

“I feel sick every time I imagine how it’ll be.”

Kelsey lets me go. “Who even does that?” Her fists are balled, her lips pursed into an angry little rosebud. She’s a dancer with awesome powers of emoting. “He just wants to crush you! He wants to demolish your dignity like a house of cards!”

“Okay, you can hide your horror a little.”

“No, I can’t hide it. I hate him so much on your behalf, I want to burst!”

“Thank you.”

“Of course,” she says.

“You guys, do I need to call the overacting drama police?” My friend and former roomie, Lizzie, comes in from the other room.

“Oh my god, Lizzie!” I give her a big squeeze.

“I called in the cavalry,” Kelsey says.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad,” Lizzie tries.

I raise a brow. “This is a man who woke up one day and thought, ‘I’m rich and famous and I can have anything I want, and what I most want is for my old high school nemesis to be forced to deliver sandwiches to me in my office. In a friggin’ cat suit.’”

“You can’t be sure he requested you *personally*,” Lizzie says.

“The office said as much when I tried to switch. It was a specific request for me to be the one to handle that building. It’s that or I lose the job. And not just one time—no, no, no. Ongoing deliveries. You know it’s him.” I unbutton my coat. “It’ll be the worst ten-year high school reunion ever.”

Confession: I’ve spent a truly unhealthy amount of time imagining running-into-Max scenarios. They always involve me wearing an amazing gown; possibly a tiara. And our high school hostilities are so insignificant to me, I’m having trouble remembering them. I’m all, *Max who?* But in such a gracious way. My career is going so gangbusters that everything from high school is a dim footnote.

Unfortunately, ten years out from our graduation from The Soho High School for the Performing Arts (aka SHSPA, aka *the Shiz*) I don’t have much to show for my career.

“Well, pizza’s coming, so there’s that,” Lizzie says.

“Heart eyes.” I peel off my winter coat, stripping down to the Meow Squad cat suit I’m forced to wear on my lunch delivery route.

I look up and catch them staring at it, and I can tell they’re imagining it—

what it will feel like. What is there to say to that?

Then Kelsey says the one thing you *can* say to that. “You’re not alone.”

I take a deep breath. My knotted shoulders relax a smidge. These girls are everything to me. Two best friends who are in it with me. “Thank you.”

I go to my room to change into my favorite sloth T-shirt and bright pink yoga pants, and then I go back out and curl up on the couch.

Kelsey gives me a beer. Her purple fingernails match perfectly with the purple streaks in her jet-black hair. “CLC,” she says. *Carb-loving comfort.*

Lizzie snuggles in next to me on the other side. “Were you just mortified?”

I retell the moment of discovery. One second I’m standing out at the Meow Squad truck, waiting for tomorrow’s delivery assignment, feeling pretty happy about my life. Sure, I have a job where I have to dress as a cat and deliver food-truck orders to office workers, but it’s a part-time job with insurance, the holy grail for up-and-coming actresses.

And then the next moment, I see Maximillion Plaza on the roster.

And the sun goes behind the clouds.

And shadows move across the land at terrifying speeds.

Giant birds with dinosaur faces screech across the sky.

“And I’m like, no friggin’ way! You know he found out. I swear to you, the day I first tried on the outfit, the biggest thing on my mind was not how stupid I looked, or how grateful I got hired and all of that. My first thought was, what are the chances I’ll ever have to deliver to Max Hilton? A million-something people in Manhattan, what are the chances Max orders from Meow Squad, and I end up with the delivery? Maximillion Plaza wasn’t even in the Meow Squad delivery area when I first started. I thought I’d be safe. I should’ve known.”

Lizzie winces. “Maybe he wants to apologize?”

“No way. Trust me—no apologies will be forthcoming. He’s rubbing his hands in sweet anticipation.”

“Was it that bad?” Kelsey asks.

“He once baked dirt into a brownie she had to eat on stage,” Lizzie says. She’s heard all of the stories. “She took a bite and she had to keep chewing —”

“—and it was dry and weird and gritty, and I so wanted to spit it out,” I say. “Though to be fair, I did put a remote-control squeaking mouse cat toy in his piano right before his freshman recital. And I made it scrabble around while he played Chopin’s Nocturne in E flat. A sweet, quiet piece.” I snicker, remembering. “Of course he didn’t react. Nothing fazes Max. He has a protective titanium exoskeleton.”

Lizzie gets the pizza alert text and runs down to the lobby. Our apartment’s official pizza is brie, potato, and caramelized onion. Crazy toppings are firmly against my pizza religion, but once you’re out of Jersey, all is lost in the realm of pizza.

“You’ll get through it.” Kelsey doles out napkins.

“You don’t know. Max is my kryptonite. Beyond kryptonite. Kryptonite doesn’t live to destroy you. Kryptonite doesn’t stare at you with an amused light in its eyes as you die inside.”

“Well, you’ll be able to quit when we land our parts. We’ll have jobs for a year. At least.”

“Dude, *Phantom of the Opera* has been running since eighty-eight.”

“Jobs for twenty years. Fifty! We’ll be old ladies, singing and dancing up there.”

“Pinky slap!” I hold out my pinky. She slaps it with her pinky.

We’re both going out for the massive *Anything Goes* revival. Kelsey’s trying for one of Reno’s Angels, a really demanding singing and dancing part, and I’m trying for the lead, Reno Sweeney. I’m shooting crazy high, but I feel like the part has my name on it. Deep down I feel it.

“We deserve it,” I say.

“So deserve it!”

Kelsey especially does. Over winter, she found out her live-in boyfriend was cheating on her with four different women. Hence her presence as my new roomie.

Lizzie arrives with the pizza and sets it out. I grab a piece of steaming, carb-laden yumminess and sink my teeth in, and for one blissful moment, Max is out of my mind.

“You should’ve switched over to my room when I moved out,” Lizzie says. “You shouldn’t have to look at his stupid tower.”

“Agreed,” Kelsey says. “You know I’ll trade rooms with you any day of the week. Just say the word.”

I mumble and eat some more pizza. It’s true; I can see part of Max’s tower through the configuration of buildings out my window. I had a lot of feelings when I realized that was his tower. Feelings like dark, hard diamonds in my heart.

“I wonder how he found out,” Lizzie says. “Maybe Facebook or something?”

“The day I’d post an image of me in that thing on Facebook,” I say. “He had to find out some other way. God, I can only imagine his glee. He would’ve been like, *how the mighty have fallen*. But a more clever and witty version of it.”

Kelsey groans and grabs another piece.

“He is going to rub it in so hard,” I say. “He’ll be laughing the whole time while I set out his sandwich. And then I’ll have to say *Meow* at the end. Like a trained monkey.”

“Or a trained kitten,” Lizzie says.

“Is that supposed to be a helpful comment?”

“Yes?” she squeaks. “No?”

Playfully I punch her arm. “Get with the pity program!”

Even back in high school Max was cool and superior, though if you watched him long enough—like really watched him—you could see that

silence was one of his big strategies. And that underneath that aloof silence was the slightest edge of teen awkwardness.

Now he's remote and beautiful in his Manhattan lair, the head of the billion-dollar men's style empire that grew out of his infamous pickup guidebook, the international bestseller that helped catapult him to a level of notoriety to rival the Kardashians.

"Millennial Dean Martin," *Slate* magazine once called him.

I read somewhere that he laughs about that. I don't doubt it for a minute; of course Max would think he's too cool even for suave Rat-Pack playboy Dean Martin.

"Will it help if I carry a black magic marker around town and black out one of his teeth whenever I see his face on a bus stop ad?" Kelsey asks.

"Yes," I whisper. "That would be extremely helpful."

"I'll give him a Frankenstein scar," Lizzie offers.

"That might make him look hotter."

"A penis coming out of his nose?" she tries.

"Here's the only thing I'm wondering—is he planning on guffawing and being all *boo-yah* as I set out his sandwich? Or will he go for superior silence with a smirk? Never mind," I decide. "It'll be the smirk."

I sit back and stare at the nearly empty pizza box. I was a lot more excited about the pizza when it was still in the box.

Lizzie grabs her giant purse. "I have treats. First, dessert!"

"Did you frost special anti-Max cookies?" I ask hopefully.

"Something better." She pulls out a three-pack of Peanut Butter Kandy Kakes and tosses it to me.

"Oh my god! Where in the city did you find these?"

"Internet."

I rip open the plastic, press the package to my nose, and suck in the smell of my childhood. It was always a good day when you found Kandy Kakes in your lunch bag. It was about the treat, but it was emotional, too. Finding one

of these meant our family was on a good streak. “You guys want one?”

“Not so much.” Kelsey wrinkles her nose. “You have to be from Jersey to like those. I think it’s a rule.”

“Lizzie?”

“All for you,” Lizzie says.

Nobody I know appreciates Kandy Kakes, which is fine by me. I sink my teeth into the sponge cake-y, peanut-buttery goodness, which is of course wrapped in a thick layer of milk chocolate.

When I re-emerge from my dessert bliss, I notice Lizzie’s tearing at something, trying to tear the molded plastic wrap off something rectangular.

“What is that?”

“Something else I think might help.”

“What?”

“Hold on.” She claws at the package with her fingernails. “Uhh!”

“Is it a one-woman performance art show depicting wrap rage?” I ask.

She throws the package at me.

I catch it and turn it over. It’s a dart set. “Um, thanks?”

Kelsey has scissors. “Gimme that.” She cuts open the dart set.

“It goes with this.” Lizzie pulls a beat-up paperback from a bag and slaps it onto our coffee table.

Not just any paperback. I grab it. “Excuse me? What is this?”

A rhetorical question. I know what it is. *The Max Hilton Playbook: Ten Golden Rules for Landing the Hottest Girl in the Room*. Most people call it *The Hilton Playbook*. It’s Max’s “how to get girls by being an arrogant jerk” guide. It sold millions of copies back when it came out, just a year or two after we graduated from high school.

Max launched his men’s style empire after that. Shoes. Watches. Body spray. Instagram stardom. They’re saying he has a deal for a Netflix show.

I flip the book over.

The entire back cover is Max’s face. It’s one of the more iconic pictures

of him; he looks devastatingly handsome, but that's not what's special about it—it's the way the shot captures his gaze, his ability to make you feel like he's looking right into you and you alone, all sparkling, knowing humor. Like he knows all of your secrets because you trusted him for a little while, and he stomped all over your heart, and he's just a little too proud of himself.

“Don't worry, I didn't buy it new,” Lizzie says, grabbing it from me. “No jerky billionaires were made richer in the acquisition of this book.”

“That's not my question,” I say. “It's more like, why is this thing even here?”

Lizzie smiles at Kelsey. “Because *plans*.”

“Did you ever actually read this thing?” Lizzie asks.

“Hell no,” I say. “Who would read it?”

“Not me.” Lizzie rips the back cover off the book, pulls an old dartboard from behind the couch, and tacks the picture on. Kelsey clears the wall of our mementos, my fun cross stitches and even the picture of my dream shoes, Louboutin Solibria pumps in starshine pink.

“You got me a game of darts.”

“On Max Hilton's face,” she says, handing me the darts, which Kelsey has finally liberated.

“You shouldn't have,” I say.

“Go, go, go!” Kelsey claps. “Dart therapy!” Her pretty dimples are in full flare.

I feel a little weird about it, but I throw. I get his cheek. My galpals clap. My next hits the board, wide of the picture. I still get applause. “I don't know, you guys.”

I sink back down onto the couch. My friends take their turns, then it's time for more beer. We leave the darts on his face. It was a sweet thought.

“It's a good look on him,” Kelsey says.

“Doomed to serve my nemesis every day of my life for the foreseeable future,” I say. “Isn't that one of the punishments they give Greek gods? I

would honestly rather roll a boulder up a mountain or have birds tear at my flesh.”

“It really *is* as if he wants to punish you,” Kelsey muses. “And he’s found the most stunningly effective way to do it.”

“If you’re trying to cheer me up, it’s not working.”

Kelsey snorts and picks up Max’s book. “Over a million copies sold,” she reads. “A million suckers.” She starts flipping through. “Newsflash, losers: Max Hilton picks up girls because he looks like Max Hilton. Not because he has some golden rules.”

“I was thinking,” Lizzie says, “if you were truly insignificant to him, why would he bother making you deliver sandwiches? What if he needs you to do the delivery because you’re *not* insignificant?”

Such a weird idea. My chest buzzes with the strangeness of it.

“You never know,” she says.

“Spoken by a woman newly in love.” Lizzie is enjoying living with her man now. And she owns her own cookie bakery, so to say that she’s seeing the bright side of things is an understatement. She’s looking through a kaleidoscope of hearts and sugar frosting.

Kelsey’s unusually quiet. Her nose is buried in the book.

Lizzie informs me that today is National Square Dance Day. She describes how hard it was to make a cookie to commemorate that. Her cookie bakery specializes in cookies that are frosted to ironically commemorate holidays. “I ended up doing a woman with a really big skirt. I thought about an accordion, because chocolate—”

“Wait one minute,” Kelsey says. “No. No freaking way.”

“What?” I ask.

Her jaw is set hard. “Nathan used one of these pickup techniques on me. He worked Max’s system on me, and I fell for it.”

Lizzie’s eyes widen. She knows all about Kelsey’s cheating ex.

“Maybe it’s a coincidence,” I try.

“You were there! It was last fall at the Chiron Club. Remember how he wore the hat? And he told the funny, sweet story about the strange dog that got in his house?”

I sit up, not liking this. “The dog story was fake? It’s the only thing I liked about him.”

“It’s a script from this book! There are all these scripts of funny stories for men to tell in the back.”

Lizzie looks stunned. “Who does that?”

“Nathan did. And these rules. What the hell? Okay, get this—” Kelsey holds up a finger and begins to read. “Pick a girl, any girl. Go ahead and pick out a hot one—if you learn my system properly, you can have her. Get everyone laughing, but ignore the hot girl.” She looks up. “Remember how he was all friendly and funny to all of you and ignoring me? It’s a little technique called *reverse-chasing*.”

“No,” I say. Nathan broke her heart into pieces and stomped on it. It was all Max’s book? My throat feels thick.

“Okay, now I hate him on three levels,” Lizzie says.

Kelsey continues to read. “Act annoyed if she tries to get your attention.” She looks up. “Remember? Nathan was totally doing that! His story was funny and sweet, and then I asked him a question, just joining in on the fun, and I touched his arm because it seemed like he wasn’t hearing me and he’s like, ‘hey, stop pawing the goods.’”

“Stop *pawing* the *goods*?” Lizzie says.

“And we thought it was funny,” I say, stunned. “Men flock to you like rabid magpies, and this guy was all, ‘stop hitting on me.’”

“It’s a technique right from Max’s book. That worked on me.”

I shake my head, remembering how Nathan seemed to defy the laws of dating physics—he was obviously straight and single and open to a hookup, but not interested in Kelsey.

“*Reverse-chasing*,” she reads, “Act like you think she’s hitting on you.

Rebuff her imaginary advances, but be playful about it.”

“And you ask him to dance, and he goes, ‘You think I’m easy? Just a piece of meat for you to parade around the dance floor?’ And then you’re staring at him in shock and he goes, ‘are you mentally undressing me?’”

Through gritted teeth, she says, “A script.”

Suddenly we’re all three reading the book. “He used a lot of these techniques to pick up the other women he was sleeping with, too,” Kelsey says. “This book was Nathan’s bible.”

My face feels hot.

“No way,” Lizzie says at one point, grabbing it from Kelsey. “This jungle kiss—I think somebody did it on Jada Herberger.” Jada’s an actress friend from the first floor of the building.

Lizzie’s on the phone with Jada. “Tell me if this sounds familiar.” She begins to read instructions from Max’s book.

Basically, the man is supposed to tell the woman that her perfume is intriguing, and then act surprised when she says the name of it, like he can’t quite believe it. He’s then supposed to gently brush the woman’s hair off her shoulder, taking another whiff, just to be sure.

Lizzie continues to read, “‘Now memorize this line—*There’s something about it. The way it mixes with your body chemistry that’s...hard to describe.* Now pull away. Take your time. You’re not the pursuer here—she is. Say, *scent is such an afterthought in our society—people don’t understand how deeply and intimately it links to the most primal part of our brain. That’s why you’ll see animals scenting each other before mating...*’”

Screaming on the other end.

Lizzie winces and pulls the phone away from her ear until it stops. “No, I’m reading it in a book!” she says. “The Hilton Playbook. Get this—” She reads another passage where the man is to talk about how wild animals gently bite the scruffs of the animals they’re mating with, that this, too connects to the primal brain. Max’s instructions go on to instruct the man to run his hand

up the back of her neck and pull gently on her hair and say, *see?*

More screaming from the other end.

Lizzie pulls the phone away from her ear. “Jada’s coming up.”

“Tell her to bring beers,” Kelsey says.

“Bring beers!” Lizzie says.

Jada’s up with a six-pack of beer a few minutes later. She has bright blonde hair and pouty lips that are vampiric in a pretty way. She also has a love for bright patterns and all things shiny and sparkly. She’s a walking color explosion tonight, right down to her silver sparkle combat boots. “You’re telling me the guy was following a script?” she demands. “Is that the book?”

“You want to hear the rest?” Lizzie asks.

“No!” Jada hands over the beer and folds her arms in a huff. Then, “Yes.”

Kelsey sets her up with a frosty glass as Lizzie reads on, this whole sexy thing about mammals and being hardwired to respond to being smelled and having their hair gently pulled...and even more, being lightly bitten on the neck.

“Noooo.” Jada presses her palms to her forehead. “That was all the Hilton Playbook?”

“More?” Lizzie says.

“We’ve gone this far,” Jada says.

Lizzie reads on. “‘She’ll be ready to kiss you, but don’t give her what she wants. Say, *that’s why it’s such an intense sensation to be bitten on the neck. The lightest pressure with the teeth, right on the side of the neck, stimulates the basest of instincts. Not a lot of people understand this.* Now touch the side of your own neck, showing her where you want her to bite you. Look into her eyes and say, *It’s okay, you can.* Act as if she’s been dying to do it. If you’ve been doing my system right, she’ll reach around and take the back of your hair and gently bite your neck.’”

“This is so messed up,” I say. “Did you bite him, Jada?”

“I feel so stupid,” Jada says, mortified.

“Nothing to feel mortified about.” I sling an arm around her. “How were you supposed to know?”

“Get this—Nathan, my ex? He was following this book,” Kelsey tells Jada. “And I lived with him for a *year*. While he cheated on me with techniques from it!”

“Oh my god,” Jada says.

I grit my teeth. I can’t believe Max’s book played such a huge role in Kelsey’s disaster of a relationship. And now Jada?

Lizzie raises a finger in the air. “If she does *not* take the bait, do not smile. She needs a negative consequence. Find something more interesting to look at. Then turn back to her. Now she’s ready for your command. Look into her eyes. *Go on. Bite me here.*”

I shake my head. No words.

The passage goes on. The man is to criticize her bite, and show her how to do it properly. He may give her “mild approval in the form of a lazy smile” when she gets it right. “Remember, you are the prize she is vying for. Eventually, she’ll get the bite right. At this point, finally, you should drop your gaze to her lips. She’s won the privilege of your kiss.”

We all scream.

Jada grabs the book. “I can’t believe it was all an act from a book!” She frowns. “Written by that jackass who thinks he’s Gandy with his face plastered everywhere? I can’t believe I fell for it.”

“I would’ve gone for it,” I say. “Who doesn’t want a guy with knowledge of erotic animal things? A little crazoo in bed, you know...”

“And base primal instincts,” Lizzie says. “You want base primal instincts in a guy. Except when he’s driving. Or fixing a computer.”

“Did he wear a weird hat?” I ask.

“No, but he had a lot of cool bracelets and a really shiny shirt under his blazer,” Jada says. “And he was not primal or in *any way* crazoo in bed.

Because it was all Max Hilton's material. Why am I just finding out about this now? I need to read this whole book!"

"Mia knows him," Kelsey says. "They went to the Shiz together."

"Max Hilton went to the Shiz?" Jada says. "What was he studying, utter jackhole-ishness?"

"Yes," I say, heaving myself off the couch. "You could major in theater arts, classical music, or utter jackhole-ishness. Max was an A student in the latter." I pull the darts off Max's face. "And his name was Maxfield Miller. Not Max Hilton."

Jada just looks mystified. "The Shiz?"

"Yup. Classical piano," I add, because I know that's going to be her next question. "A little bit jazz."

She looks at me like I've sprouted an extra head. "Piano? Max Hilton can play...piano?"

"Dude," Kelsey says from the couch. "He got into the *Shiz*." She says it like that explains it, and it does explain it. The Shiz is one of the most elite performing arts high schools on the planet. "He comes from a classical music dynasty—don't you know that? His father is some famous conductor, and his mother is Gloria Perez, the violinist. And he and Mia were high school rivals in a bitter feud."

"You hated each other?" Jada says.

"Ninety-nine percent of the time." I hand her the darts. "Go for it."

Jada lines up her shot, one eye closed.

I watch her shoot, glad none of them thought to ask me to tell about the one percent where Max and I didn't hate each other. That's the part that hurts the most.

Jada nails his face with scary precision, three times in a row—*whop-whop-whop*—much to Kelsey's delight. She's acting upbeat, but I can tell she's hurt and angry, and I don't blame her. Finding out that Nathan was following Max's stupid book the entire time has opened old wounds—and

even made them worse. Their whole relationship was even more fake than she thought.

Jada turns back to me. “Max Hilton got into the Shiz for classical *piano*?”

I nod. “Yup. But his true talent? Really dorky old-timey show tunes.”

“No!” Jada says.

“You should hear him sing songs from *Oklahoma!* playing the aw-shucks lovesick cowpoke, Curly McLain. Goofy comic songs. I’m telling you.”

Jada claps a hand over her mouth. Kelsey’s jaw hangs open. “Definitely the last thing I can imagine out of Max Hilton.”

Exactly.

Because Max’s brand is all about ordering cocktails by the pool and careless jet set fun. And high-style shots of him on billboards and the sides of busses and the pages of magazines. And being surrounded by beautiful women on the society pages.

And those women? They become known as Max Hilton girls. That’s his power—the girls he dates actually lose their names. Because he has a million times the gravity of anyone else. He’s James Bond and David Gandy’s love child on steroids.

The opposite of a goofy singing cowboy.

“Is this something we can find on YouTube?” Jada asks. “Pretty please, please say yes?”

“Do you think, with all of Max Hilton’s money and power, that he would allow a YouTube of him singing goofy to be out there?” I say. “That he and his people wouldn’t put the boot down on something like that so hard?”

What I don’t say is that I’ve looked. Like there have been times I go back to it in my mind and I think it maybe never happened, and so I look. And it’s never there. And it crushes me anew every time.

“How did you never tell any of us this bit of gossip?” Kelsey demands.

I shrug. Lizzie knows about it, but in general, I don’t talk about it. Maybe that is weird that I’d store the memory in a little box inside me like a fragile

keepsake. Especially considering it was all a cynical joke to Max.

“But you witnessed it?” Jada says.

“I was in the summer production with him. I sang opposite him. So yeah.”

Jada blinks, newly baffled.

I wouldn’t believe it either if I hadn’t been there.

“And you were enemies,” Jada says.

“We made careers out of humiliating each other. Max’s business partner Parker went there, too,” I say. “It’s just old Shiz week over there.”

“And guess which Meow Squad delivery cat is going to have to deliver his lunch from now on? Starting tomorrow?” Kelsey says.

Jada gasps. “No!” Then, “Not that it’s *that* bad.”

“Don’t even,” I say. “I have to be a servile minion to my high school rival. Wearing a cat suit. And he’s a billionaire in a gleaming tower.”

Lizzie gives me an exaggerated frown.

“Would you be fired if you let your friend Jada poison his sandwich?” Jada asks.

I smile.

We spend the next hour reading the book to each other. Max’s ideas are diabolical. Creative genius. There are lots of lists of principles and things. *Women are like dogs. They like to know you’re in charge.* That one gets major groans.

There’s a knock at the door at nine. I think it’s a neighbor, coming to complain about the noise, but it’s Antonio, my cousin from Italy, script in hand.

“Oh my god!” I say. “Antonio, I completely forgot.”

Antonio’s a male model who did a lot of runway work in Milan, and now he’s here trying to break into acting. He doesn’t have a lot of stage experience, which is a nice way of saying he’s awful at acting. I’ve been trying to help him, but he has a serious over-acting problem that hasn’t been

improved by his fascination with books on character motivation and method acting.

Antonio's smile is tentative—wary, even; I can't tell whether he's upset that I forgot about our practice date or whether he's overwhelmed by the angry vibe in the room.

“You guys remember my cousin Antonio, right? We were supposed to run lines.” I turn back to him. “I'm so sorry.”

“We'll all run lines with you.” Kelsey pulls him in and shoves the book into his hands. “First you have to tell the truth, though—do you recognize this book? Have you ever used it to pick up women?”

Antonio reads the inside description, which guarantees success picking up nines and tens or you get your money back. “A pickup book? I'm a male model with an Italian accent, *cara...*”

“True, he doesn't need the book,” I confirm. “Unless it's to drive off women by beating them over the head with it. He could use it for that.”

Antonio sighs wistfully, flipping through the book, reading random pages. “Americans.” He shakes his head. Reads, “‘Never ask a woman what she wants—tell her what she wants. You are a capricious god and she is your subject.’”

We all groan.

He reads more, fascinated. To be fair, the book *is* fascinating.

“Such stuff would work on men, too,” Antonio observes, shutting the book. “You could wrap a man around your little finger with these techniques.”

“If you're an awful person,” I say.

Antonio shrugs in his European way. “But if you wanted to bring a man to his knees. Some of them would perhaps need to be adjusted but...” He lifts the book. “This is what I'm saying.”

“Seriously?” Kelsey asks. “You honestly think these techniques could bring a guy to his knees?”

“Of course,” he says.

Kelsey stares at him a moment longer, then she’s grinning so wide, it squeezes my heart. It’s been a long time since I saw that look on her face, and it makes me want to smile, too.

Then she turns to me. Not just turns to me, points the high beam of her exuberant gaze at me. “Maybe even bring Max to his knees?”

I narrow my eyes. I love seeing her happy again. But I’m not sure about where this is going. “What are you thinking here, Kelsey?”

“I’m thinking about justice,” she says.

“Yes!” Jada turns to me, too, now. “Justice. You could show him how it feels, Mia.”

“I’m not doing pickup techniques on Max,” I say.

“It’s not about pickup techniques, it’s about showing him how it feels to have somebody work a system on him,” Kelsey says. “He needs to know. It’s perfect karma.”

“Except he wrote it,” I say. “It probably wouldn’t work on him.”

“Or maybe it would work on him better than it would work on anyone else,” Lizzie says. “He wrote a manual on how to get to a person’s heart. How many hearts do you think he knows firsthand? One. He only knows *one* heart. His own.”

“You’re assuming he has a heart.”

My pals laugh. They think I’m being extreme. I’m not.

By the time Max graduated, he was playing the most demanding pieces with stunning precision...and zero emotion. A wildly impressive robot. I’d call him that sometimes. I’d joke to my friends that he played like the *Terminator*, knowing it would get back to him.

“Anyway,” I say. “I think he’d recognize somebody running his own golden rules on him.”

“No way. He’d never know. He wrote that book almost ten years ago,” Kelsey says. “My sister writes books. She can’t remember anything she wrote

even one year back. She says her head fills up with a new book and crowds out the old one. And this guy, he's running a billion-dollar business and being all Mister Celeb? Trust me, Max Hilton has no memory of what's in this book."

Jada turns to me. "Do it! Teach him a lesson. Make him crawl on his grovelly knees."

"I don't know if it can be done by a person who's just delivering sandwiches," I say. "And the whole reason he requested my deliveries is to make fun of me."

"You'll see him every day. It's perfect!" Jada says. Antonio and Kelsey agree—they're full of ideas. Even Lizzie is getting into it.

I bite my lip.

I spent the past few hours dreading tomorrow with every fiber of my being. I even thought about quitting, weighing the pain of going without insurance, without allergy meds, and possibly even without a place to live against being under Max's imperious thumb.

It never occurred to me to fight back.

The girl I was in high school would be all *hell no!* to that. The south Jersey girl full of fire and confidence and mile-high plans to conquer Broadway—she'd never buckle under and assume defeat. She'd never quit Meow Squad just because Max may or may not have ordered a sandwich. And she'd raise hell if it helped her friends.

Sometimes I wonder where that girl went.

Admittedly, it's been a demoralizing few years of scrimping and saving, working menial jobs, trying out for every part under the sun, working my ass off in dance lessons and acting lessons and voice lessons and lessons to get my accent smoothed out. I've been out there hustling, but in some ways, I feel like I'm still on square one.

"Use his own system to wrap him around my little finger..." I whisper, trying it out, "and then I bring him to his knees."

“His grovelly knees,” Jada clarifies.

Kelsey is beaming at me. She’s convinced I can do it. I bite my lip, thinking back over the endless hours of holding her, comforting her as she sobbed over how bad Nathan screwed her over—using Max’s book as his guide. And then there’s Jada. And lord knows who else.

My friends need me.

I stand straight and tall, jam my fists into my hips with a confidence I don’t really feel. “Okay, then,” I say. “I’ll do it. I’m gonna bring Max Hilton to his grovelly knees.”

Kelsey hugs me. And Jada is clapping, and Antonio is insisting it can be done and Lizzie is finding pens and markers and then we open more beers.

You are the alpha. Adorn yourself with symbols of your superiority.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

Two hours later, Max's dart-porcupined face is a distant memory.

There is something new on the wall: a giant chart made up of taped-together sheets of butcher paper that Lizzie borrowed from an artist on the third floor. Across the top, in heavy blue magic marker, Kelsey has written *Operation Bring Max Hilton to his grovelly knees!*

There are ten checkboxes for his ten golden rules, which are more like techniques. The hot cold move. The power play. Pulling out the praise rug. Every time I do a technique on Max, I get a checkmark.

The idea is that I'm supposed to do at least one technique on him per visit. And at the end of ten visits, he'll be on his knees. I don't know if I can pull it off, but it means something to Kelsey and Jada that I'm fighting for them. And it makes me feel like less of a victim with these visits.

I point to the first box. *Adorn yourself with symbols of your superiority.* “This one is already a problem.”

Kelsey turns to the page with the rule and reads, “‘Demonstrate your alpha status by wearing standout clothes and otherwise adorning yourself with symbols of your utter superiority.’ Seems pretty straightforward.”

“I have to wear the cat outfit. You get fired if you cover it up or don’t wear it. Seriously, they’d fire me if I showed up in a gown or a tiara or something.”

Kelsey wants to see the employee handbook. I grab my laptop and find the PDF of it.

Jada reads over our shoulders. “It says that you can’t hide the ears or put other clothes over the cat suit, but what if you became the most fabulous cat? There’s nothing here forbidding you from jazzing up the outfit.”

“You guys, the fact that I’m a delivery girl who has to wear an embarrassing cat outfit is not a quality I want to play up.”

“Unless you work it!” Kelsey says. “You know how to work an outfit better than anyone.”

“I’m not working the Meow Squad delivery outfit.”

“I have a glue gun downstairs. And sequins and rhinestones—” Jada says.

“—that are staying downstairs,” I say.

“Yessss,” Lizzie says. “And you’ll need fake eyelashes.”

“Oh my god, no!”

“I have those silver go-go boots,” Kelsey says. “Go get your outfit, Mia. We’re going to make you the most fabulous delivery cat of all.”

“Don’t you want to bring him to his grovelly knees for all of womankind?” Jada asks. “While turning the tables on him? And then crush him under your sparkly silver heel?”

Lizzie is grinning. “This is going to be perfect!” She reads more from the alpha-signaling chapter.

Meanwhile, Kelsey grabs the magazine picture of the insanely expensive

Louboutin Solibria pumps in starshine pink that I've been coveting.

I sigh when I see them, like I always do. They're the ultimate fairy godmother shoes.

She waves it in the air. "If you do all ten of the golden rules to Max over the course of your deliveries, I'm putting one hundred dollars toward your Louboutins." She tapes it at the far-right side of the *Operation Bring Max Hilton to his grovelly knees!* chart.

"I'm in for a hundred," Jada says.

"Two hundred fifty!" Lizzie says.

Antonio shrugs, throws down some twenties. Just like that, we're almost halfway to the shoes.

"Wow," I say.

"As thanks," Kelsey says.

Ten minutes later, we're all hard at work on blinging up my cat delivery outfit while Antonio reads the book aloud. He's discovered a concept called prize baiting where you're supposed to go places with a really beautiful women on your arm, and ideally two. It's all about seeming pursued by others while appearing unavailable to your target.

"I don't know about going around with two beautiful women on my arm," I say.

"What about two beautiful men?" Jada asks. And suddenly everyone is staring at Antonio.

"I do not share," Antonio says. "Please. One of me is enough, no?"

We all groan, but we're joke groaning, because one Antonio is worth two if not three or four normal hot guys.

"I'll do it. I'll be your suitor," Antonio declares. "But I'll need a good backstory."

"No backstory," I say. "It wouldn't be a speaking part."

"I follow you in on your delivery," Antonio says, "so jealous am I when you so much as look at another man."

“You can’t follow me on my deliveries,” I say. “You’d get me fired. We’ll have to think of something else.”

Antonio’s bummed, but my outfit is looking kind of wonderful, though that might be the beer talking. Kelsey’s calling for me to model it.

I go in my bedroom and put it all on, including the cat ears. I inspect the transformation in the mirror. Jada has edged the V-neck of the cat suit with sequins, which spray outward over the bodice—there’s a definite figure skater vibe going on. The apron got the same treatment. I fit the ear headband onto my head; the ears are trimmed with sequins except for crystal jewels at the tops. Jada did a very creative job.

Somebody’s Flawless by Beyoncé. I shove my feet into Kelsey’s silver boots and dance my way out. Everybody oohs and aaahs. I don’t know if it’s the beer or the fun night or what, but I’m feeling pretty good.

We hang out a bit more after that, me in the outfit. At one point, I pick up the book, looking to see if there are even sex tips. He’s rumored to be amazing in bed, but I tell myself it would be all precision, like his piano playing.

Heartless tricks where he amuses himself with you and then casts you aside. Working a system.

Now he’ll see how it feels.

Men of worth pursue big goals.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

My blinged-out outfit isn't feeling all that fun in the grim morning light of our cold kitchen. In fact, rather than improving the look, the sparkly stuff seems to be saying, *in case you haven't noticed, check it out! I'm wearing a dorky delivery outfit!*

I pull on my winter coat and hat and trudge to the subway station. The closer I get, the more my heart sinks. I'll have to do my entire route in it, including a likely delivery to Max Hilton.

But I remind myself that I'm not doing it just for me. I'm doing it for justice. For Kelsey and Jada and all the other women who got worked.

I reach the Meow Squad truck. I don't see our driver, but my work frenemy, Sienna, is there.

I stroll with confidence that I don't feel.

Sienna has pretty strawberry blonde hair and a dusting of freckles on her perfect nose, basically, the kind of looks that allow her to look either beautifully scrappy or beautifully elegant, depending on the needs of whatever part she's competing with me for, and she has amazing fashion sense and cool friends who seem slightly futuristic.

She feels confident about her superiority to all of us, and she's 98 percent right. I like to pretend I don't care about her opinion, but I actually do.

Sienna also has an amazing talent for posing. It helps that she has a really long, willowy body and long limbs, so when she leans against a wall, it's *willowy girl leaning cool*, whereas when I do it with my considerably shorter and less willowy limbs, it just looks like *pasta-fed girl of sturdy Italian stock is sooo weary. Pasta-fed girl needs to work on cardio. Pasta-fed girl shouldn't have gotten bangs, but she's doing the best she can so give her a break already.*

Sienna is eyeing my boots. "What's up with the boots?"

"Nothing. Just..." I decide it's now or never. I pull off my hat and take off my coat and shove the stuff in the back of the truck. And then turn and try to look natural.

Sienna is staring at my uniform with a stunned look and let's just say you wouldn't call it stunned admiration.

She devotes extra staring time to my sequined ears, her pretty features twisted into horrified yet delighted confusion. "You lose a bet or something?"

I'm about to explain the whole thing, but then I decide not to. An actress commits to a part. "No, I've decided that I'm the queen of delivery cats."

Sienna adds a lip twist. "Are you trying to be funny?"

"Do I look like I'm trying to be funny? Do you see the work that went into this? I'm the queen of the delivery cats."

"What? You just...decided that?"

"That's right."

She gapes at me a bit longer.

I smile and pull out my phone.

“Oh-kaaaaaay.” She pulls out her phone with an attitude of, *done with the crazy person*.

I scroll through Instagram miserably. I just have to get through this one day.

It’s possible somebody else at Maximillion Plaza specifically requested me as the delivery girl assigned to that tower. I don’t know anybody else there, but maybe somebody who saw me in a show or something?

“Isn’t that kind of like declaring yourself the queen of the latrine?” Sienna’s staring at me again. “Or like declaring yourself to be the most Burger Bob’s-iest of the Burger Bob’s fry crew?” Burger Bob’s is a greasy burger place we make fun of.

“It’s not like that at all,” I say, pocketing my phone. “I am queen of the delivery cats. It’s a desirable thing.”

She frowns. “So you think you’re the manager now?”

“No. It’s like, the queen of England doesn’t actually run the country. I’m queen of the delivery cats like that. I’m queen in spirit, in enthusiasm, in adornment. I’m alpha cat, and these shiny things signify that.”

“Well, they’re signifying something,” she grumbles.

“They signify my superiority,” I say, really, really committing.

She furrows her pretty brows. She is liking this less and less. Maybe these things won’t work as part of a diabolical plan to bring Max Hilton to his knees, but they certainly work as a Sienna Carlisle annoyance device. “That’s not the word I was thinking.”

I’m all smiles and utter conviction in my role. If there’s one thing you learn as an actress, it’s that the show must go on, but I so wish I could rip off the sequins and rhinestones and glam eyelashes. “I’m the top cat now. I’m the queen of the cats.”

There’s this little pep talk in the alpha-signaling section of Max’s book where he talks about how difficult it is to stand out from the herd. “When you

alpha-signal, it's not just about looking amazing, it's also about communicating that you have enough personal power to pull off a bold look. The more you own your look, the more power you communicate," he writes.

Thinking about that passage comforts me, which is ironic on about five different levels.

"What if I want to be queen?" Sienna asks.

"Too bad," I say. "There can only be one queen."

She laughs, like it's all a big joke. "I can't believe you're going to deliver in that."

"Watch and weep," I say, though actually, I'm the one liable to weep, considering I'll be delivering a sandwich to my legendary rival dressed as the most ridiculous cat of all the cats.

What have I done?

Our sector driver, Rollins, comes around to the back of the truck. He gives me a startled look, then starts pulling out carts.

Meow Squad delivers food-truck food to people in office towers and residential high-rises throughout Manhattan. The stuff gets ordered and paid for through an app. We're a well-oiled network of food dispersal—people in cat costumes whose job it is to wait in line and bring food to drivers like Rollins, who assemble the carts and bring them us runner cats, and us runner cats who do the deliveries.

Our high-style carts are more tall than wide, all the better to fit into crowded elevators. They're made of brushed stainless steel with the orange Meow Squad logo on the sides and hot and cold insulation compartments. We're adding new buildings and new cats all the time.

Rollins lifts my cart out of the back and onto the pavement, turning the handle to me with a nervous smile.

Rollins is a sweet, naïve farm boy who grew up in the rural hinterlands of some western state, and then came to the city as part of a really religious production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

He thinks tattoos and facial piercings are Satanic and says nerdy things like, *We give 110 percent of ourselves in every rehearsal!* We're all kind of shocked he's lasted this long in the city.

We go through our carts, checking our condiments and chips stash.

"This is going to be great," I say to nobody in particular, trying to exude personal power. "I'm the ultimate delivery cat. And the ending meow? I've got something better."

That gets Sienna's attention. We delivery cats are supposed to say *meow* after each delivery. It's a fire-able offense not to say it. Most of us say it to the tune of *thank you. It sounds least dorky that way.*

"What are you going to do?" she asks.

I mimic putting down a meal, then I put my hands on my hips and strike a pose, focused on channeling personal power. "Meowwwwww!" I say, all style and moxie.

My co-workers just look stunned.

Rollins barks out a laugh.

Okay, I'm officially ridiculous. I can't even meet his eyes. What a dork I am. When I turn back to him, he has this odd look on his face. Have I finally put poor, wholesome, wide-eyed Rollins over the edge? Is he wondering how he can switch with another driver? Or just go back West?

"Cat got your tongue?" I say. Because if he has something to say, I just want it out there.

"It's just that..." Long pause.

"What?" I press.

He starts to say five different things and then stops himself each time, opening and closing his mouth like a fish. Then he says, simply, "You're gonna kill with tips out there."

I blink. "You think?"

He nods. "Queen of the cats. You know you are."

I grin. I just want to hug him.

In fact, Rollins turns out to be right. My first two towers have been on my route forever, but when I appear as a fabulous alpha cat, people sit up and take notice. They smile. They engage with me more. They give me compliments and say things like, *New ears? New boots?*

I play up the queen thing, strutting around and having fun. When they ask me about the change, I say things like, *I've decorated my outfit because I'm the most wonderful delivery cat ever*, or, *I've declared myself queen of the delivery cats*.

My tips go through the roof.

I'm stunned. The more I work it, the higher the tips.

I'm back out at noon getting the cart for Maximillion Plaza.

I'm checking the order on my Meow Pad, which is an iPad that they decided they needed an embarrassing name for, and enter the cart number to check the roster. And there it is. An order for a roast beef and swiss croissant sandwich. Twenty-fifth floor. No office number.

His.

There's always been a strange, sizzling line of knowledge between us like that. Not sizzling hot, but sizzling painful. A sizzle that stings and leaves a terrible scar.

My heart pounds. It's fear, but something more—a kind of dark exhilaration. I'm going in there. I'm gonna do this.

I make my way to the building, steeling myself. The other deliveries were easy audiences, but Max zeroes in on your weak points. He sees through your bullshit. Queen of the cats is pure bullshit—bullshit that *he* invented. Will he know?

I keep going back to what Kelsey said, though—her sister never remembers what she wrote even a year ago. Max is running a men's lifestyle empire now; surely the things he put in a book nearly a decade ago have faded into the dust heap of time. Also, his system was for men. He'll never recognize it coming from a woman...right?

Can I actually bring him to his knees with his own system? People rarely see their own weak spots, even if they wrote a book on those weak spots for others.

And my sisters are counting on me. It's this most of all that gives me the rush of courage that propels me through the gleaming steel-and-glass doors of Maximillion Plaza; this that gets me across the high-ceilinged lobby.

It's dizzyingly lux inside, an assault of white marble and exposed pipes and polished metal beams with an ultra-mod lighting scheme, like somebody threw a basket of enchanted glowing orbs toward the ceiling, and they froze midflight in an arrangement that's entirely random, yet utterly perfect.

Naturally.

What you also can't miss are the mammoth photographs of Max on the towering walls. Black-and-white on-brand photos.

I recognize some of the shots from magazine and billboard campaigns for his eveningwear line, his sportswear line, his exclusive wristwatch line.

There's Max leaning in a darkened doorway, all merciless charm in a tux that looks lived-in and maybe even fought in and now clings wantonly to his muscular chest and shoulders.

There's Max leaning on a railing looking thoughtfully out over some Mediterranean cliffs wearing a Maximillion brand watch on his very muscular forearm, shot with some type of photographic trickery that makes you really, really want to touch his skin.

Further down, there's a shot of Max surrounded by beautiful women, but not in a cheesy way. Max never gives you openings. He's like a steamship with massive, iron-clad sides. Your puny little shots ping right off of him as he looks on amused, at ease, a glorious god accustomed to the sparkling waters in which he floats.

It's no wonder that millions of men emulate Max, strive to be the cool, handsome man of mystery with the world at his feet. Max walks into a party on a yacht and everyone on board scrambles for his attention, competes to

offer him his favorite cocktail, ready to smile at his quips, but not too hugely, because you don't want to be sycophantic!

The security people wave me into an elevator area. I wait alongside a bunch of beautiful people with respectable jobs that don't require them to wear ears and make animal sounds.

Sweat trickles down my spine.

I shouldn't have been surprised Max found out I was a delivery cat. Max always finds out everything that is wrong. Everything you want to hide, he finds it and exploits it.

I should be surprised he took as *long* as he did. That's what should surprise me.

The elevator doors open and I get in with the group. A few of them glance discreetly at me. I hold my head high.

I go over various self-confidence mantras I have.

Many successful actresses were still struggling in their late twenties and thirties.

Another: You made a choice to reach for the stars, to have a career on Broadway. There's no shame in doing what it takes. It's called paying dues.

And when things are at their worst: You have a right to dream.

The lines all crumble as I ride up the elevator. Only Max has the ability to pre-crumble me.

Max's is the highest floor, but I'm not going to deliver to him first, though in a different building, I would.

The efficiency of delivering up versus delivering down is a raging debate among us Meow Squad delivery cats. I'm a deliver-down girl, especially before three in the afternoon, a decision that has to do with my personal theories of elevator traffic patterns. I'm going against my normal way, partly because I want to make Max wait the longest, and also, I might have to cry afterwards.

So I hit floor five first, in and out of the elevator. Five orders on the sixth

floor, mostly sushi; lots of falafels and some wraps to the conference room on seven, nothing else until twelve, and so on.

I deliver in the persona of most wonderful cat ever, but it's fraying at the edges.

I dispatch food to the twenty-first floor and get back in with my cart. Max is next. I remind myself to breathe. I picture Kelsey's and Jada's faces when I check off the first box when they see I'm stepping up for them. And I'll keep checking off the boxes.

Assuming he makes me deliver his lunch more than once. But he will. Max has no mercy. He never did.

The floor buttons blink. My pulse races.

A lot of successful actresses were still struggling in their late twenties and thirties.

The doors squeech open.

The twenty-fifth floor is a crystal palace of breathtaking views featuring the cool angularity of Manhattan beneath a soaring blue sky. A beautiful woman not in an embarrassing cat squad delivery outfit sits behind the desk.

I suck in a breath. There's still a chance this is all coincidence, or that somebody else in the building requested me. If this is not a setup personally designed by Max, she'll take the delivery for him. One of the main things big money does is to insulate you from commoners. "Meow Squad delivery."

"Go ahead and bring it down. All the way down." She turns her head to indicate the direction.

With that one command, she shows me that she had instructions to let me through.

Which means Max is expecting me.

She's still looking at me. Again she does the head motion, or more like a graceful torque. It's the kind of move I might memorize and fold into my catalog of character details if I weren't feeling like I was wearing a Lady Gaga-style meat suit on my way to a rabid dog convention.

I head down.

The floor is sparkling white marble and the walls are something white that glows, as though with lights behind; skylights above showcase the blue sky.

All in all, this hallway could be somebody's idea of what the path to heaven is like. But being that every ten feet there's a photo of Max Manwhore Hilton looking like he's Adonis himself, and I'm dressed up as an animal that eats from a bowl on the floor and poops in a box, it's more like the highway to hell for me.

My neck feels unpleasantly clammy. Sweat is pouring down my back.

I don't have to go in. I could turn around. I could ditch the cart and turn around. It's a still free country. I slow my steps, thinking seriously about going back to waiting tables. Except insurance. Flexibility. My friends.

I reach the door and do an acting exercise where I breathe in the feeling that I wish to convey. I breathe in confidence and success.

I'm cool and confident, never doubting the path I've taken.

Max is nobody special to me. I barely even remember him from high school.

With trembling hands I knock. "Lunch delivery." Because I can't quite bring myself to say *Meow Squad*.

"Come," he says, sounding bored.

I push in my cart.

There across an expanse of white marble tile stands a massive desk. And behind it sits Max.

My mouth goes dry. Butterflies scatter in my belly.

He's typing something onto a laptop, eyes fixed on whatever he's writing. The light from the screen seems to kiss his cheekbones, brushing them with an imperious glow.

People talk about resting bitch face, but Max has the opposite. He has resting amused-and-confident-god face, the default expression of a man with

incredible beauty and wealth and a magnetic presence that people can feel in their bodies when they get within ten feet. Not to mention an uber-cool mythology about himself where he lounges by pools in sunglasses and likes his women hot and his scotch cold.

I stand there flooded with loathing and something else that I don't have a category for.

He doesn't even see me.

On his wall is a massive photograph of him sprawled upon a princely chair; three gorgeous gown-wearing supermodels hang on him. They're all laughing.

I recognize Lana Sheffidy, the most famous Max Hilton girl. She parlayed her association with Max into one of the world's top handbag brands.

"Mia?"

I turn.

Our gazes lock.

And for one skin-shivering, heart-thundering moment, I forget how to breathe.

Because it's Max. The familiarity of him buzzes through my veins like a drug. He tilts his head, dark brows a bold slash over blue eyes.

Maybe it's the surprise that makes him look vulnerable for a second, that lets me imagine I see the boy I knew that summer, the sweet kid who sang with me and brought me snow cones and helped me with my music theory class.

"Mia. What are you doing?"

I straighten. He's acting surprised? *Seriously?* Who arranges for his high school rival to deliver him a sandwich and then acts surprised?

For a second, I think it's real. That this is some kind of mix-up.

Then the corner of his lip quirks up, all baffled amusement. Like something's funny. Like it's all a joke. Because of course he knew.

My body heats. More than heats. I'm a nuclear reactor of mortification.

God, when will I learn my lesson? How many times will I think Max Hilton is having a real emotion, only to be slammed in the face with the cynical, cold-hearted truth of him?

I smile my hugest smile. It's not for nothing that I attended Manhattan's most elite performing arts high school. "Max," I say. "Looks like *somebody's* getting a delicious croissant sandwich."

I park my cart and move across the elegant white marble floor of his airy office like he's just another customer. I set the bag and his complimentary mini-bag of potato chips in front of him.

He just watches me. Saying nothing. Savoring his victory, I suppose. There's a lot of victory to savor.

But either way, alpha-signaling unlocked!

It's here that I get my flash of brilliance. I put my hand on my hip. "Very nice, Max," I say. "All of this is very impressive."

To most people, that would sound like a compliment.

But Max and I aren't most people.

His lip twitches—that's how I know my little zinger hit home.

I strut back to my cart and push it toward the door, biting back a smile at my cleverness. Still he says nothing. I really, really, really don't want to do the outrageous meow—or really, any meow—but I need to. So I'm thinking about that when he speaks just one more word.

"Wait."

I brace. I turn.

And meet his gaze.

He beams at me, his amused resting face turned to eleven. After a perfect amount of time, he crosses his legs, leisurely king upon his throne.

"What is it?" I ask.

He takes a nice long look at me in my stupid outfit, and finally his gaze rests at the top of my head where my glittering cat ears perch. It's the part of

the outfit I hate the most right now, which just goes to show that Max's ability to zero in on my weak spot is still intact.

He lifts the white bag with the Meow Squad logo and website URL and delivery promise spelled out in a fab orange font. "It says right on the bag that I get to choose from an array of chips."

"When no choice is made, you get plain Lay's."

He frowns. "I'd prefer to choose from the array."

I raise my eyebrows, but just a tiny bit, because I'm so rising above this power play. "I have Lay's, cheesy puffs, barbeque, cool ranch, and baked sea salt."

"Let's see them." He circles his finger, a shadow of a grin playing on his generous lips.

"Well...I just told you what they are."

"I'm sorry," he says. "But *presented with an array* is a visual concept. I'd like to be presented with my array. I think I'm entitled, don't you?"

My pulse races. So this is how it's going to be. Max going full asshole. Milking every bit of evil pleasure out of my servitude.

"Oh, I definitely think you're entitled," I say, and I'm definitely using *entitled* as an unflattering adjective. "Very entitled."

His stare is all cold sparkles. "Present my array, Mia; I don't have all day."

My belly twists. I'd thought I'd had Greek yogurt for breakfast, but maybe it was daggers that I ate. And somehow I can't move. I really should hop into action. The longer I wait, the more obvious it'll be that he's getting to me.

Rule number one: never let Max know he's getting to you.

And of course, there's the little matter of my job. Meow Squad is a customer-is-always-right place, and Max Hilton is more important than most. He could get me fired with the slightest complaint. One disparaging word on Instagram and Meow Squad could go supernova.

I turn to my cart. I grab two bags in one hand and three in the other and walk his floor of glamour—slowly—head held high. If nothing else, I'll waste his time, one of the few ways the powerless get revenge on the powerful.

I smile coolly, an old technique from my Max wars. I recite the names in the manner of a game show hostess, “Lay’s, cheesy puffs, barbeque, cool ranch, and baked sea salt.”

He makes me stand there while he decides, demoting me from delivery girl to human chip display rack.

“Hmm.” He’s not looking at the chips, though. He’s looking at me. I stand proudly, foot out front, a model with attitude. *Eat your heart out, Max Hilton*, that’s what my stance says. *You have your empire but you’ll never have me. I’m queen of the delivery cats.*

Or at least, that’s what I’m hoping it says. Max’s book is really strong on projecting confidence. I project with everything I have.

The seconds tick away. My pulse whooshes in my ears.

“Very good,” he says with a twinkle in his eye.

Whoosh whoosh whoooooosh.

Literally is an overused word, just as *worst nightmare come true* is an overused phrase. But put them together and you have the perfect description of Max finding himself with the ability to order me around. *Literally my worst nightmare come true.*

And maybe this awesome power to humiliate me is *his* dream come true. We always were on opposite sides of things like that.

“Well?” I say.

“Hmm.” He puts his finger on his chin.

Seriously?!

Time slows. Humiliation is a buzz inside my body, growing more and more intense with every passing moment, until it reaches the level of an agitated hornets’ nest. The hornets trapped, frantic.

“I’ll take the cheesy puffs,” he says, voice rough.

I force myself to give him a mocking smile.

“Open them and set them here, please.”

I walk back around the desk, feeling his gaze—not just on my skin, but deeper than that, like he can hear those hornets.

I really want to rip open the bag in a way that either smashes the puffs or sends them flying, but then he’d know I’m upset, so I open it nicely, channeling the dancier grace of Kelsey. Coolly I set it next to his sandwich.

“Thank you,” he says.

I head for the door, feeling warm in my cat suit, and like the ear-headband is too tight on my head. I need to get out of there. And I so don’t want to say meow. But what if he decides to make me? I can hear him now: *Did you forget your line, Mia?*

Though that wasn’t his criticism of my acting back at the Shiz. It was that my acting was obvious. Without nuance. *Jerseygirl*, he’d call me, mocking my south Jersey accent.

My accent definitely put me at a disadvantage. So did my lack of training—all the other kids at the Shiz had grown up with lessons in everything, but I was lucky to get a bowl of Cheerios for dinner some days.

Still, I’m proud of where I’m from. And I can be proud of who I am. I don’t have a tower, but I have friends who I fight for.

I decide I’ll say *meow*, and I’ll say it the best ever.

I put my queen-of-the-delivery-cats attitude back on. Tears prick at my eyes, but I smile through them and whip around, chest lifted, shoulders back, so happy and sure of things. I’m channeling the love I have for my girlfriends and for my sweet, hapless cousin, and for Beyoncé and Peanut Butter Kandy Kakes and when I nail a monologue so hard I feel magic, and that’s what I load into it. “Meowwww!”

He looks up, features formed into an expression I can’t read. What? Did I disturb him? Had he returned to his important business, thinking I’d left, only

to be interrupted by my silly antics?

“That’ll be all, Mia.”

The breath goes out of me. *That’ll be all.* As though I’m a ridiculous creature, scrabbling at his feet.

My hands grab onto my cart handle, seemingly of their own will. It’s like my hands are saying, *let’s get out of here!* And my feet agree. *Go, go, goooo!* They’re moving, ferrying me away with whatever shreds of dignity I have left. Somehow I get my servile cart out through the door. I push it down the hallway and all the way down to the elevator. Into the elevator.

I don’t remember getting down to the street, but eventually I’m there, grateful for the bracing winter breeze.

One thought and one thought only races through my mind: *never again.*

I can never go back there again. They can fire me, take my apartment, strip me of my insurance. They can send me back to south Jersey to run-down Sadler with its bars and sad little Dollar Store and boarded-up movie theater.

And my mom will be so sweet to me. She’ll totally understand, because that’s the Corelli family curse. Chase your goals and get knocked flat. My folks started so many crazy businesses when my brother and I were coming up, but they’re playing it safe now, working at the Foot Locker at the mall. “The higher you shoot, the harder you fall,” Dad warned me when I took off.

I walk down the block, trying to keep a spring in my step in case he’s watching. And then I go around the corner and cry.

Remember, you're the alpha. You're the pursued. Let your reality be stronger than hers.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

Kelsey, Antonio, and Jada are waiting for me when I get back home, along with a redhead who rises from the couch with the poise of a dancer. She rushes up and shakes my hand before I can even take off my coat.

“I want you to know that I dated a guy off that capricious-god-escalation move,” she says with confidential urgency. “And I found half the things he ever told me in the back of that book. I kept giving him chances because of those stories and it was all Max Hilton material!”

“Oh, no,” I say.

“This is Francine,” Kelsey calls from the couch, dimples on full flare. “Francine is in.”

Francine says, “I’m putting a hundred toward buying your heels because

you are so amazing for doing this, and here's another hundred from my sister, who fell for half the lines in there. Kelsey told us to read that book, and we've been freaking out."

"Thank you," I say, "but I don't know...this whole thing..." I give Kelsey a desperate look.

"Are you gonna have him on his grovelly knees soon?" Jada asks excitedly, not picking up on my distress.

Kelsey gets it, though. She's on her feet. "What?"

"It was harder than I thought it would be," I say. "It might be a little ambitious, thinking I'm going to put Max Hilton on his knees. After today, I'd settle for retaining a shred of dignity. It could not have been more demeaning."

"Demeaning the woman who inspires my dreams?" Antonio growls from the couch. "Perhaps my character needs to teach this man a lesson he won't forget."

"Don't," I say, not sure whether I want to laugh or cry. "It's not funny."

Kelsey wraps me in a big long hug. "You got this." She gives me one final squeeze, then lets me go. "You got it."

"Yeah, I don't know," I say.

"What happened?"

I peel off my coat and sink into the couch next to Antonio, who's studying his phone now. "It was just the worst experience of my life."

"So, you wore the ears?" Jada asks softly. "Did he notice?"

"Hard to say. Max is a man with a carefully curated surface. I know in his pictures he looks all natural and warm and friendly with his enchanting smile, but he's a cold, calculating metal robot. He gives you nothing. Though he did try to act like he was surprised that I was there, and then he got off on ordering me around. It was just...uhhh." I tell them about the chips array thing.

"I would die," Francine says unhelpfully.

“I wanted to,” I say.

Jada scowls. The silver glitter headband that holds back her thick blonde hair seems almost to sparkle in sympathetic anger. “Why is he such an asshole to you?”

“Because we’re natural enemies in the wild. Why is the lion an asshole to the antelope?”

“I think that’s a negative way of framing it,” Kelsey says. “It positions you as the prey of the lion. You’re more like the giraffe.”

“A lion can take down a giraffe,” I say.

“Hyena?” Jada offers. “The lion can rarely get the best of a hyena. You’re the hyena.”

“The hyena. Thank you, Jada. Why not *a plague of locusts? Or a noxious cloud?*”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Kidding,” I say. *Kind of.*

“Anyway, I’m a long way to bringing him to his grovelly knees. It’s not just about his heartless power. There’s a massive flock of supermodels that will be keeping him from sinking to his grovelly knees for me. With gossamer threads. Lifting him up.”

“Max Hilton girls,” Kelsey groans.

Antonio looks up from his phone. As a male member of the species, it’s his duty to perk up whenever Max Hilton girls are mentioned. “You don’t think those girls all actually...”

“Fuck him? No way, it’s just publicity,” Jada says. “Socialites and models and designers use him for his name. And he’s using them for the Max Hilton illusion.”

I study her. She’s quite the Max Hilton expert. “Yeah, they’d flee like rats if he went out in sweatpants with socks under sandals.”

Kelsey snorts.

“Give them a break. The Max Hilton girls are sweet,” Antonio says.

“They’re very attractive and clever too. On Instagram...”

“Uhhh.” Kelsey tosses a cork from our cork bowl at him. And then another and another.

Kelsey tosses more corks. I grab a handful and completely nail him.

Antonio’s cringing, laughing. “What?!”

“It’s PR, Antonio,” Kelsey says. “That’s not who they are.”

I’m feeling better. Slightly. Antonio watches Kelsey out the side of his eyes. Did he say that to get a rise out of her?

“It was only your first day working his own rules on him,” Kelsey says. “Do we need to get out the Hilton Playbook and read what it says about perseverance?”

I snort. “No.”

“What does it say?” Francine asks.

“To not get discouraged,” Kelsey says. “Hold your head up high and keep moving forward. You can do anything.”

“As long as you have Max Hilton telling you what to do,” Francine grumbles.

“It’s a good system,” Antonio says, gazing over at Kelsey, who’s all dimples back at him.

Antonio and Kelsey. Is it possible?

“You have to deliver sandwiches to him either way,” Jada points out. “You may as well check off all of the boxes. Worst-case scenario, we buy you those shoes. Best-case scenario, he’s on his knees and you are wearing them as you crush him.”

“You can do it!” Kelsey grabs a marker off the side table and holds it out to me. “Put an X in that box! You nailed that rule. One golden move down, nine to go.”

I just stare at the marker.

“And you’re fighting for us,” Francine says. “For all of us who went home with a clever, exciting guy and woke up with a loser. You’re our hero.

You're showing Max what it's like for somebody to do a system on him. Please don't quit."

"Pleeeeeease," Jada says.

Something swells in my chest. They're counting on me.

We used to play this nerdy guessing game in acting class where you had to pantomime things in a really specific way—like you'd pantomime washing the dishes smugly or charmingly or happily or wonderingly or whatever, and the others would have to guess the adjective you were going for. It's a fun game—if you're an actor—and great for building nuance.

So I'm looking at my girlfriends, old and new. And yeah, maybe I'm fighting a losing battle, but I'm fighting for them, and that means something.

I grab the marker and march over to the chart swashbucklingly. I slash out an X resolutely, and spin around. Boldly I jam my fists onto my hips. I'm fighting for my friends. I'm fighting for all women. I'm Joan of Arc in kitten ears. "One golden rule down, nine to go, bitches!"

Francine hoots, and Jada claps. Kelsey's hands are clasped. Antonio looks on smolderingly, a five on the Blue Steel scale.

The other nine rules won't be so easy, but I'm acting *as if*, and that's important. Acting *as if* is the key to a lot in life. Acting as if you're successful invites success. Acting as if things are sexy with a guy makes things sexier. Like if you act like a kiss is super sexy, then it *is* super sexy. Or at least that's what I think. Lizzie disagrees. But she's a baker, what does she know about the magic of acting as if?

"What rule are you doing tomorrow?" Kelsey asks.

I eye the chart. "Reverse-chasing is next."

"Reverse-chasing?" Francine asks

Kelsey raises her hand. "Oh, I know all about reverse-chasing." There's a murderous look in her eye. "*Reverse-chasing* is where you act like the woman you want to pick up is after *you*, even though she totally is not. And you're all like, get away! Even though she's not at all after you, but you act

like you think she is, and it intrigues her. Falsely. That's how my cheating ex kicked things off. If only I'd known."

Francine shakes her head disgustedly in solidarity with Kelsey, then she turns to me. "So you're gonna do it right back at him. What are you gonna say?"

"I don't have it worked out. But I have some ideas. I want it to feel spontaneous."

"Mia can improv like a boss," Kelsey says. "Mia'll reverse-chase his ass so hard, he won't know what hit him."

"Do not forget prize-baiting." Antonio puts away his phone. "Where you position yourself as a prize. A sought-after partner, desired by others." He smiles, all smoldery man-mystery. "I've been working on my backstory, *cara*."

"You have?" I try to act like that's good news, and not the worst news ever. If there's one thing you don't want, it's Antonio working on his backstory.

"And when I dress in Hugo Boss?" He kisses his fingers. "With this backstory I'm creating?"

"You in a suit, that's probably all we need, right there," I say.

"But to add this backstory," he says.

"We'll see. I *did* see Max cross the street from afar, going between his two buildings, before the last delivery. Around eleven. So we could set it up so he sees you talking with me out there, but you wouldn't have to interact with him."

"You saw him before the delivery?" Kelsey asks.

"Just from afar. I was pretty sure it was him. Max's company owns this rehabbed workshop space across the street from Maximillion Plaza. If he goes back and forth often at that time, I could get the driver to park at a spot where Antonio would be visibly admiring me."

Antonio rubs his hands. "I will be such a suitor. He will see my passion."

“My plan is that you just smile at me a lot and laugh at whatever I say. It doesn’t have to be over the top.”

“He would see my desperation for you.”

“Just passion is good,” I say.

“No, it’s desperation.” Antonio puts on a dark expression. Scarface meets Blue Steel on steroids. “I grew up poor in the streets. My father rejected me. My mother was cruel but beautiful. So poor were we that they sold me to a brothel when I was but a boy. I was forced to sell myself in the alleyways of Milano.”

“Double Dark Chocolate Milano is my favorite cookie,” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

“Milano is not a cookie,” Antonio growls. “It’s a city.”

“Sorry, Antonio...” Jada winces. “In America it kind of *is* a cookie.”

“If you knew the underbelly of Milano as I did,” Antonio says, “you would not think it.”

“The underbelly of Milano,” I say. “Is that near the hardscrabble alley behind the Keebler Elves’ Factory?” I ask.

Jada raises a finger. “I believe it’s located east of the Pepperidge Farms killing fields.”

“Stop it, you guys! Let Antonio tell his backstory.” Kelsey turns to Antonio. “Ignore them, Antonio. Please go on.”

Antonio fixes her with Scarface meets Blue Steel. “I grew up fighting hoodlums. The fist, the blade. What did I care? What did ever I see of life?”

I suck in a breath. “Too many productions of *West Side Story*, maybe?”

He gives me a dark look.

“Dude, I’m just saying you should save this backstory for a real role where you have lines and things,” I say.

Antonio’s unperturbed. “So many shameful acts I did until I hit rock bottom, so desperate was I for a kind word from my mother.”

“Your mother?” Jada squeaks. “Are you going Jerry Springer on us?”

Kelsey scowls at Jada. “Come on, you guys!”

“Italian men prize the love of their mothers,” Antonio says. “It is a pure and good thing.” He turns to me. “Then, at my lowest, lying in the gutter, I see your Yummies ad.”

“Oh my god, Antonio, no,” I laugh. I actually *was* in a Yummies caramel-pops commercial that got made into a print ad. “I don’t think they have Yummies in Milano.”

“They don’t have Yummies there because all the people are eating Milanos,” Jada says.

Antonio waves her off and continues with his backstory, which involves him lying injured in a pool of blood—the blood of his rival, he clarifies—and then an American tourist comes by and casts a magazine down onto his face in disgust, and when he regains consciousness, he sees my ad. “It is your beauty and talent that inspired me to clean myself up and climb from the gutter and come to America. To seek you out. You are the light of my life.”

“Umm...that’s an amazing backstory, Antonio,” I say. “Not that you’ll be able to use it. But I guess there’s no harm in having that on your mind as you appear to admire me when Max walks by.”

The operative phrase there being *on his mind*, as opposed to *leaving his mouth*. No way do I want him saying crazy things to Max.

“Will we kiss? We could make a signal,” he says. “I remember every one of your expert stage kissing pointers.”

I smile. I taught Antonio the art of the stage kiss, where the man puts his fingers behind the woman’s ear and his thumb over her lips, and then he leans in and kisses his own thumb. Antonio’s a very dramatic kisser of his own thumb, needless to say. But then, I’m a dramatic kisser, too.

I sometimes apply my stage-kissing expertise to real life, pouring on the big drama. I find that big, emo kisses make things seem sexier. Unfortunately, the few long-term relationships I’ve been in have felt way more convenient than passionate.

“We won’t need a stage kiss,” I tell him. “Your character sounds protective and macho. Maybe he prefers his woman to appear modest. I doubt he’d wanna go all PDA.”

“Unless he feels his woman is being ogled,” he rumbles. “Then he would want to claim her publicly.”

“Yeah, but what if she gets carried away and messes up his hair?” A threat. He hates when you touch his hair.

“She must not do that,” he growls.

I snort. “Well, it luckily won’t come to that. It would just be you looking adoringly at me.”

If and when the time comes. Which is looking less likely with every new twist in his backstory.

Nice guys wind up in the friend zone.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

Sienna is down at the rendezvous point when I arrive. She is sitting today, draped elegantly over a bus bench, arms splayed to either side. You can almost hear the lush electronica playing in the background.

She looks me up and down, from my shiny silver boots sticking out under my wool overcoat to my sequined cat ears. “Again? Seriously?”

I put on a Cheshire cat smile, and do a little shimmy-dance right up to her, in time with music blaring out of somebody’s car.

She sits up. “Seriously? How much did it raise your tips?”

“Does it matter?” I tease. “Sienna, only one cat can be alpha queen.”

“Cats don’t have alphas,” she says. “They’re not pack animals.”

I hold up four fingers.

“Four percent better?” she asks.

I smile even more widely, shaking my head.

“Forty?!?”

“Forty.” And that’s not counting Max’s great tip. Far more than the cost of his meal.

“Are you messing with me?”

I shake my head. “Not messing with you.”

She narrows her eyes. “It could’ve been the shock of the new outfit.”

“Possibly.”

She studies my getup. “Lemme know if the tips stay good. If this thing holds, I’m doing alpha-queen cat, too.”

“I’ll let you know,” I say.

And I will. Sienna’s not the nicest, but we all deserve more money.

I do my route, taking my pair of financial industries buildings first, because those guys are all at work at five in the morning, so lunch for them is around ten. I head to the next building, a mammoth office complex. I check my tips between buildings, and they are definitely staying high. In fact, the more expressively I do my meow, the higher they go. I’ll definitely let Sienna in on that.

It’s half past twelve by the time I hit Maximillion Plaza. I deliver up, and before I know it, I’m on the twenty-fifth floor. I walk down past the glorious receptionists and continue on down the glorious hall and knock. “Meow Squad,” I say.

“Come.” Because he can’t be bothered to say come in.

I push in with my cart.

My belly turns upside down like it always does when I get into the presence of Max. His beauty crackles through the air like an electric charge. It gets inside you and melts your will to hate him.

He sets down his phone and leans back in his chair, stretching his arms slowly upward, then places them behind his head as a lazy smile overtakes his face. It’s as if every fiber of his being is saying, *Ah! A big, delicious dish*

of humiliation. Can't wait to dig in!

I grab his bag of cheese puffs from the cart and head toward his desk—that's a Meow Squad thing; you're not supposed to pull the cart right up to people's desks. It gives more of the illusion of table service, I suppose. In an office with as much square footage as Max's, I have to cross several feet of tundra.

He nods at a space that's been cleared in front of him. "Lay it out here."

I put down the bag that contains his roast beef croissant sandwich, and set the cheese puffs next to it. Now's my chance to reverse-chase him. I have a few ideas.

"Mia," he says. "Did I not say to lay it out?"

"What?"

"Lay. It. Out." He waits, all sparkling arrogance with a streak of smug pleasure.

I suck in a small breath and hold it. Like maybe if I don't breathe, somehow this won't be happening.

Lay it out.

Lunch layout is definitely something he has a right to request, but it's designed for conference scenarios, in order to minimize distractions during meetings. So that people can keep their attention on the project instead of on crinkling bags and switched orders and extra napkins.

What is it not designed for? A jerky billionaire in an office ordering you around.

Now I have to set his place for him like a servant? But of course, it's what he wants.

I give him a cool stare. "You're asking me to lay it out?"

"Yes," he says.

I regard him with amused consternation, like it's such a ridiculous request I can barely process it. *Acting skillz!*

"Is there a problem?"

I give him my trademark cool smile. “If that’s what you *need*,” I bite out. As in, *If that’s what you need to feel good, jackalope.*

His eyes glitter. “It is what I need, Mia. Thank you.”

It is what I need, Mia. Thank you.

Millennial Dean Martin, thinking he’s ending our rivalry once and for all in a blaze of glory that leaves me eating his dust.

Eating the dust of his dust. Uh!!

With perfectly steady hands, I take the sandwich from the bag and set it aside. I form the bag into a placemat in front of him. Meow Squad is an eco-friendly place where we repurpose the packaging when possible—there’s a whole training video on it, but I’m taking it further. I’m smoothing it down with an extra fussy flourish, like he’s such a ridiculous person to have requested a layout. I’m also taking an obnoxiously long time.

I set his roast beef and swiss croissant sandwich upon the bag and pull up the four corners of the wax paper by the edges. The video doesn’t have you unwrap the sandwich, but how can I resist? I happen to know that Max is the kind of guy who gets annoyed by fussy inefficiency.

I get each of the wax paper corners to curl slightly outward, as if to say, look at how fussy your demands are.

“This is how you lay it out?”

“Shh.” I take the three mustard packets from the bag and arrange them to splay out from the upper left, like a small hat—a fascinator, if you will—for the sandwich.

Sir Ian McKellen himself couldn’t squeeze more mockery out of a performance if his life depended on it.

Max, of course, shows me nothing, unless you count the slight enlargement of one of his neck muscles, which I definitely do.

I set the chips down, pull my hands away and make a square with my thumbs and pointer fingers, as if to examine the presentation.

“Are you quite done?”

“No.” I reach back down and set the chips at a jaunty diagonal. “There we go.”

I look up and find him watching me sternly.

His pillowy lips twist.

My heart does a lightning-bolt zig zag.

“Or perhaps you’d prefer something more symmetrical,” I find myself saying. I line the mustards up, three soldiers in a row. It’s hilarious, what with his gaze so stern.

His expression is unreadable.

I proudly cross my arms, looking over this new arrangement. “Now we’re done.”

I sneak another look at him. There was a time when I imagined I could read him. I thought I knew his heart as well as my own. I thought he had a heart. But it was all a cynical joke. It was Max pretending to have a heart.

He frowns. “Did you forget something?”

“What?”

“Where’s my array?”

“You picked cheesy puffs. There they are.”

“That was yesterday,” he says.

My pulse pounds. Is he going to make me do it?

He wouldn’t.

But there he is, waiting. Cruel, perfect Max. He does the finger-twirl.

I grab the chips from their jaunty angle next to his sandwich and take them back to my cart and grab the other chips. I hold them up and list them off, knowing he’ll choose the cheesy puffs. The understanding rushes between us, strong as an ocean current.

I know, and he knows I know. I guess that’s what makes this fun for him.

“Very good. Now let’s see.” He folds his hands and rocks back. His gaze is palpable on my skin, a cool, smooth weight.

I grit my teeth, heart drumming inside me. But all he sees is my cool

smile—I make sure of it.

Finally he speaks. “I’ll take the cheesy puffs.”

“Excellent choice.”

I see right now he’s going to make me show him the array every time. And he’ll choose the cheesy puffs every time. Even if he doesn’t want cheesy puffs, he’ll choose cheesy puffs, because that will upset me most.

It’s as if we’re connected by some horrible thread. Just like always.

I tuck the other chips back in the cart, wondering what he’d do if I smashed them. But I’m here to check off boxes, not to crush his chips. If I’m going to reverse-chase him, now is the time.

Even though it feels pathetic. Like spitting at a hurricane.

He smiles as I bring him his cheesy puffs. He’s so much more substantial now than he was in high school. Solid in places where he once was slight. Hard where he was soft. A bright and beautiful glacier, shining above the globe. A vicious, aggressive winner with a charmed life.

I focus on my girlfriends. I’m doing this for them.

“You know,” I say, placing the chips at a jaunty angle, “if you wanted to ask me on a date, there were easier ways than having me deliver your sandwiches.”

He stiffens slightly, looks at me quizzically. Did I manage to surprise the great Max Hilton?

I lower my voice. “I get that you wanted to bring me here in hopes that I’d see all of this...*success* of yours.” I say the word success with everything but the quote fingers. “Hoping that it would help your chances with me, but I’m sorry...you should’ve messaged me—”

“I brought *you* here,” he says.

“Yes, to ask me out, and I’m flattered, I want you to know that.” I act like I’m arranging things in my cart. “And maybe if things were different, my answer would be different...”

He looks baffled. Like the whole idea is ridiculous, and it is—he’s always

been too good for me. He always made sure I knew that.

I force myself to think about the book. *Keep pushing the illusion no matter what. You're the alpha. You're the pursued. Your reality is stronger than hers. Go ahead, shoot for the stars.*

"I know you're disappointed, Max. I'm sorry you went to all this trouble to woo me—"

"This is what you're going with, Mia? That I arranged all this?"

"And I do want you to know I'm flattered, Max. It's not that you haven't impressed me."

That muscle in his neck twitches. *Was impressed* too much?

He turns back to his computer. *Tap-tap-tap*. "Yes, I'll cry every night. I'll rest my head into the bosoms of supermodels and just weep."

I stiffen. Probably three supermodels at once, like in the stupid picture. Something unpleasant twists in my belly. Why did I ever think it would work? Max is winning. He always wins.

Keep pushing with the illusion. You're the alpha. You're the pursued. Don't give up.

"All this trouble you went to. I'm sure you'll find a wonderful real-life girlfriend someday who appreciates you the way you deserve..."

"Compelling as your little lunch-cart-girl monologue is, I have work to do, so..." He circles his finger and returns his attention to his computer.

Little lunch-cart-girl monologue? *Lunch-cart girl?*

"It has my attention," I continue. "Don't get me wrong. I di-int think..."

Right there I freeze.

His gaze snaps back up to mine.

Di-int. We both heard it clear as a bell—the dropped "d" of didn't, so that it comes out di'int. A glottal stop, my voice coach called it. That's a central feature of the south Jersey accent I worked so hard to erase. *I di'int think. Di'int think.*

My heart bangs in my chest as he watches me, sizing me up, predator that

he is.

And then he goes in for the kill, which is, in this case, a smile.

Or to the world it would look like a smile. Between us, it's him enjoying the Jerseygirl slip, softly and silently plunging me back to those years in high school when I tried so hard to erase my accent. To have a shot at the lights of Broadway. To overcome the Corelli curse.

Jerseygirl. The name hangs thick in the charged air between us, all the more hurtful for being unsaid.

My face heats. Even my ears lose a little sparkle—it's as though I can feel them dimming on top of my head.

With as much grace as I can muster, I put my lunch things back in my cart. I enunciate my words in my best, most aristocratic-sounding version of General American English, what my voice coach calls GA, "That's all I'm saying, Max. Sweet of you. I *am* flattered."

Still he says nothing.

I turn and walk. I need to say *meow* now, but I don't have it in me. I just don't have it in me. Except then he'll make me say it. I run the exchange in my head:

Forget your line?

Please, just let me go.

You're the lunch-cart girl.

"Mia," he says softly.

Something about my name on his lips like that, sounding genuine, even full of feeling, it reaches deep into me and squeezes my heart.

But when Max is nice to you, that's the time you can least trust him. He's going to make me say *meow* now—I know it.

I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

I turn, full of breezy determination, holding up a finger, smiling like I have a wonderful secret. I breathe in all of the magic that I can possibly breathe in. I am the queen of the cats, pursued and loved.

I straighten my spine against Max, against everybody who ever doubted me. I press my hands on my hips and let loose. “Meeeeow.”

He tilts his head. “Oh, I was just going to say, I’ll only need two mustards going forward.”

My pulse races. My cheeks heat.

But I don’t lose my aplomb. “We’ll see,” I say. Like I may or may not comply. With that, I leave.

This is what I’ve been reduced to, I think, heading down his faux-heaven hall. Max has everything, and my only recourse is maybe giving him the wrong number of mustards. And then he’ll just make me correct the mistake in the most demeaning way possible, so what is the point?

I’m dimly aware that I ride the elevator with other people. Some people get in. Some people get out. I barely see them. I’m too focused on myself. Or more, the naive girl I once was, trying so hard to be sophisticated. The world’s greatest fraud.

I di-int think.

I spent so many hours with that voice coach, trying to polish myself up in order to be worthy of the glittering, glamorous Broadway scene.

I thought maybe I was, finally. But then Max had to come back into my life to remind me of my station. Because it’s not enough to be king of the world—not for Max.

I burst outside onto the busy sidewalk, into the chaos of honking cars and hurried pedestrians. I pull my jacket from the cart pocket and wrap myself against the cold, wet wind and set out to the meeting point.

Didn’t didn’t didn’t didn’t.

A lot of really prominent teachers cycled through the Shiz. Famed director Strom Windmeyer. Choreographer Fanny Forlio. Actors like Jean Stern and Marcel Rhodes. Many of them had encouraging words for me. Some of them even singled me out for praise.

But it’s Max’s biting words I remember. *Obvious. Without nuance. Not*

there. Not her best. He never said them directly to me—we didn't speak except for that one summer. But other students took glee in passing our insults along to each other.

I'd always laugh dismissively at them. Max was just some sullen rich boy who hated me. What did I care what he had to say?

But I remembered each and every word he spoke with the precision of a near-death experience. Sometimes I'd lie in bed staring up at my autographed *Mamma Mia!* poster and dissect his words, turning them over and over, painful artifacts.

I pull out my phone. Rollins is five minutes away. I punch in my location, hit send, then sit in the shadowy doorway, feeling small and cold. I need to compose myself.

Didn't didn't didn't didn't didn't. I enunciate the word with the tip of my tongue at the just-right spot behind my teeth.

How can I let him do that to me still? Why did I ever think this would work?

I rip the blinged-out cat-ears headband from my head and scrape off the sequins, ripping them off with my fingernails. This whole thing was a mistake! The threads break and sequins go all over the sidewalk.

Didn't didn't didn't, I say. But it's not enough. It'll never be enough.

I'll never be enough.

I hate how tuned into him I still am. I always was. Though really, everybody back at *the Shiz* was fascinated with Max.

It wasn't just that he came from old money and famous parents. He had this quiet, brooding awkwardness. And then there was his legendary talent. He knew music theory inside out, and he could sight-read wildly difficult piano scores. He'd had lessons practically from birth, but still, it was impressive.

All the cool kids wanted to be his friend. The teachers deferred to him.

Max and I were polar opposites in every way—he was in the classical

music track and the rich kid group; I was dirt poor and in theater, and on a full housing scholarship. And I'd never even ridden on a plane or slept overnight in a hotel, and he'd lived in every glamorous international capital you could name with his fabulous parents.

And beyond that, the musician kids didn't like the theater kids and vice versa.

Unfortunately for the musician kids, they were *musician kids*, a socially awkward if not downright nerdy bunch, and we were theater kids, all outgoing and fabulous and way better prepared to make fun of the musicians. We had nicknames for a lot of them, and we did impressions of the way they walked and talked. I actually did a great Max-the-robot impression where I mimicked his way of playing piano. We put it up on YouTube, and it got a ton of views.

Sophomore year, he composed a song making fun of my laugh. It had a dance move that went with it—the Donkey Honk. Even the name was catchy, and it spread through the Shiz like wildfire. Performing arts kids are hungry for that kind of thing.

I acted like I didn't care, and I even sometimes laughed and danced along, but I hated it—I'd changed my laugh to sound prettier and more bell-like. I'd worked on it really hard, and Max's song made it so nobody could forget.

If you would've told me then that years later I'd be delivering sandwiches to Max as he sat behind a desk in a grand office tower that he personally owned, I would've asked you to put a bullet through my head.

I wait for Rollins, keeping the breath going though the words. *Didn't. Wouldn't. Shouldn't. Couldn't. Mightn't.*

Why do I still care? Why do I care if I'm not good enough for him? He's a cynical robot with no heart.

Then I remember my friends. That's why I care.

I get on my hands and knees to pick up the sequins now. It would be easier to sew on new ones, but I'm imagining pigeons trying to eat them and

getting sick.

Whatever. I may be the world's most loserish Broadway hopeful, but that's not a reason to go hurting birds.

The most painful critique of his came down after my senior project, a solo monologue and song-and-dance number from a musical adaptation of *Age of Innocence*, all upscale NY society women. The perfect part for a well-mannered girl. I felt like I'd internalized the character of May, and I had that polished GA accent so deep in me, I felt like I was even dreaming in it.

And then word came back that he'd seen it—maybe on YouTube, or on a fellow student's phone—and passed his judgment. Two words. *All wrong*.

It was as if he alone knew. As if he alone saw the poor girl burning through.

Didn't didn't didn't didn't didn't, I emote silently to all of Manhattan. *I didn't think*.

Maybe they can all hear it.

A cool smile is never out of style.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

Kelsey has her dance stuff on when I get home. “Petra canceled her jazz dance class—we have the studio for two hours. The one with the piano. Hurry!”

“Oh my god, I’m there.” I hand her a bag—a double-order mistake. “Korean fried chicken with spicy dressing. You’re gonna die.”

“Smells...mmm. I’m eating half now. But only half.” She digs into the bag while I rush into my room to get ready. Kelsey teaches at the dance studio just up 45th Street.

I scrounge up my dance workout clothes. Kelsey’s helping me with my dance moves for the audition, and I’m helping her nail her song. Usually we practice with recorded piano, but it’ll be good for her to do it live.

“Now I want to eat it alllllll!” she calls to me.

“Don’t.” I go out and whip the bag out of her hand. “You’ll get a side stitch.”

“Eating doesn’t cause those.” She takes it back. “I’m eating it all. So how’d it go today. Did you reverse-chase him?”

I grab my coat and my phone and then the marker. I put an X in the reverse-chase box.

“You so rock.”

“Uh, I don’t know.” We get out of there and head down the stairwell.

“Did he respond?”

“It’s gonna take a little more oomph to crack that nut.”

“What happened.”

We burst out onto the street and hoof it down the block. “I acted like I thought he brought me in as a delivery girl as a way of hitting on me, and I was all about letting him down easy. I go, I’m sorry you went to all this trouble to woo me.”

“To woo you,” she snorts. “Love it.”

“I was really going for it. Just putting up this wall of belief, as though my reality is so much stronger than his. Like he says in the book.”

“Which is something you’re actually very good at,” she says. “You know you have a talent for that.”

“Well, he wasn’t all that moved. He opened with disbelief—he was all, ‘that’s what you’re going with? Really?’ and eventually he moved on to informing me that he’d be weeping into the bosoms of supermodels.”

“What a pig,” Kelsey says. “But maybe you were getting to him. Maybe a little?”

We hold up at a corner. “He didn’t show it.”

“Well don’t forget—the target will act like they wouldn’t ever even give you the time of day. But they’ll keep on engaging you, and that’s how you’ll know.”

“I won’t give up, don’t worry.” We grab hands and run across the street

before the wall of cars hits. We hop a puddle and get safely to the other side. “He’s messed with the wrong Jerseygirl.”

“Yeah, motherfucker!” Kelsey says. “Don’t you flip my girl’s bitch switch.”

I snort. “Though he has been giving me great tips.”

“He’s a billionaire,” she says. “Billionaires and celebs have to tip extravagantly or people think they’re cheap.”

“True.” We sidestep bits of soggy garbage and head in under the bright red dance studio awning.

“I still can’t picture him as a goofy cowboy,” she says as we climb some more stairs.

“He was great as a goofy cowboy.”

“How did you guys even co-exist in a summer production. And what was he doing there anyway? If he was mister classical?”

“It was part of a crossing genres requirement. Where a teacher puts you in a production out of your comfort zone and the other kids have to help you. He was my lead.”

“Wait, you were leads together?” She stops at the landing. “You didn’t tell me that part.”

“Yup. I had to play a poor rube in love with Max. And him in love with me. It was...whatever.”

We head on into an unfinished hall. “It doesn’t sound *whatever*,” she says, slightly accusatorily.

“It was,” I say.

She unlocks the door and we go in. It’s a massive room with mirrors all around the perimeter, and an upright Yamaha piano in the corner. We put down our stuff. Kelsey goes over and hooks her iPhone to a speaker and starts up the music. She claps twice. “This music is mellow—what do we need?”

“Back grooves!” I say.

She starts in, rocking her hips, and I mirror her. “You were romantic leads.”

“Yup,” I say. “And it was a summer show, and summer shows are always weird, like this one was full of younger kids, mostly from other schools. It felt like we were stranded on a deserted island, away from our friends. It was the one time we got along. Or I thought we were getting along.”

“Define getting along.” She turns to the side and I copy her. We dance side by side in the mirror.

“Okay, I’m going to confess something to you here—we had kind of a fling. Or, I thought we did.”

Kelsey turns to me, eyes wide. “Excuse me?”

“Not a full-blown fling. More like, the stage kisses were getting hot.”

“Switch!” We hop around to face the east wall. “And?”

“Let’s just say we rehearsed the kiss a lot. It was a joke with us—even knocking around backstage, one of us would say, we need to practice that kiss. And we’d make out. And we’d get bubble tea afterwards and do homework together and stuff.”

“Mia,” she says. “You had a fling with him.”

“I don’t think it was a fling to him. To him it was more like, he was trapped in an uncool musical with an uncool girl. I was the only person his age there. It was a game for him, as it turned out.”

“This guy is unbelievable. Switch!”

I hop in unison with her. The beat is picking up, and I’m thinking back to those long afternoon rehearsals. I played the prairie girl with a rope for a belt, so smitten. And Max would shove his thumbs into his pockets and play the goofy cowpoke. He couldn’t sing, but he really seemed to enjoy being in the show. It was fun, like we had this entire secret life together of being all in with stupid *Oklahoma!*

I fell for him hard. Daydreaming, name-doodling, social-media-orbiting hard. “My heart would just hammer to think about him,” I say. “The force of

my crush on him could've powered a small nuclear sub."

She starts us on oppositions, getting more core involved.

"I had this stupid idea that the production of *Oklahoma!* was the real him," I continue, heart pumping. "I thought that I was the only person who knew the real him, and all the rest of his life was the false him. Wrong."

"He was just playing you."

"And then school was back in session, and it was the worst. Our texting had been sparse. That should've been an alarm bell. And finally I spotted him at lunch, sitting with his crew. And this happiness just filled me. I had this tray full of spaghetti, and I rushed over there. And he had this weird look on his face. And I started feeling all nervous, and then I wasn't looking where I was going and I tripped and fell on my ass with spaghetti all over my shirt. And my face and hair. And the whole lunchroom erupted in laughter. I was mortified."

"And Max?"

"He did nothing. He just watched. My friends rushed to my side, but it's like he didn't care at all."

"Did you confront him?"

He came later and apologized, but I really think he was just jerking me around. He didn't want to know me once cooler people were around. I was all, fuck off! Don't pretend like you care."

After our warm-up, we move onto my dance for my audition, a combination of contemporary and classical ballet moves we worked out, and Kelsey picked the music. There are a few combinations I haven't been nailing, so we concentrate on those.

I'm dead on my feet an hour later. Luckily, it's switch-off time. I seat myself at the piano and take Kelsey through her vocal warm-up. We've chosen *Midnight Blue* as her audition song, but we think if it goes well, the casting director might ask her to sing *Blow, Gabriel, Blow*, so we're preparing that one, too.

Getting this show would be so major. As in breakout major.

People are saying it's going to be the next *Waitress*. Maybe even the next *Hamilton*. The group behind it has had massive hits before, so who knows? Needless to say, the best actors are vying to get a part in this production.

Sometimes I'm afraid to hope for landing the part of confident, sassy Reno, like am I dreaming too big? But when people who know the show hear I'm going out for it, their eyes light up. It's a very *me* part.

At home I eat rice and cheese and watch YouTube videos. I go to bed early to read, but eventually the evil phone is calling and I'm on Max's Instagram feed.

Why I bother, I don't know. I guess I have this desire to find out something vulnerable and sensitive about him. A post where he isn't perfect, either. Where he shows his belly.

Some of the posts are familiar to me from late-night Instagram scrolls, or let's just call them drunk scroll.

There's Max with the captain of his yacht. They're standing in front of a giant steering wheel and Max's hair is all windblown, his cheeks are kissed by the sun and he's in a perfectly worn-out T-shirt with some sort of rugged tan shorts, making the captain look like a sad vision of manhood indeed. Caption: *Rough weather ahead. Prepare the martini shakers.*

There's a series of pictures of him kissing a short woman with dark, curly hair—definitely not a supermodel. Caption: *Happy Saturday.* So not the Max Hilton type. I always felt sure it was one of his fans.

I scroll past Max sitting in the front row of some basketball game next to the coolest movie stars ever. Caption: *Down five points!* Judging by the outpouring of sympathy in the comments, you'd've thought he was a child trapped in a mine shaft hundreds of feet below the earth's surface.

There's Max the fierce entrepreneur, hands planted on a drafting table, necktie loosened just enough that you can get a hit of his corded neck, and from that infer an entire body of muscular perfection. He's surrounded by

fiercely photogenic twenty and thirty-somethings in an array of genders, set against the grunge-chic background of his “studio complex.” Caption: *Never feels like working when you’re doing what you love.*

There’s an arty shot of a woman in an elevator, head tipped back against the panel, as if in pleasure—you can’t see her face because of the light from the elevator chandelier reflected just above her, but a man’s hand is planted on the panel next to her. Caption: *This elevator has everything it needs except a well-stocked liquor cart.*

Max at work, surrounded by models, and they’re all laughing their heads off—one guy is doubled over. Caption: *Shoot crew made my day.*

I definitely feel like that caption lies; if you study the picture long enough, you can see that their energy is directed at him, like he said something funny. He made the shoot crew’s day, not the other way around, but Max is clever like that.

It made him a dangerous enemy.

There’s Max holding a lady’s hand over a candlelit table. The hand is all of her that we see—the rest of her is cut off, because it’s Max we care about. But presumably it’s a Max Hilton girl, possibly it’s Lana, his most famous Max Hilton girl, the model with a really successful line of capes and boots that even Antonio had heard of.

Whoever it is, she has pretty blue fingernails and wears several vintage cocktail rings. And Max gazes intensely across the table at her with an expression that is so full of desire, it makes my heart hurt. Caption: *No words.*

I tell myself it’s not the girl he’s looking at, but that’s a lie, because if you trace the line of his gaze and triangulate from her hand, it’s obvious that he’s staring right at her face.

But who can say what she’s doing with the other hand?

I decide she’s holding a pork chop in front of her face with her other hand, and she’s about to bite into it. And it’s the pork chop—and not her—

that Max is staring at, lusting over.

New Caption: *Why the hell didn't I order the pork chops? I wonder if she'll trade with me. I am Max Hilton, after all.*

I shut off Instagram. Max Hilton's Instagram feed is not helping my mood. But then there's that slice of his tower, right out my window.

"Yeah, I'm not done with you," I say. I give his tower the finger and go get my uniform. I empty the sequins out of my pocket from when I ripped them off my ears in fury—oh my god how Max would've loved to see that.

Carefully, I sew them back onto my ears. Because I'm doing this thing. I'm fighting him on behalf of all the women who ended up going home with losers because of his stupid book.

I sit in bed, hand-sewing them on. I don't care what it takes, I'll keep alpha-signaling and reverse-chasing and all of the rest until Max sees what he's done.

Women are like dogs. They enjoy knowing you're in charge.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

Sienna slips from her pose of leisure into a pose of attentiveness when I arrive at today's meet place. "So?" She looks my blingy self up and down. "You're wearing it again. Does that mean the tips stayed good?"

"Oh, they stayed good, my friend," I say.

"Really? Forty percent good?"

I smile. Raise my brows. *Yes.*

"And you didn't do more deliveries? It's per delivery?"

"Per delivery, an average of forty percent better."

"That settles it," Sienna says. "I'm doing it."

"You should."

"You don't mind?"

"Of course not," I say, feeling happy that I could help pretty Sienna. We

may be in bitter competition for musical theater roles, but we're a family at Meow Squad; one of us getting better tips doesn't take away from the others.

"So is this the sort of shit you'll be wearing for the *Anything Goes* tryouts?"

"Not sure yet," I say. "Did you pick yours?"

"Not sure," she says, resuming her picture-perfect pose of leisure.

Neither of us want to reveal what we're wearing. The audition outfit is a delicate balance—you want to *feel* like that character to the casting director, but it's a rookie move to go full-on dressing the part.

Sienna could be real competition. She has a bell-like voice and perfect diction. She has a big ballet pedigree, too, but I'm the better overall singer, and a way better soprano.

A few hours later, I'm heading into the lobby of Maximillion Plaza with my trusty cart. I'll be doing the *Show You're in Charge* rule, which is exactly what you'd think it is.

It's not easy to take charge when you feel like a tiny little plastic figurine living in a snow globe on Max's desk. And Max gets to shake up your world and make it snow whenever he pleases.

But that doesn't stop me. I have a little something in store for him. I may not be in charge of much, but there is one thing when it comes to Max—his lunch.

I practice showing I'm in charge to the customers on the lower floors. I give people unasked-for mustards when they've ordered sandwiches that should have mustard, and instruct them to use it. Or I override their chips selection, or tell them to eat their cookie before the sandwich.

Going bossy like that was scary at first, but people love it. Max's book is kind of brilliant, aside from being the pickup guide that helped to ruin Kelsey's life.

There's a sweet guy on the twentieth floor who has lots of *Blade Runner* stuff in his office. The first day he was all, *the cat thing is working for you!*

and we had a charming exchange. Today I tell him he has to eat his barbecue chips after he eats his sandwich, because otherwise it spoils the taste, and I'm very firm about it. He seems surprised, but then we bond over *Blade Runner*, and I tell him I'll be calling him Blade from now on.

Blade is the kind of guy I'd normally fall for if Max wasn't looming up there, poised for another round of his favorite new game, jerky billionaire vs. delivery cat.



PLAYBOY BILLIONAIRE EXECUTIVE and supposed woman expert Max Hilton is on the phone when I arrive.

I busy myself with my cart.

It's a problem that he's on the phone—I need him to be paying attention. I've taken the liberty of changing his order. He'll be eating a lunch of my choosing.

He motions to the corner of his desk, not even looking at me. Like I'm a dog who needs a hand signal to understand that the master needs his food laid out.

So arrogant.

I look away, because maybe I can't be bothered to glance at him.

Looking away turns out to be worse, because there's that giant photo of models hanging all over him. I avert my eyes after a quick, hate-drenched glance. Those models need to buy a clue about the cynical, soulless robot they have their sights set on.

I go around and extract the sandwich and work really hard on flattening the bag out to form his little placemat. He's talking scheduling, something about Tuesday night being out.

“No, it's out, always out. The entire evening. A foundation commitment.”

Slowly I unwrap his sandwich. I'm detecting a definite emotional charge around this Tuesday-after-work thing. Somehow, I know he's lying.

It's not like I interacted with Max all that much in high school in terms of volume—aside from *Oklahoma!*, anyway, but I interacted with him a lot in terms of intensity.

The relationship of prey and predator is a fierce form of intimacy, especially in high school.

I watched him closely. Listened to conversations across the halls and classrooms with rapt attention, tuning out all else. And it wasn't just real-time stuff; I kept his every utterance alive in my mind for later dissection and analysis. Understanding your enemy is an important survival skill.

So I really think he's lying to whoever is on the other line. *Foundation commitment* is the sort of vague term a man like Max would use as a lie. Maybe he's really going to be out having a foursome with his three best friends' wives. Or visiting a children's hospital dressed as an evil clown.

I set the sandwich he didn't order on the perfectly flattened bag-bed, showing meticulous care, adjusting it just so. I'm close enough to feel the heat of him, the electricity of him, and something else—annoyance, maybe. Anger. Some high emotion.

It feels amazing. I don't know why, it just does.

I decide to push things even further by making presentation hands, like a game-show hostess presenting a special prize.

A muscle in Max's jaw fires.

I bite back a smile, imagining how Sienna's jaw would drop if she saw me doing the presentation hands like this. Especially if she knew that this wasn't even the sandwich Max ordered.

I spin around and go back to my cart. I can literally feel his eyes on me, like an angry caress, waking up my skin.

Probably mocking my outfit in his mind.

The only good thing about my outfit is the short multipocket apron that covers most of my middle and is designed to hold utensils and stirrers and salt packets and things, and in my case, it doubles as a really effective tummy

hider.

I fuss in my cart, like I can't find something, trying not to smile or laugh.

I sneak a glance. Quickly he looks away. My pulse races.

He totally hasn't noticed the sandwich, yet.

"Yes, that works. The nineteenth. It's a go." I hear the click of the latest model of iPhone being set on a soulless glass surface.

Call ended.

Most people say goodbye when they hang up, but Max dwells in a special world where people don't say goodbye when they get off the phone. They just hang up. Like in movies.

I finger the smooth packets of mustard feeling his gaze on my back. The sensation is physical, as if the Lycra cat suit has taken on an electric charge, making my skin underneath feel intensely alive.

"You like it?" he asks.

I turn. "What?"

He tips his head at the wall. "The photo. You look at it enough. I could get you a copy for your bedroom wall. For...personal purposes."

I snort. "As if."

"And to save you the extra labor, I could have my assistants angrily pre-snip the women out of the picture. Or would you prefer I have them scratch their eyes out? Or maybe both? A two-step process?"

"Do those poor women know you're a robot with no feelings?" I ask.

He leans back, so cool. "I like to keep that a surprise to whip out on the second date."

Heat steals over my face. Is he dating one of them? All of them? I can't think of what to say back. Never mind; he's looking down. He's noticed the sandwich.

I bite back a smile as he lifts the bun. "What is this?"

"Grilled whitefish with a spicy curry sauce. It's only available in December."

“I ordered the roast beef and swiss cheese croissant sandwich.”

I fix him with a steady gaze. Max’s book stresses the importance of believing in yourself, or at least looking like you do. *Fake it until you make it* is a recurring theme, though he never puts it like that.

“I know what you ordered,” I say sweetly, “but *this* is the sandwich that you *want*. You’ll like it much better.”

“I’d like a roast beef and swiss croissant sandwich much better.”

“Wrong.”

He frowns. “You can’t just change my order.”

I tilt my head, all sunshine and innocence. “This special-edition grilled whitefish sandwich comes from a food truck on Seventh that was recently purchased by a five-time Michelin-rated chef. Way better than your stupid croissant sandwich.”

He looks between me and the sandwich, baffled. “You can’t just...”

I cock my head, feeling happy and excited. Max needs to do a revised edition of his book, because nowhere does it say how crazy fun the process is. “It’s the superior lunch.”

The secret truth is, he *will* like it best. Not only is it the objectively superior meal, but it matches his taste. I might not be able to tell you what my best friend in junior year preferred for lunch, but I can tell you what kinds of food Max always went for, yet another unfortunate side effect of the kind of concentration it took to be enemies with him.

I’m excited for him to take a bite. Not that my life’s goal is for him to have a delicious sandwich, but I like the idea that he’ll see I’m right. I’m showing him that I’m superior. I’m in charge of the entire world. I’m X-ing that box off like a boss!

He stands. Gives me a hard look.

Max was always much taller than me, maybe that’s why he stands. To intimidate me from across the room.

Shivers go over me. Does he think he can intimidate me? Or is it more

than that?

He comes around his desk.

I swallow. “Try it, you’ll like it.”

He keeps coming at me, eyes on mine.

My skin tightens as he nears. This process is getting more exciting by the second. “I’m telling you that this is the one you’ll like best. I’ve chosen it for you.”

He keeps coming until he’s right in front of me. I gaze up into his eyes, awash in a feeling of hilarity and something else—a strange alertness. My nipples strain at the fabric of the cat suit. What’s up with the AC in this place?

“Do you want to get fired? Is that it?” he grumbles.

My heart is basically banging out of my chest at this point. I swallow with difficulty. “No, I don’t want to get fired. I’m telling you what sandwich you want.”

Emotion flares in his eyes.

It’s been forever since I’ve been this close to Max. Forever since I studied the stray brown fleck in one of his otherwise intensely blue eyes, pale at the center, like a ring of ice formed in there.

“You’re telling me what sandwich I want,” he gusts out, his words like feathers on my forehead.

“That’s right, Max. It’s the *sandwich*,” I enunciate sassily, “that you *want*.”

“If I’d wanted it,” he says, “don’t you think I would’ve had it?”

“Not necessarily,” I say, “being that you have no idea of how amazing it is. All that you’ve missed out on. So sad...”

Something in the way he looks at me changes; his nostrils flare, and for a crazy second, I think he’s going to kiss me.

For a crazy second, I want him to. *I’m the amazing one*, I think. *I’m the one you missed out on*.

The moment stretches on. I don't know where we've gone, but the sandwich is nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly he straightens. He turns and walks the few feet back to his desk, him and his perfect suit.

I stand there gawking, thinking he probably requests his suits be made a little too tight through the shoulders in order to give the optical illusion of a perfect body, strong and lithe and predatorial like a lion, accentuated by the finest fabric. Only the best will do when it comes to kissing and cupping Max Hilton's muscular torso as he prowls his office.

He grabs the sandwich and turns, leans back, butt against the desk, eyes boring into mine. Then he takes a bite, eyes never leaving mine.

My stomach tightens as he chews.

I have a lot of customers to attend to, a lot more tips to get for myself. I have the Edgar building next. If I take too long, people will be mad.

But none of that matters.

I'm furious with excitement and something that feels strangely like happiness.

He chews, looking deliberative.

And then his gaze drops to the sandwich.

He thinks it's delicious—I can tell. I feel like my smile might crack my face. "Right?"

He looks back up. Narrows his eyes.

"Oh, snap," I say. "Who's your daddy?"

He snorts, and for a second, he's not my enemy. For a second, it feels amazing to have introduced him to this sandwich, one of my personal favorites. He dabs the sides of his mouth with a napkin.

"The *sandwich* that you *want*."

He watches me. Battling with himself, no doubt. Trying to find some loophole where it's not true, maybe.

"Right? Admit it."

“Why is it so important to you?”

Before I know what I’m doing, I go to him, enter his force field of smooth, suave perfection. I have this crazy feeling like I need to break through it. “Because people should admit things.”

“Yeah?” he says. One word. Voice calm like steel.

“So delicious. Oh, the deliciousness that you’ve been missing!”

I’m joking around, but his stern gaze is locked on mine in a way that’s anything but jokey.

The floor seems to dip beneath my feet.

Slowly, without warning, he reaches up and touches the side of my face—one lone fingertip. A featherlight touch that sizzles.

He holds my gaze with those eyes, the bluest of blue with that pale ring of ice, and slowly draws his fingertip along the edge of my jaw, heading for my chin.

I feel like he’s looking into my soul with those eyes.

The air thickens between us. My sex turns molten with excitement.

I should laugh at him and push his hand away, but it’s the last thing I want. *Don’t stop* is more my thinking.

I’m nearly panting by the time he reaches my chin, but his wicked finger isn’t finished. It’s a knuckle now, and it’s reversing course, slowly trailing backwards across my hyper-sensitive cheek.

I’m dizzy with the gentle sweetness of his touch, like he’s petting a tiny wild bird.

Neither of us says a word, as though that might break the spell.

My breath is quick and shallow—okay, I’m panting—but hopefully not that he can see or hear. Every molecule in my entire being is focused on the progress of his knuckle. Yearning for more.

I keep my face neutral when all I want is to turn into his hand. I don’t even know how I resist. All I want to do is give him everything.

Finally his finger of amazement reaches the tender skin below my ear;

then and only then does he stop. He gazes at me even more deeply, as if that's possible. Something in my belly melts.

I have no breath.

He leans in and presses his lips to my cheek.

One tiny brush of a kiss.

A seismic event in my belly.

Somewhere on the other side of the globe in some tiny island nation, Richter scales are going crazy. Animals are racing into the hills. Nobody understands what has happened. But it's me, standing in this Manhattan office tower, cracking apart in shards of pure lust.

He pulls back, watching me.

"S-soooo, you really *did* like the sandwich," I say.

His lips quirk in a half smile. It's a smile that I haven't seen for years, and it lights something deep in me. "Thank you."

It comes to me that he's thanking me for the sandwich.

It seems like madness, but yes, what else is he talking about? I put on a sarcastic expression. Like he's such a freak. "Oh-*kay*, then."

His lip twitches. "Chips would go great with this," he says. "What do you have?"

I give him a look. *Don't you dare*—that's what my look says. *You can't make me show you the chips array. You can't be an asshole after that.*

He circles his finger.

Heat fills my face.

I go back to my cart, grab a bag of cheesy puffs, and toss them at him.

He catches them, eyes never leaving mine. "You're not going to open the chips for me? What would Meow Squad say?"

"Call 'em and find out."

He stares at me a bit. "Are you going to get my order right next time?"

"Unlikely." I grab my cart and turn, pulse racing.

Show her you're the one in charge by creating a system of rewards for good behavior and demerits for behavior you don't like.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

I attend an acting seminar over the weekend and take off Monday to do some work as a film extra, which goes late into the evening. I don't get home until after three in the morning, which I'm a little unhappy about. I wanted to be well rested for Tuesday. But even on five hours of sleep, I'm feeling strangely chipper, and looking forward to doing some more of Max's system.

I don't know how to feel about the way he touched me on Friday. All weekend I've been processing it, which is basically a euphemism for replaying it over and over in my mind as butterflies do loop-de-loops in my chest.

Today I'll be doing rewards and demerits. He'll hate it. I smile whenever I imagine how much he'll hate it.

In his book, Max suggests giving the woman a Hershey's Kiss whenever she does something you like. To get her to associate pleasure with being agreeable.

"What the hell!" Kelsey had exclaimed when I read that part aloud. "Like we're Pavlov's dogs?"

Tell her playfully that she has to earn her chocolate candy. She won't like it and will probably find ways to resist, but hold your ground. Do what you need to do to stay in the alpha position—you are the judge of her, the one who gives rewards for good behavior. If you feel your control slipping, simply give another reward for something. Or a demerit.

"Oh, you have to go after him with everything," Kelsey had said.

I just snorted. "Don't you worry, sister." *And I won't think about kissing his palm or putting my face to his chest, either!* But I didn't say that out loud.

We decided that following his system exactly would be too obvious. Like if I start giving him Hershey's Kisses, it might jog his memory.

In order to position myself as approval giver, I've decided to go with a gold-star grading system like they have on Amazon.

Max is behind the desk when I get there, the king in his castle.

His white shirt fits him just so, his tie slightly loosened, brown hair perfectly tousled.

He gives me a smile, but it's not his real one. It's his Max Hilton smile, the smile of Maximillion magazine ads and billboards above Times Square. Enchanting Max who knows all the fun secrets. Max who wears a tuxedo to the many glamorous events you will never be invited to. Max having fun elsewhere without you.

It's a beautiful smile that feels like a wall.

"Is it too much to ask that you've brought the sandwich I ordered?" he asks.

"I've brought the sandwich you want," I say.

Blue eyes simmer behind lush lashes. "We'll see."

Fun electricity trills through me, much as I try to clamp it down. I proceed, conscious of him watching my every movement. The taking of his sandwich bag from my cart. The bringing of the sandwich to his desk. The extraction of the sandwich, the smoothing out of the bag.

I've done lunch layout for hundreds of conferences, but until Max, I've never been so aware of how much I'm invading somebody's space when I do it. I've never felt so acutely the hum of another person's nearness. The electric charge of another body up close.

He's not even pretending to work this time. He just sits there enjoying my servitude. Maybe thinking about the way he touched my cheek.

God knows I'm thinking about it. I blot all sexy thoughts from my mind. I'm on a mission.

I position the knife and fork perfectly. I clear my throat. "You know, I can see your tower from my bedroom window."

"Can you," Max rumbles, velvety cool.

"It's a beautiful building, it really is, but..." I trail off.

"But what?"

"I'm afraid I can't give it more than three stars."

His expression is just a little bit stony; no sign of emotion whatsoever unless you count that muscle twitching at the side of his jaw.

"I know you would've wanted at least a four-star rating from me, if not a five. I hope you're not disappointed."

"I can't say I'm disappointed," he says dryly. "Disappointed is not the word I'd use."

"I'm glad."

"And what piece of Manhattan real estate would the *lunch-cart girl* have me purchase?" he asks.

Again with the *lunch-cart girl*. Deep inside my chest, small demons stoke a fire of outrage. Somebody needs a demerit.

"That's not something I can solve for you, unfortunately." I arrange the

mustards, feeling his gaze fixed on me, which makes it difficult to think. I keep thinking about the way he touched me. Feeling the sizzling path of his finger. Imagining primal moves.

I nod at the picture on the wall. “Three stars,” I say.

“What’s that?”

“The Max Hilton girls. Please. They’re not as pretty as I am, and probably not as fascinating as I am, either.”

Everything in him seems to go still, except his eyes, which are busy boring holes in the side of my face. Maybe stunned at how deluded I am.

Because let’s face it, they are all objectively prettier than me.

I mean it—they are prettier by every pretty parameter, killing it in the categories of nose-straightness, hair silkiness, and symmetry of features. They especially dominate in the willowiness-of-limbs area, whereas I’m short and sturdy. My boob size disqualifies me from being able to pull off the drapey dresses they’re wearing. They might be more fascinating, too.

But I’m going with it, even though, standing there under his stern scrutiny, I feel less and less confident.

Never let them smell blood in the water, that’s one of the concepts in his book that comes to me now. Like women are sharks, always ready to attack.

The only shark here is Max, of course. With his harsh good looks and his merciless precision and his billion-dollar empire that eats other billion-dollar empires for lunch.

I lower my voice to a confident whisper. “Probably not as fascinating *or* as fun. I think you know it’s true. I might even give them a two. As compared to me. Especially...” I adjust my sequined ears. “Oh, what the hell, two-point-five. I’m feeling generous.”

He clears his throat. “Are all of your visits going to be this disruptive?”

I sigh like I have a wonderful secret. *The world is your cocktail party*—that’s an attitude Max suggests in his book. I actually liked that one—it really resonated with me. “We’ll see.”

I grab the five bags of chips before he can demand his array. He watches, expression intense.

Of course, in the cocktail party I'm imagining, I'm not acting as a human sandwich dispenser. I'm having fun and laughing, and Max is watching me, besotted.

And it's not because I have a pork chop lifted to my face.

"Are we going with cheesy puffs today?" I ask when he doesn't say anything.

"Cheesy puffs," he says hoarsely.

"Good job," I say. "You made an excellent choice. And just for that, you get an extra bag!"

He tightens his jaw as I snatch up an extra bag.

I'm keeping him off-balance. I feel like I'm really nailing his system today. I head right for him, all the way around his desk, holding his gaze, because that's what you do to show a dog that you're in charge.

It hits me here that holding a man's gaze and walking steadily toward him, never looking away, is also an incredibly sexy thing to do. Every inch of my skin feels alive with excitement.

He swivels away from his desk as I near, facing me with that strangely serious expression. His shirt cuffs are rolled partway up his muscular forearms. His hands rest on his hard thighs, fingers relaxed. Nails trimmed short. Pianist-short. Some habits die hard.

And those thick thumbs. They're the same thumbs he stuck in his belt loops while he sang with all of that sweet goofiness during that lost summer. Though science tells us that the cells of the body replace themselves over time—nine years for an entirely new body. So he really is a different person in every way.

But god, the way he'd sing to me.

Even when there was a full auditorium, it was as if he was singing to me and me alone, gaze dancing under that floppy hat, red bandana around his

neck. And he'd make these jerky motions, pointing this way and that, singing about how the farm animals will scurry when he gets a surrey with a fringe on top to drive me around in.

The song was about young, hopeful love. It's how I felt that summer.

It meant nothing to him. A dalliance of proximity. The second we were back at school, he went back to his cold and cynical mode. Too cool for me.

Quizzically, he tilts his head. "Mia?"

Have I been standing there weirdly long?

If you feel your control slipping, simply give her another reward for something.

"And as a reward for *extra* predictable behavior..." I toss one bag onto his desk and pull open the other one with a loud crinkle-snap that splits the air.

His eyes flare.

I remove one puff from the bag and hold it out to him. "Open," I whisper, pulse racing. "Open for your prize."

He watches me sternly. Opening for his prize is the last thing he's going to do. Nobody pushes Max Hilton around.

The book doesn't have instructions for outright rebellion. The book doesn't say how sexy that might be. How a person's beauty can squeeze deep into your belly. How you might really want to kiss him. To straddle him. To sink into him and make him remember. Make him come back.

I've wrested control away from him, but I don't seem to have it, either. Like I flung it out the window. Fly! Be free!

I swallow. "That's not open." I nudge his lower lip with the cheese puff. "Do better," I say.

He grabs my wrist, encircling it snugly and completely with his big, warm hand.

My breath quickens.

His challenging gaze deepens, like he can see right into me.

The bright orange cheese puff falls from my fingers.

Slowly, he pulls my hand toward him, pinning me with his eyes.

I swallow, mouth dry. “Are you going to eat my fingers instead?” I whisper.

He brushes his lips over my knuckle, soft and warm and smooth as velvet.

More shivers. I’m a fireworks show of shivers.

“Somebody thinks he’s quite the operator,” I gasp out. “Somebody thinks his robot moves are all that.”

A chunk of brown hair has fallen over his eyes, and it’s unbearably sexy. He kisses my next knuckle, still watching me.

I stifle a gasp.

Is Max Hilton seducing me? Yes.

My knees tremble.

I steel my resolve. Max doesn’t get to think he’s actually seducing me. No way. Not him.

But his lips are hovering over my pinky knuckle, and everything between us is electric.

God, I need to get control back. I try to think of the book, but I’m in a canoe heading over a sparkles waterfall, and control is soaring over the treetops. Control doesn’t remember me. It will not come when I call.

Max’s eyes are bluer than blue, and his breath is a wisp of silk on my skin. And suddenly I’m imagining his mouth over other parts of me.

Behind those blue eyes I think he’s thinking it too. I ball the hand that he doesn’t have hold of, tightening it against the overwhelming urge to shove it into his hair, to pull his face to my chest. Or maybe just straddle him.

He looks down at our joined hands and adjusts his hold, making my hand all the more his. We’re holding hands. I nearly collapse from the unexpectedness of it. The jaw-dropping sexiness.

He looks up and it’s a bolt through my belly.

Holding my gaze, he kisses my pinky knuckle, a brush of a kiss that sends

shudders through me.

How is this happening? He's taking me over and he hasn't even gotten past my wrist!

He turns my hand so that his lips are over my thumb knuckle. How could I have forgotten about that one? He's now going to kiss my thumb knuckle.

I wait, barely breathing. My entire world has collapsed to that thumb knuckle. It cries out for his lips.

And omigod, what will he kiss after that? Images of me stretched naked across his desk crowd through my mind. Flashes of his wicked lips hovering over my belly. Pressing to the space between my legs.

My mouth begins to form his name—*Max*. I'm not above begging if that gets us moving along.

It's here I come to my senses. Begging? Moving along? What is happening to me? It comes to me that *this* is probably what he wanted when he set up these deliveries.

Maybe he even wagered on it with Parker—*how long will it take? How many Meow Squad visits until I'm the main course?*

I yank my hand away. "In your dreams, buddy. In your dreams."

I spin around and get back over to my cart, awash in a sense of loss, but you can't trust a man with no heart.

He turns back to his computer. "Are you going to bring my correct sandwich next time?"

"Doubtful," I say.

The woman will scoff at your rewards and demerits but keep going. Doling out rewards and demerits positions you as the approval giver and her as the approval seeker.

-THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

Kelsey's there when I get home from work. I peel off my winter clothes, feeling like a fugitive. Am I running from Max? Or myself?

"So? How'd it go?"

Unbearably sexy comes to mind. *Wild. Confusing. Knuckle kisses of wonder.*

"I'm definitely getting his attention." I grab the marker and put an X in the *mete out rewards and demerits* box. "He got three gold stars for his tower."

Kelsey smiles. It's nice to see her happy and excited like this. "All this time he thought it was such an impressive tower."

"Such high hopes for his tower. And then I gave some supermodels in a

photo with him two-point-five stars, and he got an extra bag of cheesy puffs when he behaved well.”

“Wow. You are going master-level on his system.”

This is the part where I should tell her about the knuckle kiss, but I don’t. I can’t. Maybe it’s cowardly.

That afternoon, I set out with my script teed up on my phone, off to wander the streets and memorize lines. And I’m a little bit avoiding Kelsey.

Though I really, really do need to work on my monologue.

On the first call with acting and singing auditions, you always go in with your own material, and for my monologue I’m doing something from *Wicked*.

In order to not look crazy, I wear an iPhone headset, like I’m talking on the phone. Though if people listen, they’ll definitely wonder about my sanity.

One of the best things about winter is that it gets dark earlier, and you can see in windows, so many windows like bright fishbowls.

I walk and I talk, watching the world around me. The way people move, the way they get into cabs or even wait for a light, all of that goes into my tool bag.

I people-watched a lot when I first arrived in the city as a freshman attending the Shiz.

I’d especially watch the elegant women. I remember how horrified I was when I realized how little grace I had compared to them. I flopped down on chairs instead of sitting. I slammed my beverages instead of sipping. And I didn’t talk, I spouted off. Worst of all, that brassy laugh.

I’m heading up Ninth Street, running through my piece enough that it’s in my bones. I try incorporating that tip-of-the-head movement that Max’s receptionist did, a slight twist of the spine and a tip. It’s not right in the piece, but it feels very chic. I like it.

I go along the edge of the park, just over a mile from our place. I re-tie my scarf against the wind coming across it and head back down 8th, which is

a reasonable enough street to take back to our neighborhood, but it's also where Maximillion Tower is.

I haven't forgotten the seeming lie I overheard on the phone. I've thought about it on and off over the past weeks. A foundation thing after work on Tuesdays.

What does he really have on Tuesday nights? What is he hiding? I can't quite shake the feeling he's hiding something.

It's 6:30 PM and Max's lights are still on. Most people would have gone home, but Max is there. He always was a hard worker—I saw that up close during the musical. He seemed to have come in with the songs pre-memorized, and he was so serious about getting the blocking right.

I huddle in a doorway across the street.

Is he working this late? Or maybe there's a supermodel up there, and he's saying Max Hilton things to her. *You're wearing far too many clothes, baby. Come on over here and let's get nasty.*

Or maybe he's kissing her knuckles and melting her mind. And she hates how bad she wants him.

Standing out there, I'm thinking that I could just see where he goes. What if he's learning to juggle? Attending a jazz-hands-to-the-oldies class? These are things I would need to know. Chances are good that he'll have a driver pick him up and whisk him off somewhere, and it's not like I'm going to jump into a cab and be all, *follow that limo!*

Probably.

In his book, Max talks about the practice of observation.

Guys are stupid and oblivious as a rule. You don't have to do much to rise above the competition. You want a book about how to seduce the woman you want? It's written on her face, in her clothes. She tells you with every word she speaks, with every smile. What does she like? What does she care about? Open your eyes. Start seeing what's in front of your face. Use everything.

I wander up and down the long block, keeping an eye on his window, thinking I'll just linger for a while.

I tell myself it's not weird. I tell myself it's all in that service of my girlfriends—the more ammunition the better, right?

But really, I just want to know. I can't stop thinking about his half smile, how it feels like a secret smile that's just for me.

Stupid.

His light goes off. I step back into the shadows. A few minutes later, he steps out of the building. No car tonight. He's wearing an overcoat and winter hat with ear flaps, pulled low over his forehead. A long scarf slung around his chin.

In other words, a disguise. But I'd recognize that posture anywhere. The angle of his head as he looks around.

He turns right and heads along 8th.

Will he take the subway? Does somebody as rich as Max even take a subway?

If it's an easy ride, I suppose he might, though following him all the way down and onto the train seems like a pretty big commitment. Hard not to be noticed if it's not crowded. And if I'm not in the car he rides, it'll be hard to get off at the stop he gets out at.

I channel every action and adventure movie I ever saw as I follow him at a discreet distance, telling myself I'll decide when I decide.

After high school I'd keep my ears peeled at parties, curious where he was auditioning. I knew he wouldn't go for traditional, more established orchestras or ensembles; that wasn't Max. He'd go for something up-and-coming. The sleek and exciting dark horse trio. Something with the edge and cachet to make you go *ooooh*.

My friends and I were surprised when pianists other than Max turned up in those *ooooh* sorts of positions, whereas Max's name was nowhere, not even sitting in for concerts.

He was so talented and connected. What was he up to?

Then *The Max Hilton Playbook: Ten Golden Rules for Landing the Hottest Girl in the Room* came out. And there was nothing in his bio about playing piano. Like he'd erased that whole part of himself.

We were all stunned, even more when his guide sold millions of copies, earning him more money in a month than the most musicians make in a lifetime. A lot of us thought he'd come back to music after that, but instead, he took his mad money and built a global men's style empire.

Max had more talent in his little finger than most serious musicians and he'd cast it all aside.

Now he has his own jet.

And a secret about Tuesday nights.

Much to my delight, he passes the 50th Street station and keeps going. I pull out my phone and text Kelsey. I told her about my suspicions, and she as interested as I was.

Me: Remember Max's secret Tuesday night liaison? Hot on the trail!

Kelsey: Wut? Girl!

Me: I was monologue walking and...*shrug emoji*

He takes a few turns, walks maybe a total of six blocks until he arrives at a not-very-special building with a Korean noodles place and a Starbucks on the bottom, and five unmemorable stories up top.

Me: Subject has arrived at destination.

I text her a map link.

Kelsey: Don't recall a stalking component in Max's book.

Me: It's there. Know your quarry.

I slink back into a doorway, all the better to watch him. He's in the

doorway on his phone, texting, presumably. I snap a picture and text it to Kelsey.

Kelsey: That is no foundation meeting!

He looks up, then turns and leans back against the wall. Waiting? Is he picking somebody up? Going in? The lights in the building are all off except the fifth floor.

The door opens suddenly. A statuesque woman with bright blonde hair comes out. Max kisses her cheek. My stomach jackknifes as they disappear inside.

I fold my arms, laser gaze set on reduce-to-rubble.

Me: Some woman came out and let him in.

Kelsey: *frown emoji*

I wait, watching for movement or lights to show me where they went. Finally I get what I want—or don't want—up on the top floor, a corner window lights up, but three nearby windows go dark.

And then I see her back to a window sill. Her hands are out on either side of herself, like she's leaning back and talking to somebody in there.

I punch the address into Google and get a series of hits. Eye doctors on the second floor; accountants, fabric wholesaler on the fourth and then a hit on Suite 500, the fifth floor. It's a yoga studio. Namaste Way. Sure enough, there's a neon lotus on the farthest window. The whole half of this side of the top floor is a yoga studio.

Me: They went into a yoga studio and turned most of the lights off.

Kelsey: *frown emoji*

Me: Private yoga lessons? In secret?

Kelsey: But why??????

The woman moves away from the window. I wait a few minutes. Then the neon lotus goes out. Moments pass.

Me: No more movement. What are they doing?

Kelsey: Why does a man ever meet a woman in secret?

Me: Then why not a hotel?

Kelsey: Perhaps he is an exceptionally acrobatic lover?

Something clenches around my heart.

Kelsey: Naked yoga? Troll doll full-costume sex fetish films?

Me: Shit! I was watching the window and somebody else went in!

Kelsey: Did you see who?

Me: IDK could've been more than one person.

Kelsey: Erp.

A few minutes later, somebody else emerges from the front door, all bundled up. The blonde. She turns and walks down the street.

Max doesn't come out. And the corner window up there is still lit. I report back to Kelsey. Did those new people join him? I check the back of the building, but the yoga studio is the only lit-up area.

What does Max do in a yoga studio by himself that he has to lie about? He has a palatial apartment on Central Park; I've seen the photos. If he wanted a yoga studio, he'd have a yoga studio there.

I wait for a bit more, then I give up, cold and hungry. On the way home, I Google Namaste Way. The blonde is the owner, a former gymnast turned yoga teacher, which isn't a big surprise in terms of career progression.

Kelsey and I eat cereal and discuss the new mystery. She's wrangled

another donation from another Max Hilton book victim. The woman wants me to know that I'm doing God's work.

"Yeah, I don't know about that."

"You're standing up to him, that's what counts. He's seeing what it feels like to have somebody work a system on him like he's a piece of meat," Kelsey says.

"I'm not going to overpromise," I say. "Max is a man who is surrounded by gorgeous women. He probably has mysterious assignments all over the city, like a bee going from flower to flower."

"And you'll squish him," Kelsey says.

"Well, bees are endangered, so..."

"Squish his overblown ego," she amends.

I try to imagine that, but I can't quite get past the feel of his fingers around my wrist. His lips pressed to my knuckles. And then it turns to him throwing the yoga teacher up against the wall in the dark stairwell and kissing her. Which is basically like a furious scribble in my mind. In unrelated news, I suggest that maybe it's time for Antonio, and Kelsey's texting him before I can even finish my admittedly weak rationale for my change of heart.

Fifteen minutes later, Antonio's in our living room modeling a three-piece suit he plans to wear for his star turn, hair-that-shall-not-be-touched perfectly tousled.

It's as if he lounges around his apartment looking like he stepped right off the pages of a men's magazine.

Kelsey bites her lip, beaming at him.

"Antonio Corelli. Bringing it," I say.

Antonio smiles. "Hugo Boss fall collection. I did a runway show last month and they gave me this one. A ten-thousand-dollar suit if not for a fray by the button."

"It's a wonderful suit," Kelsey says. "Just stunning."

"The bracelet gives it a slight organized-crime twist," I observe. "Very

nice. Not that Max will be close enough to see that, so I guess it doesn't matter." This is my gentle way of reminding him that he won't be trotting out that backstory.

He fingers his bracelet. "If you are asking if I am a *friend*—a *soldier*..." He gives his Euro shrug. "This is not something you should ask. I will tell you that my time in the streets made me hard. A very hard businessman. My practices..." Thoughtfully, he adjusts his suit sleeve. "They are not what you call ethical, I'm afraid. Effective, yes. Ethical, not so much, *cara*. Everything I have, I've had to fight for. And now I fight for you. I will follow you up the high-rise. I am not above helping the object of my affection in her menial chores. And if another man even looks at her sideways." He gives Kelsey a dark look and lowers his voice. "I will slit his throat. Without a moment's hesitation, I will do this. I will leave him to die on the street like the dog that he is."

"Dude, no," I say.

"How will this pickup artist know that I adore you?"

"Remote visual observation," I say.

He frowns.

"And you're not following me. You'll just be out hanging around at the rendezvous truck where I switch out carts between buildings, and he'll see you looking at me adoringly when he walks by. It's usually before lunch, or else right after. Okay? He's not going to come talk to us."

"But if he does..."

"You're a guy on your lunch break who wants a date with me. And you say nothing."

Antonio shakes his head vociferously. "I would not stay silent," he growls. "One sideways look from him—"

"It won't come to that."

"You never know," Kelsey says. "It's good for Antonio to be ready."

I widen my eyes at Kelsey.

Antonio gazes at the ceiling, sucks in a breath. “Even the smallest interaction with you, when you’re loading your lunch cart out on the street, is solace to my darkened soul. Does he think to take you from me? He’ll see that the blade is just another tool to me. I am not afraid to tell him that.”

“Yeah, you don’t want to scare him off,” Kelsey says, chastened. “Just watch her with that deep look, maybe a smile. You’ll be amazing.”

“A smile with no subtext is but a shape of the lips.” Antonio turns his deep look to me. “How many men have I killed in this short life? One does not lurk around after a street fight in the alleyways of Milano.”

“...cookies,” I whisper.

“Roma, then,” he growls.

Do something outrageous. You don't give a shit what she thinks.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

I call Rollins to try and persuade him to use the Maximillion Plaza block as the relay point—I suggest a spot that will be in perfect view of Max walking across the street for his pre-lunch visit. It's just a block over from where we usually are.

Rollins is not so sure—in addition to the innocent-country-boy-in-the-city thing he has going on, he's a dedicated rule follower. Rollins never met a rule he doesn't want to marry in a little white chapel on a windswept prairie.

I promise him I'll tell the other delivery cats and take all the heat, and he finally agrees.

I arrange my delivery schedule so that I can meet Antonio out there just before eleven.

The timing works like clockwork, which I guess is the point of using a

clock. Rollins brings me a new cart and switches out the old like the Indy 500 pit crew of sandwich delivery that he is. I'm refilling the chips and utensils just as Antonio arrives in his beautiful suit.

"Can I help you?" Rollins asks, because Antonio looks more like somebody we'd deliver to than somebody we'd know.

"I'm past help," Antonio says darkly. "So far past help."

"It's cool, he's my cousin," I explain.

Antonio slides his hand up the side of the truck, gazing down at me. It's a smoldering, sensual, uniquely male stance. "Do not minimize it, *cara*," he says. "Do not minimize what we are to each other. We are more than mere cousins."

Rollins straightens, nervously restocking chips.

I widen my eyes at Antonio.

Antonio turns to Rollins. "I came to look at her beauty, hoping that it would ease the despair and darkness in my heart."

"Oh," Rollins says.

"Antonio, stop being funny."

"*Pah!* You wish me to hide my love. I will not. I had no beauty coming up on the streets of Roma, you know." He turns to a wide-eyed Rollins. "I sold myself, I hurt people. The blade was my friend. I am not proud. But everything I went through is worth it..."

"Okay..." I say. "But do you remember our discussion?"

Rollins is busying himself with the condiments box.

Antonio glances significantly over my shoulder, then back at me, and he turns a thousand-watt smile on me.

"I ask you," he says, tilting his head, which adds hot-guy dimension to the smile. "Who is that dog over there who thinks he can look at you? I will cut out his heart as easily as I'd plunge a knife into a ripe tomato. Your body is not for men to feast their eyes on."

He's spotted Max. I pull out my phone and put it on selfie-mode. My

breath catches as I see that familiar pair of shoulders behind me.

I gaze up at Antonio, who looks down at me besotted. Beatific, even, like a monk, having endured years of darkness for this one chance to gaze upon the divine. “All my problems disappear when I set my eyes upon you,” he whispers. “All of them!”

I smile back at him. Now I’m turning on the drama. “You really are amazing,” I say.

“I know I am,” he says.

“I appreciate it, I do.” I’m also relieved that there was no weird confrontation.

“Well, all the lessons you have given me. You have taught me so much.” Acting, he means.

“You’ve been putting in the work.”

Antonio sighs and shoves his hands into his pockets.

“Gone?” I ask.

“Gone, *cara*.”

I lower my voice. “You think he even saw?”

“I don’t know. He seemed...absorbed in thought.”

“Do I get to check off the box if he didn’t see?”

Antonio looks at me sadly.

Rollins stands behind him, fussing with a cart, a look of alarm etched upon his features.



I EXECUTE my deliveries for Maximillion Plaza at peak efficiency, getting peak tips. I never looked forward to my route this much before.

Blade, the guy on the twentieth floor who really loves that movie, is excited about the whitefish I recommended. He’s been talking me up on the floor and it’s suddenly my most lucrative floor. He asks me whether I’m appearing in any shows coming up and I tell him about my upcoming

audition for *Anything Goes*. He's sure I'll get it.

By the elevators on Blade's floor, there's a pair of enlarged photos of Max.

In one of them, he's looking bored in a fabulous suit, sprawled on a kingly piece of furniture. A woman stands behind him with her hand in his hair.

My belly grinds at the sight. Which just goes to show the devastating power of prize-positioning. Max has many flaws, but ignorance was never one of them.

I only wish he'd seen Antonio admiring me, so that I could be prize-positioned, too.

What did all of that maneuvering get me instead? Rollins thinks I'm dating my murderous gigolo cousin.

But I really want to be able to X off a golden-rule box today. I'm thinking about the *Do Something Outrageous* one. My gaze falls to the twelve bags of cheesy puffs still in my cart. A plan starts to form.

On the twenty-second floor I start giving the cheesy puffs away. "You get an extra free one!" I say to my excited customers. I'll have to settle up with the Meow Squad powers that be, but who cares about obstacles like that when you're on the do-something-outrageous warpath?

I strategically work it out as only a delivery cat can so that I have precisely one bag left when I get into the elevator going up to his floor. One of the willowy, statuesque receptionists is riding with me; I'd hoped to have privacy for this part of my plan, but then again, it's not like people sit around staring at each other in elevators, right? Elevators are a zone of ignoring each other.

I retreat to the back of the elevator and pull open the last cheesy puff bag and stuff a handful into my mouth, allowing bright orange crumbs to cascade down my shirt. I stifle a grin, imagining Max's face after I tell him I'm out of cheesy puffs and he specifically sees them all over my front.

I shove another bunch in, kind of smashing them into my mouth, so that they get into my hair a little bit.

It's right about here that I realize the statuesque beauty is watching me in the reflection of one of the slim, highly polished panels. She quickly looks away.

My pulse races. I think about saying something, but what? There are some instances when explaining an awkward thing will only make it more awkward.

Finally the elevator arrives at the top floor. She gets out first and walks off—eager, perhaps, to tell her willowy, statuesque co-workers the cautionary tale of the lunch-cart girl.

I keep Kelsey's faith in me in mind as I knock on Max's door wearing a cat suit full of orange cheesy puffs. "Meow Squad."

There's a largish puff right on the center of my chest, a bright orange badge of outrageousness. I'm so X-ing off that box.

"Come," he says.

I push in. "When did people stop saying *come in*? I don't know how I feel about *come*, just on its own."

Max has his jacket off again, his tie is a little bit loose, and his dress shirt is tight over his sternly crossed arms, creating a definite guns-n-stuff effect. Arm muscles ahoy. Just looking at him makes my head feel light.

He says, "I think of it as a Jean-Luc Picard from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* thing."

I snort, as if that's so uncool, though in my own personal hierarchy of pop culture references, Jean-Luc Picard beats Deckard from *Blade Runner*. Leave it to Max.

I pull his lunch from my cart. "I'm going to guess you want layout."

I go around without his telling me to. I flatten out the bag, feeling his stare, hungry and heavy on my skin.

"I've taken the liberty of ordering you a sesame chili salmon sandwich

with kimchi fried rice today,” I say. I’m thinking about the knuckles kiss, much as I’m trying not to.

He probably forgot about it by now. A brief knuckle kiss is just a drop of water in the vast ocean of Max Hilton’s daily moves.

His arms are still lusciously crossed. I imagine flattening the shirt fabric over them, smoothing the shirt so that it perfectly outlines the contours of his muscles, and then I’d smooth some more, soft fabric over steely strength, like a party for my hands. And then maybe my lips could get involved. And then maybe my teeth.

“Am I ever going to get what I ordered again? You’re not a very proficient lunch-cart girl.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Go ahead and play this sad little game if you want,” he says, “just know that I don’t like mushrooms, bacon, ham, or cilantro.”

“Oh, I’m not the one playing a sad little game, my friend.”

“What exactly is that supposed to mean?”

I place a napkin and knife and fork next to his new sandwich. He knows exactly what it means. Ordering from the Meow Squad. Requesting me.

“Who’s your little friend out there?” he asks.

I still. He saw Antonio and me out there? Was he pretending he didn’t see? “Out where?”

“Out where,” he snorts. “The *strapping fella* in Hugo Boss out by your lunch-cart truck?” I get the sense he’s going for lightness in the *strapping fella* bit, but it sounds slightly adversarial, too.

Is he jealous? Excitement surges through me. I’ve never been somebody excited by jealousy before.

“Ah,” I say with faraway eyes. “Antonio.” I’m stoking it now. What’s going on with me?

I continue my machinations, reveling in his covetous gaze. I set out his mustards with my usual flourish. He picks up a pen, moves it carelessly

around in his fingers. His hands really are large. And warm and soft.

“*Please*,” he says.

“What?”

“*Ah, Antonio*,” he echoes, matching my intonation exactly. “He’s a friend. You look at him like a friend. Like one of your galpals.”

I give him a sympathetic look. “Poor Max Hilton. I think that’s maybe what you wanted to see.”

“I know what I saw.”

“That was not a galpal face,” I say. I set a bag of Lay’s plain potato chips next to his sandwich.

“What is this?” He picks them up, brow furrowed. “Where’s my array?”

“Can’t you just access the image from the last time I displayed them in your robot memory files?”

He shakes his head.

“*Ungh*.” I go back to the cart and pluck out four bags of chips. I hold them up. “We have Lay’s, barbeque, cool ranch, and baked sea salt.”

“No cheesy puffs today?”

“I ran out.”

He zeroes in on the bright orange cheesy puff crumbs. “You’re telling me you ran out?”

I show him the empty cheesy puffs box, quivering with maybe too much excitement. “The very last bag was eaten. Quite recently!” I bite my tongue—hard—applying intense, anti-laughter pressure.

He stands.

I’m fighting not to smile. Bite bite bite.

He’s coming for me.

I back up.

He keeps coming. I’m a deer in the blazing headlights. If a deer ate the car’s dinner. And the car is barreling down the road.

I hit the wall. His hands hit the wall on either side of me.

My knees are jelly.

“What are you doing, Mia?”

I can feel his warmth deep in my chest—it’s like he has his own personal force field.

His eyes bore into mine, and then he drops his gaze to my shirt.

My pulse pounds.

He picks a bit of cheesy puff off my chest and holds it between us, evidence of my impudence. “Who ate my cheesy puffs?”

Excited shivers rain over me. “I did,” I whisper into his face.

We both seem to hold our breath. It’s like we’re in some kind of strange limbo.

Sexiest. Re-enactment. Of Goldilocks. Ever.

His pulse drums hot and steady beneath the hard line of his jaw. I imagine pressing my lips to the tender skin there. Desire floods my veins.

“You think it’s funny?”

“I don’t know.” Something’s melting in my belly.

He drops the puff bit, his face lit with beautiful fury.

He brushes some bits off the center of my chest, my shoulder. The feeling of his hand on me is electric.

And then he moves to my cheek, swiping it with his thumb, rough velvet on hot silk. There might have been a crumb there. Really, I don’t care.

His chest rises and falls, seemingly in unison with mine. His expression is so serious. I remember it from that summer—it was the way he looked when he cared about getting something right.

I feel this rush of frustration. I want us to be different. Free of our factions and fraught history.

He slides his thumb across my lower lip. The urge to take it into my mouth is nearly unbearable. I would suck it so hard. I would reach down and touch his cock and suck the hell out of his thumb.

“Look at you.” He reaches to my hair, brushes a possibly real or maybe

imaginary crumb off, then slides a strand through his fingers. He watches his progress through lowered lashes. He says, “You look beautiful with cheesy puffs on you.”

I swallow with difficulty. “Thank you.”

Again he slides my hair through his fingers, watching intently, as though he’s really into making sure the crumbs are gone. The lightest sheen of whisker stubble glints on his cheeks.

He tucks another strand behind my ear. Then he brushes some more back. I’m catatonic with lust.

And confusion.

What is Max doing?

He tucks my hair again, this time grazing the shell of my ear. The bright swipe of his touch ripples over my body. It arrows down between my legs.

My breath hitches.

I want him to press himself right into me and make me come. Coming like that is not a thing with me, but right now, it would be.

I want him so badly, I might burst into flames.

He draws his mouth close to my ear, right there where he tucked away the hair. His breath is warm velvet on my ear.

I close my eyes.

My entire skeletal system is turning into jelly at this point. I imagine gripping his shoulders, pulling him to me.

“That,” he whispers, “is your non-galpal face.”

My eyes fly open. “Oh my god!” I push him away. “You are so full of shit.”

He just watches me, amused.

“You think you’re all that.”

He lowers his voice to a hard rumble. “You’ll bring the cheesy puffs next time.”

I snort. “Definitely not.” I grab my cart and leave, fling open the door and

almost bump into Parker.

I step back.

Parker Westbrook, his brainiac business partner, a budding sax player back at the Shiz.

Parker still has his same chubby cheeks and nerdy glasses and generally disheveled bearing—the pile of folders and magazines he’s carrying looks like it’s about to explode.

“Parker!” I say, then I remember he was another rich kid who was unkind to me. “Hi,” I add, in a more morose tone.

“Mia...” He looks me up and down. “Nice threads.”

I do a little shimmy, hips wiggling, while I circle my finger, then point it right at him. “You can’t touch this.” Just a little alpha-signaling-reverse-chasing combo courtesy of Max’s pathetic book.

“Good to see some people haven’t changed,” he says, walking in.

“Back atcha,” I say.

“Vicious campaign mockups,” he says to Max. “Fucking golden.”

Vicious campaign. I snort and look back at Max. He just smiles his cool superior smile.

I get out of there and ride the elevator down.

Be playful and outrageous.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MAX

I should bar Meow Squad from the building. It's what I should do. A smarter man would do that. A smarter man would've done it the first day.

"So...not to point out the obvious," Parker says, "but that was Mia Corelli. In your office. In a cat suit."

"I know. She's been delivering sandwiches."

"And?"

"There's no *and*. She engineered getting in here somehow. God knows how or why. Apparently Meredith left instructions for the front desk to let her through before she flitted off to her yoga retreat. I've got an email out to her, but it's a yoga retreat. In Costa Rica." I shrug. "I know it was Mia, though—she was so clearly unsurprised to be walking into my office that first day."

Parker has this strange look on his face. He never liked her, never wanted

to be around her. “Really.”

It’s outrageous, of course. The idea that Mia would seek me out, thinking she’d just bring it—to *me*—a man who controls a billion-dollar empire, along with all of the messaging and mindshare that spreads out from that, and she’s a lunch-cart girl, and she decides it’s a good time to bring it...it’s classic Mia.

“Yes, and I’m sure you’ll be happy to know that she finds all of this *impressive*.”

Parker frowns. “That’s what she said?”

“Impressive.”

Parker snorts. You had to be a student at the Shiz to comprehend the cut of that word. Impressive meant style over substance. Flash over soul. It meant you were pandering to the audience as opposed to being a serious artist. Impressive suggested that you cared only about looking good to people.

“So, what’s she up to?”

“I don’t know. It’s not as if I follow her on Facebook or anything.”

“You’re not catching up?”

“On the sandwich trends of Manhattan, maybe. She’s delivering lunch.”

“Right to you in your office,” he says.

I shrug. “Let’s have it. Where are we on the campaign?”

Parker spins through the media plan.

I sometimes fly Parker and some of my buddies out to Vegas to see mixed martial arts fights. Front-row seats. Ringside service. If you know the sport, you know that the fighter who is flat on his back can sometimes turn that position to his advantage. There are certain moves that can be downright deadly from the bottom.

Leave it to Mia to think she’s going to bring it from the bottom.

A lunch-cart girl. But what does Mia care? The world is her cocktail party. Back at the Shiz, wherever you heard laughter or gasps and whispers rising up from a group, you knew Mia was at the center of it.

Ah, Antonio.

Who the hell is he? A Wall Street guy? Hotshot exec? How does she even meet somebody like that?

No, she's not with him—I know it. Mia's gaze takes on a certain softness when she's captured by something. And that's not how she looked at Antonio. I saw her face only briefly, but it was enough.

Still. What was I seeing? He looked ready to haul her over his shoulder and carry her off.

Parker shows me another board. “The slate gray is pitch perfect,” he says. “And the look on your face. This is gonna kill. They will eat it up. Don't you think?”

“Agreed,” I say. “Perfect.”

“Here's our location for your shoot.” He flips to a backdrop. “Check out this gritty drama. Set you up here with Lana and a couple of the other girls.”

“Yeah, that works.” I look up at the image of me and Lana at the Maximillion fifth anniversary photo shoot that Mia keeps staring at. It's a shot of me sitting with my old friend Lana, bag designer extraordinaire. Lana's sister and one of the Max Hilton girls from that year, a jewelry designer, are gathered around us, laughing at something.

Two-point-five stars. I bite back a smile.

It was a good night at the top of Maximillion Plaza, all champagne fountains and A-list celebs and athletes. A whirlwind event where we raised tens of thousands of dollars for charity.

And not once did I look out over the rooftops and wonder what she was doing.

Not once did I sling my arm around a woman's shoulders and think, *you're not her*.

Only an idiot tells a woman what she wants to hear.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MAX

The Maximillion Companies studio complex sits across the street from the main headquarters. It's a creative workshop, a refuge from the demands of running the company. Doing a round through there is the high point of my day—I enjoy finding out about my employees' projects on an informal basis. Hearing what's on people's minds.

I sometimes see Mia and her co-workers around the Meow Squad truck out on 8th, but she's not there today. Which means I may not see her today at all—I have an interview and a lunch event across town.

I head in. The studio complex was an abandoned eyesore across the street when we first took over the tower. After an unexpectedly good quarter—and against the wishes of our accounting team—we bought it and had it gutted and made into an open, colorful creative space with large and small work

rooms honeycombed around the edges.

I love to walk around there and get the fashion designers, industrial designers, and marketing creatives to pitch me big ideas. Sometimes I pitch them.

It took a long time to get them to stop treating me like an owner, or worse, a celeb. To understand that I'm just a collaborator with extra juice. It took a few rounds of championing wild ideas and handing out bonuses even when things crashed to get them to relax around me. And Maximillion Companies is all the better for it.

I check on the apparel design team, and then I'm up in the photography studio talking about shots. The studio has windows that overlook the street below.

It's right before eleven when I see the Meow Squad truck pull into one of the fifteen-minute spaces.

Somebody is talking to me about a new series of images for the Maximillion body spray, but I can't stop watching the truck, wondering what she'll get up to today.

Eating my cheesy puffs. Letting the evidence of it sprinkle down her front. I'm sure she was laughing as she did it. Stuffing her face and laughing.

Did she deliberately place the one large puff right in front, hoping to draw my eye?

Yes, of course. Standing there trying to look serious. Mischief in her eyes; cheesy puff crumbs in her hair. In your room full of balloons, Mia is the one holding the needle, dancing around like a dervish, laughing her head off.

And the way she added all of that bling to her uniform.

It reminds me of the way she dressed when she first got to the Shiz—as though a magpie dressed her, all loud colors and mismatched metallics. Later, she made herself over, or maybe her friends did. A new casually-elegant style to go with her new casually-elegant accent.

A young guy jumps out and opens up the back. A redhead with Meow

Squad ears walks up—hers are lit with tiny lights, oddly enough.

My photographer is talking about the color process, petitioning for a Japanese photo app that automates something or other. He drones on as more Meow Squad people arrive and get their pre-packed carts.

I nod, feigning interest.

And then she's there, ears shining in the late-morning sunlight, standing straight and proud, making the most of her small frame. The stance is classic Mia.

She'd hold her head high through every setback, going after her stage career with an urgency that wasn't there with other kids. It looked like urgency, anyway; I had this idea that it was a little bit about escape, too. We both wanted to escape in our own ways, I guess.

One of the few things we had in common.

I flex my fingers as she touches the young van driver on the shoulder, talking to him excitedly. Mia always had lots of funny, charming stories. I think half the school was in love with her.

She pulls out her cart and arranging it just so, laughing.

Something lightens in me, seeing her laugh, but then her friend Antonio appears around the corner. How does he end up out there? Does he wait for her? Do they text? He's wearing another nice suit, actually. He's young to know how to wear a suit so well. I'd think he was a model himself if not for his briefcase.

She seems happy to see him, but the way she looks at him—she's fond of him. It's the way she'd look at a pet hamster. She grabs his arm and says something, head tilted, just an air of mischief.

“Max?”

“Buy the app,” I say, not wanting to tear my gaze from the scene unfolding below. “Send me a few shots so I can see.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

She's twisting her lips at him. It's her humorous and not-so-sure-about-

this look. Playful scolding.

Or am I reading her wrong?

Now his hands are on her shoulders and he's regarding her with outsized emotions—shock, joy.

I'm reminded of a Facebook video I once saw of a deaf man who'd gotten some kind of ear implant and could hear for the first time. He listened to the ocean with that stunned, joyful, bewildered expression. Then he listened to some symphony music with a face like that.

I don't get why Antonio looks at Mia like that. Did she deliver some astonishing news? But she still has that fond scolding look. She reaches up and fixes his tie. Is she whispering to him?

My blood goes cold as he slides his hand to the side of her head. He leans in and kisses her.

I wait for her to push him away. Instead she shoves her hands into his hair, vigorously messing it up. Her hands grip his back. The kiss is getting dramatic.

I'm off, heading down to the lower level, my legs moving before my mind can stop me. I'm rushing down the stairwell, out the door.

My mood is dark as I emerge onto the busy thoroughfare. I need to get to them. I don't know why. I don't need a reason.

Traffic is insane—I'm waiting at the light for what feels like forever. Finally it clears. The walk light flashes on and I'm stomping across the street. Around the corner. My brow lowers as I approach the truck.

They're both gone. There's just the kid. The driver.

"Can I help you?" he asks.

I take out my wallet and extract a fifty. "Who was that with Mia?"

The driver gapes at the money. "I can't take that."

"Why not? Did you take an oath of silence?"

"No, but...I don't want trouble with Antonio."

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?"

The kid looks up and down the street, as if he's worried Antonio might jump out of the shadows. "He has a lot of darkness in his heart."

I frown. "What does *that* mean?"

"You don't want to know. Just leave it. And don't ask around about him—he's dangerous."

I get a little closer and shove the fifty into his front pocket. "I won't have to ask around if you tell me. What do you mean by dangerous?"

The kid lowers his voice. "Antonio would plunge a knife into your heart as easily as he'd cut a ripe tomato. *That's* what I mean."

I stare. Hard. "Are you being funny?"

Solemnly, he shakes his head. "You didn't hear it from me. Okay?"

My protective instincts kick into overdrive. "He's some sort of criminal?"

"To put it mildly," the kid says. "The man is a killer from Italy who had very little to live for before Mia. He grew up selling his body on the streets of Roma and getting into knife fights. He's killed before. Sliced men to ribbons, and he thinks nothing of sleeping in pools of blood. And there are other things, too. Between him and Mia...it's very..." He shakes his head as he loads an empty cart into the back of his truck.

I frown. "Very *what*?"

"Unsavory. I'd rather not get into it."

"Unsavory how?"

He rushes around to the front and pulls open the door.

I follow on his heels. "Where is she? Right now."

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do," I say.

"The Hillman building. She has a quick route there, and then she's at the International Foods Center."

"Thank you." I turn and walk toward the Hillman building.

I don't like this. I don't like the boy's alarm. I don't like that they kissed. Is this man in the mafia? Is that what the kid was getting at? Mia wouldn't

have anything to do with somebody like that.

I go one block, two blocks, barreling past the dawdling pedestrians, ignoring the heads that swivel around in recognition.

I'm thinking about calling a friend on the force, a detective who's done time on an organized crime unit, and asking him what he knows about gang members newly arrived from Rome, specifically anybody named Antonio.

The Hillman tower looms ahead.

I position myself to the side of the door, trying to collect my thoughts. I can't be late to this luncheon, but this Antonio situation feels all wrong.

I go over what I know: Roman male prostitute who graduated to knife fighting. He murdered several people. Sharp dresser. Model-good looks.

And the way he looked at her, like a man in hell seeing an angel. And the way she gripped his back, the high drama.

I turn the thing over in my mind.

And then I just start laughing.

Mia's out the door moments later, bumping her cart down the steps. I go up to help her.

"Max! What are you doing?"

I lift the cart onto the flat sidewalk. "I heard some disturbing news about Antonio," I say.

"I don't think Antonio is really any of your business," she says.

"He's extremely dangerous," I say. "Did you know that he sold his body in the gutters back in Italy?"

She looks bewildered. "Huh?"

"Antonio would plunge a knife into a man's heart as readily as he would slice a tomato. He's killed before, you know. I'm thinking about alerting a friend on the force."

She looks pale. "A cop?"

"He bathes in the blood of his enemies. Though on the upside, tomato-slicing skills like that would make him handy around the kitchen."

Confusion fills her face.

I do my best not to smile, but I fail, and she sees it.

She slaps my chest. “Screw off. I can’t even with you.”

I go to her, knit our fingers together, right there on the sidewalk, with streams of people moving around us and the cart. She’s warm and breathy, a beautiful, trembling confection.

What am I doing? I need to be across town. “And that kiss. So fake.”

A defiant gleam in her eyes. “Who are you to say what’s fake?”

I lower my voice to a deep register. “I’m the man who’s going to kiss you for real.”

I can feel her shudder through our pressed-together palms.

I brush my lips lightly over hers, and then I kiss her.

She gasps into the kiss. She presses into me. Her pleasure is a drug—the more I get, the more I crave.

“You think you’re all that,” she whispers into the millimeter of space between our lips. “You think that was a real kiss?”

I cup her cheeks, cradling them. “I know it was a real kiss.” I swipe my thumb over her perfectly plump lips. “Try not to eat all of the cheesy puffs next time.”



I SIP MY LATTE, waiting for my pre-luncheon interview. Why did I kiss her like that? What was I thinking?

I’d vowed to stay away from her.

But god, the way her eyes shone—burnt-sugar brown. Maddening, impossible Mia Corelli.

A shadow falls over the table, and there he is, Tarquin Walters, intrepid tabloid reporter. “I understand you’ve been kissing Meow Squad cats out on the street,” he says, sitting down. “Leaving them stunned and breathless.”

Stunned and breathless? He watches my face a little too intently. Does he

sense a story? The last thing I want is for Mia to wind up in the tabloids with me. She'd hate it.

"Kissing me is always a deeply religious experience for women."

Tarquin gives me a jaded look and orders a coffee.

"Come on," he says, "Level with me. A delivery girl now? Do tell." Tarquin's doing a feature on me. The goal of a feature profiler is always to get something juicy.

"Max Hilton with the lunch-cart girl? Why not go all the way? We could do Satanist Max Hilton, all animal sacrifices and strange tattoos. Or Max Hilton with an alien baby. Or maybe Max Hilton who sings weepy show tunes and still can't get over that first love who rejected him."

"Gimme something real. Some interiority."

"Tarquin, the side boob has come back in style, and the Verona Club has Delmonico steak back on the menu. Let's grab a window table and get day drunk."

"You're not doing that to me again," he says.

I smile. "Fine. Questions. Anything."

"Lana Sheffidy."

"Lana's one of my best friends," I say. "I'd tell you if there was something going on. I promise you," I say when he protests. "Though she's threatening to design a men's fanny pack line for Maximillion." A joke.

"God, no," he says. And then he turns serious. "You ran away from home at the age of eleven. What happened?"

I sip my coffee. "Doesn't every kid run away from home?"

He checks his iPad. "It was right after your elderly nanny, Annette O'Grady, died in a crash on the Queens Expressway."

I stir my coffee. How did he think to connect those things? None of the reporters at the time made the connection. The narrative was that I was trying to get out of a concert.

"It was a big loss," I say. "Annette was a sweet, caring woman. She'd

been with us since I was a toddler and she was..." *Everything*, I think. *The one who kissed my skinned knees and sung me lullabies. The one who brought laughter to my grim childhood. The one who took the sunshine when she died.*

I stare into my coffee. "Annette was full of life. Missed by the whole family. She loved custard, as I recall."

I look up, pulse racing, relieved to see that he's back on his notes.

We discuss my upcoming pet project, Catwalk for a Cause. I give him some red meat on that one—warring factions in the fashion world. A juicy celeb cameo. I'll let him announce it.

We talk food. A restaurant opening we're attending. I tell him about the special-edition grilled whitefish sandwich from a food truck on Seventh. The chef with the Michelin rating.

How did she know I'd love the sandwich like that? Did it give her satisfaction to be right? She always did have excellent taste—that's something I remember from high school. She'd cultivated excellent taste and her own unique opinions on everything. Little Jerseygirl, scrabbling her way up. And she always, *always* wanted to show you that she was in charge.

Show your sense of humor—you never want to take yourself too seriously, and you definitely don't want to take her too seriously.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

I'm still fuming on my way to work the next day.

He's a complete and utter jerkalope who loves to mess with me. One furious, utterly mind-blowing kiss and he thinks he owns me.

Why do I keep falling for it? Yes, it was a good kiss. Max is good at things. Ruthlessly so.

He was good at making me think he cared that summer.

Sienna is at the meeting spot the next day, posed next to a fire hydrant. She has pink fur on her ears and a pink feather boa. She springs up and hugs me. "I should give you the two hundred dollars extra I made yesterday from your idea to pimp out these stupid cat getups. But I need it for rent. Thank you."

“You’re welcome. It wasn’t really my idea,” I say, eyeing her boots. “I adapted it from Max Hilton’s playbook. You know, that pickup book?”

“Seriously? Why would you read that?”

“I deliver to his tower. I wanted to be ready.” I explain alpha-signaling.

Sienna is just laughing. “The playbook. Thanks, Hilton,” she says. “What else are you doing? I want more tricks.”

I cross my arms. “Here’s another: Be playful and outrageous. You need to show you just don’t give a shit. Like, give people funny nicknames and boss them around.”

“Seriously?”

“Say, if there’s any sports stuff in in their office, you call them that—like Bengals or Cubby if it’s Cubs. A guy with a *Blade Runner* sticker on the outside of his laptop is Blade. Or if they order something unusual, like Shasta, you call them that.”

“You just say, here ya go, Shasta?”

“Or Dr. Pepper. Whatever.”

“I could do that,” Sienna says.

Rollins arrives with our go-sheets. I grab mine to see what Max ordered.

Nothing. No order from the twenty-fifth floor. *Again.*

My heart sinks. But it’s for the best. I’m supposed to be fighting for my friends, not kissing Max Hilton, king of careless trysts and liquor carts, the player responsible for Kelsey’s misery.

It’s just that he didn’t feel like a player—not when he’s with me, anyway.

I run through my financial building delivering meals. Trying to be bright, calling everybody by their assigned names. I hit my next buildings, one by one, and then I’m at Maximillion Plaza. The people are upbeat. It seems like a good place to work. Blade, in particular, is all smiles.

“What’s up, Blade?” I like calling him Blade.

He launches into some funny story—not from Max’s book. But still. I give him a sideways look. Is he flirting with me?

He says, “I know this is last minute, but what are you doing Saturday night?”

My mind goes blank. Not only flirting; he’s asking me out.

“It’s the Maximillion party,” he says. “I want you to feel free to say no and know that I’ll never ask you out again or be weird, and I don’t want you to feel any pressure to say yes because I’m a delivery client,” he adds. “But before you answer, let me add that it’s one of the hottest parties in town. Because of the scavenger hunt. Have you heard about it?”

“I thought people hated scavenger hunts.”

“They don’t hate them when there’s actual treasure to be scavenged—like cruises and thousand-dollar bills. And there’s a trivia component and you seem to know a lot of useless music trivia and I know sports. We could clean up.”

“What was that, mister? *Useless* music trivia?”

He pulls open his chips, which he in no way gives me a hard time about. “*Seemingly* useless...”

“I don’t know,” I say. I’d feel...weird. Even though it would be hugely effective as prize positioning.

“Think about it. Even as friends. Seriously. The prizes are insane.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say, and I give him a silent meow, just because that feels appropriate.

Never let them smell blood in the water.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MAX

Parker and I are hosting the Catwalk for a Cause steering committee luncheon over the noon hour.

Laughing and brainstorming with some of the smartest, most fascinating people in the style and design world is something that would've been a welcome break from the stress of my routine just weeks ago. But now? I wish I could be back in my office.

I hate missing lunch in my office, or more specifically, I hate missing Mia. I hate missing her smile and her frown and her smartass comments and her outrageous moves.

And god, that kiss. It's wrong what we're doing, and I no longer care.

The topic is music. Parker's at the head of the table with a lot of opinions on the subject. He loves music. Lana's next to me, bending over the proposed

schedule that I've worked out, practically on my lap, and Brazilian supermodel Zera Valsano, who hates costumes, is playfully wringing my neck over my suggestion she walk out in a whale costume, and I'm laughing, and that's when Mia appears.

I stiffen. What is she doing here? There's usually a caterer for these things.

She manages a tight smile, but I see her. She doesn't like the photo on my office wall, and she really doesn't like it being re-enacted in front of her.

I stand. "Hey," I say.

She pushes her cart to the edge of the room, proud and aloof, with a slight air of danger.

How is she here? Parker's assistant usually arranges the catering on these things. Did Parker's assistant put in this order?

"I have seven low-carb salmon bowls, five keto pork, one vegan veggie, two teriyaki steak wraps and a roast beef and swiss croissant sandwich." This last in a tone dripping with loathing.

Our gazes lock. The sparkle of anger and aliveness in her gaze hits something deep inside me. And I don't care. I'm just glad she's here. Mia's beautiful even in her hatred—so fucking beautiful I can barely breathe.

Zera still has her hand on my shoulder, but it's Mia I'm watching, Mia's hand I'm imagining. Doesn't she see she's the most exciting woman in the room?

My girl goes through the layout with confident movements, never giving me the satisfaction of seeing her sweat. I'm so proud of her I could die.

Needing somebody more than they need you is for suckers. That was the central lesson in the book I wrote way back when.

It felt like the gospel truth back then. But right now I need for everybody to be gone from here so I can be with Mia.

"Now where were we?" Parker says, squeezing mayo onto his sandwich. "Lindsey, let's have the media schedule."

Lindsey launches into a rundown of the schedule in the exciting and slightly confidential way that she has. Mia has everybody's lunches set out except mine. Making me wait.

She gives me a mischievous look. She's a lot of sunshine and a little bit devil. She sets a napkin in front of me, and then my croissant sandwich.

I gaze up at her, meeting her devil. "Mustards, please," I say hoarsely.

Her cheeks go pink. There's nothing sexier than the real Mia pushing out from underneath her acting skills, like a wildflower through concrete. When she's really off-balance, the old accent peeks through—just the edges of it.

She sets down the mustards. Energy flares between us. It's all so wrong, and I goddamn love it. I'm addicted to our dance. To her.

She sets down the cheesy puffs.

"What other chips are available?" I ask.

Her cheeks go pink. "Cheesy puffs were specified."

"You were out of cheesy puffs the other day and I recall having something else that was really delicious," I say.

She licks her lips. "That choice is no longer available to you, I'm afraid. It'll have to be a fond memory. Never to be repeated."

"No?" I can feel Parker staring at us—probably wondering what is up. I'm so far from caring.

"So sorry." She opens the chips and arranges them just so, at a specific angle like she does when she's trying to annoy me, then she positions the mustards.

"Thank you," I say. At least it sounds like a thank you to the people around the table. It's really just a tug on the rope between us. Mia spares me a burning glance. Is it possible she's jealous?

Does she think I arranged this? To get a rise out of her?

She's doing her fussy repositioning of my sandwich, and all I want to do is kiss her. I want everyone gone and for it to be just us. I'm going mad.

"Wait, it's not quite right," she says sweetly.

“It looks good to me.” My breath speeds. “I would go so far as to call it impressive.”

“No, there’s something missing.” She has everybody’s attention now. “Wait, I know what’s missing.”

“What?” I ask, rapt.

With the economical speed of a boxer, she punches her fist down into the sandwich.

The dull *thump* of a fist hitting a wad of meat and pastry resounds through the hush.

Gasps and exclamations rise up.

I stare at the sandwich in shock.

She’s smashed a crater into the middle of it. Bits of roast beef and swiss bulge out the sides of the misshapen croissant.

She straightens. She smiles at me. “There we go.”

My people watch me, aghast. The lunch-cart girl just smashed her fist into my sandwich. What will I do?

I bite back a smile. Pride is probably the wrong emotion here.

Lust is definitely the wrong emotion.

Everything falls away but her. She just doesn’t give a fuck—she never did. Even back in high school she was like that.

“Odd,” I say in the patrician tone that drives her insane. “I don’t recall ordering a panini.”

“My bad.” She smiles sweetly.

Everybody turns back to me, waiting for the famous Max Hilton retort. I always have something clever to say, but right now I don’t. There’s just me and Mia.

I just love her. I swallow. Did I really just have that thought?

“Anything else? No? *Bon appetit.*” She pushes her cart out.

I stand. “I’ll go see if everything’s...” I end the sentence with a mumble and get out of there. Nothing in that room is important anymore. I head out

after her, down the hall. I round a corner just as her cart disappears into the elevator.

I slap my hand over the doors.

Her nostrils flare. “You think you’re all that. What with the models. Please.”

A grin splits my face. “And you think you can punch my sandwich?”

“Yes,” she breathes. “I think I can punch your sandwich.”

I’m in the elevator. I let the doors close behind me. “Do you have an apology for me?”

“No,” she says.

“What was that?” I cage her with my arms. Pure lust courses through my veins. “No? No apology? That won’t do.”

She beams at me “Okay, lemme try for a better answer. *Hell, no.*”

“That’s not better,” I whisper. She so loved punching my sandwich, and I love her for it.

“*I don’t have an apology.* Is that better?”

Never fixate on any one woman; you're playing a numbers game.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

I should be angry. Max making me play lunch-cart girl in front of his models? What *is* that?

But being with him in this small space is putting my hormones into overdrive. Lighting my skin like electricity.

He slides his hand around the back of my neck. His fingers seem to tremble—there's something so raw about him now. "Fuck," he says raggedly.

My hands are sliding around the bulk of him. My hands are treating themselves to generous helpings of his cashmere suit coat, pulling him to me, rampaging across soft fabric and hard muscle

He kisses me—furiously, passionately. He hauls me up to him, closer, harder. His chest is a flat plane against my breasts; his cock at the V of my legs a delicious presence.

“Fuck,” I say into our kiss.

I had this whole idea of not giving him the satisfaction of a reaction, but I’m failing at that.

“Mia,” he breathes, peppering hot kisses over my neck while I pant and melt some more. He’s a spy in the night, stealing over enemy lines, going deeper, winning me over.

My fingers have hit warm skin under his white shirt.

And I don’t want to stop. I want Max like there’s no tomorrow. Like there’s no chart on our wall that’s a service to all womankind.

He pulls away from the kiss and looks into my eyes. He looks furious and beautiful. Suddenly the elevator’s moving. Maybe another floor called it.

He lets out a shuddery breath and shoves a key into the panel and the elevator grinds to a halt.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Nowhere,” he says, twisting my hair in his fist and pressing kisses onto my neck, and then he sucks in a small tag of skin and it bites. I think I’m going to have a hickey and I want that. I want him to mark me. “The elevator is officially going nowhere, does that work for you?”

“That’s the exact floor I wanted.”

I burrow my fingers under the belt of his trousers. Feverishly I pull his belt from the loops, big, dramatic motions that enhance the drama of our elevator tryst.

“Hey.” He catches my greedy hands and extracts them from his person, presses them back up against the cool panel, up over my head. All in one big hand of his.

With the other, he slides a knuckle over my cheekbone.

What is he doing? “What’s wrong, Mr. Roboto? Did your software for elevator quickies go offline?”

“That’s not what this is.” He dips his head and kisses my neck. “This is just for you.”

“Oh, that’s how you think it’s gonna be?”

“Just for you.” I gasp as he slides his hand slowly down my front, passing over one electrified nipple on his way to my pussy. He shoves my apron out of the way and his whole hand is between my legs, cupping and kneading me through the warm fabric.

“Omigod,” I breathe, “yeah.”

He’s on the move again. He found the hidden elastic waistband of my cat suit pants and pushes his hand in. I hiss as he makes contact with my wetness.

He keeps my hands pinned, like I might fly away.

“Like this?” he asks, rubbing a heavy finger across my swollen nub.

“Yes,” I breathe. My body hums in response to his confident strokes. Ratchets up with feeling. Everything is so surreal now, maybe I can fly.

But I wouldn’t want to right now. I wouldn’t want to leave his fingers and exactly what he is doing to me.

I groan as he slides a wide finger along my seam.

“Shhh,” he says. “Not a peep.”

So I’m silent, immobile, the opposite of how I usually go at sexytimes, but it’s good. Like the pressure’s off. It’s just me and him. And his perfect finger. His wise, all-knowing, all-rhythm-having finger, stoking my pleasure. I don’t want him to stop.

My eyes close. I’m in some delicious agony where Max is owning me and I’ll probably regret it but I don’t care. I’m a junkie who will give up her world for what his finger is doing.

He kisses me at an expert angle that feels like heaven, nipping my lip. I’m panting out words that don’t make a lot of sense unless you understand that every word I’m saying right now means *more*, which Max seems to fully understand at the moment. Because he gets me like that.

My orgasm sneaks up on me, sudden and unexpected, swelling through my body, my mind. My head lolls against the elevator panel.

He doesn’t have my hands pinned any more. When did that happen? He’s

pushing a lock of hair out of my eyes, watching me come down. Like he's absorbing my pleasure. It's the opposite of everything that's classic Max Hilton.

"Omigod," I say.

He smiles his knowing smile. "Mia—"

"I think we went temporarily insane," I say.

"Maybe we didn't," he says. "Maybe this is sane. Maybe this is how it's supposed to be."

My heart pounds. I want it to be true so bad, but I'm scared. Max has made a cottage industry out of lulling me into a false sense of security and then yanking the rug out from under me.

"Where are you going?" he rasps.

To the reality of us—that he got Meow Squad assigned to his building and requested me as delivery person with an agenda in mind. That he's too good for me.

I try to tell myself that it's maybe just fear, but then I look up at the elevator chandelier. Something about it is so familiar. What?

Then I remember it—the Instagram post. A woman against this very wall. A man's hand planted on the panel next to her. That chandelier in the reflective area above her. The caption: *This elevator has everything it needs except a well-stocked liquor cart.*

I feel sick.

"Like I'm gonna be a notch on your elevator bar?" I push him away. "In your dreams, Max."

"What?" he asks.

"Dreams. A thing that the mind imagines, but that will never be."

"What's going on?"

I hit the buttons. They make a little plastic nothing sound. Ineffectual buttons disconnected from the world. Like Max's heart. I point to the key. "Make it go."

“What’s wrong?”

“This is wrong,” I snap. “What am I thinking?”

Pain flashes across his face. Or maybe I just imagine it. He turns the key and the elevator is moving. I move away from him.

He says my name and I put up my hand. “Can you leave me alone for once?”

The door opens on the lobby floor to a group of chattering professionals who part as I push my cart away.

The doors shut.

I stand alone in front of the blank elevator doors, panting. He brought me into his building to wait on him. Now he’s seducing me.

This is a victory lap, nothing more, nothing less. If Max was actually interested in me, he’d ask for a date, not make me his servant. The more I think about it, the angrier I get.

I hit the elevator again and pop back up to the twentieth floor. I leave my cart in the hall and burst into Blade’s office. “Let’s do it. Let’s kick some scavenger ass.”

He looks surprised. “The New Year’s Eve party?”

“You still want to?”

“Of course,” he says.

You’re sweet, I think before I can stop myself. And then I add, *You’re sexy*. I don’t hugely think it, but maybe I could think it. I remind myself of all of the TV shows that I currently love but that I wasn’t so sold on during the first few episodes. Maybe Blade’s like that. Maybe he’ll unwarp my mind from Max. “Okay, Blade, we’re on.”

“I’ll text you the deets,” he says.

My mouth is smiling, but my mind is saying, *please, for the love of all that’s holy, don’t say deets again*.

Never ask a woman if you can kiss her. She should be asking you. Better yet, she should be begging you.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MAX

People start streaming into the four-story atrium, everybody in their finest. Oscars-night shit. I shake hands and exchange New Year's wishes.

I'm not a fan of New Year's Eve, but I'm proud that the Maximillion holiday ball is such a hot ticket, all tuxedos and cocktail-length gowns. Never underestimate the draw of a dress-up party with a large Instagram component.

I fix my bowtie.

Parker's sitting on the edge of the stage, holding court with a glittering group. I catch his eye and salute him. He smiles huge and salutes me back. You couldn't want a better business partner.

The professional scavenger-hunt designers—yes, there is such a thing—

come over to consult with me about some last-minute decisions. They've been hiding prizes and clues in the blocks between the park and Midtown. You have to take selfies with the clues when you find them. They've done an amazing job.

The party is also beloved by my employees, thanks in part to the massive loot that's involved. The socialites and industry people tend to play for charity. The PR and social media buzz we get off it is worth ten times what we spend on the thing.

My heart is not in it. All I can think about is Mia. Mia punching my sandwich like an outrageous goddess. The way she felt in the elevator, soft and hot in my arms. Mia's face at the end. What happened? Maybe I should've followed her, but I'm not in the habit of following women who say *leave me* as energetically as Mia did.

I tracked down her number and texted her a few times, and she promptly blocked me. I got her address, and I gave serious thought to sending something nice, or even going over there. I'm going to figure it out after this party. I'm going to make her see that she's not notch in my elevator bar.

I've never felt such an intense connection with a woman—not even close, except maybe that summer with Mia. I screwed it up. I won't do it again.

I grab a champagne off a passing tray.

The string quartet plays a festive arrangement with its roots in folk songs—the key changes feel Slavic. Russian, maybe. They've got an excellent fiddler—somebody actually trained. Enough that I have to wander near to get a look.

I stop short when I recognize the lead violinist from the Shiz—DJ Barnes.

I'm not loving that DJ Barnes is here. A lot of the people from high school are jobbers now, sitting in on musical groups and bands and orchestras. It's inevitable that I run into them at events. Still. High school was a miserable time, and I don't like seeing people from then. Except Parker. And Mia, of course.

DJ looks over and smiles. I give him a friendly nod.

They start up something new—a demanding number designed to pluck annoyingly at the heartstrings, and they’re putting their all into it.

Hearing him play his heart out, it sends a feeling through me that’s not exactly pleasant.

As if on cue, Tarquin Walters is by my side with his photographer. Still working that profile. He’s the last person I want to see. “I appreciate the invite.”

I raise my glass with a smile. “You find your angle yet?”

He gives me a look I can’t quite read. “Are you playing this year?”

I frown, stiffen. “Playing?”

“The famous scavenger hunt? They say you sometimes do it.”

“I play when there’s an odd number.” I shrug. “I hope you’re getting in on it. You’re perfectly welcome to.”

“I’m on the job. I’ll stick with you.”

Of course he will. All the better to ruin my party for me. Not that it isn’t ruined already, because I can’t stop thinking about Mia.

Lana comes up and links arms with Tarquin. I give her a grateful look.

My attention drifts back to the quartet. *In your dreams*, she said.

Except she was right there with me before that. My blood races. She thinks I’m toying with her?

It seems clear she doesn’t trust me, maybe doesn’t trust my motives. Why? Is it from high school? Is it the Max Hilton thing?

Tarquin’s addressing me now. He’s broken away from Lana, who shrugs helplessly behind him.

I give him a charming smile. An in-on-the-joke smile. People want a lot of things from me. Tarquin wants his angle, yes, but he also wants to feel like part of the in-crowd. One of the beautiful people. I have created this empire by knowing what people want. Specifically what men want.

A new song. A musical arrangement that’s new to my ears. I feel his eyes

on me as I zero in on the contrapuntal voice of the bass. “Question?”

“Who picked the music?”

“Planners.”

“They’re good. This quartet.”

I cock my head. “Can anybody really tell? With classical music?”

“But you went to the Soho High School for the Performing Arts. You studied music. Surely you know. Surely you’d have an ear.”

I lean in to him as if I’m about to share a confidence, to give him a piece of Max Hilton. “Did you take a language in high school?”

“French,” he says.

“Tell me this—” I dip my head closer to his, deepening my confiding tone. “Can you watch a French movie without subtitles and understand what the fuck they’re saying?”

He snorts.

I smile. I slap his back. We clink glasses.

“And please. Don’t call me Shirley,” I add. He laughs at the ridiculous reference. I take another glass. I have him back under control. We talk movies and he takes notes on that.

People stream in, peacock colors across my periphery.

My attention drifts to the east doorway and everything in me goes hot.

I blink, unsure whether I’m seeing right. But I’d know that posture anywhere. It’s Mia in a sky-blue gown that hugs her curves and sets off her dark hair. She stands out from the crowd, so self-assured and heart-stoppingly beautiful.

Something in me surges to attention.

What is she doing here? The crowd shifts and I see him there on her arm, Ryan, I think his name is. From marketing. She’s with Ryan? She waves to somebody. She turns to say something to Ryan and he laughs. She’s animated. Relaxed.

You can’t be with him, I think wildly.

Tarquin is saying something about *Airplane Two*. Family anecdote. I tune back in. “Funny,” I say, and from his face, I see that wasn’t the right answer. “I mean, the franchise.”

“Yes,” he says.

I swallow and look back at her. People are coming up to her, but Ryan keeps ahold of her. I want to storm over there and pull her away from him. I want to wrap her up in my coat and take her home and kiss every inch of her.

“Who is that?” Tarquin asks.

“Who?”

He gives me a strange look and nods. “The couple you’re staring daggers at?”

“I do believe...” I furrow my brow, “I do believe one of my employees has hit on our poor lunch-cart girl. Meow Squad or something. They all look so different without their ears.” I drain my drink, hand it off, pull out my phone, and start trashing emails, as if clearing my Gmail deck might magically translate to clearing the snarl from my mind, which, for the record, it doesn’t.

What does Ryan think he’s doing, bringing her? Why would she come with him?

I look back over. They’re laughing together again.

“You have a policy against fraternization here,” Tarquin says. A statement, not a question. “Does that extend to vendors?”

Unease twists through me. “No, it wouldn’t be against the policy. He’s free to ask her out,” I say, wishing he’d leave it already. I hate that she’s here with him.

Parker comes up and points out my jacket to Tarquin. Tarquin feigns interest, but he’s sensing red meat elsewhere. “What’s her name?” Tarquin asks.

I frown. “The lunch-cart girl?”

Parker gives me a strange look.

Tarquin's not letting it go. "Maybe she's the next Max Hilton girl."

"Dude," Parker says, reading my mood. "Sometimes a lunch-cart girl is just a lunch-cart girl. On the other hand, speaking of Max Hilton girls..." Parker drags us over to Britta and Tabitha, two of the nerdiest models you'll ever meet. I encourage Tabitha to show him images of her stamp collection. That will trap him for at least twenty minutes.

I watch Mia out of the corner of my eye as she moves around the edge of the place like the fucking queen of England, with Ryan gazing at her like a besotted serf, utterly outclassed. A grim smile tugs at my lips. He probably thought he was getting a bit of bling on his arm only to have her outshine him like the sun.

"Excuse me," I say, extricating myself from the three of them.

I wander toward Mia, greeting all the people who want something from me—favors, promotion, proximity. Usually I try to talk up this year's charities, trying to goose the donations. I force myself to do it now.

I draw near enough to her for her voice to burn. I'm agitated, flustered, hurt, angry. I catch shards of the accent she buried like a violet in a snowstorm. I'm shaking hands, talking with people, her laughter invading my awareness. Finally I reach them.

Her gaze skitters over my tux before quickly snapping back to my face.

I smile and take her hand, a quick touch, quickly ended, except for the heat that sizzles over my skin. "Finally free from the ears," I say.

"I was going to wear them, but people would expect sandwiches."

Ryan laughs, gazing at her like a puppy. I turn to him. "The lunch-cart girl," I say.

He can't seem to tear his eyes from her. "Mia. Her name is Mia."

"Oh, don't worry, he knows," Mia says. "We went to high school together, didn't we, Max? The Shiz."

"The Shiz," I say, holding her gaze.

"*You* went to an arts high school?" Ryan says to me.

“Yes,” I say coolly.

Ryan looks amazed. I don’t publicize it, but it’s on Wikipedia. Did he not look at my entry? I make a mental note to check with his supervisor about his fitness for whatever role he plays in marketing. “I guess I can’t imagine you in a performing arts high school.”

“He was quite the piano virtuoso at one time,” Mia says.

“You play piano?”

“Played,” I say, wondering how many times tonight I’m going to have to have a conversation about the Shiz. I turn to Mia. “You might see somebody familiar in the string section over there.”

She puts a hand on Ryan’s shoulder and goes up on her tiptoes, craning her neck to see the band. “DJ! DJ Barnes!”

“Break out the party hats,” I say.

“A piano virtuoso?” Ryan still can’t get past that one.

Mia’s shining eyes meet mine. “Max could play anything. He could dazzle. So...*impressive*.”

There it is. I turn to her, my gaze every bit as bright as hers. “I tend to succeed at whatever I put my hand to.”

She stares daggers at me. My blood runs thick with lust, and there’s a strange energy in my chest. Everything feels too bright. The room feels hot.

“Do you still play?” Ryan inquires from somewhere out on the nowhere fringes.

“No,” she says, and then she turns to him. “Blade, did you play an instrument?”

“*Blade?*” It’s out of my mouth before I can stop it.

“Yes, that’s my nickname for him.” She grabs his arm. “Blade,” she says it kind of badass, like they have a dirty inside joke.

What? She calls him *Blade*? Why would a woman call a man Blade? Why would a woman call *this man* Blade? It’s like calling a Chihuahua *Killer* or something. But he seems to be in on it. Does he carry a blade? Is he thuggish

in bed?

An unpleasant heat prickles over my skin. “Interesting,” I bite out.

“We’re both *Blade Runner* fans,” he explains.

“Mmm,” I say, still not liking it.

She glares back at me. “Yes, he has one of my favorite stills from the movie up on his office wall.” She turns to him. “We share a passion for that movie. It’s good to have *genuine* passions.”

“That still is your favorite?” Ryan says to her. “I would’ve guessed the street walk scene. That’s usually people’s favorite.”

“But isn’t that one so obvious?” she says. “A lot of steam is coming up from grates.”

“Steam coming up from grates is awesome!” he says.

I gaze over at her and she itches her nose with her middle finger. FU. Everything in me swells.

“Is everything okay?” Ryan says. “This isn’t...” He motions between them. “This isn’t against policy, is it?”

“Of course not,” I say. “You can bring whoever you want outside of the company.”

“Don’t pay any attention to Max,” Mia says, giving me a challenging stare. “He’s just crabby because we’re discontinuing cheesy puffs. I’m sad to say that there will be no more.”

“Oh, I’ve heard that before,” I tease.

She sets her jaw and straightens up, a posture I came to understand, over long hours of watching her, as her *strong-against-the-world* posture. The stance she takes when she means business “This time it’s true.”

“They really are my favorite.” I lower my voice. “Nothing else compares.”

Her cheeks go pink.

“I have to admit, cheesy puffs *are* good,” Ryan says.

“Well, you can’t have any,” I say to Ryan, though I’m still looking at

Mia.

“I don’t know, I might scrounge some up somewhere.”

“Uh, that’s okay, there’s plenty of food here,” Ryan says.

Mia sniffs. “You know what this stupid conversation needs? A nice liquor cart stocked with pure-grain alcohol, because it’s making me want to kill all my brain cells.”

I want to drag her off. I want to kiss that smart mouth and peel off that gown and worship every sassy inch of her. Never have I felt such absolute, primal desire for a woman. My gut twists with the force of it.

And then my phone buzzes. Again and again. It’s here I realize the band’s stopped. When did it stop? Parker would be the one buzzing. I have a speech to make, but I’m feeling crazy. Mia can’t be with Ryan.

I look over at Ryan, who gives me a faltering smile, and I smile back. This isn’t about him and I can’t blame him for wanting her. *Just don’t fucking touch her again*, I think like a man possessed.

“Speech time.” I head up toward the stage on autopilot, doing the Max Hilton walk, cool as a cucumber in my designer tux.

I grab a glass of champagne from an assistant and climb the three steps, sauntering over to the podium like I own the place, which I do. I smile, holding my glass in two careless fingers, trying to find her in the crowd, but the lights are dimming.

I gaze out at the crowd, like, *what the hell are you all still talking for?* Some people laugh. More look up at me.

Eventually everyone’s with me without my saying a word. Because people want to be with me. I’m the playboy with a glass in his hand and a sparkle in his eyes, the man who makes them feel like they’re part of the glamorous, carefree, lux life that exists in the lifestyle ads we pump out like useless dreams.

I start the speech, forcing my mind to timing, delivery. I feel the lift of the audience coalescing around me. Performing arts high school wasn’t a total

waste.

Parker comes up and we give each other shit like we do every year, and then we talk about the charity. “Give a bit to a cause,” I say. “Who cares, it’s only money. What’s the use of money when there’s a champagne fountain?”

Parker gives me perfectly scripted shit about that. I loop an arm around him and we clink glasses and wish each other a happy new year.

I thank the caterers and the band. Fifteen minutes to hunt time. I remind people of the rules.

The quartet strikes back up.

Parker hops down.

I move to the edge of the stage and hand the mic back to the audio guy. I ask him a question about the acoustics of the place, knowing he’ll spin on it for a bit.

She’s brilliant in that blue. Did she wear it for him? I bristle as he touches her arm. *Blade*. Does he think he’s a tenth of a match for her?

I watch her circulate. She seemed to have close personal relationships with every last one of my employees. Mia, beloved by everybody, just like old times.

Lana’s up with the scavenger-hunt crew, comparing clipboards. They have directions for me to read off clipboards after people drink some more. This is a group that loves clipboards.

The music stops just then. I look up, confused. I’m not ready to kick off the hunt, but I see the problem. Mia. The inevitable reunion with DJ Barnes.

Tearful hugs. I shouldn’t watch, but I can’t look away.

They’re arguing, or more, bantering. Mia is turning back and forth between Ryan and DJ. She’s lit up with energy. It’s a form of her I remember, laughing and arguing. Mia pokes a finger into DJ’s chest. The oboist is shoving a microphone at her. Shivers cascade over my body. They’re asking her to do a song.

No, I think.

I stand, immobile. Parker's back, talking. Parker's saying my name, somewhere at the fringes of my awareness.

She's going to sing. *Something, something wrong*, Max? Parker again.

I can see plainly where DJ places his fingers on the fiddle. He scrapes out the first strains. *Many a New Day*. That's what she's going to sing. One of her *Oklahoma!* solos.

Not in front of all these people, I think. Because it's ours.

"What's wrong?" Parker asks.

Wrong. Wrong doesn't come close.

I need a bigger word, the kind of word that the Germans might invent. A word that means that you're dreading something that will be painful, but you also very much want that thing to happen.

And that painful thing you dread and want would involve longing for moments you can never have again. And it would involve a bursting, shouting feeling inside your chest, and all the while, your teeth are clenched. *Dreadshockjoy* or something.

She takes a breath, and I breathe, too, because that's what Mia Corelli does, she reaches into your chest and pulls your breath out. Mia Corelli, always longing for more. Fighting for more. All brave and beautiful and tragic, but yet always somehow out of reach. Like a not-quite-remembered dream that floats away as soon as you grab for it, laughing as it goes.

Back in your life to bring it.

She starts in, high and strong and full of emotion. Voice clear like a bell. My *dreadshockjoy* swells. She's really doing it.

She looks across the room at me, eyes colliding with mine, show tune like a cannonball.

Parker's still there. "My bad," he says.

"What?" I say.

"I thought you'd have fun seeing her again. Delivering your sandwiches and all. I didn't think you'd get all twisted up about it."

I turn to him. “You can’t stand Mia.”

He holds up his hands in mock defense. “I thought you’d get a kick out of it. You’ve always had such a spark around her.”

“So you arranged for her to deliver my sandwiches? Directly to me in my office? And didn’t see fit to tell me?”

“Well...” he stammers.

“Never mind.” Everything I understood about the situation reshuffles in my mind.

I thought she’d somehow engineered it. And she thinks I arranged it...in order to what? Taunt her and boss her around? Punch down and seduce her? Of course that’s what she’d think. Why not?

God, what a dick move. And of course it’s what she thinks.

The song’s over. She’s smiling. She looks at Ryan. He smiles at her. People will start setting off with their clues. *No*, I think. *You can’t have her*.

My feet take me back to the scavenger-hunt people. I tell them I’m changing it up. We’ll make it random.

“You’re not letting them pick their own partners?” the guy asks.

“Random partners are better for team building,” I say, on full Max Hilton arrogance mode. I take an iPad. I redo the numbers, putting Mia and me together. It shuffles all the rest of the partnerships. “That’s how the partners go now. Send it out.”

They send out a new list based on my idea.

You have high standards. Let her know that it's up to her to meet those standards.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

“Usually they let you pick your partners,” Ryan says, frowning at the app. “I can’t believe you’re with Max.”

I blink at the list. “What happened?”

“I’m seeing some comments that the partners were shuffled specifically to be better for team building and community building,” Ryan says.

Heart still thundering in my chest, I gaze across the room at Max, cold and beautiful and perfect in his tux.

Community building. *Riiiiight.*

Seriously, Max should’ve been a spy. He’d be an amazing spy. He changed the entire course of the party and created a disinformation campaign in one fell swoop, just to ruin my date.

I should be annoyed. My face is annoyed, but inside there’s this spark of

forbidden excitement.

And really, I shouldn't have sung the song. I told myself I wanted to get some control back, but it was a lie. I wanted some connection. To rip down his façade and get through to the cotton-candy-musical Max that I fell for. It's crazy behavior.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Ryan smiles. "Not your fault."

Partygoers in their glamorous garb are heading out to take selfies. People have brought awesome coats, because some of this takes place outside. That's how you collect the clues, you do a selfie with your partner with an Instagram tag. There's even a special glam black-and-white filter for the party that nobody else gets to use.

"A lot of women would kill to do the hunt with Max," Ryan says unhelpfully.

"I would kill to *not* to do the hunt with Max. Does that mean we can have peace? Or does everybody have to die?"

Ryan smiles. "You are so funny."

Ryan's partner comes up. She's a perky redhead, an intern who is super pumped about the game. She reads their first clue off her phone and tells him her theory. Everybody's clues are different because this is a scavenger hunt created exclusively for this party. Max probably flew in a team of turtleneck-and-monocle-wearing Viennese game designers.

"We should go," she says.

I smile. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Ryan says.

The intern isn't listening; she's staring at Max, strolling toward us, a tiger in a tux, New York's most eligible Prince Charming.

I'm angry, but there's something else—this warm buzz of familiarity as he nears.

People head away, leaving us standing there, an island in the ballroom.

“Ready?” Max says.

“I get it—you’re in charge, not me. You really had to change the whole game to prove it?”

“You think that’s why I changed the game? To prove a point about who’s in charge?”

I raise my brows. A *yes*.

He tips his head near mine. Lowers his voice. “I couldn’t let you go out there with him.”

Butterflies swirl in my belly. “Why? Why’d you have to do that?”

He comes nearer. “Because I couldn’t let you walk out of this ballroom with him. It’s not about control.”

“Why would you do it?”

People are coming up. Max is a magnet for people. “Let’s get out of here,” he says.

I narrow my eyes.

“Humor me.” His tone is serious, like this is really something.

I grab my coat and we head to the elevator. His touch on the small of my back seems to radiate across my body.

We wait with a crowd of rowdy partygoers and get in. People are talking to him, jokingly trying to get him to give clues. A few of them have bottles of champagne, and the mood is jolly.

He says that he didn’t create the game. “We’re all on equal footing,” he insists.

It’s not the elevator he got me off in, but it’s the same décor. I give him the side eye, but he not joking around.

Eventually we all spill out onto the sidewalk in front of Maximillion Plaza. It’s a magical night; snow falls in thick, lazy flakes, dramatic as a snow globe, frosting the dirty horizontal surfaces in sparkling white. The air is warm-ish, almost balmy, and the traffic sounds are subdued.

Max shakes a few hands and poses for a few selfies and then people rush

off.

“So...do we have a clue to follow or something?”

Max looks up and down the street. More people are shouting to him. Waving. He waves. The partygoers want a piece of him, or at least a selfie. “I need to tell you something and...” Somebody else waves. “Come on.” He takes my hand.

We cross at a lull in the traffic and duck around the side of the Maximillion studio building—the one that used to be some kind of industrial building, the one he visits every day. He punches in a code and pulls open a door.

In we walk. The door shuts, sealing us away from the din of Manhattan on New Year’s Eve. It’s spacious inside, with just the lights of the city pouring in through the high arched windows, making glowing squares on the wood floors.

He locks the door and fixes me with a serious look. “We have to talk.”

More laughter sounds from out there. Somebody knocks at the door. “Max?”

“Christ,” he says.

“Your party just won’t quit,” I whisper.

He scowls. There’s something aching real about him. He feels genuine; raw, even. No liquor carts in sight. “Come on.” He leads me across a giant expanse of moonlit floor past hushed workspaces.

“This game has taken a mighty strange turn,” I say nervously. “Are the enemies of yore to retreat?”

“I’m done with the games.”

We end up in an interior space lit by skylights from above. A lounge for workers, maybe.

He sets me down on a chair and bends over me, hands on the armrests. His brows are furrowed, eyes without the ironic twinkle. “I need you to know something. I didn’t arrange the Meow Squad deliveries. I didn’t have

anything to do with them. I wouldn't do that."

"Wait, what?"

"I know you thought I did. I don't blame you for thinking that. But yeah, it was Parker."

"Parker?" I say. "I thought..."

"He only just told me back there at the party. I couldn't believe it. Making you be my delivery person like that?"

"I totally thought you did."

"Mia." One word. My name. *Mia*. The low rumble of it pulls at something inside me. And I'm so acutely aware of us alone in this space, and of the dominating way he looms above me.

"Actually, I thought *you'd* engineered it," he says with a half smile.

"In what universe do I engineer that? In what universe is doing lunch deliveries in a cat suit a good plan of vengeance against a rival? You have no idea how much I hate this uniform. Like, hate it. As evil master plans go? *D minus.*"

"You were driving me crazy. I could barely concentrate on anything, just waiting for those deliveries." He kneels in front of my chair. "Your deliveries were destroying me, Mia."

He's saying some more words, but his head is in the zone of my lap, now, and it's hard to concentrate. I imagine my lap lined with lights, like an airport runway, highlighting the forward route his face needs to travel in order to land in the safety and comfort of my pussy.

My breath quickens. He's talking more. Something about the sandwiches.

But then he pauses. His grip on the chair arms changes as his eyes skate over me. "I don't like how it happened. I don't want any bullshit between us like before." *High school*, he means.

"Let's not think about that," I say.

"We need to."

My hormones are little luggage trucks, driving in furious circles, *beep-*

beep-beeping excitedly. “Do we, though? Right this minute?”

His eyes go dark, and I’m stunned anew by how beautiful he is. “I didn’t bring you here to fuck,” he growls.

I have this sense that it’s not me he’s growling at—it’s more like he’s growling at the part of himself that wants to fuck. The really primal and base animal part that might grab my hair like a motherfucking lion.

“And yet…” I whisper.

“Fuck, Mia.” Again his eyes rake up and down me, and suddenly his hands are heavy on my thighs, all harsh gravity through the delicate silk of my dress.

I exhale a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

My sex heats, a glowing landing beacon, and I settle my hands onto his, slipping my fingers suggestively under his shirt cuffs. I meet his feral gaze with a sassy little smile.

Right then, it’s as if the floodgates let loose. “God, Mia.” He’s pushing his hands up my legs, taking the silky fabric of my dress with it, motions getting more frantic the more stocking he uncovers. He gathers my skirt in his fists, shoving it up over my knees.

I lift my butt, giving him an assist.

He shudders out a breath when he finds bare skin over thigh-high stockings.

He kisses the inside of my thigh, then he rubs his whiskers there, hungry, wildly, as if to mark me.

“Fuck, yes,” I pant.

He presses a thumb to my core, wet through silky undergarments, and moves it, slides it, stoking waves of pleasure while he attacks my other thigh with his hungry face.

It’s silk and sandpaper.

My breath catches. My toes curl.

He rumbles against my tender skin.

I squirm, whimpering with need.

I shove my hands into his hair. Air traffic control to Max!

And just like magic, he's shoving my legs apart and kissing my pussy, the hot tenor of his breath against the silk that covers my clit. I hold his hair, holding on, loving him there.

He kisses me again. I'm diffuse with pleasure. My clit stands at attention, a tendril of need. The blunt pressure of his lips drives me nearly over the edge. Then his tongue is gone. He scrapes his teeth gently over my core.

I cry out, meeting his gaze.

"Need you bare," he growls.

"Do you want me to..." My mind races with the logistics of the strapless bodysuit. "Um..."

He's pulling at the fabric, shoving his fingers clear through the lacy part above the crotch, and then he just rips it down.

Cool air invades my hot, wet pussy.

"Taking it as a no," I gasp.

He's not done. "Need you spread out for me." He pushes my legs wide over the chair arms. I'm about to protest, except his tongue is there, warm and thick against my core.

"Ohmigod."

He licks up once, again.

My breath comes fast.

I'm so exposed to him, it's madness, and the sexiest thing ever.

He grips my thighs, holding me apart as he licks me. He's holding me in place as though he has me right where he wants me and he won't be letting me go. He's my roller-coaster and my seatbelt.

Mercilessly he licks me until I'm at the point of no return, the tippy-top of the arc, suspended before the freefall.

He draws his tongue roughly along my clit one more time. Pleasure explodes over my brain, bright behind my eyes.

I'm weightless. I'm crying out.

Max's rumble is a merciless vibration between my legs. I tighten my grip on his hair. "Slower!"

He's already there, following my cadence like the musician he once was.

Suddenly I'm laughing. It's the release of pressure, and how crazy good that was, and how fast I came, and a little bit the sounds I made.

He kisses my belly through the part of the bodysuit he didn't rip, and then gazes up at me in wonder.

"Need you inside," I say.

Slowly he presses a finger into me.

My body shudders around him.

He doesn't reply; he simply adds a finger.

"You," I say. "You, Max."

There's something shattered about his gaze. He kisses the inside of my thigh, and then the other side for symmetry. And then he stands over me, leaving me with my legs over either chair arm.

"Stay like that," he rumbles, undoing his bow tie in the dim light. "I'm sorry I wrecked your undergarment, but you waiting for me like this...so hot."

"In other words, you're not sorry at all."

"Not sorry. I'm gonna take you just like that." He whips off his bow tie and then he's undoing his buttons. "You are so hot, it blows my mind." He rips the rest of his shirt open, not bothering with the buttons, then skips to his pants.

"Cheating. One demerit."

A wicked light shines in his eyes as he yanks off his belt. His pants are off and his cock juts upward, so thick and hard, it's nearly against his belly. I've never seen his cock, but somehow, it's so him. He has a condom, tearing it open.

"No, no, no." I undo my sex-ready position and stand.

“Hey.”

I go to him. “Let me.” I want to be in on this with him. I kneel in front of him, wrapping my hand around him, marveling at his cock.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I love the shape of you,” I whisper, “how you’re slightly wider than round.” I kiss him and he groans. “I love this vein here.” I trail the side of him with my fingers.

“Mia,” he gasps. “I’m not an art exhibit.”

No, he’s something better. He’s undiscovered territory, wild and exotic, yet achingly familiar. So perfectly him.

I lick the underside, and it jumps. I do it again, reveling in the salty, musky maleness of him, and then I press my cheek to it.

“Mia.” His voice sounds strained.

I put him in my mouth, feeling the whole shape of him with my tongue and lips. I wrap my hand around his thick root and explore him. I don’t want to stop.

With other guys, I try to stage manage. Maybe set the scene with flower petals and candles. Or juice things up with breathless oohs and aahs, but Max and I are beyond that. We’ve been through a war together.

I pull him from my mouth and kiss just his tip.

Suddenly he’s out of my hand. He kneels in front of me. “You’re too slow,” he whispers.

“You’re too perfect,” I whisper.

“You’re too hot,” he says, watching my eyes.

A condom wrapper crinkles at the edge of my awareness.

My heart pounds. We’re kneeling face-to-face in this empty studio space in the middle of the city, me and my enemy who I know like the back of my hand, and all the walls are coming down.

“You’re too terrifying,” I finally say.

The light flooding in the windows is a faint dot of white in each of his

eyes. “So are you,” he says.

I kiss him. I press into him because I want my chest against his, because my heart feels raw, like there’s a hole there that can only be plugged by his chest.

“Mia,” he rumbles into the kiss. He stands, pulling me up with him, never once breaking the kiss. I fling my legs around him and kiss him. He holds me aloft, kneading my partly-silk-clad butt cheeks.

“You’re gonna make me come again.”

“That’s the plan.” He whirls me around and we cross some expanse of floor—three feet or thirty feet, I have no idea. He sets me on some sort of surface.

My head lolls back.

“Look at me,” he rumbles.

I look at him as he puts himself at my entrance, sliding his condom-clad cock around, picking up juice. “Your enemy of yore is gonna fuck you now and it’s gonna be unbelievable.”

“Please,” I beg.

He pushes a little ways in, stretching me. “God, it already is unbelievable.”

I grab handfuls of his shirt, holding him, rocking with him.

His gaze falls to my lips. He leans in, nips my lower lip, just softly.

I suck in a shaky little breath, trying to be quiet about it. I don’t want him to know how he shatters me. How much power he has over me. How much I want this.

“I love when you do that,” he says.

“What, when I breathe?” I joke. “You need to get out more.”

“I love when I touch you, and you try to act like it’s nothing.”

“Are you calling me a bad actress?”

“You’re a great actress—you know you are.” He pushes in deeper, rocking gently, in and out. “But when you secretly melt like that, you have no

idea how sexy it is. It's a gift," he whispers. "Something only for me."

My eyes drift closed as he moves deeper, filling me fully. The shock of him so thick inside me makes me shudder with pleasure.

He rocks into me again, breath erratic. He's fucking me. Owning me. It's beyond anything.

My hands are all over his chest, hungrily smoothing over hot skin and cool shirt. I push his shirt off him. I kiss his sweaty chest, learning the shape of his shoulders with my palms.

I'm the queen of the cats, plundering the catnip storeroom.

"Max—"

"What, baby? Anything." He does me slowly, grinding against my pussy. "Anything." He says the word in time with the roll of his hips. "Anything. Anything."

"Like that," I say.

He replies with nonsense into my ear. The music of his voice is familiar, but this is a new key.

I can feel him quickening, lost in a primal rhythm, old as the hills. "Anything."

I grab his thumb and press it to my clit. "Right here," I say.

"God that is so hot." He does my clit while he fucks me. "Like that?"

"Faster," I gasp. He's grinding me and rubbing me. I'm lost in us.

An orgasm explodes over me, white-hot behind my eyes. I grip his arms as he cries out, a pleasure-pain sound that feels so Max-ish, I want to die.

He stays in me a long time, forehead to mine.

I bring my palm to his cheek. "Max," I say.

"Oh my god, Mia," he finally says.

Neither of us say anything. There's just the sound of our breath and the press of our sweaty foreheads together.

And then I just laugh.

"What's so funny?" he ask.

“Us,” I say.

“Right?” He pulls out. “We deserve an award for...I don’t know what.”

“My mind is too offline to think of what.”

“Here.” He whips a monogrammed hanky from his pocket and shoves it into my hand.

“I could just use...a paper napkin.”

“I insist.”

“It’s monogrammed.”

He rips it from my hand and swipes it between my legs. “And now it’s the most fucking perfect hanky in the world.” He tosses it in a nearby garbage can.

“Is it too perfect for the world, and that’s why it must die?”

He rolls off his condom and gets rid of that, too. “Yes.”

I pull myself together...as much as I can with ripped undergarments. “What is this place?” I ask.

“It’s my favorite place in the world. It’s where we create and design.” He sits on a couch and pulls me down onto his lap.

“Tell me,” I say.

He tips his head sideways. “That whole side is the design area. And photography studios take up the whole floor up there. Behind us are illustrators.” He explains his concept of this place. How he fought to make it happen.

I slide my hand over his whiskers. I love the force of him. The confidence of him.

He brushes back my hair. “I’m going to make Parker apologize. Delivering sandwiches to me? That was so out of line. You must’ve hated it.”

“At first.”

“But you launched right in, taking no shit.”

I should talk about the book here, but I don’t know how to start it. “You don’t have to make Parker apologize,” I say.

“He thought I’d get a kick out of you turning up with sandwiches. That’s not okay. You’re not entertainment.”

“Dude, it’s my whole goal in life. To be entertainment.”

“You know what I mean. And while we’re at it, Mia. The way things happened after the summer of *Oklahoma!*?”

“Please. Can’t we leave what happened in high school back in high school?” I press my fingers to his lips. I don’t want to think about the worst day of my life.

He pulls down my hand. “When you did that whole spaghetti-on-your-shirt pratfall? I just want you to know how excruciatingly aware I was that I screwed up. Freezing like I did.”

“That’s what happened? You froze? I never imagined...”

“I froze, Mia.”

“I thought you were amused.”

He shakes his head. “I was consumed with the fear that I might do the wrong thing. Was I supposed to help you? Would that bring unwanted attention? Would you be embarrassed for me to get in your face? Don’t forget, until the Shiz I was homeschooled. I had no friends until the Shiz. And zero exposure to girls. Until you. Though that’s no excuse. And then your friends rushed to your side, and god, I felt like I was watching myself make it worse and worse. Every passing moment, it became a bigger screw-up, more impossible to undo, to explain. And then you looked over at me, crushed and angry. And I knew it was too late.”

Something melts inside me. I was so mortified, I’d barely seen him. “You tried to apologize later.”

“And you told me to fuck off in front of everyone.”

“I felt so humiliated, I couldn’t think straight. All I could hear was that laughing. Running out of there with spaghetti all over the shirt that I’d worn to impress you. I was just so embarrassed.”

He takes a curl in his fingers, knuckle brushing my cheek. “You hate

that.”

“You tried to apologize twice. Why didn’t I believe you? Don’t answer that. I thought you thought you were too good for me.”

“That would never be a thing,” he says.

“And then I went around ruining your dates. I was so angry, but I also didn’t want you with anyone else.”

“I didn’t want you to be with anybody else either,” he says. “But you were a more creative date ruiner. The Max Robot impression you put on YouTube?”

“Yeah, well let us not forget the Mia laugh song and dance. It was both brilliant and diabolical. And my accent—the highlight of your day was in pointing it out when I slipped up. You hated it.”

He takes my hand. “I loved your accent. I loved your laugh. I would hunt for the Jerseygirl in your words. I would hunt for that girl.”

“Nobody wanted that girl.”

“I wanted that girl.”

My heart skips a beat. Max kisses my finger.

“You turned all cynical after,” I say. “So sullen and cynical.”

“I suppose it was my natural state,” he says. “It was how I was before that, so…” he shrugs. “It was my default. Except for that summer. It had been a hard few years.”

I sense worlds in his pause. A story—something sad. A place he doesn’t want to go, and I want to respect that. I give him a smile. “And you are *still* ruining my dates.”

He seems to snap back from wherever he went. “I hated you walking in there with him. I hated him putting his hands on you.”

I probably shouldn’t love that. I definitely shouldn’t want to climb all over him for it. “Your shirt has no buttons,” I say.

“I have an extra here.”

“Do you have extra women’s underwear.”

He kisses my cheek. “Sorry.”

“I don’t know how this works where we’re not enemies,” I say.

He slides his hands to my heart, resting it there on my chest. It’s the most intimate thing he’s done to me yet, because I know he can feel my heart pounding. And there’s no fucking to take away the attention. I feel naked to him, bare to him. “How it works is that I’m in your corner,” he says, “and I always have been.”

The last thing you want is a woman you can't walk away from.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

Kelsey's still sleeping when I wake up the next morning, which I'm relieved about, because I don't know what I'm going to say to her.

But I need to say something.

What happened between Max and me feels beyond words, but he still wrote that book that screwed up Kelsey's life.

I shower and make coffee and scroll through my phone. There are texts from Ryan from last night. I read through them thinking about what Max and I were doing at 10:10 when Ryan wanted to know if we found any clues, at 10:50 when Ryan sent a shot of him and the intern in front of a double hydrant.

Max and I went back to the party a little later. Max had an avalanche of duties, and I found Ryan and thanked him for bringing me. Ryan was only

slightly disappointed that I was leaving; he was having fun with the intern.

I find a New Year's Day yoga class. All the coffee in my belly hasn't helped me figure out what to say to Kelsey, but maybe yoga will center me, and the teacher today is a hard one.

I pull my winter coat over my yoga outfit and head out with my mat, walking the three blocks to class.

The teacher instructs us to leave the world behind and be on the four corners of our mats, but it's not easy. Every inch of me feels suffused with Max. I slide my finger over my bottom lip between poses, remembering how it felt when he nipped me there. The heaviness of his hands on my thighs. How he sounded when he came.

How it works is that I'm in your corner.

I lie on my mat after class, energized and serene. I want to see him. I feel like a stowaway on a forbidden ship, but I just do want to see him. I text him on the way home, and a second later, it rings.

"Max," I say. "You're up."

"I've been up for hours," he says.

"I forgot what an overachiever you are."

"So how fast can you get ready to go out?" he asks. He wants to go to New Year's tea at The Plaza.

"I've never been to The Plaza," I say. "I'm more of a hoagies and Dunkin' Donuts gal."

"You'll love it. They have lots of tiny sandwiches for you to apply your expert opinion to." There's a smile in his voice, and of course I say yes.

I pop back home to face Kelsey. Instead I find a note.

Where are you? DETAILS! BBL.

I write, *out to lunch!* And I scribble a heart. I'm so afraid to tell her about Max. I tell myself I'm going to talk to him about the book. Do my due diligence.

I Google the dress code at The Plaza. It says smart casual, but elsewhere I

see a suggestion for party dress, and I'm all about that. I pull a pink party dress out of my closet and some fun black shoes with pink around the edges, and I'm walking onto the street at 11 sharp in my fuzzy short coat.

My belly flip-flops when catch sight of Max in a black overcoat, next to his even blacker town car. He smiles the half smile, opens his arms, and I go to him, a magnet to a lamppost.

He holds me and kisses the top of my head. "Hi," he says into my hair.

I crane my neck up at him. "Hi."

He opens the door for me and I slide in. He slides in after me and closes us into the dark, warm back seat.

"How are you?" I say as the car starts moving. "Actually, did you notice we hadn't seen each other in ten years that day I delivered the sandwich, and we didn't ask each other how we were?"

He touches my hair. "You want a rewind?"

"There's stuff I'd replay. From last night," I say.

"What parts?"

I slide in closer. I never had such an irresistible need to be close to somebody. "Oh, *you* know what parts."

He smiles. A small crinkle around the edges of his eyes—how did I never notice that?

I straighten his lapel. "Of course, I knew what you were up to the last ten years, being that your picture is everywhere."

"That's not really my picture."

"It's your face."

He puts his arm around me and pulls me closer. How am I so comfortable with him? "I knew you were delivering sandwiches. I know you've been working. Congratulations on the reviews for *Sir George and the Dragon*. That one in the *Times* that specifically pointed out your stage presence?"

"You read the reviews?"

"I went to it. You were the best thing in it. I'm not just biased. Everyone

saw it.”

I pull away. “You went to a show of mine?”

“Mia, I went to all of them. That I was in town for.”

He was out there all that time? In my world? I’m reviewing every show in my mind. What did he think? “You’ve been going to my shows.”

“Is it so hard to believe?”

“Well, I didn’t hear about it.”

“I wore a hat.”

“You know, a hat doesn’t disguise your face. God, you were at them? I can’t believe—”

He puts a finger over my lips. “You were amazing,” he says. “And when you played Missy Bee in *Glenda Rayborne Girls*? That solo?”

I grin and pull away his finger. “God! Right? That solo!” It was the least flashy solo, but the range it demanded was madness, and I was proud how I nailed it, night after night. Not a lot of people noticed. Only the musicians.

“I was on the edge of my seat for you,” Max says. “As soon as the progression started, I knew you were going to end up on a sustained high C. You made it sound easy.”

I love that he noticed, that we have this language in common, even though he quit music. “Thank you. I’ve been working like a dog preparing for the *Anything Goes* revival.”

“That’s going to be huge.”

“I’m going out for the part of Reno Sweeney.”

“Mia,” he says. “God, yes. It’s so you. And your dancing is right there with your singing and acting. You have the trifecta now.”

“It’s gonna be brutal choreography, but I’ve been working so hard on it. My roommate Kelsey is a dancer and we do trades. I’m helping her level up on her acting and singing and she’s helping me level up on dancing.” This is the place where I should bring up the book. But the car is stopping, and the door opens as if of its own accord, but of course it’s a driver.

Max gets out and extends a hand down to help me out. I take it, and he pulls me up to meet him. I feel fully like a princess now. He kisses me and introduces me to his driver, Kenneth, who seems happily surprised about the introduction.

“Hi,” I say.

Kenneth nods. “Miss.” It’s such a small thing, Max introducing me to his driver, but it feels like he’s bringing me deeper into his world.

The place is glorious inside, all potted palms and towering French windows that flood the place with natural light. The place is a full white tablecloths and chandeliers explosion.

Max sets his hand on the small of my back as the host leads us to our table. Guys I’ve dated never touch me there unless they’re being ironic or playing it for a joke. Like everything’s just a joke.

Man things aren’t a joke with Max. He leans in toward my ear. “I can’t tell you what a perfect Reno you’d make.”

Everybody turns and watches us as we’re seated next to the window. A few people come up and say hi to Max. He introduces me to some, but not to others. The ones he introduces me to, he always says something like, *we go way back*.

“You make a point of saying we go way back,” I observe between interruptions.

“That’s for anybody connected to the press or blogs who might conclude you’re a Max Hilton girl, and that they can get all sorts of access. What we’re doing isn’t PR.” He picks up the menu. “You’re the opposite of business.”

“I’m pleasure?” I say.

He gives me a look, that frank, open face of his that never appears on the ads. “You’re my real life.”

Heat steals over my face.

“*And* pleasure.”

I snort. “Touché.”

His half smile appears. The waiter comes up, but I don't want to take my eyes off Max and his half smile. He covers my hand with his and orders two New York teas and champagne, and the waiter leaves.

"Aren't we gonna eat?"

"The tea is sandwiches."

"No comment," I say.

"What?" he asks.

"So all of those models, you don't go out with them?"

"The models are my co-workers. Lana Sheffidy is one of my oldest friends. She's a good friend who'll show up places. Business. I forget that everybody just doesn't know that. Mia, tell me you don't think those ridiculous shots are real life."

"I don't think they're literally *real life*."

"A woman in a Givenchy gown gazing at me as we stand in the ruins of the Coliseum? That is *not* what a date with me looks like."

"Speak for yourself. That's what always happens on my dates," I say.

He gives me a look. "Come on. What do you do on dates? Or just for fun. Like with your friends. Where do you go?"

"What do the little people do?" I tease.

"I'm serious. I want to know."

I shrug. "Order pizza and watch a movie. Or, for going out, there's this old-school bar down on 47th that a lot of my gang goes to. They have this amazing juke box and you just sink into these booths. A lot of theater people go to it, and there are certain nights where, if you're there after midnight, you can find out that, yes, these tables are sturdy enough to dance on."

"I love it."

"It is. Or we go to shows. A lot of comp tickets floating around. There's also, you know, the park. Park dates."

"Yes," he says.

"Is this what your dates look like?" I look around. "The Plaza and Four

Seasons?”

“I usually go low key,” he says. “But I feel celebrational.”

I’m stupidly excited and trying not to grin too big. I feel celebrational, too.

He adjusts his fork. “Parker apologizes, by the way.”

“So he thought it would be...funny?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know. It was messed up, and he should’ve told me.”

“I can’t believe you guys stayed friends all these years. I bet he’s a good business partner—he always was kind of an operator.”

Max beams at me. “He still is. You have no idea.”

“Remember when he was always starting those wacky businesses he’d try to get everyone involved in? The dance mob birthday business. Or that guerilla serenading YouTube channel? Getting kids to serenade jaywalkers and things?”

“He almost got hit a few times off that. He’s lucky he didn’t.” We laugh about Parker businesses.

The scones come. They’re warm, served with clotted cream. I nearly die of bliss.

“Right?” he says.

“They’re almost as good as a pork roll sandwich from Mort’s Diner back home.”

“Mia.” His tone is warning.

“What? Have you ever tasted one?”

“Are you talking about that fried ham stuff that you get in a can? Tell me you’re not.”

“Taylor ham, and it’s amazing. Though these little cucumber things? Giving the pork roll a definite run.”

We try the different sandwiches. It’s like we’re right back how we were that summer. The way we go together, it feels like we were forged in the

same oven, pieces from the same set that got separated, and now we're back, but better, because Max is all grown up, and there are exciting new sides of him.

The song changes. It's background classical music, but it's not background-ish for Max. It's a song he once played really well. I secretly watch his expression. He probably has opinions on this version. I can see the knowledge in his eyes, following the notes. He could play it backward and forward. Back then, anyway.

"Why'd you quit, Max? With the music? Not that you haven't done obnoxiously well for yourself and all. But you were so good and you left it behind."

"You said I attacked the keyboard like Terminator."

"That's not answering the question."

He turns his champagne glass in the light, studies the bubbles. "It wasn't for me."

"You had to get to the most elite level of musicianship to realize music wasn't for you?"

There's a beat where I think he might not answer. Then he says, "I always knew I hated it."

The admission hits me in the gut. I think back to him bent over that keyboard, working so hard. Did he hate it all that time? "I'm sorry," I say, bewildered. "You hated it?"

"Ferociously."

"Something that you did like eight hours a day."

"You're supposed to be miserable in high school, right?" he asks. "Isn't that a rule?"

"I kind of can't get over it. You were in a performing arts school and you hated performing."

"Not all performing."

Oklahoma! I think it like it's a lost thing. Maybe it is. "You liked

Oklahoma!.”

“I loved it. That summer...I’d always loved that music. I mean, I never had the chops for doing it professionally, but I loved it. Maybe that’s part of why I loved it. And then for them to put us together.”

“Why didn’t you just go over to the theater side? Max, you were having fun up there. They probably would’ve let you.”

“My folks would’ve pulled me out of that school so fast. You don’t know. I could’ve been snorting coke and making bombs, and they wouldn’t have pulled me out as long as I was performing at an elite level, but show tunes? The seventh ring of hell.”

“It’s pretty far from Mozart, I guess.”

“Classical music is the Miller family business.” He tips his silver butter knife this way and that, playing with the reflection. “If I’m honest, I liked what came with the child prodigy status. It was an instant place on top of the food chain.”

“Like being star quarterback,” I say. “You get all the popularity for being good at some game.”

A group seems about to approach us. Max uses his knife to cut a scone, and the group fades off. “See that? They usually won’t talk to you if you have food in front of you. Unless they’re complete assholes. FYI.”

“You played angry.”

He spreads cream onto the scone. “Yes, and like a robot. Without feeling. Terminator, you said. You heard it and you were right.”

“I didn’t say that to be cruel.”

“This might sound a little strange, but it meant something that you saw it. You saw me. It made me feel less alone.”

The world is your cocktail party; never forget it.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MAX

I hit the button for my penthouse, relieved to have Mia all to myself without the eyes of the world on us.

The elevator doors shut and she leans back, hands on the rail behind her, luminous in her pink dress.

“Nice elevator. There’s just one thing missing,” she says. “What could be missing?”

I go to her and cage her with my arms. I love her sassy smile. I love that she gives me shit about the Max Hilton lines.

“What could it be?” she teases.

I shut her up with a kiss. She grabs my shirt, pulls me in hard. I’m stunned all over again at how well we fit. The more time I spend with her, the less I want to let her go back to her apartment, her job, her world.

The door opens and we're there.

She turns. "So this is where you live."

"When I'm in the city."

"Ah, of course." I can hear the smile on her lips as she says it. More Max Hilton mockery, but she likes that I've built this. Mia loves competence. She always has.

I hang behind and watch her look around. "Where are the giant freak lips?" she asks.

It takes me a moment to realize what she's talking about—a massive posterized image of lips that was above the fireplace once upon a time. My designer hung it as a favor to the artist for the magazine shoots.

"Somebody is obsessed with me. Did you collect all of the articles ever written about me?"

"You're inescapable," she says. "You're even on the sides of the busses? Somebody loves his own face." She goes to the window and peers out over the park.

I go up behind her. I move her hair aside and kiss her neck. "I think you love my own face."

She turns around in my arms. Her look says, *aren't you so full of yourself?* It also says, *I do love your own face.* She kisses me and pulls away to continue her self-guided tour around the living room.

I love the sense of ease between us. I never brought women home into my private spaces. Never introduced them to my driver or made confessions about the music.

But no woman is Mia.

She runs her hand over the nubby blue couch and the antique lamp.

"This isn't at all what was in the magazine. It's so much more..." She turns around and looks at the painting above the fireplace. I bought it at a flea market in Amsterdam. It's a crow in a tree, done in bold, heavy black strokes on a bright blue background. It's not at all realistic, but there's something I

just love about it. I want her to love it, too.

“It’s so you,” she says.

“A crow?”

“It’s so straightforward, just the lines of it. Energetic and watchful. People think crows are carnivorous and mercenary, but in truth, they’re fun and smart and playful.”

“Are you saying people think I’m carnivorous and mercenary?”

She looks at me strangely. “Maybe.”

I don’t love that she’d say that. We’ve been trying to modulate that image lately. Not enough to defang the brand, but corporate responsibility is a thing with me these days. It’s a lot of what Catwalk for a Cause is about.

She moves on into the dining room. “It looked so different in the *Architectural Digest* article. This is much more human.”

“I’m still on the carnivorous and mercenary thing.” She looks thoughtful, as though she has something more to say.

I think she’s about to tell me, but then she spots the hot tub on the porch. “Look, Max, there’s steam coming out of there.” She points to the corner of the cover where steam leaks up. “Is that thing functional in the wintertime?”

“Maybe.”

“That is so decadent.”

“Decadence is the spice of life, baby.”

She gives the Max Hilton line an eye roll and I go to her, slide a knuckle along her jaw, down her neck, down the smooth silky bodice of her dress. I’m imagining her naked in there. “It’s amazing in the winter. You want to go in?”

“Would we need suits?”

“I have a no-suit policy for you.”

She gives me a sassy smile. “Oh really?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s a strict no-suit policy that I enforce in only the harshest way.” I slowly unzip her dress, kissing my way down, unwrapping

her like an erotic confection. “I’m afraid I’ll have to enforce it.”

Her breath speeds. I love that I can affect her this way. I plant kiss after kiss along her spine. My cock is rock hard as I push her dress down in front of the panorama of the park. Her whole body shudders as I pull down her panties, get her to step out of her clothes. “Bra off,” I grate.

She takes it off and flings it in true Mia style. It lands on the couch.

I stand, running my hands over her hips. “So beautiful.”

She gives me a wicked look over her shoulder, and I’m so overcome with affection, I forget how to breathe. Just her standing there naked is all my fantasies from that lost summer coming true, but so much better. She goes to slip off her shoes, but I stop her. “No, no, no, no. Keep the shoes on,” I growl.

“I can’t wear shoes in there.”

I wrap my arms around her from behind, slide my hand down over her pussy. One stroke and her whole body quivers. In her ear I whisper, “Bad news. We’re not gonna make it that far.”

She gasps as I stroke again.

I hold her more tightly. “You’re so wet for me,” I say. “I love how you get wet for me so fast. Almost as fast as I get hard for you. Almost.” I finger her some more, waiting for the feeling of her melting in my arms.

“See that table over there? I’m going to bend you over that table, and you’re going to let me do what I need to do.”

She turns all the way around now, with a hazy look in her eyes. “Yeah?”

I lower my voice. “You want me to describe how I’m going to fuck you?”

“Yeah, Hilton.” She pushes my jacket off my shoulders. “I want the details.”

I kiss her the way she seems to like—soft and slow, though there’s nothing soft and slow about how I want to take her.

“I’m going to hold your hair in my fist and press you right onto that table. It’s cool marble, but you’ll warm it up with your sweaty little body, because

I'm going to be working you so hard."

I slide my hands over her chest, her hips, learning her curves, the silky warmth of her skin.

"I'm not just gonna fuck you. I know from last night you like a little something extra over your clit, and it's the perfect position for that. I'm going to make you come so hard you'll forget how to meow."

"That's a tall order," she whispers huskily.

I hoist her up; her legs lock around my waist like it's the most natural thing in the world, like she was always meant to be flush against me. I carry her over to the table and put her down, threading my fingers through her soft curls before I fist her hair at the nape of her neck. Her eyes go unfocused as I tighten my grip.

"Undo me," I whisper.

I kiss her while she fumbles at my pants. I want her hands on me again. I loved the reverent way she touched my cock last night. The way she kissed it.

She takes me in her hand and squeezes.

"So good," I whisper. "That's how hard I am for you. I'll get even harder once I'm inside that pussy of yours. I'm gonna make you come so hard, your knees might give out. But I'll hold you. I need you upright for how I'm gonna do you."

I spin her around. There's nothing gentle about the way I press her down on the table. She makes little begging sounds as I push aside her folds, press one finger in, then another. "This pussy," I grate. She angles up her hips as I press myself in. As I lose myself in her.

She cries out. I slide my hands all over her back. "I gotcha, baby."

I cover her, fucking her. I reach around and do her, lost in the sounds of her pleasure. Lost in her. Never have I lost myself in a woman so completely.



SOME TIME LATER, we're in the tub. I have her foot. She has the view.

“Well-fucked is a good look on you,” I say.

Her smile gets me in a way I can't describe. Her smile draws me to her. Across the room, across the bed, across the dark bubbly water. I slide my hand up her calf, smooth and warm.

“You're just saying that because I'm naked,” she says.

“So not true.”

She reaches over the side and grabs one of the Italian chocolates a design house sent over. She closes her eyes and moans as she lets it melt in her mouth.

“I'll never get sick of watching you enjoy things.”

“That works because I'll never get sick of enjoying things. Especially you things.”

I massage the ball of her foot.

“You are spoiling me,” she says. “You are ruining me...”

“For other guys? That's the plan.”

The silence stretches long, punctuated by horns honking below. The ambient noise of Fifth Avenue.

“Have I modulated my mercenary carnivorous image with you yet?”

She opens her eyes and gazes at me from across the steam. Like she has a thousand thoughts. What?

“We're actually working on it. Not to change the Max Hilton persona, but adding a corporate responsibility dimension.”

“I'm not talking about dimensions of your persona, exactly.”

Something inside me twists. “What?”

“Well, the book. The pickup book.”

“What? The book? It's ancient history. I don't think anybody even reads that book anymore.” I move onto the next toe.

“Oh, people read the book. People take it to heart. It's not good. It teaches guys how to be jerks.”

This gives me pause. The book has always had haters. I tend to ignore

them. “It’s designed to help awkward men have confidence.”

“I don’t know if it does that, but it definitely teaches guys who are stupid jerks how to be smart jerks. And they go out and screw with women.”

I frown. What happened to her? Low and slow through grit teeth, I ask, “Did somebody mess with you?”

“Not with me, but my roommate Kelsey? Her boyfriend picked her up with your techniques. And they ended up living together and it turned out that the entire time, he was using your techniques to pick up a zillion other girls. While they were living together.”

“That is awful. It’s an awful thing to discover something like that.”

“She was devastated.”

I don’t know what to say. I stare out at the park, so many brown trees tipped with snow. “I have to say, though, he sounds like he would’ve been a bad boyfriend without the book.”

“Yeah, but you helped him *seem* like a good boyfriend. And my friend, Jada? She went to bed with a guy who did the jungle kissing move and it was like, false advertising. Those are two women I personally know.”

I frown, confused. “Are you holding me responsible for that?”

“Well, yeah. It teaches guys how to be jerky. The book sucks.”

“Ouch,” I say.

“I know you wrote it when you were twenty, but seriously?”

“Look,” I say, “if you went and got coaching on how to say the right thing in a job interview, is that wrong?”

“It would be wrong if the coach told me to pretend I was something I wasn’t. And meeting in a bar isn’t a job interview.”

“Meeting in a bar is exactly like a job interview,” I say. “And the company who hires you would be responsible for confirming what you told them. Maybe giving you a probation period.” She’s shaking her head. Is this our first fight? “The book was designed to inspire guys to have confidence. To be unique, let their personalities shine through.”

Mia's cheeks are rosy from the steam. She looks cherubic, but she's a cherub on the warpath. She was always fiercely loyal. She'd fight to the death for a friend. "You helped them pretend they have a personality that isn't theirs."

"It's coaching," I say.

"Really? What do you call the thing where you're supposed to completely ignore the pretty girl and talk with everybody else? Emotional manipulation. Come on."

"All performance is emotional manipulation. At the Shiz they talked all the time how to wring emotion out of music. Method acting is emotional manipulation. The key of D minor is emotional manipulation."

"It's different," she says. "And the men are only supposed to choose girls they will never feel attached to, so that they can't get hurt. What the hell is that?"

I think back on my state of mind when I wrote the book. The apartment above a grocer in Little Italy. "I was definitely cynical about...romance," I say. *What the hell was she doing reading that book?* And then I get the real trouble here. Or part of it. "Does Kelsey have a problem with me?"

"A lot of my friends do. I'm honestly surprised you're surprised. Like you never get any blowback?"

"I've never pay attention to my critics. You can't get anywhere like that."

"So basically, everybody you deal with is in awe of you. You're surrounded by fans and yes-people and employees. Even in high school people were in awe of you."

"Not everyone," I say.

"Be serious. You've never had to deal with people who'd rather give your picture a magic marker moustache than wear Maximillion logo shit, but they're out there."

"I don't doubt it," I say.

She gives me a hard look. As though I'm being arrogant. I rub her foot,

staring into the bubbly depths of the hot tub. I don't feel like I did anything wrong, but it's always possible I'm not seeing all the sides of this. "Let me look into it. If I feel like there's a problem, I'll make donation to something. The Harriet Tubman shelter, or..."

"You can't just throw money at it, Max. This isn't PR. This is real people in the real world."

I frown. If nothing else, I'm thinking I need to look at that book again.

She narrows her eyes. "You better not be thinking of a Max Hilton line right now."

"I'm not."

"*Who needs the real world when there's hundred-year-old scotch?* Or some shit like that? Is that what you were thinking?"

"Oh, baby, you gotta do better than that for a Max Hilton line," I say.

She snorts, but my mind is whirring. I won't be the boyfriend that all her friends hate. No way, that's not acceptable.

We get take-out from the little Indian place down the street and I press her for more details on the way back. We spend the rest of the night sprawled on the couch, watching musicals on the big-screen TV and singing along, something I can do with exactly zero other people.

We begin with the serious warhorses, starting with *HMS Pinafore*. We sing along to every song. She's such an amazing singer.

"How do you know all of this?" she asks me at one point. "I knew your family was musical, but god. I thought it was only classical."

"It's not my family. Not exactly."

She tilts her head. Interested. Caring.

I grab a bottle of wine and two glasses. I never talk about my late nanny, Annette, not even to Parker. I never wanted to. But I want to tell Mia.

So I pour the wine, and I tell her the story. What an important part of my life Annette was—more important than my parents in many ways. How I didn't even know how to be playful until Annette came along. "I didn't have

any electronics or playmates or anything. It was just the music. But Annette brought those songs. She had dyed blond hair and huge rings on her wrinkly hands and an actual record player in her room. And when my parents went on trips, she'd bring it down the living room and we'd sing and laugh. I suppose it gave her deniability. She could always report that we were working on music."

Mia threads her fingers into mine. Listening. Caring. When did I stop sharing things? When did I build this wall around myself? When did I stop letting people in? Always deflecting. Everything Max Hilton. Jokes and cocktail hour.

I don't know if I'm telling the story right.

I'm sure I'm not.

It's hard to explain about Annette, the only sunshine in a grim childhood of scales and drills. Sitting on that bench until I was dropping from fatigue. And then she died in that crash. And a few years later, the Shiz was my escape.

"It was your escape, but you still hated it," she observes. And then I see when the understanding dawns. "And then you were in *Oklahoma!* with me. I assumed it was like a punishment to you."

"It was the best thing that could've happened," I say.

"For me, too," she says.

"That summer," I say. There's nothing much to add to it. We tossed it away. Retreated to our corners. Insecure teens.

"Do you see your parents?"

"Not much. They're in France now."

"I'm so sorry about Annette," she says.

I shrug.

"I hate that you were made to hate music," she says.

"Not this music. It represents everything good. Your turn to pick," I say. "Go ahead."

She trolls through the streaming menu, looking for a new musical to watch.

I wind my fingers through her hair, thinking how there's nobody else I could do this with. Talk. Sing. Nobody else in the world. "We need to go to *Calle Corrientes*," I say. "We could fly down next weekend."

She widens her eyes. *Calle Corrientes* is the Broadway of Buenos Aires. "Just fly down? Just like that?"

"I've never been and I've always wanted to. Haven't you always wanted to go?"

"Of course I have. I'm surprised you haven't taken your jet down there if you wanted to go so bad."

I tuck her hair behind her ear. I rarely take trips for just pleasure. I never had the urge until her.

Never ask a woman what she wants. Tell her what she wants.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

It's hard to go back to reality after that long weekend with Max. Hard to put the Meow Squad uniform back on.

The good news: Max is still on my route.

The first day back, I bring him a lunch of my own choosing. Which is convenient because, even though I left him just hours before, I suddenly have a whole list of things I need to tell him about. Plus an insatiable need to touch him.

"I have to go," I say, kissing him. "The Edgar building has been complaining." I tear myself away and turn the cart.

"Hey, before you go, what are you doing tomorrow night?"

I still. It's a Tuesday night. The night he customarily goes to the secret yoga place. "Umm...a few errands. Nothing, really."

“You think you’ll be done by seven or so?” I nod. He scribbles down an address. “Meet me here at eight-thirty. Call when you get there.”

“What...do you have planned?”

“It’s a surprise,” he says.

“Should I wear something special?”

“Whatever you want.”

I finally see Kelsey at home after work. She’s already in her dance workout clothes. “Chop chop,” she says. “Get in your leotard and you’re going to give me the Ryan details on the way to the studio.”

I go in and change, feeling like an asshole.

“Every last one,” she calls out.

Five minutes later we’re traipsing the block avenue to her dance studio, and she has her arm in mine. “Well?”

I take a deep breath. “Ryan is out of the picture,” I say.

Her dimples deepen. “Uh-oh, already?”

I take my arm from hers and stop, pulling her from the stream of pedestrian traffic.

“What?”

“Max,” I say.

Her dimples disappear. “Max...w-what?”

“That’s who I was with all yesterday. All the night before.”

“Excuuuuuse me? No! Mia, no!”

“I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do. I’ve been so torn and just... I don’t know. You have this experience with his book—”

“—an experience with his book wrecking my life.”

Nathan wrecked your life, I think, but is that me drinking the Max Kool-Aid?

“Max is not his book. He’s not like his book at all. We have this history, and we’ve reconnected so powerfully. I fell for him so hard that summer, and it’s all right there. You know how I fell for him.”

“And he hurt you.”

“It was high school. And we talked about everything that happened and it’s amazing—”

“Nooooo!” She presses her palms to her eyes.

I grab her arms, pull them down. “I’ve felt like such a jerk. I want to be in solidarity with you, but I can’t. It’s so, so good with him. Like I never imagined...”

“Mia,” she says.

“I want you to...at least keep an open mind?”

“Oh my god, Mia. Come on.”

She’s silent all the way to the next corner, thinking. But at least she’s holding onto my arm.

“He was twenty when he wrote it. He didn’t set out to ruin anybody’s life.”

She turns to me at the *Don’t Walk*. “Look, the book didn’t ruin my life. I’m the one who decided to move in with that asshole. And the jungle kiss, guys have been using lines forever. Though, that’s a diabolically good one. But the thing is, who writes that kind of book? I can get past it on behalf of me. I can’t get past the book on behalf of you. Because you don’t have a complete personality transplant between the ages of twenty and twenty-eight.”

“I know what I’m doing. I know him.”

She rests her hands on my shoulders. “I don’t want what happened to me to happen to you. Some friggin’ player.”

“It won’t,” I say.

“He wrote the book. ‘The last thing you want is a woman you can’t walk away from.’ Remember? He literally *wrote the book* on being a jerky player.”

“But he’s not like that. Think of how you were at the age of twenty. Personally? I was a basketcase.”

“Excuses won’t unwrite the book for him.” The light turns green and

we're on the move again. "I'm officially registering my objection."

"This isn't a jury trial."

"I'm just saying. I'm not going to harp on this going forward. I want you to be happy, and as your friend, I'll support you. But if he pulls a Nathan."

"He makes me happy."

We go on in silence.

"Okay," I say, "And what if I told you he invited me to his secret Yogic sex lair for the acrobatic arts of love tomorrow night?"

She whips her gaze around to me. "He did?"

"Will that make a difference? That we get the answer to that burning mystery? You're at least glad for that, right?"

"What did he say about it?"

"To meet him at that address. And that it's a surprise."

"What the hell."

"Right? Though he did say eight-thirty. Whereas he got there around seven the night I followed him."

"Did you tell him—"

"That I followed him like a freak? No." I poke her arm. "So? Are you happy for that at least? To get the answer to our burning mystery?"

She puts on a grumpy face. "You'll miss drinks for Jada's wrap. For that *Fox in the Henhouse* show."

"Jada has a wrap party every month."

"Still." She sighs. "Okay, it makes one percent difference in how happy I am. Because I'm mostly worried on your behalf. That he's a player."

"I'll tell you for two. If you say it makes two percent difference."

She shakes her head.

"Troll doll full-costume sex fetish film," I whisper. "You never know." Though, I do. I know that's not it.

"You are such a dork. Okay."

"Thank you."

“He’d better be a good lay at least. Like amazing.” She looks over and I’m just grinning.

“Jesus.” She sniffs and takes my arm again.

Open your eyes. Start seeing what's in front of your face.

THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED PROOF - YOU MAY FIND TYPOS,
BUT THOSE WON'T BE IN THE FINAL VERSION.

MIA

I'm outside the Namaste Way Yoga building at a quarter after eight. Only the windows on the top floor are lit. A woman comes out the door with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

"Can I help you?" she asks.

"I'm here to meet someone."

"Max?" she asks.

"Yeah."

"Go on up. They should be almost done."

What. The. Hell.

I swallow.

"I can just go in?"

"Well, you'll want to wait in the hall until they're done." She puts the

cigarette into her mouth and cups her hand, shielding the lighter flame from the wind. I add my hand, and the thing finally lights. “Thanks,” she says, blowing a stream of smoke from the side of her mouth.

“How will I know...when they’re done?”

“When all the banging and pounding stops, I imagine.”

“Thank you,” I say.

I go in and study the directory, reluctant to go up. Was Kelsey right? Is he just a master player? Because, *banging and pounding*?

I find Namaste Way on the directory. Studio 503. It takes up half the entire floor, and it doubles as a ballet studio. It’s pretty common for yoga studios to share spaces with ballet studios. All that expanse of wood flooring. Not cheap.

I take the elevator and get out on the fifth floor, dreading what I’ll find.

As I head down, I hear music—Bach—played badly. Noisily.

What. The. Hell. Camouflage for the banging?

I draw nearer. No way is it Max. No way could Max have lost his abilities so completely. Is this some sort of perverse live accompaniment to whatever is happening?

The same prelude is played again, but this time, it’s played beautifully. And then it’s played poorly again.

I draw nearer to the door. Is he having dueling pianos with his alternate shitty-at-piano self?

And then Max’s voice. “Listen.” A string of notes. “Let’s play the left hand. Do you hear the voice here? This voice is telling a story underneath the top voice. I’ll play the top voice, you play the voice that tells the story below it. The quiet story.” I hear murmuring. Not Max. It’s a kid.

Notes. Faltering stops and starts. A few more stabs.

I blink, unsure what I’m hearing. There’s more talk about voices. Notes.

It seems that Max...is teaching a piano lesson?

Yes. A piano lesson.

Laughing, drink-swirling, Ferrari-driving Max secretly teaches *piano*?

Suddenly there's the sound of shuffling. Mumbled questions. Footsteps. I step aside as the door opens. A kid comes out. He's maybe thirteen. He nods and heads to the elevator.

The door closes behind him.

I knock.

"Did you forget—" The door flings open and I'm face-to-face with Max. His shirtsleeves are rolled up; his tie hangs loose. My heart skips a beat.

"What are you doing up here? I thought you were going to call first," he says.

"Somebody let me in."

"Well...you didn't have to come all the way up here."

He's tentative. Did he not want me to find out? I push in and look around until I find it—the piano, glinting in a dark corner. I go to it, ignoring the click of the door. The footsteps behind me.

"Were you giving a piano lesson?" I ask stupidly.

"Yeah." Arms snake around me.

"I don't get anything that's happening here," I say.

Or at least, most things I don't get. I sit at the bench and run my fingers lightly over the keys. It's a Kawai—a nice one. That's the kind Max would prefer, I think with a rush of affection. He'd want it for the tone.

"You're secretly teaching piano?"

"Busted," he says.

I turn to him. "Why the secrecy? It's not like you're making troll doll full-costume sex fetish films up here or something."

He look at me strangely.

"I mean, it's piano lessons."

He sits down at the bench next to me and plunks the middle C. "I don't want anyone to know. I don't want it to be a thing."

"A Max Hilton persona thing."

“It would turn into a circus. A performance.”

It comes to me here just how much he hated being made to play. To perform. The child prodigy alone on the stage. I feel this wave of compassion for him. “But you like teaching?”

“I love it. I love getting kids to connect with the music, but not forcing them or shaming them. Just...showing them. I love when a kid catches fire with the piano.”

Goosebumps prickle over me. He wants to give them a chance to love music. To have what he didn't have.

“Do you feel like you're undoing it?” I ask softly. “With the lessons?”

“Maybe.”

I trace a finger over the cool, glossy keys. I play part of a scale. I can feel him cringe. He used to play scales so perfectly. “You could have a piano at your place. A baby grand.”

He gives me a jaded look. “You know what they say about people who decorate with baby grands.”

I snort. “Okay, Max Hilton. So who are the kids?”

“Employees kids.” He plunks another note. “What songs are you preparing for *Anything Goes*?”

“Wonderful” from *Olympus on My Mind* for my comic one. It's a little risky. Bawdy.”

“I love that for Reno. A big personality piece.”

“I have that one down cold, but my challenge is ‘How Could I Ever Know?’ from *The Secret Garden*. It's tricky.”

“But it would show off your high notes like crazy.”

“Right? It goes up to F5.”

“You know you can nail that.” He plunks a few notes of it. He's familiar with the song. At least the refrain. Then he plays a few chords.

“You know it?” I ask.

“Not really.” He grabs his iPad and looks up the music.

“You’re going to play it?”

“I want to hear you sing it, and I’m thinking that’s the only way that happens.” He’s got the music up. My heart pounds. “I want to hear.”

It’s a marvel to watch him run through enough of it to get it down. I’d forgotten how well he can sight read, just a few stops and starts to get it in his bones and he’s on his way, making it his own. His phrasing is everything. Like he’s discovering the heart of the song. He could always do that.

He goes to the top, giving me my way in.

My chest feels light—I’m not sure if it’s fear or excitement. We’re doing music together. I want to jump in, but something stops me.

“Train’s leaving,” he says, repeating the prelude, a musical question he knows I have to answer.

We’re two pieces of a puzzle. We always were.

He goes back to the top. I watch his face.

He glances at me and groans and starts again. It’s a leap what I’m about to do—more intimate than fucking him. He knows it. He’s pulling me.

I stand. I launch in. The first verse lyrical and sad—the whole song is. I sing it like I’ve been practicing.

It was good how I did it, and then I look at him and his eyes are sparkling. Shivers go over me because he’s right in there with me.

He comes back at me with the next verse. Max makes it seem easy. Max has a distinct piano voice, but he knows how to use it to support my voice. We sang together that summer and he knows how to make me shine. The perfect tone to enrich mine.

We head into the song, like heading into the wilderness together.

And then everything falls away, and it’s just us, meeting in the music. The song is heartbreaking, and toward the middle it soars operatically. When we come to the end, he moves his finger in a circle to show he’s circling back to the beginning. I head in again and we’re off.

Flying again. Back in that magical summer, but so much better.

He pauses when I falter, returning to just the right point to get me back. We go again and again and then back around to the front. Like if we never stop the song, this doesn't have to end.

It's so beautiful and right that at one point this wave of grief washes over me. All the years of being stupid.

He stops. "Where did you go?"

"I feel sad." Like sad could even begin to describe it. "We really do deserve that award. For friggin' boneheadedness."

He looks at his hands, poised over the keys. Does he feel it?

"You want to stop?"

"Hell no." I sit next to him on the bench and show him on the score where I'm thinking of trying something new.

He starts back a few bars, posture erect, color high. He's the opposite of the Max Hilton that's offered for public consumption. He's the old Max. Genuine. In my corner. I try the new thing. He goes back again and again. I feel like we could play forever. I want the shine of our music to push away reality. But finally I have to stop or I'll burn out my vocal chords.

He looks over at me.

Smiles.

Not his Max Hilton smile, but his goofy smile. "You are gonna kill it," he says. "And the role is for you." He's up, crossing the room to a small refrigerator. He tosses me a bottle of water. To soothe my throat. "You hungry?" he asks. "I'm hungry."

"If you're hinting that you want me to serve you a sandwich, you can forget it."

"Let's go out. I have a standing reservation at Ralazzio. We have more than enough time to get there."

Ralazzio is one of the most amazing restaurants in the city; there's a month's waiting list for tables at least.

"Don't tell me you have plans after this?" he says.

“My friend Jada has invited people to join her for drinks for her wrap. At The Wilder Club. This little place near our apartment.”

He unscrews his own water. “Jada is your friend with the jungle kiss experience?”

“Yeah, but she always has wrap parties. She’s in a lot of small quick shows. It’s not like, mandatory.”

“Will Kelsey be there, too?”

“Kelsey’ll be there.”

Never beg a woman for anything. She should be begging you.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

The Wilder Club is hopping. I can tell where my group is just from the laughter in the far booth. I take Max's hand, feeling jittery about having him meet my friends. "You good?"

"Yeah. I've always wanted to meet the people who draw moustaches on me," he says.

I snort and drag him around a group of bright-haired neighborhood people and up to the bar. Sweat beads on my forehead underneath my hat, and it's not just because it's hot inside.

Several sets of eyes follow us. People have recognized him. "Two local brews," I say.

"Is that the drink here?"

"Yup." I turn and watch him look around. It's strange seeing The Wilder

Club through Max's eyes. It always struck me as wonderfully old school, full of aged woodwork and plants and vintage maps. Tiny brass lamps on thick, plain tables. I love the coziness of it, but Max's habitat is made up of limos and places of airy glamour that are lit by chandeliers.

And he looks larger than life in here, a sleek, magnificent hawk at a gathering of colorful songbirds.

"A little different from what you're used to," I say.

He pulls me to him by my scarf. "I love seeing your life." He kisses me, and my nerves ratchet down. We're together. We can handle this together.

A couple of women come up and ask Max to do a selfie. He's fun about it—he makes the selfies good, and my chest just swells to watch it. I've never felt so right with a man.

"For the love of god, don't put the location," I say to them while Max is paying for the beers.

"Oh my god, we won't," the one says. "The place would be mobbed."

An angry, booming voice. "You." I spin around and Antonio's giving Max his best Scarface meets Blue Steel. "Nobody puts their hands on my flower," he growls.

"Except maybe Kelsey?" I say to him, grinning. "Can Kelsey put a hand on your...*flower*?"

Antonio gives me outrage. Then, "It is in no way like a flower." He turns to Max. "And you!"

"Dude. The jig is up." I loop my arm in Max's arm. "Max, this is my cousin Antonio. He's awesome and studying to be an actor. Antonio, Max is with me. And you're not a murderous gigolo anymore."

Antonio frowns. He liked being a murderous gigolo.

I make them shake hands.

"You had that poor boy shaken," Max informs Antonio. He tells us what Rollins said about him. Antonio is excited that Rollins was so convinced. Something unwinds in my belly, seeing them get along. It's Kelsey and Jada

I'm worried about, but this is a nice first step.

"Have you ever thought about modeling?" Max asks Antonio. "I mean, if the acting doesn't work out."

Antonio likes that. He's been thinking about it, though his experience is all in Milano, he says to Max. "And for the record," Antonio says, "I was kissing my thumb."

"He was kissing his thumb, it's true," I tell Max. "So was I."

Meanwhile, my gang has spotted us. We make our way over to the big corner booth. Lizzie and Jada and Kelsey are there. Antonio slides in next to Kelsey. "He knows."

I introduce him around. Kelsey smiles as she says *hello*. Jada is gracious when he congratulates her on the show, but it's not okay. The fun has stopped and people are stiff now. I feel like it might never be okay. Is politeness between Max and my friends the best I can ever hope for?

There's more small talk, which is bad enough, but then he takes a book from his pocket and sets it on the table.

The Hilton Playbook.

And that really stops the conversation in its tracks.

"Oh, look," Kelsey says.

What was he thinking? Despair spreads through my gut like acid. He wrote the book. He can't unwrite it.

Jada folds her arms. "You carry it around?"

"I've been re-reading it. I want to know your experience with it," he says. "You don't have to tell me, but I want to know."

"How I ended up with a jungle-kissing reverse-chaser?" Jada asks. "How Kelsey lived with one?"

My mouth goes dry.

"I don't know if I feel like spooling it all out." Kelsey drains her beer. I say a little prayer that he doesn't offer to buy a new one for her. Kelsey wouldn't take well to that.

Except Max really is interested, and I think that Kelsey senses it, because she launches into her story. What it felt like to have Nathan take the center stage, and be all scintillating, but ignoring her. “He seemed so funny and unique, but it was all your lines!”

He nods. Some protective instinct seems to be telling him not to use the interview coaching analogy. “I didn’t...think it through from that angle.”

“It’s not an angle,” Jada says. “It’s a freaking ruse. I specifically gave a guy the benefit of the doubt because of that cute dog story and it wasn’t real. I felt deceived, and I feel like your book encourages that.” She turns to the page where it says to memorize the jungle-kiss script.

He takes it, looks at the words he wrote. They don’t want excuses, and he’s not giving them.

“It was a bit much to suggest they memorize it,” he says simply. “They should have their own unique thing.”

“Yeah, that’s a start.” Jada tells him her friend Gracie’s story.

“I didn’t mean for it to be used that way,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you for saying that,” Kelsey says. “I do appreciate it.” The way she says it, though, there is a *but* in there. She appreciates it, *but*...

Sweat prickles along my spine.

“I mean it,” Max says. “And I think sorry isn’t enough. I’m thinking about doing a new edition. I talked to my publisher and they’ll go for it if I write it. I can encourage guys to be confident and interesting without being fake.”

“You’re thinking about doing a new edition?” Jada sounds intrigued.

Kelsey’s not so sure. She turns to her most hated section. More beers come.

He’s genuinely sorry—they can all see that. But I want more. I want my friends to see the vulnerable, passionate, brilliant guy I see. I want them to see the Max who knows every word to every song of *Hair* and secretly loves teaching piano lessons. I want them to see the creative, thoughtful man, not

the Max Hilton of Ferraris and zillion-dollar watches and devil-may-care liquor carts.

“There’s something you’re not saying,” he says.

Kelsey gives me an apologetic look, then turns to Max. “It’s not just about my experience; in fact that’s the least of it. Because I’ll own right now that I had a part in what happened with Nathan—your book helped get him in the door, but it was on me to see him for what he was. To not be blinded by his looks. But here’s the thing—I got burned by a guy who read your book. He only read it. You wrote it. You put down every single one of those words. How can I trust you to be good to Mia when this is the way you were directing guys to behave? People change, but do they really? Or do they just get better at hiding shit? So if you think I’m not saying something...that’s it.”

“He’s not that guy,” I protest. “You need to give me a little credit here, Kelsey.”

Max settles his hand over mine. “I’m going to prove you guys wrong,” he says.

“I want you to,” Kelsey says, raising her beer. “To you, proving me wrong.”

“He’s gonna,” I say.

We all clink glasses. Somebody new comes by to congratulate Jada, but it doesn’t break the tension. I’m staring down the barrel of a reality where my friends tolerate my boyfriend, but secretly hope we break up. Because they don’t trust him with my heart.

I drink my beer, but I barely taste it. I give Max a nervous smile. It was good that he tried. A standup thing to do. And there *is* the new edition. I suppose all he can do is prove them wrong.

“I’m curious about your pickup system,” Lizzie says after Jada’s well-wisher leaves. “How did you develop it? How did you know what would work? You were twenty years old without much experience dating from the sound of it. Was there some sort of testing protocol?”

I try not to stare daggers at Lizzie. I really, really wanted this topic to be over.

Max is toying with his napkin. Like he doesn't want to say something. So of course, everybody's attention is riveted on him. "I was...on the other end of it, in a way," he says.

"The system?" I sit up.

"What does that mean?" Kelsey asks. "A woman did a system on you?"

"It wasn't a system, not anything anybody was consciously doing. It was just...observing the effect of her on me."

I frown. Who the hell is he talking about? I so don't want Max talking about an old crush on top of everything else. "I've had enough of this topic," I say.

"I haven't!" Jada says. "I want to know."

My cheeks heat. I want everyone to stop talking.

"She was playful and outrageous," Max says. "A little bit bossy. And so goddamn beautiful, it killed me."

Antonio frowns, not loving the sound of this. I grit my teeth. What is Max doing? He would talk about some past crush at a time like this?

"She was a force of nature," Max continues. "And the outrageous things she'd do. With every little thing she did, I'd just want her more. She dressed so brightly when I first met her. Loud colors and metallics."

Kelsey listens, rapt. "The alpha-signaling."

Jada exchanges glances with Lizzie.

"Yup," Max said. "Like she was anointing herself. Choosing herself." Max looks over at me.

Something in my belly turns upside down. *What?*

"She was the bravest, boldest woman I'd ever met," he continues. "She came up poor; she wasn't supposed to even leave her tiny town, but she set her sights high, believed in herself when nobody else would. She'd literally bulldoze you with her reality. And god, the stories she would tell!"

I stare at him, stunned. “What are you doing?”

“We started out enemies, but one summer we did this musical together, and it was the best summer of my life. But I screwed it up, and we were enemies again. Even so, I’d sneak into Miedlow Hall and listen to her sing. I couldn’t stay away from her. I loved her.”

“What?” My voice sounds hoarse, like it’s coming from somewhere else. I feel like everything I ever knew has been turned upside down.

“When I left high school, I was sure I’d lost my chance at love. I wrote the book.”

“Love ruins a man. Just walk away,” Antonio quotes.

I’m trembling inside. “Max?”

“It was easy to go hard.” The way he looks at me, I think his entire soul is there in his eyes. “They say cynics are just disillusioned idealists. Writers of pickup books are just heartbroken romantics.”

I’m blindsided.

“Jesus Christ!” Kelsey says. “It was Mia.”

Antonio gazes into the middle distance. “He wrote it because he couldn’t have Mia. His heart was broken in pieces. So he goes off to warn other men. Never pursue a woman you can’t walk away from. Never fall in love.”

“Max,” I whisper hoarsely.

Max presses his hand over mine. “I just love you, that’s all. I’m not saying that so you say it back. In fact, I don’t want that right now, but Lizzie asked how I came up with the system.”

There’s no sound at the table. Everybody’s staring at me now—I feel their eyes on me, but all I can see is him.

“Excuse me, Max Hilton?”

I look over. It’s a couple of college kids, phones in hand.

“Sorry to interrupt,” the one says, “but it’s my friend’s birthday...would you mind...”

Max kisses me on the cheek and stands to do a selfie with the strangers.

“As long as you don’t give the location,” he says.

“God, right?” Jada says, eyes shining with emotion.

I exchange glances with Kelsey while they’re doing the selfies. She’s smiling huge, her dimples deep. “Okay, okay,” she says. “That works.”

The night goes on. Some of Jada’s cast mates come by and things get raucous. People are surprised that Max is in our group, but the novelty wears off and he blends in easily. I sit back, watching my friends. It’s easy to forget how we all have the same performing arts roots.

And he loves me.

And I love him. I want to tell him that, but not in front of everybody.

Around midnight everybody wants to play eighties songs on the old-fashioned jukebox, and Kelsey and Antonio are sexy dancing on the tables. The bartender does his usual scolding, then turns back to serve more beers.

Lizzie announces she’s hungry, and we hatch a plan to order ten of our official apartment pizzas. Snow has started to fall in huge, pretty flakes. We run to our place in a group, laughing and screaming, desperate to arrive before the pizzas.

A few minutes later, we’re all crowded into the elevator, rosy-cheeked and out of breath.

And he loves me.

I find his hand. Squeeze.

On the way up, I tell them about the chandeliers in Max’s elevator. He stands straight and tall, acting weary of my teasing, but I think he kind of loves it. Minutes later, we’re walking into my apartment.

People are shedding winter coats, getting places. Max strolls around the living room, eyes sparkling. “So this is where you live.”

“Don’t laugh,” I say.

“It’s...” His face changes. His eyes seem to lose their sparkle. I’ve never seen a man’s face change so fast.

So fast, I think he’s joking. I trot out my best Oliver Twist accent. “I

know it's not much, but we like it." He doesn't seem amused.

Then I trace the direction of his gaze.

The Bring-Max-Hilton-to-his-grovelly-knees chart.

My blood goes cold. Breath whooshes out of me. "No, Max."

He turns to me. His voice, when it comes, sounds casual. "What do we have here?"

"Max. It's nothing." My heart is a panicked bird in a cage.

"Nothing."

I hate the light way he says it. As though it doesn't have meaning. As though it doesn't hurt.

"It's bullshit. Just a bullshit thing."

"It's just a joke thing," Kelsey says. "A stupid joke."

"Doesn't look like a joke to me." He goes to it. He slides a finger over the grid, so many boxes with X's, each corresponding to one of his golden rules. *Adorn yourself with symbols of your superiority. Do something outrageous.*

"I was wondering how you all knew so much about the book."

And then he finds the Max Hilton dartboard.

"I did that." Lizzie says. "That was all me."

"Max," I say. "It was a stupid thing." I can feel his heart breaking. That's how connected we are. His heart breaking is my heart breaking. "That was how it started, but it's not how it ended."

The way he looks, so calm and steely, I know he doesn't hear me. I can see that isolated boy, going at the piano he hated like a robot.

He showed me his vulnerabilities. He showed all of us. He laid down his Max Hilton armor.

I grab his arm. He used to be warm and pliable, but now he's a stone statue. "Stop staring at those stupid things! It was before I realized how I felt about you, before I—"

"Yet you kept them up," he says softly, shaking me off. "Look at all the X's."

“Max, no! Look at me.”

“You didn’t complete a few of the rules.” This like he’s amused, eyes brighter and harder than diamonds. “Then again, you brought me to my knees, didn’t you?”

“It was a dumb thing. From when I thought you arranged the visits. Please, listen to me! I freaked out when I saw you on my roster. I was scared. Look at me, Max!”

He goes over presses his hand to the picture of the shoes, cut out from the magazine. It’s as if he needs to touch it, to see it’s real. Glitter stars around them. He snorts. That’s the only sound he makes—a derisive snort that cuts me like a knife.

“It’s not what it looks like,” I say pathetically.

He turns. “Grovelly isn’t an adjective.”

With that he walks out the door, shutting it behind him.

I rush out into the hall after him. “It’s not like that, Max. You have it so wrong.”

He stabs the elevator button. “Darts? Really?”

“Let’s talk. We can work this out. History doesn’t have to repeat itself.”

“It already has,” he says.

The floor seems to tilt beneath me. This can’t be happening. “This doesn’t have to be us.”

The door squeeches open. He gets in and turns, arms outstretched, barring my way. “Word of advice. If you’re going to sell your soul for a pair of Louboutins, at least make them this year’s model.”

With that he steps back.

The sound of the elevator doors shutting is a punch to my gut.

Never buy her a drink. That's a move for losers.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

Max is impossible to get to in the days that follow. It goes without saying that there are no more Meow Squad deliveries to the Maximillion tower. I can't even get in.

I text and email him, but nothing comes back.

After work, I go to where he lives and stand outside. Two women from Canada are out there taking selfies in front of his building. They ask me to take one of them together. One of them wears an "I heart Max" hat.

I do it, thinking about how kind he always is about selfies. Was.

I head to Maximillion Plaza after work one day with a bag of cheesy puffs as a peace offering, or more, a prop to hopefully make him remember the fun we had. The security guard won't let me in.

I trudge out and sit on the bench outside the building, letting the winter

sun warm my face.

“Mia.” A familiar voice. I look up, shading my eyes.

“Parker,” I say. “Did Max tell you—”

He sinks down beside me. “What the hell?”

“How is he? Is he...okay?”

“Jesus, Mia, no. What were you guys thinking? Who even does that.”

“I thought he’d called me there to mock me or something!”

“Max would never mock you.”

“I know I screwed up. So bad.” I press my palms to my eyes.
“Reconnecting with Max has been everything.”

“Well, he’s pretty angry now,” Parker says. “It’s partly my fault. I shouldn’t have gotten involved. I just always thought you two belonged together. You were enemies for so long, but nobody got him going like you.”

“We do belong together,” I say.

“Bring Max Hilton to his knees chart? Darts?”

“What can I do?”

He squints out at the scaffolding over the pizza place. The green and red slice showing through in parts. “Maybe another ten years.”

“No,” I say.

Believe in yourself. Shoot for the stars.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

Meow Squad may be barred from the building, but I still have allies there.

I take the day off from work, and just before lunchtime, I buy him an amazing lobster roll sandwich. I put cheesy puffs in the bag along with it. I include a note. A picture of a heart. Underneath I write, *I'm outside the building and I won't leave until you come down. Because I love you.*

I see a woman from the seventh floor I used to deliver to; she's heading in with a coffee. I beg her to deliver my bag to Max's assistant. She seems a little bit bewildered, but she agrees.

I wait outside on a bus bench. After a half an hour I'm shaking—not from the cold, but from the fear that he might not come out. I don't even peek at my phone. I'm waiting for him. I want him to see that.

People come and sit by me, waiting for busses, and then they're gone.

Three hours into it, the same busses come by again. I wonder if the drivers recognize me. Some of the busses have Max's face on them, ironically.

The sun goes behind the building at around four, and it gets cold. But still I sit there.

Kelsey comes at four thirty and brings me warm soup. I drink it right from the Thermos. She even puts on my hat and waits in my place while I pee at a nearby Starbucks. Not that the hat switch would fool Max, but we decide it's like a placeholder for me.

"Guess what else I brought," she says, when I come back. She pulls out my cross-stitch project.

"I'm not going to sit out here doing a cross stitch," I say. "I want him to see that I'm focused on him."

"He's not going to come out," she says after a while. "I saw his face. That chart. God, why did we leave it up?"

"And the darts," I say.

"All this time he seemed like the kind of guy where everything rolls off his back," she says. "You look at his pictures. It's like nothing matters. But after what he confessed at The Wilder Club, it's really the opposite, isn't it?"

I stare up at the tower that I so impudently gave him three stars for. "He didn't create the Max Hilton persona because nothing matters to him," I say softly. "It's because things matter too much."

I tell Kelsey about Annette. His nanny who died in a crash after bringing sunshine and song into his life. Is that what he meant about history repeating itself? That sunshine comes, but it always goes?

Kelsey slides closer. "You don't mind if I sit with you, right?"

"I'm glad you're here." I lay my head on her shoulder and tell her things I've observed about busses.

At around six, the lights in his twenty-fifth floor office blink off. We both sit up.

"Does he come out the front?" she asks.

“No, his car gets him below ground.”

“But maybe not today.” She stands. “I’m going to get a bagel over on the corner, and I’ll take a really long time. But I’ll be here.”

She goes off. I wait, hoping he sees that I’m serious. Five minutes go by. Then ten.

Nothing.

A few black town cars pass by. Those sorts of cars tend to look alike—clean and shiny with tinted windows. But I don’t think he was in any of them.

Somehow, I feel him watching me. I feel him near. Is he coming out the front door? My heart nearly jumps out of my chest when my phone dings. A text.

Kelsey: can I come back?

Me: Not yet.

I put it away. Twenty minutes after his lights went out, a black car slides past my bus stop. I can’t see Max in the window, but I feel him. The feeling of him is an ache so intense, I want to double over. I don’t know how I came to my feet, but I’m standing, watching his taillights disappear. Empty.

A bus slides up and I’m face to face with fake Max, smile full of secrets. Ferrari-and-liquor-cart Max Hilton.

Me: Let’s go.

The next day I can’t get off of work, but I pull together another great lunch—a Korean fried chicken sandwich with spicy dressing that has some of the buildings abuzz. I pair it with cheesy puffs.

The note I include is longer. I talk about the night we sang on the couch to *Carousel*. I just tell him what he looked like to me—how soft his eyes got. And the glint he’d get when he’d hold a note nice and long, or hit one just right. His goofy, friendly half smile that will never appear on an ad. The point where he tangled his fingers into mine and I felt like I’d never get higher. How hard it was not to just lean in and kiss him. How I wanted to stay there forever. How bad I want to tell him that I love him to his face.

In another note, I tell him more about that day in the lunch room. How I'd bought a dress for homecoming dance against the advice of all my friends, but I'd just felt like everything was magical with him, with us.

I still feel like that, I write. I won't stop this. I won't stop fighting for us. You said you messed up that day, but I messed up, too. Half the responsibility was mine back then. I'm going to fight for us now in a way I didn't back then. You said I don't give up on my dreams. You should know I won't give up on us.

Another day is an open-faced bao—a steamed bun sandwich—filled with tender and fatty pork belly, topped with spicy relish, crushed peanuts, and Taiwanese red sugar. I tell him about the way his face looked in the dim light of his Studio Complex on New Year's Eve. How connected I felt with him, like we're two pieces of a puzzle.

Surround yourself with interesting people. Get them talking and laughing.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MAX

I open the note in the lunch she sent up.

“You want to me to leave you?” Parker asks.

“I know what it says.” I fold it back up.

“That smells amazing. Are you gonna eat it?”

I push it his way. I really should eat. It’ll be a long night with the Catwalk for a Cause happening.

He grabs it and unwraps it. “How long are you going to string this out?”

“I don’t know. How long does a person sleep with somebody, and at home she has his picture full of darts? And a wall-sized chart plotting vengeance?”

“Dude, you’re talking to a guy who had a picture of Britney Spears wearing a snake on his wall well into his twenties. And it stopped being sexy

when I was fifteen. People leave shit on their walls.” He takes a bite. “Oh my god,” he mumbles.

I go to the window, look down at the bench where she sat all that day. So many times I stood looking at her.

“It feels too late.”

Parker’s in a stare-off with his sandwich, like he’s stunned at its goodness. “You sure?” He takes another bite.

“It wasn’t just the fact of the picture and the chart, though that was bad enough. It was the shock of it after what I’d told the group of them. I mean, I’d just spilled my guts, right in front of her friends. About fucking pining over her. Loving her from afar. I laid it all out on the table—things I’d never told a living soul.”

“You got blindsided, no question,” he says.

I press my hand to the window. “I couldn’t believe what I was confessing to. It was like shoving a knife in my gut and bleeding out on stage. Right there in front of Mia and four complete strangers. But in a strange way, it felt good to bare my soul to them. I wanted them to see how I felt. And then the next thing I know, my face is covered in darts. Like I’m Satan over there.”

“I would’ve felt blindsided, too. And I don’t have issues.”

“We all have issues,” I say.

“You’re not good with vulnerability. How about that?”

I give him a hard look.

Parker raises his hands. “You’re not. Have you heard a recording of the way you used to play piano? Have you read the Hilton Playbook lately?”

I pick up the note. Read it over again, then I put it in the drawer with the others.

Go ahead and make her compete for your approval. Remember, you are in control.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MAX

Parker and I head to the auditorium at seven. We've put a lot into this; I really want it to be a success. It's not just about polishing my image. The city's best designers have gone all out donating clothes. The models have donated their time. Maximillion employees have solicited donations from businesses and vendors for the raffle. We've got some surprise models lined up for turns on the catwalk—comedians and musicians, mostly.

I go back to check on the Maximillion team of models. We're trotting out the Vicious line tonight. Of course, the designers have things under control.

I'm not surprised; I've built the business by putting good people in place and letting them run with their ideas; checking on them is really just a formality. A way of showing them I'm right there with them. A way of trying to get my mind off of Mia, even though everything makes me think of her,

right down to the snarky expression on her face that day she heard we had a fashion line called Vicious.

I head back through the front past the catering staff, thinking about her little notes. The sandwiches that she chose. I gave Parker every last one of the sandwiches. Like enjoying them might be dangerous, somehow.

I check on the team of event planners, whose base of operations is off to the side of the giant space. Everything's running like clockwork just when I could use a disaster. The place looks great, though; a vast spread of candlelit tables beneath chandeliers and streamers. Guests in tuxedos and gowns are starting to arrive, moving through the sea of elegance like exotic fish.

Parker comes up and hands me a drink. "We gotta get over to the captain's table—the show's gonna start."

It won't start for twenty minutes, but there are lots of dressed-up people between here and there, which means photos. It's easier to say no to photos when it's somebody else's event.

I make my way over, posing for pictures and saying Max Hilton things, being the carefree playboy who exists in the glittering two dimensions of screens and billboards and camera lenses.

It was almost enough for a while.

Lana comes up and hugs me. She's with her real boyfriend, a man who's allergic to public events. I shake his hand, thank him for making it. Everybody looks amazing.

That, too, makes me think about Mia, declaring herself more beautiful and fascinating than the models in my pictures. With enough force that you could almost think she believes it.

I knew it was true.

Fifteen more minutes, and we're finally home free, heading for the four empty chairs at the table at the end of the runway. Our fashion industry co-hosts are already there, next to Henry and Vicky Locke. I go over and shake hands with Vicky, and then I clap a hand onto Henry's shoulder. "So good to

see you,” I say. And I mean it. Henry and I became friends while we worked together on rehabbing the studio complex. His foundation is involved in a big way with this night. In fact, the Lockes’ favorite animal shelter is this year’s charity.

Parker leans across the table and says something to Henry.

I feel something brush against my leg—once, then again, with more deliberation.

A wave of surprise comes over me; it can only be Vicky Locke, who’s seated directly on my right. Is she rubbing my leg by accident? It has to be by accident. She’s mad about Henry.

I angle away, but there it is again.

“I’m sorry, that must’ve been my leg,” I say to her.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“I think...our legs.”

“Oh!” She ducks under the table, bringing up a little white dog wearing a bejeweled bow tie. “Smuckers! What are you doing?” She gives me an apologetic look. “I hope it’s okay that he’s here.”

“Of course!” I ruffle his furry little head.

“We’re raffling off his diamond bow tie collar,” she says. “He’ll be modeling it later on. He’s the spokes-dog for this charity.”

“Spokes-dog,” I say. “A vital role.” It’s a little bit silly, because, really? Spokes-dog? But Henry Locke beams at his wife.

She grins back over at him, and I’m blown away by the affection they have for each other. The sense of their mutual acceptance and support. Something dark ripples through my chest.

The music starts up and models come walking out. Everybody’s showing their playful collections—this isn’t a hugely serious show. A few rounds in, Lana has bicycle messengers riding around the catwalk with her purses.

I order another drink. The night is going to be interminable.

Go ahead and choose a hot one. If you work my system right, you can have her.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MIA

Kelsey lines up my Meow Squad co-workers and friends by height and hands out the squares. Jada adjusts our sequined ears. Sienna complains about her letter. “Can’t I be the ‘L’?”

“You’re the ‘Y,’” Kelsey says. “The ‘Y’ is important.”

I give some last-minute instructions. The same ones I’ve given a dozen times already.

I’ve been in a lot of shows, done countless auditions, but I’ve never felt so nervous, never felt like so much was at stake.

“Flip over the squares when I give the signal,” I say.

“Breathe.” Jada loops an arm over my shoulder. “You got this.”

I’m not so sure. “What if he’s just...annoyed? There’s a good chance of it.”

“I promise you, he won’t be annoyed,” Kelsey says.

“Angry, then.”

“You don’t know until you try,” Kelsey says. “You’re scared right now, but you thought up this scheme when you weren’t scared. Your bravest self thought up this scheme. Trust that girl.”

“That girl wasn’t thinking about the downside. Max hating it. What have I done?” I wrap my arms around myself. “This could be the high school lunchroom all over again,” I say.

“We can still pull out,” Jada says.

“What?” Sienna complains. “Are you shitting me?”

“Nobody’s pulling out.” Kelsey claps three times. “Walk-out positions.”

“What if I created this just to punish myself?” I say to her.

“Then I’ll get you a year’s supply of Peanut Butter Kandy Kakes. Okay? And we’ll dance it all off when we land *Anything Goes*.”

I barely hear her. I’m back in that lunch room, flat on my face with spaghetti all over me. “I seriously think I might throw up,” I say. “I really think I’ve created my worst nightmare.”

Love ruins a man. Just walk away.

~THE MAX HILTON PLAYBOOK: TEN GOLDEN RULES FOR
LANDING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN THE ROOM

MAX

The show really is interminable.

And then the strangest thing. A pair of women come down the runway, arms linked. They're wearing cat suits. Matching sparkly ears. Aprons.

It takes a while for me to process that this is the Meow Squad uniform.

I turn to Parker. "What is Meow Squad doing up there?"

Parker shrugs.

Only businesses that donate get to do a turn, and they're supposed to be modeling clothes.

"Meow Squad made a huge last-minute donation to the shelter," Vicky says. "Well, it makes sense. Meow Squad, cats, right?"

Another pair of women walk out. And then another pair. They stop in a clump at the center of the catwalk. I recognize Kelsey and Jada there.

And then Mia strolls out, boldly owning the catwalk in the uniform she despises. Her cheek glow pink with high emotion, a fighter to the end.

“She hates that uniform,” I mumble to nobody in particular. “What is she doing? She hates being seen in it.”

As if that’s the issue.

The women have squares with letters on them. They run around and get into formation, spelling L-O-V-E Y-O-U.

“How sweet is that!” Vicky says. “Look, Smuckers! Meow Squad loves us.”

I stand, heart thundering.

Kelsey and Jada hoist Mia up above them, cheerleader style, holding her feet.

She holds up a lone letter— “I”—and gazes down at me. I can barely process it. Her up there, hanging her heart out. Opening herself up.

I love you.

Waiting.

And no way will I leave her standing there. I’m moving before I can even think about it. I jump up onto the stage.

I nearly have a heart attack as she begins to free-fall backwards, but her friends catch her neatly and bounce her to the floor in front of them.

Dancers.

I go to her. “Mia, what are you doing?”

“I wasn’t sure if you were getting the letters. Or my texts,” she says.

“So this is what you came up with?”

“I was an idiot. I love you—that will never stop. I need you to know.”

A hush falls over the room—people are straining to listen, but the only sound I can hear is my pulse, banging in my ears. “You decided to make it into a spectacle. At my fashion show.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think this through,” she says, eyes shining with unshed tears.

I go to her. I cup her cheeks, only vaguely aware of the applause this seems to spark. “No, you didn’t think it through. You just went for broke. You shot for the stars. It’s one of the things I love about you.”

And then I kiss her. The applause turns deafening.

I pick her up and whirl her around. I don't care that everybody’s watching.

The music changes and she laughs into the kiss. “Let me down, the next group needs to come out,” she says.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I say, kissing her again. “I love you.”

“You still do?”

“Like I ever stopped,” I say.

Somehow we’re off the stage. Parker’s scrounged up an extra chair. I’m a little disappointed; I would’ve preferred her on my lap.

She sits and says hi to Vicky. It turns out that they’ve met—her old roommate Lizzie is a mutual friend.

The show continues on. I remember nothing.

Just the warmth of Mia’s hand in mine. The wonder that I feel when I look at her.

The way I never want to let her go.

Epilogue

Six months later

MIA

I'm touching up my makeup one last time while a guy from wardrobe reinforces a hem on my Reno Sweeney pants.

"Bad luck to wear something that's being sewn on me," I say. "And I don't even care. I feel impervious."

"You are impervious," Kelsey says. "We are impervious."

She and I slap pinkies.

It's like a dream, being in the show together. We're pretty sure it's going to get extended, too. Ticket sales have been through the roof.

The stage manager calls out the ten-minute warning.

Kelsey sees something over my shoulder and her eyes crinkle with glee. "Don't look now."

Of course I look. It's Max, coming through the crowded dressing room with an armful of roses.

I stand. "How'd you get in here?"

"I'm Max freaking Hilton, baby."

"He's Max freaking Hilton," Kelsey says.

I snicker. It's an inside joke with our group to say that and tease him about it.

But when we're all hanging out together, we get the real Max Hilton, not the one who drives a Ferrari and spends his days looking pensively over Mediterranean cliffs.

We get the Max who teaches piano and does laundry and remembers people's birthdays. And is a great friend.

And an even better boyfriend.

“No kissing Reno,” the stage manager says, pointing at Max. “No, no, no.”

“You’ll muss my makeup.” I breathe in the scent of the flowers, so rich and sweet. “Thank you.”

“Nervous?” he asks.

“It’s opening night,” I say.

He leans in. “But are you, really?”

I bring my lips close to his, wishing so bad I could kiss him. “I’ve been training for this all my life.”

He kisses the top of my head, and I’m sure he gets a face full of hairspray smell. “I’ll be out there,” he says.



THE SHOW IS AN ABSOLUTE HIGH. There’s no other way to describe it.

I can feel the audience soaring during the peaks; I can feel them swooning when the romance story takes off. Their cheers after our first big tap number fill my chest to the brim.

Most of all, I can feel Max out there, true North in the darkness.

I wait in the wings after the big final dance number as the members of the cast go out to receive applause, starting with the small roles—the sailors and passengers—and working up to the leads.

I catch sight of my parents in the front, right next to Max. It’s beyond thrilling to have them in on opening night.

Finally it’s my turn. I go out with my co-stars. We grab hands and bow as a foursome. The applause feels like starlight.

Max and I take my parents out to dinner at The Four Seasons. The two of us tend to prefer low-key restaurants these days, and he’ll even indulge my passion for diners, but it’s special for my folks. After we drop them at their

hotel, we head to The Wilder Club.

Kelsey and Antonio have gotten there early; they've staked out our gang's favorite booth, snuggled up together in the corner of it.

"You sure you want company?" Max asks as we walk up.

"Sit," Kelsey says.

Max and I slide in. The guys start talking about how great we are, retelling the high points of the show from the perspective of the seats. Just shamelessly stroking our egos.

Drinks come and they keep on.

I catch Kelsey's gaze and grin. She puts up her pinky, and I put up mine. *Long-distance pinky slap.*

The four of us double-date a lot. It's been a total blast. We're planning a picnic in the park on Monday, and it's supposed to be perfect weather. I'm bringing the sandwiches.

I'll be throwing in some cheesy puffs.

Max knits his fingers into mine. "Seriously killed it," he says.

"And anybody who says otherwise will find the end of my blade," Antonio jokes.

Jada arrives in full sparkle mode with a couple of other friends. They all shove in. "Are you talking dirty, Antonio?" Jada asks.

Antonio snorts.

Parker comes with another guy; the booth gets so crowded, I have to sit on Max's lap. Which I don't mind at all.

When we get back to Max's place, there are vases of roses everywhere, and champagne on ice on the table.

What is this? I say.

"I wanted to celebrate."

"I didn't know! We could've left Wilder hours ago."

He comes to me, begins unbuttoning my shirt. "I wanted to stay. We have a lifetime to celebrate."

My belly flip-flops. *A lifetime.* “If you think you’re going to get some action, you’re right.”

He already has my shirt off. “You really were so amazing.”

I’m pushing off his suit jacket. “Action getting more likely.”

Eventually, we’re ripping off each others clothes and throwing them everywhere. Maybe it’s the adrenaline, but I’ve never wanted him so badly.

I scream and laugh when he hauls me over his shoulder and carries me to his bed.

He throws me down and crawls over me, and we make love by the moonlight.

Later we’re just lying there, looking out over the city. He wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking about amending the grade for your tower to five stars.”

“I want ten stars. What do I have to do for ten?”

“Hmmm,” I say with a mysterious smile. “Good question.”

He growls and flips me over on my back and looms over me with that half grin.

Then he kisses me.

And I think that there are not enough stars.



THANK YOU FOR READING MAX & Mia’s story! I hope you enjoyed reading about them as much as I loved writing about them.



OMG - the little dog I adopted turns out to be a billionaire! That's right, my tiny dog inherited a jerky bad-boy billionaire's entire company...and he is not amused!

Are you ready for more romantic comedy? Don't miss [***Most Eligible***](#)

Billionaire!

“I can't remember the last time a book sucked me in like this...the experience of reading this book - transcendent! There aren't words.”

~Book Girl



TURN the page for a peek at Most Eligible Billionaire!

MOST ELIGIBLE BILLIONAIRE SNEAK PEEK!

VICKY

I'M SMUGGLING a tiny white dog named Smuckers into a Manhattan hospital to see his owner, Bernadette Locke. Thanks to a standing appointment at a chandelier-draped dog salon on Fifth Avenue run by a woman who ostensibly loves dogs but might secretly hate them, Smuckers's facial fur is blow-dried into such an intense puff of white that his eager black eyes and wee raisin of a nose seem to float in a cloud.

There are three things to know about Bernadette: She's the meanest woman I ever met. She believes I'm some kind of dog whisperer who can read Smuckers's mind. (I can't.) And she's dying. Alone.

The people in her condo building will probably be glad to hear of her passing. I don't know what she did to earn their hatred. That's probably for the best.

Bernadette has a son out there somewhere, but even he seems to have washed his hands of her. There is a photo of the son on Bernadette's cracked fireplace mantel, a toddler with a scowly little dent between fierce blue eyes. Surrounded by people, the little boy manages somehow to look utterly alone.

Back when Bernadette got her terminal diagnosis, I asked her if she'd told

her son and whether he might finally come to visit. She brushed off the question with a contemptuous wave of her hand—Bernadette’s favorite way of responding to pretty much anything you say is a contemptuous hand wave. *He won’t be coming, I assure you.*

I can’t believe he wouldn’t visit her, even now. It’s the ultimate dick move. Your mother is dying alone, jackass!

Anyway, put all of that in a pot and stir it and you have the strange soup of me clicking past a guard, smiling brightly—and hopefully dazzlingly—enough that he doesn’t notice the squirmy bulge in my oversized purse.

Smuckers is a Maltese, which is a toy dog that’s outrageously cute. And Smuckers is the cutest of the cute.

Smuckers and Bernadette Locke made a notorious pair out on the sidewalk in the Upper West Side neighborhood where my little sister and I have our very sweet apartment-sitting gig.

I remember them well. Smuckers would attract people with his insane fluff-ball cuteness, but as the hapless victim drew near Bernadette would say something insulting. Kind of like the human equivalent of a Venus flytrap, where the fly is attracted to the beauty of the flower only to be mercilessly crushed.

Locals learned to stay away from the two of them. I tried—I really did.

Yet here I am, slipping down another chillingly bright hospital hallway, smuggling the little dog in for the third time in two weeks. It’s not on my top ten list of things I want to do with my day. Not even on my top hundred, but Smuckers is Bernadette’s only true friend. And I know what it’s like to be hated and alone.

I know that when you’re hated, you sometimes act like you don’t care as a survival method.

I push into the room. “We’re here,” I say brightly, relieved no medical personnel are around. While Smuckers enjoys being in a purse, he prefers to ride with his head out, like the fierce captain of a pleather airship. Needless to

say, he's achieved maximum squirminess. I take him out. "Look, Smuckers—your mom!"

Bernadette is half propped up on pillows. Her skin is sallow and her hair sparse, but what hair she has is energetically white. Her eyes flutter open. "Finally."

She has a tube in her arm, but that's all. They've taken Bernadette off everything except morphine. They've given up on her.

"Smuckers is so excited to see you." I go over to her bed and set Smuckers next to her. Smuckers licks Bernadette's fingers, and the love that comes over Bernadette's face makes her look soft for a moment. Like a nice woman.

"Smuckers," she whispers. She moves her lips, talking to him. I can't hear, but I know from past conversations that she's saying she loves him. Sometimes she confesses she doesn't want to leave him, doesn't want to be alone. She's frightened about being alone.

Feebly she scratches Smuckers's fur, but she's focusing hard on me, whispering something fervently. I draw near. *Eggplant*, she seems to be saying.

"Are you hungry?"

"*Eggplant...*" she says, voice weak.

"Yes, Bernadette?"

"*Eggplant* makes your complexion..." she winces hard, "...*wormlike*." She manages to infuse the word *wormlike* with incredulous contempt, as though I've performed such a feat of fashion monstrosity that she needs to muster all her strength to let me know.

"Damn. I was going for slug-like," I joke as I adjust Smuckers so that he's not on her tube.

She sniffs and turns back to Smuckers.

Over the three years I've known her, Bernadette has always been judgmental about my fashion choices. *Did you get that out of a 1969 catalog*

for librarians, Vicky? Did JCPenney have a sale on drab pencil skirts? At times I literally seem to hurt her eyes, what with my uninspired ponytails and glasses and whatnot.

I have this suspicion that Bernadette came from money but that her fortune dwindled over the years. Clue one: her apartment is in an expensive neighborhood, but it's really shabby inside, like it was once grand and went to ruin. Also, her clothes are worn versions of what was expensive maybe fifteen years back. Really, she seems to spend nothing on herself. But Smuckers? Nothing is too good for Smuckers. No expense spared.

I take her hand and put it where Smuckers most likes it so Smuckers will settle down.

“Smuckers,” she breathes.

I have this impulse to set a comforting hand on her arm, but human contact is not something Bernadette would ever want from me.

I'm really only around as an extension of Smuckers, a conduit for Smuckers's important communications. Other than that, I'm chopped liver. If Bernadette could somehow automate me or keep me in a sardine tin with just the corner rolled up so my voice can escape, she would.

She looks up at me expectantly. I know what she wants. What does Smuckers have to say?

I'm at a loss for what to say, or rather, what Smuckers might say. I never signed up for this pet whisperer thing with her, and what with her being on her deathbed, it seems especially wrong.

But she's waiting. Glaring. It's Smuckers or nothing.

I suck in a breath and put on my whisperer expression, which I would describe as a curious listening face. “Smuckers says that you shouldn't be afraid to die,” I say.

She waits. She wants more.

“He wants you to know it's going to be okay, even though it might not feel like that right now.”

She nods, mumbles to Smuckers.

In terms of subject matter, this is getting into new territory. Smuckers has typically confined himself to lifestyle commentary—requests for certain styles of neck scratching or flavors of Fancy Whiskas dog treats.

Now and then he'll speculate on the antics of pigeons outside the window. He has certainly never betrayed any divine wisdom about death or special understanding of esoteric secrets of the cosmos.

But I can tell from Bernadette's face that she likes hearing that Smuckers said that.

"Vicky," she says to Smuckers. "Vicky will care for you."

"You know I will, Bernadette," I say. "I'll care for Smuckers as if he were my own flesh and blood."

Though not literally. I don't plan on racing around Central Park eating goose poop with him.

"He'll live like a little king," I amend.

Bernadette mumbles something and I settle into the surprisingly luxurious, leather-upholstered chair in the roomy private room they've given her. This is the hospice wing of one of the larger Manhattan hospitals where the news often talks about overcrowded conditions.

Maybe she has good insurance or something.

Bernadette scratches Smuckers's neck. "Love you, Pokey," she whispers.

I quietly scroll through Instagram, one ear attuned to the door, but all I hear is the sound of footsteps and muted conversations going up and down the hall, along with the occasional intercom announcement. I want to make this visit last as long as possible.

Smuckers will live like a little king, but maybe not a king of a wealthy country. More like a king of an impoverished nation, but one that loves their king. That's the best I can do for him.

I took Smuckers home two weeks ago, the day before Bernadette went into the hospital. It wasn't long before I discovered that the raw frozen food

he gets is more expensive than spun gold, and I can only imagine what it costs to re-up his puffball hairstyle at his monthly standing appointment at the aforementioned dog salon, which has an original Warhol painting of a poodle in the waiting area.

I'll just let you do the math on that one.

So, no, I don't envision keeping Smuckers in the exact life he's accustomed to. I've supported my little sister, Carly, ever since she was nine years old and I want her to have everything I never did. I want her to feel safe and dream big.

And if there's some left over for a fabulous blowout, it'll be her in that chair and they won't have to tie her up to do it like poor Smuckers.

She's sixteen now. It's hard to raise a teen in Manhattan, but somehow we make it, thanks to my Etsy store of funky dog accessories. Someday I'll break into women's jewelry, but for now, it's all sequined bow tie dog collars all the time.

Bernadette's lips move. Nothing comes out except the word *alone*—*I don't want to be alone.*

I feel a pang in my heart.

It's strange how a long life can be reduced to a darkened hospice room, a stranger scrolling Instagram, and a little white dog.

Though I suppose it's no more strange than my playing the part of a pet whisperer, which I never in my life wanted to do, and a hundred percent blame my friend Kimmy for.

Kimmy is the one who put on a festival to raise money for her animal shelter, the one who looked at me so beseechingly, holding a colorful scarf and hoop earrings, when the real pet whisperer didn't show up for the pet whisperer booth.

Just make shit up, she said. It'll be fun, she said.

I left Carly to handle the booth selling my dog accessories and put on the scarf.

I'd said whatever came into my head that day. A lot of pets had complaints about their food. Most wanted the owners to play with them more. Sometimes, if the companion person seemed sad, the pet would express intense empathy and love. I think, no matter who you are, your pet cares about you.

Sometimes I'd say how much the pet enjoys it when they talk to them or when they sing to them, because doesn't everyone talk and sing to their pets?

Then Bernadette came by, steely and outraged, smashing the pavement with her cane alongside a tiny, energetic toy dog.

She threw down two five-dollar bills and demanded to know what Smuckers wanted to tell her. I honestly couldn't tell whether she wanted to debunk me or if she really wanted to know.

So I took the little dog in my lap and rubbed his fuzzy little ears and started talking. I'd found, over the course of my afternoon as a pet whisperer, that the more flattering you are, the more the people buy it.

Smuckers loves you so much, I'd told her. He knows you think you're too slow for him, but he doesn't care. He loves you. And he mostly loves to hear you sing. Maybe you can't run around with him, but he wants you to know that your singing is amazing to him. He thinks you're beautiful when you sing.

When I looked up, her eyes were shining. She really believed me. I hadn't felt like a scammer until then. She asked for my card, but I told her it was just for fun.

She didn't believe I didn't have a card. Like I was evilly keeping my card from her.

I told her that if she just watched Smuckers closely enough, she could do it, too.

She bit back something about *not all of us being pet whisperers* and then proceeded to try and get my contact information from other people there, who refused to give it, and who she then insulted.

She finally left, and I thought I was home free, but New York has a way of pulling random people into each other's lives. And you can be sure that the exact person you don't want to run into in the city of millions will show up as a regular where you work or shop, or in Bernadette's case, as a frequent sitter on the bench Carly and I had to pass on the way to her school.

I look up from Instagram to see Smuckers at the edge of the bed, like he wants to jump down. I go over and give him a vigorous ear rub and he circles and settles.

The last time I was here visiting, a priest came in, offering to say a few words, and Bernadette called him a sewer rat in the process of banishing him from the room. *Sewer rat* is one of her favorite insults for neighbors, mail carriers, clerks, and the revolving roster of maids she has in.

But never for Smuckers. I stay at the bedside, feeling so bad for her.

"Smuckers wants you not to be scared," I say. "Smuckers says you're not alone, and you won't be."

Her dry lips move. If I could give her anything it would be some way for her not to be scared, but it's pretty unavoidable in her situation. I don't care what religion you are, the unknown is always scary, and death is the ultimate unknown quantity.

A nurse comes in just then, entering stealthily. She spots Smuckers before I can flick the sheet over him like I usually manage to do. "You can't have a dog in here!"

I shamble on a surprised face. "The other nurses didn't say anything about the dog..." Since they didn't see the dog.

"You need to remove the animal."

"Get out," Bernadette says hoarsely.

"I'm sorry," the nurse says. "Animals not allowed."

I go over. "Please," I say under my breath. "The dog's all she has. You need to give her a break."

"Hospital regulations."

I look back over at Bernadette, who is doing a nervous clutching thing on Smuckers's fur, something Smuckers won't tolerate too long. I go back over and put a protective hand on Bernadette's to get her to stop it.

"A few more minutes," I say. "If he was a service animal you'd let him in here. Can't you just pretend he's a service animal? I mean, he pretty much is one."

"You'll have to remove the animal."

"A few more minutes," I say.

"I'm getting security." She spins and leaves. Security.

I turn to Bernadette. "The *animal*," I say. "Please."

She's only paying attention to Smuckers, though. Her breathing is erratic. She's upset.

Security will throw us out, and I probably won't get Smuckers in here again. Which means this is the last time Bernadette sees Smuckers, and maybe she knows it.

I feel sad and helpless, but also like everything is important now. Like I have an important job to do as fake pet whisperer.

That's when I make up the story.

"Smuckers has something to tell you, Bernadette," I say. "He has something to say that he never told you before, and he needs to say it."

She moves her lips. Nothing comes out, but I know what it is.

Tell me.

That's what she always says when I announce that Smuckers has something important to communicate.

GRAB [MOST ELIGIBLE BILLIONAIRE!](#)

ALSO BY ANNIKA MARTIN (AKA CAROLYN CRANE)

Romantic Comedy

Most Eligible Billionaire

An enemies-to-lovers standalone!

He's a powerful, arrogant billionaire CEO who built the family business into an empire. The money doesn't matter to him, but the company is his life.

And then his eccentric mother wills it all to the tiny dog Vicky cares for.

The Billionaire's Wake-up-call Girl

An enemies-to-lovers standalone!

When my manager assigns me the task of finding a new wake up call service for our CEO, I think, how hard can this be?

Answer: practically impossible. It turns out that no wake-up call company in the world will take him on as a client. They've all had enough of his surly personality. So in an effort not to lose my job, I secretly start making the calls myself, every day at 4:30 am sharp.

Breaking the Billionaire's Rules

An enemies-to-lovers standalone!

Max Hilton is my high school nemesis turned billionaire. And tomorrow I deliver his lunch order. In a cat costume.

You know he's going to love it. He'll smile that smirky smile, sitting there all superior in his gleaming tower, the wealthiest and most notorious playboy in all of NYC.

I'm almost ready to quit my lunch delivery job, but then my friend tosses me a copy of the pick-up guide he wrote. Now it's my new bible—for how to bring him to his knees!

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The Wrong Turn / Deeper Game

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Savage Mafia Prince - Baby Brother Kiro is totally fucking SAVAGE. Like, literally. And SO hot!

MM Spies

Enemies like You (*standalone*) - They're dangerous men. Absolute enemies. And totally hot for each other.

Romantic Comedy

Most Eligible Billionaire (*formerly Most Eligible Bastard*)

An enemies-to-lovers standalone!

He's a powerful, arrogant billionaire CEO who built the family business into an empire. The money doesn't matter to him, but the company is his life.

And then his eccentric mother wills it all to the tiny dog Vicky cares for.

Criminals & Captives (Dark romance standalones)

Prisoner - He seethes with raw power the first time I see him - pure menace and rippling muscles in shackles.

Hostage - The police say he's obsessed with me. But I'm the one who can't stop thinking about him.

[Click here](#) to see a complete list of **[Annika's books](#)**.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is a strong theme of friends lifting each other woven through *Breaking the Billionaire's Rules*. And whoa, that was *definitely* a theme when it came to writing this book and getting the details right.

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At this point, if there are typos, it's because I can't stop changing the book like, ever.

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In summation, heart eyes at you all.

ALL THE ANNIKA DEETS!

I love panty-melting books, doing yoga, taking pictures of my cats, 90's grunge music, long baths, See's chocolate suckers, heroes' hands, and helping animals. I also love connecting with readers. Let's hook up!

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