



Devil

in a Tux

ERIN SWANN

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Edited by Jessica Royer Ocken

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ALSO BY ERIN SWANN

Why romance? Because we all need a chance to escape doing the next load of laundry.

We deserve a chance to enjoy love, laughs, intrigue, and yes, fear, heartbreak, and tears, all without having to leave the house.

If you can read my books without feeling any of these then I haven't done my job right.

Devil in a Tux – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Evan and Alexa's story)

They called Evan McAllister a shark in a suit. Alexa thought shark was too kind. Devil fit him better. They also say dancing with the devil changes you. She was about to find out.

Covington Billionaires Series:

The Billionaire's Trust - [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Bill and Lauren's story) He needed to save the company. He needed her. He couldn't have both. The wedding proposal in front of hundreds was like a fairy tale come true—Until she uncovered his darkest secret.

The Youngest Billionaire - [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Steven and Emma's story) The youngest of the Covington clan, Steven, avoided the family business to become a rarity, an honest lawyer. He didn't suspect that pursuing Emma could destroy his career. She didn't know what trusting him could cost her.

The Secret Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Patrick and Elizabeth's story) Women naturally circled the flame of wealth and power, and his is brighter than most. Does she love him? Does she not? There's no way to know. When Pat stopped to help her, Liz mistook him for a carpenter. Maybe this time he'd know. Everything was perfect. Until the day she left.

The Billionaire's Hope - [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Nick and Katie's story) They came from different worlds. Katie hadn't seen him since the day he broke her brother's nose. Her family retaliated by destroying Nick's life. She never suspected where accepting a ride from him today would take her. They said they could do casual. They lied.

Previously titled: Protecting the Billionaire

Picked by the Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Liam and Amy's story) A night she wouldn't forget. An offer she couldn't refuse. He alone could save her, and she held the key to his survival. If only they could pass the test together.

Saved by the Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Ryan and Natalie's story) The FBI and the cartel were both after her for the same thing: information she didn't have. First, the FBI took everything, and then the cartel came for her. She trusted Ryan with her safety, but could she trust him with her heart?

Caught by the Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Vincent and Ashley's story) Ashley's undercover assignment was simple enough: nail the crooked billionaire. The surprise came when she opened the folder, and the target was her one-time high school sweetheart, Vincent. What will happen when an unknown foe makes a move to checkmate?

The Driven Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Zachary and Brittney's story) Rule number one: hands off your best friend's sister. With nowhere to turn when she returns from upstate, Brittney accepts Zach's offer of a room. Mutual attraction quickly blurs the rules. When she comes under attack, pulling Brittney closer is the only way to keep her safe. But, the truth of why she left town in the first place will threaten to destroy them both.

Nailing the Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Dennis and Jennifer's story) Jennifer knew he destroyed her family. Now she is close to finding the records that will bring Dennis down. When a corporate shakeup forces her to work with him, anger and desire compete. Vengeance was supposed to be simple, swift, and sweet. It was none of those things.

Undercover Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Adam and Kelly's story) Their wealthy families have been at war forever. When Kelly receives a chilling note, the FBI assigns Adam to protect her. Family histories and desire soon collide, questioning old truths. Keeping ahead of the threat won't be their only challenge.

Trapped with the Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Josh and Nicole's story) Nicole returns from vacation to find her company has been sold to Josh's family. Being assigned to work for the new CEO is only the first of her problems. Competing visions of how to run things and mutual passion create a volatile mix. The reappearance of a killer from years ago soon threatens everything.

Saving Debbie – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Luke and Debbie's story) On the run from her family and the cops, Debbie finds the only person she can trust is Luke, the ex-con who patched up her injuries. Old lies haunt her, and the only way to unravel them is to talk with Josh, the boy who lived through the nightmare with her years ago.

Return to London – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Ethan and Rebecca's story) Rebecca looks forward to the most important case of her career. Until, she is paired with Ethan, the man she knew years ago. Mutual attraction and old secrets combine to complicate everything. What could have been a second chance results in an impossible choice.

The Rivals – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Charlie and Danielle's story) He was her first crush. That ended when their families had a falling out. Now, they are forced to work together on a complicated acquisition. Mutual attraction is complicated by distrust as things go wrong around them. A second chance turns into an impossible choice.

Clear Lake Series: The Clear Lake books follow the Bensons of Clear Lake as they deal with a disappearance in town which shatters the tranquility of their community and puts them in the cross-hairs of the local police chief.

Temptation at the Lake – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Casey and Jordan's story) Shot in the line of duty and on temporary disability, Jordan leaves the city for Clear Lake to recuperate. Getting back to one hundred percent was supposed to be hard, but she didn't count on the irresistible Casey becoming the devil pushing her to the breaking point. A fling with this devil becomes complicated when she gets pulled into the dangerous town feud.

Desire at the Lake – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Waylon and Anna's story) Things quickly spiral out of control for Anna when her boss disappears. Suddenly out of a job and with no place to stay, her only refuge becomes Waylon's garage. The undeniable chemistry between them explodes. Everything changes when Waylon is arrested for her ex-boss's murder.

Passion at the Lake – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Boone and Angela's story) Angela's planned escape from the hell of her life in Boston goes awry when she is stranded in Clear Lake. Things go from bad to worse when her fate depends on her personal devil, Boone. She has no intention of falling for the beast again. But, the sparks between them result in a fire that can't be controlled. With her computer talents, Angela uncovers a clue in the disappearance of Lee Pollock.

Heat at the Lake – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Blake and Priscilla's story) Blake arrived in town to help his Gramps. A chance to work for the local police force was just what he needed to further his career goals. When he hooked up with the feisty little bombshell, he had no idea she was one of the prime suspects in a local murder case. Then, he discovered she was on the other side of the duplex he'd leased. Undeniable chemistry was about to complicate everything.



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CHAPTER 1



EVAN

WITH THE HANGOVER FROM HELL THIS MORNING, I REGRETTED GOING OUT last night with the guys. It had been shots and more shots. How many was hazy. Then there had been that other thing...

I'd arrived at work much later than usual when I punched the elevator button for the top floor of our building. The Advil had finally lessened the agony enough for me to face my father and apologize.

I'd been in the tabloids plenty of times, but this time was worse, much worse.

Before, the girls had always had their clothes on.

And so had I.

I wasn't ever drinking that fucking mezcal shit again, because it had sure knocked me on my ass. It had taken a full half hour in the shower to clear my head this morning. When had I gotten so old that I couldn't handle a few shots? I definitely needed to slow it down next time, and eat something while I drank.

By the time the elevator doors opened, I was as ready as I was going to be. I pasted on a smile for the troops and strode out. Ten paces later, I tried my voice. "Good morning, Anita," I said with a cheeriness that I hoped hid my raging headache. "Is he ready for our ten o'clock?"

Dad's assistant shook her head, still focused on her screen. "You could say that." Her tone was cryptic. She glanced up. "Are you?"

I nodded. I was always ready, although this time was likely to be worse than usual. He'd bark; I'd mumble apologies—I knew the drill. I'd have to invent even better apologies. I should have thought of that before arriving. I blamed the damned headache.

I looked across the waiting area. For some reason, my drinking buddy, Martin Graff, was here. “Hey, Martin. Some night, huh?”

He glanced up from the phone he was typing into. “Morning, Evan. I warned you not to swallow the worm.” Normally, I drank him under the table. Today, he didn't look remotely as bad as I felt. He'd been with us, but obviously hadn't had as many drinks as I'd had last night. He went back to focusing on his phone.

Letting myself into the office, I closed the door behind me. “Good morning.”

Dad looked up from the paper he held. This was clearly worse than I expected. His face was deep magenta, indicative of an impending Vesuvius-level eruption. I didn't remember ever seeing him this agitated. “A fucking disgrace,” he announced.

I stood back, eyeing the paper in his hand. “Dad, it's not what it looks like.”

Of course the pictures told a different story. As soon as I'd turned on my phone this morning, it had blown up with messages asking me about those fucking pictures. I'd pulled them up and just to be sure, checked my pants and shoes. Yup, soaked. It had happened.

He shook his head. “Of course it isn't. It's worse. A fucking disaster, and that's putting it mildly. You've done some pretty fucking idiotic things before, but this... This...” He threw down the paper, open to the page-six picture. “This last night? It fucking tops them all by a mile.” Fergus McAllister was on a roll, and at the current rate, he'd disown me some time in the next two minutes. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

I started to form words, but was cut off by the continuing explosion.

“You can't keep thinking with your dick.”

“No, sir,” I got out with conviction. If my dick had been in charge, I would have been banging the red-head against some secluded wall, not splashing around in the fucking water.

That vein on his temple looked ready to burst. We were twenty-seven floors up, and my only question was whether the glass of the wall facing Central Park was truly unbreakable. At the current moment, it seemed like

throwing myself against it hard enough might be my only way out of this office.

Dad wasn't a fan of plain, rectangular structures. Accordingly, the McAllister International building had a small patio two floors down on the twenty-fifth floor where the building widened.

After a fall like that, this suit would be toast. A small price to pay. Maybe if I rolled properly, I could avoid adding a broken ankle.

"Are you even listening to me?" Dad bellowed another dozen decibels louder.

"Yes, sir." I stood up straighter. He might be getting ready to throw me through the window himself, but I wouldn't cower. Never show fear was a lesson he'd taught me.

"Myra Cotts, for God's sake? What the hell were you thinking messing around with the district attorney's daughter?"

District attorney's daughter? I held up my palms. "I didn't know."

I'd barely gotten her name, Jenny, Jerri, or was it Jennifer? Whatever. She hadn't mentioned that little tidbit about her father. It most certainly would have killed the mood. "*Hi, my father is the district attorney, so if you don't treat me right, he'll bury you.*" No she hadn't said anything remotely like that last night. I didn't remember much, but drunk or not, I wasn't idiotic enough to go after a girl like that.

"And naked in a public fountain?" Dad took it up another few decibels. "Her father is going to crucify us."

This morning, even I could admit that skinny-dipping in the City Hall Park fountain wasn't the smartest move. Everything felt fuzzy. I didn't think I'd downed that many shots, but the pictures said otherwise. I must have been really blitzed.

"Do you have any idea how badly this could affect the company? Affect me? Her father is not someone you fuck around with."

I shook my head without adding words. The pictures were pretty incriminating. Knowing who she was now, not banging her looked pretty fucking brilliant. I hadn't done that, had I?

"We've already had a telephone-board meeting this morning."

"I didn't hear about it." I was on the board, but had been overlooked for this particular meeting, and I could guess why.

"You were there," he assured me. "As the topic."

For support, I leaned on the back of the leather visitor's chair I normally

chose to sit in. Now I could add a queasy stomach to my pounding headache. Our previous you-better-straighten-up-son talks had never involved the board.

“My tenure as CEO was also up for discussion.”

I gulped. “Dad, I didn’t mean—”

“Sit.” He motioned to the chair. “What you did or didn’t mean is irrelevant now.” His tone had not returned to normal, but it was something closer, as was his color. This was still a time to tread lightly. My contract is up for renewal at the annual meeting.

His implication stared me in the face. “But Dad, it’s your company. Our name is on the company, on the building.”

His words came out slowly. “We have shareholders now and I report to the board. Does a member of the Ford family still run Ford Motor Company?” That question answered itself. He had four months until the annual meeting where his fate would be decided.

I rounded the chair and sat. This was bad if they were threatening Dad’s position. He’d given up the chairmanship to his friend George Graff, Martin’s father, as a nod to good corporate governance. It was probably a move he regretted right now.

I sure did. If I’d cost him his job, that would haunt me forever.

He tapped the open paper on his desk. “These photos are all that matter now. The board feels, and I have to agree with them, that you’ve disgraced this company one too many—no, a dozen times too many. They printed your name and position.” He emphasized it with a finger on the page.

He was right that this wasn’t the first time I’d appeared on Page Six. But it was the first time I remembered any mention of my association with the company.

I gripped the arms of the chair and waited for his next words, for the ax to drop and Dad to tell me he was letting me go. The words didn’t come.

“I’ve already called her father to apologize for you. What else do you think we should do?” he asked after a few seconds.

He’d fired plenty of people before me, but I’d never been here to see how he went about it. Did he make it easier on himself by forcing the wayward employee to quit under the weight of his glare?

I knew my reputation on the street. I was the ruthless shark in a suit, a nickname that had served me well across the negotiating table. But here I was about to pee my pants, in front of my Dad no less. I sucked in a breath. “Are

you asking for my resignation?”

“What do you think is appropriate in this circumstance? If you were in my shoes, that is?”

He wasn't letting me off the hook. He was still going to make me say it. Dad turned everything into a learning experience.

This was one time I didn't want the lesson. If this had been one of my employees, I'd let him go with an extremely stern warning the first time. But this wasn't my first time on Page Six, and if I was honest, I'd be firing me if I were him. So I took a deep breath. “I'd be asking for my resignation.”

“Really?”

I steeled myself for what was to come. “Not for the first infraction, but this isn't the first. So, yes.”

“And the family connection?” That question gave me an out, but I didn't take it.

“Irrelevant,” I answered, barely able to breathe with the tension in the room.

Dad stroked his chin and appraised me for several agonizing seconds. “That's not the way I see it.”

I felt my lungs inflate.

“Trust is the most important commodity in a business. Wouldn't you agree?”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Family members are the ones we can place the most trust in, and that makes them—you in this case—more valuable, and difficult to replace.” So, he wasn't firing me on account of my relationship to him? “There is nobody in this building I can trust as much as you.” He was linking himself to me and his future would be in part determined by my success, however that was measured.

I nodded, feeling grateful, and relieved. “Thank you. I promise I'll do better in the future. Tell me what I need to do.” I might have to give up drinking to accomplish that, but I didn't want to find myself in this situation again. I wouldn't let him down.

He nodded slowly. “I'm sure you will. “Here's what we're going to do. I'm promoting Martin to take over your portfolio in acquisitions.”

“What?” Acquisitions was everything I did. It was my job. Not only did I enjoy it, I was damned good at it too—the best.

Dad raised a hand to stop me, which was probably good, because I would

have given him a dozen reasons that putting Martin in charge was a bad idea. He was a good bar buddy, but Martin's abilities didn't match his ego. He'd be ready in two maybe three years, but not today. "Just listen for a moment."

I made the zipping motion across my lips, even if it was childish.

"The Vagabond deal is important to us."

That went without saying, and I was halfway to finishing it up.

He tapped the paper again. "That girl—in addition to being the DA's daughter has an uncle is in the Michigan Commerce Department, and we can't let this incident affect the approval process."

I nodded along, understanding full well how subjective merger approvals could be and wishing the girl from last night had been a stripper instead of someone politically connected. I sighed and looked down at my lap. This had turned into a shitshow. I couldn't even remember if I'd banged her.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, sir." My response was well oiled after years of lectures. "We want to avoid any blowback from her uncle."

"That's right." Dad shifted in his chair. "I'm putting you in charge of community outreach." His voice was softer now, softening the blow, but not apologetic.

Community outreach? That sounded like kindergarten compared to acquisitions.

"The company's reputation has taken a hit," Dad continued. "We need to become active in the city, be seen as a contributing member of the community, doing good deeds and supporting good causes. We need the public to see McAllister International as a force for good in the city. How you accomplish that is up to you. Do what it takes, just do me proud."

I nodded as if I understood, which I didn't, but I'd been given another chance, and this wasn't the time to mess it up. At least *do what it takes* meant I had free rein and didn't report to anybody. "I'll make our reputation a hundred times better, I promise... And then I can get back to acquisitions?"

"We'll discuss that when the time is right." He stood, ending our meeting. "The board is behind this." He didn't have to add the words *for now*, as they were implied. It also closed the door on any appeal of the decision.

"Thanks, Dad," I said, lifting out of my chair. This would be our last conversation on the topic for a while. Whenever Dad added, "when the time is right" to a statement, he meant to not bring it up again. He'd be the sole judge of when the discussion would be continued. I'd learned that the hard

way.

He nodded. "I'm sure you'll do well down there."

Down there—yes, this was a downward move, not a sideways one.

"Sounds good." I didn't have a choice. This was my only path forward—even if I didn't know what community outreach meant or how long this was going to last. My only other choice would be to leave the company, and I wasn't a quitter.

When I opened the door, Martin was still there, and he stood. He'd been summoned to come take my job.

"You can go in now," Anita told him.

He smiled at me as he passed. "Good luck." That glint in his eye was hard to miss. He'd been itching for a promotion, but I never thought Dad would give him a job as big as mine without sending him for a rotation in London first.

"You too," I managed without any feeling.

Dad hadn't been specific about what would happen after I knocked this new assignment out of the park, like I did everything he gave me. At this point, asking him to clarify would show weakness, and that wasn't going to happen. He hadn't raised a weakling.

After the door closed behind Martin, Anita asked, "Well?"

"How much do you know?" This was a rhetorical question, given that little went on without Anita taking care of the details.

She shrugged. "Did you accept?" She knew everything about Dad's plan, except my reaction.

"You're looking at the new head of community outreach."

She gave me a thumbs up. "Good. I'd hate to have wasted my time breaking you in, only to have you leave the company. And God knows this place could use some reaching out."

I still had to figure out what that term meant.

She called after me. "Don't you want to know where your new office is?"

I turned and gritted my teeth to keep from taking it out on her. "New office?"

"On twenty-five. Zoe is already on the way to her new job in finance."

Anita held up her hands. "Sorry. Martin asked about the office, and he..." She flicked her eyes to dad's door. "Said yes."

"Makes sense," I lied. Of course Martin would want my corner office one floor down from here to go along with his shiny new title. Neither was mine

any longer.

“Thanks. I’ll miss you,” I said as I left.



DOWN ON TWENTY-SIX, DIANE WASN’T AT HER DESK OUTSIDE MY OFFICE—MY old office.

I did a double take when I reached for the door handle.

The nameplate had already been changed to *Martin Graff*.

One part of me was proud that we had another shark at the company to take over this job—it wasn’t a position for someone timid. But the other half was pissed that he hadn’t waited until I’d at least removed my things.

I pulled open the door, and the half that was pissed at him became a full ninety percent.

The office, my office, was empty. Everything was gone, even my special-order ergonomic desk chair.

That slimy fucker.

This was over the top. I didn’t know when, but I’d get him back for this, and good. Had the fucker also peed on the walls to mark his new territory? I wouldn’t put it past him.

With nothing to do here, if wasn’t going to set a booby-trap, I entered the elevator a second time and descended another floor.

“I actually like this better than upstairs,” Diane said as I approached. Short, wearing a green blouse and with red hair that was curled for volume, she looked like she’d stepped off a Christmas card.

I shook my head. Lower was never better.

“You get the office with a deck outside,” she noted. “You could have lunch out there in the sun while everyone else is stuck inside.” Her outlook on the situation mirrored her normally sunny disposition. If there was a silver lining to be found, Diane March found it for us. She was a good counterpoint to my killer instinct.

The door to my new office was open, the name plate already in place, and from here, it looked like it had already been set up. My chair was behind the desk, and just as she said, there was a door to the patio in the corner.

“It looks like you’ve been busy.” I nodded my approval as I stood at the doorway. “What would I do without you?”

“You’d probably be figuring out a way to murder Martin.”

I nodded. She wasn’t wrong.

“I’d remind you not to trust him, but you already know how I feel.” It had to do with Martin dating and quickly dumping her cousin.

“Maybe I should ask you where I could buy poison darts.”

She laughed. “A sense of humor. That’s the way to start, although shouldn’t we find a way to make him suffer before killing him?”

I was only half joking. Switching gears I asked, “Any idea what we do here?”

“I’m not the person to ask. However, you have a meeting on your schedule at one.”

That didn’t give me long to figure it out. “Who with?”

“With whom,” she corrected me. “All it says is Three Sisters Fund cancer charity and Alex B.

“Give me the org chart for this group, and I’ll pick a brain or two about what’s important before the meeting.”

She laughed. “Org chart? There are only two names on it. You and me.” I’ll get Ms. Shorter on the phone for you.” When that didn’t seem to click with me, she added, “Zoe Shorter had this office before you.”

Nodding, I went to my new desk. Not only had I been demoted, but I had no staff. Dad had outdone himself with this punishment.

I had to wait a half hour for Diane to connect me with the previous occupant of this office.

“Mr. McAllister,” Zoe said when the line connected.

“Evan, please. I know neither of us was expecting this, and I’m rather unprepared. In a nutshell, what does this office do for us?”

“I handled our coordination with community projects, such as the public library book drive, and I coordinated community service days like local park clean-ups, and the Arbor Day tree planting in Central Park.”

I’d seen flyers for things like these in the cafeteria downstairs, but never participated. “And this afternoon’s meeting is with a cancer charity. What’s that about?”

“We also handle the company’s charitable giving—things that will put our name in front of the community in positive light.”

“So,” I summarized, “we’re buying goodwill.”

She sighed. “That’s a rather jaded way of looking at it, but yes.” An announcement sounded in the background. “If there’s nothing else, I have to

get to my flight.”

I attempted some humor. “Leaving town?”

“Yes. My new posting is in finance in the London office.”

I wasn’t a total ass, so I wished her luck in her new position before we hung up. With the time difference, I wasn’t going to be able to pick her brain very often, but it wouldn’t matter, I decided. I was Evan fucking McAllister, and I’d put my own stamp on this position.

Calling out to Diane’s desk, I tried to project strength. “The cancer charity on the schedule... See what you can find in the files about it.”

She came in with a slim file. “Already done.”

I took it from her.

Diane’s head cocked slightly. “How much do you plan on committing to giving them?”

“Nothing today. It’s just another negotiation. Never agree to anything at the first meeting. You know that. We’ll handle it just like any other.”

Martin chose that moment to knock on the door frame. “Hi.”

“I’ll be outside if you need me,” Diane said excusing herself.

Martin strode in and looked around. “You’re a bigger man than me, Evan, taking this demotion like you are.”

I waited to see where this was heading. “I’m the one who embarrassed us all.”

“I would have quit on the spot if my old man did this kind of thing to me.”

I shrugged. “Sometimes family demands sacrifices.”

He returned to the doorway. “Right. Can I call you if I have any questions about where things stand?”

“Sure. Any time.”

Diane was back at my door after he left. “Ready for those poison darts yet?”



FOR LUNCH, I PICKED A DELI FAR ENOUGH FROM OUR BUILDING THAT I WAS unlikely to bump into anyone from work. I still didn’t have a quick way to explain my new situation. Paying for my sandwich, I fumbled my wallet. Luckily I noticed the yellow paper fall to the floor and picked it up. Losing

Gramps' note would really add to today's shittiness.

I spent the next hour alternately worrying about how to explain my new position in the company and researching the top ten charities we donated to online. All the while, I downed water, baskets of French fries, and more Advil than the directions recommended.

Not a single one of the recipients featured our company name as a sponsor on their website. Either we were new entrants in giving to charities, or we hadn't given enough to make a statement. That last option struck me as a waste of money—not that charitable giving wasn't worthy in its own right, but if Dad's objective was also to be recognized for our giving, we'd failed.

Back in my office, the grease, water, and pills had the intended effect of reducing the pain in my head to a dull throb. Again I lamented my stupidity. I had to be getting old if I needed this long to recover from a night out with the guys.

Reclining my chair and closing my eyes helped as I waited for my first appointment in this new position. Was I supposed to grill the Alex character when he arrived? Or them, if it was more than one person? I'd told Diane this would be like any other negotiation, but it wouldn't be if I didn't have a clear goal in mind. I always had a goal and a general plan prior to a meeting. But I was at a bit of a loss. *Rudderless* was the word that popped into my head.

Would the guy from the charity come with a request for a specific amount? That made the most sense to me—an amount higher than what we'd given last year.

I opened the file on the Three Sisters Fund that Zoe had kept and read each of the three pages. We'd given the same amount to them for three straight years. I stared until the words swam before my eyes. There was so much I didn't know about this job.

I'd just have to wing it in this meeting, which was not my mode of operation. But it never paid to show your cards too early in a negotiation, or to set a low opening bid. So, yeah, they'd propose an increase and be happy with something less than that.

In every previous negotiation, we'd gotten something in return for what we gave. What did we get in a situation like this?

Diane knocked and then poked her head inside. "Your one o'clock is here."

"Very good." I closed the file marked Three Sisters Fund and slid it to the side, then stood and rounded the desk to greet my guest.

Diane opened the door wide.

A minor breeze could have knocked me over. She walked in—the girl who'd haunted my dreams years ago.

I slowly took her in, head to toe. The uncomfortable feeling that stirred in me yet again proved I'd never be over her.

Alexa Borelli wasn't a teenage stick of a girl anymore—far from it. With long, curled blond hair that reminded me of a Hallmark Christmas movie and luscious curves filling out her dress, she looked like the wholesome girl next door, with an extra-big helping of sexy.

My gaze shifted to the entrancing green eyes I'd never forgotten. Like a black-magic curse, all the intelligent long words I'd ever learned left my head. "Hi?" I croaked. The last time I'd seen her hadn't gone well.

She halted at the door, her mouth open. She looked as shocked as I felt. "Evan?"

CHAPTER 2



ALEXA

HOLY SHIT ON A CRACKER. A CHILL RAN DOWN MY SPINE AS GLACIAL BLUE eyes raked over me, and I mean every single inch of me. Evan fucking McAllister, the Shark of Wall Street, wasn't supposed to be here.

My meeting had been scheduled with Zoe Shorter, their VP of community outreach, and shoe fanatic. I'd worn these red-on-pink polka dot heels for her.

She was also another Alpha Kappa sister, and our sorority connection should have made this meeting one of my easiest. Instead, I stood with my mouth agape in front of the Shark of Wall Street.

I'd known going into the McAllister building could be a risk, but I'd double checked their company website. Evan was the executive VP of acquisitions, and a simple call to their main number had revealed his office was on the 26th floor. My meeting was on the 25th. I should have been safe.

After an awkward pause, Evan said, "It's good to see you again." His tone was tentative, signaling anything but pleasure at seeing me, and the feeling was mutual.

As he spoke, I challenged him, the way he had me, by scanning his frame and taking his measure. Obviously looks and personality didn't have to match, because his broad shoulders, trim waist, and chiseled features belonged on a billboard I could salivate over, not on my enemy, not on one so evil.

We'd known each other in another life. We'd been teenage neighbors having a good time out in the Hamptons. Back then, I'd had a crush on the nice guy next door, who was three years older than me.

His current reputation as the Shark of Wall Street meant the nice guy next door had grown up to follow in his father's footsteps, with the personality to match. My stomach soured. I hadn't seen Evan since his father had bankrupted our family, and if this cause hadn't been so important, I would have marched right out of here. On second thought, I would have asked for a cup of coffee so I'd have something to throw in his face before leaving.

It had destroyed Mom to lose the houses, the cars, everything—including most of her jewelry—just to survive.

We hated the injustice of it, but my sister Rachel and I had handled the shift from the Upper West Side with a house in the Hamptons to a tiny walk-up in Brooklyn that we rented from Uncle Luca. Rachel's Toyota had taken the place of Mom and Dad's two Jaguars.

Mom couldn't deal with the way her old social circle treated her. None of her so-called friends even returned her calls after the financial implosion. It was as if without the expensive houses and cars, we didn't matter anymore. The experience had sent her to seek solace at the bottom of a bottle—every damned bottle she could get her hands on.

Try as we might, Rachel and I hadn't been able to get her to stop drinking. Then, the inevitable happened. We'd lost her in a car accident. She'd managed to find the keys Rachel had hidden, and as far as we could tell, she had been on her way to the old house in the Hamptons.

Losing Mom had sent my sister into a tailspin, but at least Dad and I had gotten her off the booze. Dad deserved most of the credit for her turnaround. Whatever he'd told her had worked.

Even though I now lived by myself, I kept in constant touch with her to make sure she was still on the straight and narrow.

Instead of wallowing, I'd used the shock of all that had happened as incentive to prove myself. And I had. I'd gone from happy Upper West Side teenager to destitute Brooklyn girl to graduating with honors from Columbia with both a BA and an MBA, all on scholarships I'd earned. I'd even landed internships at big-five accounting firms for three summers—with pay no less—which was better than any of my classmates. I was proud of this, and it had only reinforced my determination to show everybody what a poor Brooklyn girl could do.

My Brooklyn apartment was smaller than most people's closets, but it was close to work and the subway. Moving out on my own had been high on my goal list.

Poster girl for the American dream, that's me. I'd accomplished all of it on my own, through hard work and diligence. And everything I was, everything I'd accomplished was in spite of what the McAllisters had done to us.

I composed myself and didn't bother with any of the fake pleasantries I didn't feel. "I must be in the wrong place."

The intensity of Evan's stare dropped the temperature of the room a few degrees.

"I'm supposed to meet with Zoe Shorter," I added.

He retreated behind his desk without even a perfunctory handshake and motioned to the chairs across from his desk. "Please sit. You're in the right place. I've taken over for her. It was rather abrupt."

His assistant pulled me out of my stare. "Ms. Borelli, can I get you anything? Coffee? Water?"

Shaking my head, I glanced at her. "No, thank you. I'm fine."

She moved to the door.

Evan stopped her. "Diane, would you please get a pad and sit in to take notes for us?"

"Certainly," his assistant answered, retrieving a notepad from the credenza next to her without having to leave the room.

I considered running for the door, but that would probably give him too much pleasure, so I took the seat he'd offered and glared my best fuck-you smile at him.

Had he invited his assistant to join us to make me more comfortable in his presence, or to protect himself against me clawing his eyeballs out like I felt I should? Either way, we both had to behave ourselves now.

Evan sat in his ostentatious ergo-chair with more levers than a spacecraft. "I'm new in this position, and Ms. Shorter was called to London on short notice, so I have to admit I don't know what you and she had scheduled to discuss today," he began.

The pieces fell into place for me. The scandal had dropped on Page Six early this morning. Of course I'd seen the photos—everybody in the office and probably half the Eastern Seaboard had seen them by now.

Evan was sitting in front of me because he'd been demoted. He'd been

punished and knocked off his high horse. It was about fucking time.

I didn't know how many notches down the corporate ladder he'd been pushed, but it served him right. Karma had finally come to dig her claws into his ass and drag him down. Asshole that he was, he deserved this and a heap more. It didn't make up for what had happened to my dad, but it was a start.

Fine. Game on. I'd handled sharks before. It didn't matter that he'd seen me in a bikini. Or that he'd seen me puke my guts out after we'd both had way too much of his father's gin.

"I'm here to discuss this year's drive, and your company's participation level," I told him. That much should have been obvious. "Not your swim session last night."

His eyes narrowed, but he held his temper remarkably well.

That had been a low blow on my part, but he was the one who'd gotten naked in public in the middle of downtown. The City Hall fountain had been a particularly dumb choice.

"And what was our donation last year?"

If he had to ask, he didn't know, and that gave me an opening. "Two hundred thousand, and this year..." My salesmanship professor, Mr. Sliphorn, had said to always start high. Two hundred thousand was way beyond what McAllister International had ever given us. I paused, trying to figure out how high I might be able to push him.

"You'd like us to increase that, I take it?" A hint of a smirk, but not a smile, played on his lips.

Nodding, I added, "It would show your generosity to do so, yes."

His head tilted, as if trying to read my thoughts. "To what level?"

I was out of time, so I blurted without thinking. "Two hundred and fifty thousand would be a nice increase?"

His mouth pressed into a line for a moment. "Quite an increase."

I thought I'd lost him, but then he asked, "Is a twenty-five-percent increase normal? What range do you usually see from donors?"

I released the breath I hadn't meant to hold. "Some people stay flat." Maybe I shouldn't have suggested that option. "But generally we see an increase of between five and fifty percent."

He nodded slowly with his lower lip stuck out. "Do you have a card?"

The change of subject surprised me. Had he just ended our meeting without agreeing to anything? After only two questions? I looked to Diane, but her face didn't give anything away.

I'd met with rich, asshole businessmen before, but this treatment set a new standard for abrupt and discourteous. "I think you should at least give me a chance to—"

"Card," he repeated with his hand out.

I fished one from my cardholder and rose to offer it over the desk. I settled back into my seat after he accepted it. He was going to have to try harder if he wanted to run me out of his office.

He put the card face down on his desk without even reading it. *Asshole.* "Tell me, Alexa, do you make a habit of jumping to rash assumptions?"

"Pardon?" I was proud that I was able to keep my response civil. He'd been an arrogant ass, and I hadn't retaliated. Point for me.

"You suggested I should give you a chance." His eyes didn't waver as he held me in a stare.

"I just thought—"

His finger jutted out quickly, pointed directly at me. "No. You didn't think. You jumped to a conclusion—a rash one, I might add—and reacted without thinking." The nerve of this man. "In another setting, that could cost you the sale. Listening and thinking are more important than talking in any negotiation."

My hands tightened on the chair. *Keep it together, girl.* Even if he insisted on showing the world the jerk he was, I could be a professional.

He turned over my card. "Three Sisters Cancer Fund," he said, reading slowly.

I nodded. "Yes."

He wrote on a card he produced from his desk. "I requested your card," he said very deliberately, "so I'd be able to contact you later if I have any follow-up questions."

My cheeks heated with embarrassment. He might be a first-class ass, but he was spot on. I had been rash—exactly what he'd accused me of—and opened my mouth when I shouldn't have. Give the man a point.

He slid the card he'd written on across to me. "My cell is at the bottom."

I picked it up. "Thank you." I could be professional, even in the den of the devil. The card had the title crossed out and a phone number added at the bottom—a number I never intended to use.

"In case you need to reach me. Now, tell me about it, the Three Sisters Fund."

Reaching out to him beyond this meeting was the last thing on my list.

Best to make it entirely unnecessary. I recrossed my legs and began. “We started when Alpha Kappa sorority sisters from three New York colleges—Columbia, NYU, and Fordham—banded together to raise money for the cancer treatment of four children, nominated by the sororities.”

He nodded and wrote a note. “The name of the first child?”

“Pardon?” The question wasn’t one I’d been asked before.

“The first child’s name?” he repeated at a slightly raised volume, as if that would make it easier for me to understand.

“Talia, Talia Hobbs.”

“And the outcome?” It sounded so clinical the way he asked it.

“She’s now cancer free.”

He nodded and made another note, keeping his eyes on me while his hand moved over the paper. That gave me trouble. I had no issue typing without looking at the keyboard, but not when writing freehand. Maybe it was my anal need to keep the line of writing straight, but my eyeballs always guided my fingers.

I found that fascinating. “It has become an ongoing goal for us. Our focus is pediatric cancer. We raise money to help needy families receive advanced care they otherwise could not afford through cooperative agreements with local hospitals that are willing to provide the care at cost, plus a modest percentage.” The words brought tears to my eyes the way they always did as I described our goal and thought about Talia and Shauna.

I watched in fascination as he made more notes without glancing at the paper. It was more than his superhuman note-taking ability; I couldn’t avoid focusing on his hands. They said big hands went with big other things, and his were large. Hands I wouldn’t mind feeling...

Cut it the fuck out, Alex.

Just because the man was ogle-worthy didn’t make him any less evil. I had to remember that what mattered was what was inside the fancy suit—the strong shoulders, the trim waist, the large hands... *Fuck, I’m doing it again.*

The set of his jaw, and even the way he sat in that chair was commanding. *Cold* and *heartless* were other words that came to mind as all he did was hold my eyes with a face of stone. Talk of children and cancer moved everyone else I met with to some sort of emotion, but not stone-faced Evan McAllister.

“A very noble cause,” he finally said after several tense seconds.

“Thank you.” I took a deep breath and swallowed my emotions. This happened to me whenever I thought about the families we could affect, the

lives we could help save. Without the ability to pay, some patients didn't get the best care our medical system could deliver.

"How many hospitals?" he asked with his pen poised to write.

"Three currently, and we're in talks with several more."

"How modest a percentage?"

"Five percent." It was a figure I felt proud to have negotiated. I watched as Evan made another note. He looked so much more intense now than when I'd known him, but we'd been kids on summer vacation in the Hamptons back then.

In this professional setting, where I was a fundraiser seeking a donation, I should have been at ease. I'd been through dozens upon dozens of these meetings. Instead I felt more like the gazelle being eyed by the lion. Why? I looked down at my hands, but they didn't hold the answer to my question.

"Tell me, Alexa, do all of your funds come from direct donations after one-on-one meetings like this?"

As much as he repulsed me, I refused to bolt, to be intimidated by this man. "Not all, which brings me to my next topic." I cleared my throat. This shouldn't be a big deal, but it could mean I'd have to see Evan one more time. "We have a dinner gala coming up, and I'd like to ask you to purchase a table..." I swallowed and went for the win. "Or two."

His hand moved across the paper again as his eyes locked with mine. "Are those the choices?"

I maintained eye contact. "It's very unusual to purchase three."

He tapped my card again. "And who heads Three Sisters?"

I fumbled my answer, not prepared for the conversation to go in this direction. "Chelsea. Chelsea Hobbs. She started Three Sisters and is the executive director."

"Phone number?" he asked in a clipped tone, still with that pen hovering over his pad of paper.

I hesitated. I'd dealt with plenty of donors, and none had ever asked for Chelsea's number. How would it look if one went around me?

"I may have occasion to call her," he insisted.

I straightened up at the insult. "McAllister International is my account, and I can answer any question you may have."

"I have no doubt, Alexa." The way my name slid off his tongue sent a shiver through me. The image of lion and gazelle came to me once again.

I felt a moment of relief when for the first time, his cool blue eyes left

mine and traveled to his assistant.

“Diane?” he asked. “Any questions?”

I also shifted my focus to the woman on my right. That he gave his assistant a voice in something like this surprised me. *Startled* might have been a better description. I’d never witnessed it in any of the other companies I’d visited. It had to be a ploy on his part, but why? To accomplish what?

“Not at the moment,” she replied, shooting me a smile. “I think a children’s cancer charity is a very worthy cause.”

Evan placed his palms on his desk, a clear sign that our meeting had run its course.

Leaving without a commitment of any kind would be a failure, and I didn’t enjoy failing. I excelled at everything I attempted and was damned proud of it. “Should I put you down for two-fifty, or were you thinking slightly more?” Sliphorn would have been proud of my use of the preemptive close.

Evan took a deep breath and nodded with deliberate slowness, but no words came out.

Shit. Silence was the worst possible response.

It appeared he didn’t reach decisions quickly. It could have been his way of operating, or he might be unsure of how an office like this operated.

I hadn’t considered that maybe he didn’t have the authority for that much without some upper-level signoff. But that didn’t make sense. His family name was on the building, and I’d read about him concluding a billion dollar merger last week.

Evan stopped nodding and stood.

I picked up my purse and stood as well, offering my practiced smile.

His lips pursed slightly. “I’ll have to do some research before committing us to any specific number.”

Double shit. If he looked into what they’d donated last year, I was toast. And, he had Chelsea’s number to complain if he wanted to sink me. That would be a classic McAllister move.

He opened his arm toward the door. “Thank you for coming in, Alexa.” His smile now actually looked genuine.

I followed Diane to the door. But I wasn’t done yet. Sliphorn had said never to leave the table without a final attempt to close the deal at a lower level. “Before I go, since the tables sell out quickly, would you like to reserve one table or two?”

“How many people does a table seat?”

This was a logical question. Why was he the first to ask it? “Ten,” I answered.

He stopped, and for a second I thought I might not even get a table commitment. “Two tables, then,” he finally agreed.

“The children thank you,” I said sincerely as I halted outside his office. I’d skinned the shark. His company had never sprung for a table before.

“On the donation side, I’ll have to consider our response.”

“Of course.” I offered my hand. “When should we reschedule?” But my hand dangled in the air without a move from him.

“Diane will call you.” The Shark of Wall Street was too important a man to call me directly. “Honesty is the most important commodity, don’t you think?”

“Yes. The most important.” Honesty? What a crock? His father had possessed zero honesty in dealing with Dad. Like father like son, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, and a dozen other sayings proved Evan was no different.

Finally, he shook firmly with me.

The tingles of heat that raced up my arm surprised me. I shouldn’t have been reacting this way. Sure, he was drop-dead handsome, but I knew full well that inside the expensive suit was a cold, calculating shark.

He held my hand for a few seconds longer than standard. “It was very nice to see you again, Alexa.”

“You too,” I got out as he released his grip on me. It was an acceptable lie, said in pursuit of a good goal, helping the children. I added the parting ask, another Sliphorn-ism. “Any idea what you’ll be donating to the silent auction?”

His eyes narrowed. “Silent auction?”

“Yes, the one we hold at the gala you’ll be attending.”

Donating to the auction wasn’t required, but some people preferred it to donating cash. And it added excitement to the event as the winners were announced.

That slow nod of his reappeared. “I’ll have to give that some thought. And congratulations on your MBA. Diane will show you out.”

He returned to his office.

Following Diane to the elevator, I felt oddly uneasy that I hadn’t acknowledged his praise. *Shit*. That didn’t fit with my determination to be

even more professional than him.

“I love your taste in shoes,” Diane commented as we waited for the elevator. “Those are super cute.”

“Thanks. I found them at this little place off Broadway, called Heel in the Wall.”

The elevator door opened.

“So, you and Evan know each other?” she asked as she punched the button for the lobby.

Diane turned out to be much more talkative than assistants at my other corporate donors. After five minutes with her in the lobby, she excused herself, and I thanked her for the time.

When I reached the street, I paused to collect my thoughts. At least one of the people in that office was human. I turned right for the subway. My next meeting was in Midtown at Bear Foster.

Replaying the encounter with Evan in my head as I walked, I knew I would have to keep this from Dad. Instead of being happy that I’d gotten some money out of the McAllisters, he’d be angry that I’d even ventured into a room with one of the devils. On our descent to living in Uncle Luca’s rental unit in Brooklyn, “*those crooked McAllisters,*” had been a common refrain from Dad. Whenever he was particularly pissed, the adjective changed to *damned* or *fucking*. Although, I hadn’t heard any of those in years from Dad.

The deadline to give the hotel hosting our gala a table count was the end of the week. If we didn’t make it to forty tables, we’d have to change venues, or cover the minimum and reduce our income from the evening. The two tables Evan McAllister had committed to put us closer, but we were still six tables shy.

CHAPTER 3



EVAN

I OPENED THE DOOR THAT LED FROM MY OFFICE ONTO THE PATIO AND STEPPED outside. Six chairs sat about, two on one side, and another four around a small table tucked into the corner. This high up, the wind grew as I approached the railing. Looking out toward Central Park, I decided I agreed with Diane. Aside from being one floor lower, the access to outside air was a pleasant addition that made this office a preferable location.

Below me, the street bustled with people and afternoon traffic. Hearing it made it seem much more active. The glass and the height of my previous office had been more isolating than I'd realized.

"There you are," Diane said as she joined me outside.

I waved over my shoulder. "Just checking it out."

A horn sounded from street level—not that a horn was unusual, but this long a blast was.

She joined me at the railing. "What just happened?"

I pointed down at the street. "That bike messenger almost became road kill."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it." This was the downside of having a long-time assistant—she'd learned what was normal and what wasn't, and my meeting with Alexa fit in the latter category.

"I know her from a long time ago." It was the simplest explanation. "We were just kids."

“Did you not read the file I gave you?”

“I read it,” I admitted.

“Then why did you let her lie about how much we donated last year? It was twenty thousand, not two hundred. And since when do you give out your direct number at the first meeting?”

Diane knew it was one of my rules not to make myself easily reachable in the beginning stages of negotiating. The other side had to make the effort. I raised my arms. “What’s with the sudden critique?”

“While we’re at it, you said you weren’t committing to anything at the first meeting.”

“So, I changed my mind.”

Diane didn’t back down, one of the traits I’d always liked about her, at least until right now. “It’s my job, remember? You hired me to observe and give it to you straight.”

I had hired her for that, though today it annoyed me that she was throwing my words back. I tried a different tack. “You’re attracted to her, aren’t you?”

“No way. She’s not my type, and besides, Miranda would kill me.”

I nodded, knowing her partner, that was a definite possibility. And, Miranda knew people—the kind of people who meant we might never find the body.

“Now cut it out,” she demanded with a stern finger pointed my way.

“Cut what out?”

“When cornered, obfuscate, deflect, and transfer. You taught me that. So you like her; that much is obvious.”

“You’re supposed to read the other side, not me,” I shot back.

“And it was mutual at one time, I’m guessing, although she tried to hide it. Now she’s got some frost on her feathers when it comes to you.”

I’d hired Diane because with a master’s degree in behavioral psychology, and trained by the FBI in suspect observation, she saw ten times more than the average person when it came to body language. Unfortunately, she also read me all too well, so I gave in. “Once upon a time, yes. But we were kids.”

“What happened to cool her off? Was it you?”

“Her family went broke, like sell the houses, the cars, everything broke.”

Diane nodded. “That sounds rough.”

“Her father blamed it on my dad pulling out of a real estate deal. Dad predicted the Evergreen project would run into delays and fail. It did, and her father was so overextended he couldn’t recover. He lost everything to the

banks.”

“Let me guess. Sins of the father fall to the son?” Diane continued. “Her entire family hates your entire family because of that.”

“Bingo.”

Alexa’s father had poisoned her against me, but that was, as they say, water under the bridge at this point.

“Are you going to make the normal call in spite of the family history?”

I nodded. “Don’t I always?” It was a constant in my routine to make a follow-up call after a meeting to thank the person for his or her time. The gesture was small, but the worthwhile in the long run to aid future negotiations.

“I think she’d like that. I’ll leave you to it then,” she said, looking over the railing. “Just be careful out here, boss.”

“Thanks.” I pulled out my phone, but then put it back. It was too soon to call.



ALEXA

AFTER FINISHING UP AT BEAR FOSTER, MY BRAIN IMMEDIATELY SHIFTED TO remind me it was time to get back to my day job—or as it was today, my night job. An accountant’s work was a constant treadmill of activity. As soon as one month or quarter or year had been completed, summarized, and analyzed, the calendar ticked over to the next one. I started the walk back to the subway as the meeting I’d just finished replayed in my mind.

I’d met with three of their people, which was a little bit unusual and scary because I knew only too well that it took just one skeptic to scuttle a meeting. That’s when “we’ll get back to you” resulted in a follow-up phone call or the answer was no.

They had been very kind and understanding about my request that sponsoring a table at our gala was preferable to a cash donation, and they had committed to one.

This brought my total to three for the week, and Three Sisters another table closer to being able to keep our gala venue this year. Having to

downscale from using the Sanders Hotel only one year after selecting them would be a blow—particularly since we’d moved to them after failing to fill the Roosevelt. The mere thought of it made me cringe and squeeze my eyes closed. It would be devastating to the fund.

I pulled out the phone I’d turned off in the meeting and held the side button to turn it back on. I’d once had a potential donor get annoyed when the phone I’d put on silent kept vibrating in my purse. He’d felt it rude and had cut our meeting short. Since then, my phone was always off while talking with donors.

The voicemail that appeared as the phone powered on rattled me when I listened to it.

“Hi, Alexa,” Evan’s voice began. “I wanted to thank you for coming in today...”

I paused the message. It was hard to listen to his voice and not picture our past and what his father had done to us. I pressed play again.

“I look forward to seeing you again soon. How about Friday to have further discussions about a cash gift to your cause?” After a long pause, he added, “It was really good seeing you again... And, take care.”

The recording ended, and I pulled the phone from my ear. His mention of a cash gift was as clear as it got, and it overrode our past. My finger hovered over the replay button. I wanted to be certain I’d heard him correctly.

I didn’t get the chance.

Staggering back from the blow, my phone fell to the ground. Heat scorched my other hand.

“Hey. Watch where the fuck you’re going,” the guy yelled, as only a New Yorker could.

“Sorry,” I said—an automatic reaction.

A crushed cup lay on the ground between us. He wore most of the brown liquid on his dirty coat. Some had gotten on my sleeve and hand, scalding me.

He had greasy hair, an unkempt beard, and a scar down his left cheek. “You owe me a fucking coffee.” He swiped at the drops still clinging to his chest and arm.

The sea of people walking toward the subway entrance parted around us like water flowing around rocks.

I picked up my phone, unzipped my purse, and stowed it safely away. I could wipe it off later. “Sorry,” I repeated as I pulled my wallet out. “I got

something in my eye,” I lied as I pulled out a twenty.

“You asshole rich bitches always have a fucking excuse. You think because you’re pretty everybody should give you everything. You’re not special, bitch.”

I held out the bill.

He pocketed the money and held out the stained sleeve. “And you ruined my fuckin’ coat. I need money to buy a new one.”

That’s when I noticed multiple coffee stains, including one on the opposite sleeve. I wasn’t having any more of this shit. “That should cover the coffee and the cleaning. Buy your own fucking coat, if you want a new one.” I re-zipped my purse and backed away a step, ready to kick and send his balls all the way to Cleveland if he came at me.

“You fucking rich bitches are all alike,” he spat, but he didn’t move forward. “Life handed to you on a fucking silver platter and no understanding of what it’s like for the rest of us.”

I matched his tone and outdid him in volume. “I’ve never asked for any help, or taken any. I’ve worked for everything I have, so fuck off.” My heart raced as I turned and joined the human river flowing to the subway station.

Onboard the train, I finally relaxed when the doors closed and it started moving. He hadn’t followed me. Before Columbia, I would have given in to the emotional blackmail and handed over whatever he asked. But since then, I’d proved I could accomplish anything I set my mind to. My family and I had fallen from the top of the pile to the very bottom, but I’d pulled myself up and gotten where I was by my own hard work. I didn’t have to take shit from anyone about where I was now.

I rummaged through my purse to find the phone and listen to Evan’s voicemail one more time before deleting the message. I’d promised Dad I’d stay away from the McAllisters, all of them. There was no reason to tell him about today—it had been an accident anyway.

A crack ran all the way across my phone screen. *Damn that guy with the coffee.* It had to have happened when he ran into me. The train jostled, and I shoved the phone back into my handbag.

CHAPTER 4



EVAN

WHEN I GOT HOME, I FOUND THAT MY BROTHER HAD LET HIMSELF INTO MY condo.

Drinks in hand, we settled in near the window.

“Sounds like you’ve had a pretty crappy twenty-four hours,” my brother said, lifting a glass of my very best scotch to his lips.

“No shit.” I was glad to have Noah here, but I’d never admit it. I’d called him this afternoon to talk over my demotion situation with Dad, and I’d mentioned Alexa’s visit without meaning to.

My twin brother—not identical, thank God—had shown up at my apartment to talk. He held the paper in his hands. “No wonder Dad demoted you. This is like committing reputation suicide.”

“What it doesn’t say,” I explained, “is that she’s the district attorney’s daughter.”

His eyes went wide. “Holy fuck.”

“You can say that again,” I agreed.

“Holy fuck. I guess on the bright side, you haven’t been arrested yet.”

I nodded. “Not yet.” Noah’s reminder of her father’s power sent a shiver through me. I had money and influence behind me, but that didn’t matter much against a man who could put me in prison.

“Maybe you should cool it in the dating department for a while.”

I swirled the scotch in my glass. “Way ahead of you. I’m off the market

until this all blows over, and then some.”

“Wise move.” He indulged in another sip. “Am I here because Dad wants to get rid of you, and you want to join me?”

I’d already discarded that as an option. “No. Not yet.” Noah made a living in real estate, but I wasn’t built for that. “If Dad wanted to get rid of me, he would have just done it. Instead, he put me in this community-outreach job—community events and shit, but mostly charitable giving.”

“How long is that supposed to last?”

I shrugged. “No clue.”

Noah took another sip before pointing out the obvious. “Dad doesn’t do anything without a plan”

I felt exactly the same. “He said I was supposed to rehabilitate my reputation and the company’s.”

“And that means giving away a ton of money, or maybe sponsoring a lion at the zoo, to buy a reputation?”

I thought about what I’d read over lunch. “I don’t think he means that. Given the names we’re competing against—like Ford, IBM, and Bank of America—we can’t donate enough money to any charity to really be noticed.”

“Of course you can.”

“Against names like that, I could triple our giving with no impact on visibility. That wouldn’t make him happy. Dad’s all about the money. That’s one thing that never changes.”

“Then it stands to reason that he thinks improving the company’s image will improve the bottom line.”

“Or it’s all about punishing me with an impossible task.”

He studied his glass for a moment. “He always has a plan and parameters.”

“So?” I asked.

“If you go to the track,” Noah said, leaning back against the cushion. “There’s an almost surefire way to beat the odds and make money.”

I blew out a breath and rolled my eyes. “I’m not going to the track to make money. That’s just idiotic.”

“You’re not listening,” he insisted. “I said *if* you go to the track.” He lifted his glass to look up through the bottom, which meant only one thing.

“Sorry.” I settled in for a long-winded story.

“Let’s say you like the favorite, but you go up to the window as soon as it

opens and put a thousand down on the long shot. What do you think happens?”

“You lose a thousand.”

He shrugged. “The odds on the tote board change instantly on the long shot, but if you’d put your money on the favorite, nothing would have happened because your thousand didn’t change the odds. So what happens next?”

“Everyone laughs at you?” I quipped.

“Probably not, because nobody knows it was you. But, they do notice the change in the tote board, and now the long shot is the favorite, or at least close. The thousand would have been a little fish in the big pond of the favorite betting pool, but move the same bet to the small pool of the long shot, and now it’s a big fish.”

With that analogy, I could see what he was saying. “So concentrate on small-enough charities to get noticed.”

He nodded. “Now you’re cookin’. Make an impact. The rest is marketing to get your outsized effect noticed so people know you’re doing good.”

I offered the bottle to refresh his glass. “Thanks. That helps a lot.” As I poured, I realized what I needed to do, and I already had a candidate in mind—the only charity Zoe had given to that wasn’t a big name.

“Glad to help.” Noah finished a slow sip and changed the subject. “Now we can get to the juicy stuff. After all these years, Alexa Borelli just waltzed into your office?”

I took a sip of my own. “It wasn’t planned. She had an appointment with the lady I replaced.”

He leaned forward. “I’d say that’s a good sign.”

“I don’t see it.” I liked talking things over with Noah precisely because we didn’t come at life the same way. He always had a different perspective, sometimes off-the-wall different, but thought provoking all the same.

He sipped and then lifted his glass to look up through the bottom of it again.

I choked back a laugh. “Do you act like this with your clients?”

“Fuck no. I’m professional as an undertaker with them.”

“I doubt undertakers talk in circles the way you do.”

When he’d left the company, Noah had told Dad to fuck off in exactly that many words—according to him at least. “*Be my own man, set my own goals, and keep my own schedule,*” he’d told me was his plan at the time.

He ignored my comment and continued to hold the glass up and look through it. “It’s the Frost poem. Not many people get the chance to check out the road not taken.”

“No, thanks. I know the rules.” I made choices, and I always stuck to them—always. Consistency mattered.

“She’s hot,” he said with emphasis. It was a statement not a question.

“You’ve seen her around?”

“A few times,” he admitted.

My fingers tightened on my drink. He’d seen her and I hadn’t, until today. This wasn’t right. Especially given Dad’s rule.

His lips turned up. “I see that look.”

I crinkled my brow. “What look?”

“You think she’s hot too. So, go ahead and ask me.”

I did find the grown-up Alexa good looking, to put it mildly, but it wasn’t something I wanted Noah to spout around town. “I don’t have a question.”

He put his glass down. “The fuck you don’t.” We glared at each other for a moment before he broke. “When business takes me to their neighborhood, I sometimes stop by their deli.” He raised his hands in mock surrender. “That’s all. Of course I don’t use my real name, and so far I haven’t been recognized.”

My fingers relaxed. “This isn’t a game.” I hadn’t dared set foot in the Borelli’s deli since the blowup.

“For you maybe.” He laughed. “I dated this girl, Nancy—a real pretzel between the sheets, if you know what I mean. She could get into positions even you couldn’t dream up.” He looked out the window. “I never did find out if she was double jointed.”

I finished another swig and followed his eyes out the window. “Is this going somewhere?”

“I took her to this Greek restaurant.”

I twirled my finger in the air in an effort to get him to hurry to the punchline, if there was one.

“Which was a dumb-fuck move, because she was allergic to lamb, and the menu was full of lamb.”

I raised my glass to him. “At least we can agree you’re a dumb fuck.”

The insult seemed to roll right off him. “But it turned out she’d been taking these allergy shots to get over it. Anyway, she tried a little bit of lamb, and then a little more, and she didn’t have a problem. So she so she had even

more, and guess what happened?”

I sighed. “She had a reaction?”

“No. Guess again.”

This story was lame, even by Noah’s standards. “Pretzel time?”

He shook his head and held out his glass for more scotch. “No. She dumped my ass cuz she’d told me about the allergy, and I forgot. Like I said, a dumb-fuck move on my part.”

“All this to say I shouldn’t forget what a woman tells me?”

“Hell no. Don’t you get it?” His face screwed up in disgust. “The allergy shots got her slowly used to small doses of lamb until she was finally able to tolerate the real thing. The way I figure, me stopping by the deli has been getting Alexa used to seeing me. So when I ask her out, she won’t kill me.”

I coughed, sending a spray of scotch all over him.

He lurched back. “What the fuck, man?”

I got my cough under control. “Are you insane? You know how her dad feels about us.” Her father had made it clear that we took our lives in our hands if we came anywhere near Alexa.

He shrugged. “You just entertained her in your office today, so we’re both getting her in trouble with her dad. You wanna tell him or should I?”

“Neither,” I answered just in case he was serious, which was hard to tell with Noah. Both our dads would be livid, and I had no intention of creating that problem for her.

“You know she used to like me, so since you’re bowing out—”

“This isn’t a competition.” I also had never seen anything that indicated Alexa had liked my brother, and back then, I’d watched.

“I’ll keep going by the deli then, just in case I want to ask her to marry me. She’s been single for over a year now, you know.”

Single? That I didn’t know. “You’re twisted, you know that?”

“It’s in the genes.” He finished his glass with one last chug and stood. “Nice talk.”



ALEXA

\GETTING BACK AT MY BUILDING WITH A BAG OF CHINESE TAKEOUT, I noticed the super's door open, and stopped. "When are you going to get that leak fixed?"

"When are you going to stop being a pain in the ass?" he responded after a swig of his beer.

My free hand on my hip, I stood my ground and waited.

"Real soon." He closed the door.

Upstairs, I shed my work attire, including my bra, and pulled on leggings and an old Columbia T-shirt, my evening work clothes. Powering on my computer, I was ready to get to work and put in a few free hours on two clients I was helping, off the books.

The sound of my ringing phone came from inside my purse. When I pulled it out, the cracked screen showed a name I wasn't eager to hear from—Chelsea Hobbs, my friend and boss at the charity.

Getting a new phone would mean even more money I didn't have. I had to swipe right across the crack in the screen to answer it. Nothing. I swiped again, and miracle of miracles, it worked. Maybe I wouldn't need a new phone just yet, or then again, maybe it would crap out on me tomorrow. "Hi," I said in greeting.

"How'd it go today?" Chelsea asked. The nervousness in her voice came across the airwaves loud and clear. We were behind on our goals for this year, and if it kept up like this, the board would most likely vote to close down our operations.

"Mostly good." I might as well take the optimistic view. "I got table commitments from both McAllister International and Bear Foster. Three in total."

"That's great. Three more helps a lot," Chelsea said. "Did Zoe come through for us?"

I bit my bottom lip. "That's the not-so-good part. Zoe isn't handling charitable giving at McAllister anymore."

Silence on the other end said she was waiting for me to finish. "They replaced her with one of the McAllister brothers, and so that means—"

Chelsea finished for me. "Let me guess. They can't decide yet what to do."

"He's new in the job, and with me involved, I doubt there's any way he's going to give us the same consideration Zoe did."

"What does *with you involved* mean?"

I huffed out a big sigh and skirted the specifics. “Let’s just say he and I don’t get along. Actually, our entire families have a problem. I can’t go in there anymore. I’ll only poison the relationship.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“It’s worse. At the end of an hour together, one or the other of us will probably be dead.”

“But you came out of the last meeting alive.”

“A fluke. I caught him by surprise. I know you don’t have much time, but we’d stand a better chance if I stepped back and you handled the McAllister account from now on.”

I imagined her nodding knowingly. Her response took several seconds. “Of course. I’ll trade you for Bernstein Shoes.”

Chelsea’s tales of woe regarding the number of visits she’d had to make to the Bernsteins came back to me. They’d given to us each year, but the amount was small, and the process had taken forever.

“Thanks for understanding,” I said. “It’ll work out better this way. One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“He wants to meet again Friday to discuss a cash gift.”

She didn’t miss a beat. “I got it. Just text me the details and his contact info. I’ll take care of it.”

“And we’re still on for Saturday brunch, right?”

“Sure thing.”

I got together with my besties, Chelsea and Gwen, as often as I could. We’d kept in touch since being Alpha Kappa sisters at Columbia.

Chelsea and I finished our conversation as we did many times, with a quick update on our younger sisters, Talia and Rachel. Although both were fine now, five years was the medical community’s normal guideline for considering patients to have a clean bill of health. Neither had reached that point yet.

After sending Evan’s contact information to Chelsea, I went to the fridge to find a beer to celebrate. I hadn’t secured the money we’d planned on from Zoe, but I had escaped having to deal with Evan McAllister again. That counted as a win.

I was old enough not to need my father’s approval for anything, but it still felt like a huge weight had been lifted off me. I recalled the interview Evan had given last year. Why had I read it? Probably for the same reason people

watched horror flicks—evil fascinates us, whether we want to admit it or not.

Evan had claimed his success had come from modeling himself after his father, Fergus McAllister. That sentence said all I needed to know about him. The elder McAllister had proved how dark his soul was.

CHAPTER 5



EVAN

THE NEXT MORNING, THE LIGHT PEEKING THROUGH THE CURTAINS WOKE ME too soon. It must've been around four in morning when I finally fell asleep. I'd been haunted by the endless mental replay of getting caught in the fountain with that girl.

Everybody else's question had been, *What were you thinking?* The only answer to that was that I *hadn't* been thinking, which was decidedly unlike me. Even when I drank, I knew the general difference between right and wrong. I hadn't always made perfect choices, but nothing in my past had been as disastrously wrong as this.

Once under the hot water of the shower, I decided my best course of action was to look at the bright side. But the fact that I didn't have a pounding headache this morning was about the only thing I could put in the plus column for today. Everything else fell in the negative column, all driven by my own stupidity.

I put my face directly into the water to wash away those thoughts. It was water under the bridge now, and I had to deal with the situation that existed.

Now I was in charge of giving money away instead of bringing it in. That part I could control. It was simple: write checks. But Dad wanted us to be recognized for the good we did instead of the knuckleheads like me who ended up on Page Six for the wrong reasons. That part I couldn't take back.



“YOU DON’T LOOK ANY BETTER THIS MORNING THAN YESTERDAY,” DIANE noted as I made my way into my new office.

I stopped at her desk. “Schedule, please. And aren’t you the one who’s supposed to cheer me up?”

“I checked Page Six this morning, and there’s nothing new about you. That qualifies as good news, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, great.” I held out my hand. “Schedule.”

She handed me today’s schedule, with only one item on it. “Anita called down. The PR firm, Jenkins and Vaughn, wants another half hour of your time this morning for Charlie Vaughn to come over, so I told her tentatively eleven o’clock for him. Although, you don’t have anything else, so we could move him up, if you want.”

A day with only one meeting and no phone calls had never happened in my last position. “Eleven works. What’s the agenda?”

“I’m just delivering the message from Anita.” Her words said she hadn’t been clued in, and her tone mirrored her displeasure. She picked up her phone. “I’ll confirm the time.”

“In the meantime, let’s gather up the other donation files so I can get a feel for how Zoe has been handling the office. And see if you can get an interoffice number for her in London, in case I have questions.”

She offered me a note. “Already done.”



IT WAS APPROACHING ELEVEN WHEN A WOMAN APPEARED IN MY DOORWAY AND knocked on the frame. She held a manila folder in one hand. “Hello.”

I put down the file I was reading.

As she stepped past the doorway, I wondered if maybe she’d be worth putting off my celibacy pledge for another week or so.

She wore a sky blue, form-fitting blouse, with only a business-appropriate number of buttons open, and a dark pencil skirt. Her nice legs and obviously full tits under that blouse would be a nice distraction from my troubles.

Except I’d sworn off girls for the foreseeable future, and I was expecting the guy from the PR consultancy any minute. “Sorry to say this isn’t Zoe’s

office any longer. She's in London now.

"Good for her." The woman sauntered in and extended her hand. "Charlie Vaughn, Mr. McAllister. I think I'm on your calendar for eleven o'clock."

I quickly stood, removed the confusion from my face, and rounded the desk to give her a firm shake. "Hi. Yes, sorry, and it's just Evan."

She added an engaging smile to the deep blue eyes that held mine captive. "Evan, that's a strong name."

That was a come-on if I'd ever heard one. I motioned to the visitor's chair. "Please," I suggested as I returned to my seat.

She pointed at my chair. "Bad back?"

"Not at all. I merely like to be comfortable."

Still smiling broadly, she folded her hands in her lap and crossed her legs. They were very nice legs. "Well then, based on my name you obviously expected a man."

"You must run into that a lot."

"And obviously..." She pointed again. "Somebody who uses a fancy ergonomic chair has a back issue."

"I said I don't."

"I understand. Those are just examples of how each of us can make snap judgments without having all the facts—how simple things like the nickname I use or the appearance of your chair can lead even intelligent people to make quick and incorrect assumptions."

I nodded. "Point taken. If not Charlie, then what?"

She seemed to be debating whether to tell me or not. "Charlotte, but in business settings I prefer Charlie. I was told you're very good at your job."

And that was a very smooth shift away from the topic. I was unclear how to read her comment. Her directness was surprising, and appealing.

"Charlotte is a very strong name as well, derived from the French, I believe, meaning free man."

"While I appreciate the compliment, that won't work on me, Mr. McAllister," she said, emphasizing my name. "We're not here to practice pickup lines. We're going to keep coming back to the issue at hand." There was that directness again, but the implied insult was less appealing.

I schooled my features to neutral. "Which topic would that be?"

"You're familiar with why I'm here?" She recrossed her legs and settled back in the chair.

I mirrored her, relaxing back as well. "Not exactly. My father sent you."

He'd been clear about wanting to improve the company's image, but not what constituted success.

"Sent," she noted. "Interesting choice of words." She let silence linger for a moment. "*Sent* implies something different than engaged, suggested, or recommended, wouldn't you say?"

Unclear where this word game was going, I agreed. "I suppose so. Exactly what is it you were engaged, suggested, or recommended for?" After the pickup-line comment, I wasn't going to make this easy on her. And, having her explain it would give me an idea of Dad's parameters for success.

"Image rehabilitation, but this doesn't work without personal buy-in. Are you willing to commit to the process?"

I wasn't any more eager to jump ship now than when Dad had given me the chance yesterday. "Completely. I gave Dad my word."

"I specialize in personal image rehabilitation."

I sent a stare her way. "I'm more focused on how we can improve the company's image," I countered. "I think that's what's most important." Not to mention, it was obviously Dad's most pressing concern, and the thought of rehashing the events of the other evening didn't appeal to me either.

She shifted to lean forward. "Bradley will be meeting with you to discuss that area. My focus will be on your personal image."

I folded my arms in front of me. "I can save us both some time. I already got the lecture: Stay out of the news."

She nodded, but I could see disapproval in her eyes. "At first blush, that may seem like the correct response, and certainly that's appropriate for a week or maybe more, but it can't end there."

I opened my hands. "What else is there? I screwed up and ended up in the papers. I looked like the idiot I was at the time. It was the alcohol, by the way, and I embarrassed us. So, I need to stop doing that shit. Lesson learned." Somehow this woman's attitude got on my nerves. She was way too relaxed, and my glare bounced off her like she was covered in some kind of reflective material.

"I see." Her slight smile didn't waver. "In staying out of the news, what is it you hope to accomplish regarding your image exactly? Would you like people to remember the last thing they read about you in the paper, perhaps have time solidify that view of your character?"

I sighed. "Not exactly."

"Then what exactly? Do you want to continue to be seen as the

womanizing playboy with a different date on your arm every week? The one who cavorts naked in public fountains every month?”

“I would think staying out of the papers would change that perception,” I responded defensively.

Her thinking face reappeared for a few seconds. “Let me pose a hypothetical. Let’s say you and I meet for lunch, and you see me arrive driving a twenty-year-old, dirty, rusty Volvo. I’m wearing a sleeveless red dress with a plunging neckline and greet you with a kiss. Being the man you are, you try to cop a feel, and I don’t resist.”

I was already salivating, imagining the scene.

“I order the grilled salmon,” she continued, “with lemon and dill. I drink one and half glasses of chardonnay. Then we don’t see each other until the next weekend.”

I nodded along, waiting for what happens the next weekend.

“What kind of car do I drive?” she asked.

“That’s easy.” I had a good-enough memory for this game. “A Volvo.”

“That’s the problem right there. You don’t know that, but you assumed it was mine because you saw the Volvo and me together. You didn’t ask me about it, and if I didn’t tell you my Mercedes was in the shop so I’d borrowed my brother’s car, that’s the same assumption most people would make.”

I gulped, waiting for the rest of her critique.

“Pretty much everyone in the country saw pictures of you and that girl naked in a public fountain, and they’ve formed their own conclusions about your character, and who she is to you.”

“I don’t even know her,” I protested.

“They saw you together, so it doesn’t matter. Until they get another image to replace that one, that’s who you are to them, and who she is to you. Lack of countervailing information will not make the impression any better with age.”

I took a deep breath. “So what’s the plan?”

“We determine the traits you want to project, and those you don’t want to project, and build actions around them.” She opened the folder she’d brought. “The Shark of Wall Street devours another victim,” she read from the first sheet.

I listened without comment. The next three were similar.

“These all call you a shark, and sharks don’t appeal to people, personality-wise.”

I sighed. “What can I say? I negotiate hard. It’s the job, and I’m good at it.”

“Were good at it,” she corrected.

The distinction deflated me. “So, now I’m supposed to roll over in negotiations and get a bad deal?”

“The objective is to soften your image.”

“Should I adopt a half dozen puppies from the shelter and walk them around the park?”

“That would be a good start.”

I’d been joking, but she wasn’t laughing.

“Now you’ve been given the perfect platform to change your perception as a cold, heartless businessman. People like philanthropy. They appreciate it when those with the means to help others.”

In the back of my mind, I wondered how much of this had been approved by Dad. His words brought Gramps’ note to mind, but I didn’t bring it up.

“So, give lots of money away. I already—”

“This isn’t about you, but the company,” she clarified. “The act is more important than the amount. If you can become the face of McAllister’s charitable giving, people will associate that with you, and the image of the shark will recede. Your personality score will improve.”

I nodded. “Get noticed then?”

“In the charitable-giving regard, yes. For now, you don’t want to be associated with anything having to do with your prior job. Mergers and acquisitions symbolize heartlessness to people. Many of them know someone who was laid off as a result of one, or at least have read the stories.”

A thought occurred to me. “Is that why I’m here? Did you suggest this?”

For a moment she blushed, then nodded.

I’d gotten to her. It also meant Dad trusted her company, and by extension *her*.

“I didn’t have much time,” she said. “And yes, this position was my suggestion.”

I didn’t know whether to thank her or be pissed.

She pulled out another sheet, the one with the fountain pictures. “Now, let’s discuss your personal life.”

“I’ve already decided I’m swearing off girls for a while.”

She pulled out copies of several articles. “Let’s take a look at a list of your previous dates.”

I sat stoically, ready to be criticized. Apparently this was part of the process—I had to repent for my previous behavior.

She shuffled through the papers. “A socialite, whatever that means, an actress, a dancer, an athlete’s ex-wife, another socialite, another actress, an Instagram star, whatever that is, a politician’s ex-wife...” She looked up. “Do I need to go on?”

“I said I’m done with dating. You won’t be seeing any more pictures like those.”

She shook her head. “What did I say about the most recent picture sticking with the public? You need to replace that with a more wholesome image. Personally, I don’t care how many women you’re whoring around with at any one time, but the public does, and that means *you* do.”

“I’ve only ever gone out with one girl at a time.” That was a rule of mine.

She rifled through her folder and held up her counterpoint. “And the Cranby twins?”

That picture was embarrassing even by my standards. My shoulders slumped. “They said they were a package deal, and it only lasted a week anyway.”

She held up a hand. “That’s not the point. It looks like you’re running around, screwing your way through the entire female population of the city. There are too many women here.” She held up the folder. “And none of them is the girl-next-door type the public can relate to.”

I shook my head in frustration. “I don’t understand. Are you suggesting you still want me to date? There’s no way I can do that and avoid the paparazzi.”

“So long as it’s consistently the same woman and she is someone the public will like on a personal level. These ladies you’ve been out with, and I use the term loosely...” She tapped the folder. “They’re all pretty, which is nice, but they all have reputations as bad as yours. They’re sleeping around town, trolling for a sugar daddy. If it looks like you’re merely dating her because she’s pretty, people are going to see you as no different than before.”

“Does this mean I’m supposed to find a girlfriend who is...” I raised air quotes. “Not pretty?”

“No, just a woman who would be welcome at your mother’s dinner table, somebody with class—not your usual bimbo social climber looking for a cushy pre-nup.”

She’d hit the nail on the head. Most of the girls in that folder had been on

the prowl in the circuit for exactly that—a favorable marriage bargain or another notch on their bedpost. As a group, they slept their way up the ladder, as it were. I'd been happy to give a boost to one aspiring prospect after another, and this is where I'd ended up.

“If you're willing to fully commit to the process, we can turn this around,” she said as she stood. “If not, it's a waste of my time and your money. So which is it?”

My position couldn't get any worse. “Sure, I'll try this.”

Her voice turned icy. “Not good enough. In or out, which is it?” She had more backbone than I'd guessed.

I matched the ice in her tone. “In.”

“Good.” She extracted a card and set it on the desk. “This is a continuing consultancy. Absolutely no bimbos, not even for ice cream in the park. Call me when you've located a suitable long-term-girlfriend prospect, and we'll talk about next steps. My partner, Bradley, will be by tomorrow to discuss how we coordinate with the press.”

I picked up the card. “Thank you.”

Diane had already gone to lunch by the time Charlie and I were done. She and I parted ways on the street in front of our building with an agreement that I'd call her after I'd had time to think.

I walked two blocks to get myself a sandwich for lunch and returned to the office. The patio beckoned as the right place to puzzle out my solution to the two problems Bradley and now Charlie had brought up.

Charlie's words swirled in my head as I took the first bite. “*A woman who would be welcome at your mother's dinner table, somebody with class—not your usual bimbo social climber.*”

She'd been clear that rehabilitating my personal reputation was both paramount and doable. I set my phone on the table and scrolled through my contacts as I ate.

By the time I'd gotten to the end, my conclusion was sobering. There were only three women in my entire list of contacts that remotely fit her criteria as non-bimbo and dinner-with-the-family worthy. And I'd received wedding invitations from each of them, so my net pool of candidates was now zero. Coming face to face with the realization of my type was not pleasant.

I wasn't actually that shallow. I just attracted that type and preferred to avoid entanglements, so those were the women who didn't mind my kind of

arrangement, at least going in. I treated them to the fine life, and we had fun. I never promised them anything more. When I broke up with them, though, they always cast me as the bad guy for not being the long-term sugar daddy they'd wanted.

This was not going to be easy.

CHAPTER 6



EVAN

THE NEXT MORNING, I'D GONE THROUGH MY CONTACT LIST A DOZEN TIMES and still not come up with a candidate to ask out who might be a suitable longer-term girlfriend.

Charlie's partner arrived at ten, as promised, and I put my list away, planning to take the challenge back up after lunch.

Apparently public-relations types didn't believe in suits. Bradley Jenkins sat across from me, a white handkerchief corner protruding from the pocket of his navy blazer and one ankle perched on the a knee of his perfectly pressed gray slacks.

"And how exactly do I accomplish that?" I asked.

He'd explained that Dad had contracted his firm to help me improve the company's image, and so I was stuck with him. But so far none of his answers had been concrete. No surprise there. His firm was paid by the hour, so it didn't matter to him how long it took, but my job was on the line here.

He recrossed his legs, perching the other ankle on the opposite leg. "No need to be defensive, Evan."

I was already regretting my suggestion that he use my first name.

"Your question is rather on point." He gave me a nod. "A receptive press is the most important tool. Who do you know in the media? Any media—it doesn't matter, print, radio, Internet, television? You had a *Forbes* article last year, didn't you?"

He thought I had time to schmooze people who blabbed for a living. I didn't. I spent the appropriate few seconds looking thoughtful. "I don't have any friends in the media. The writer who did the *Forbes* piece wouldn't be any help. He doesn't like me." It had taken three sittings to finish the interview after I kept getting interrupted by real work. *Discourteous* was the word he'd used to describe me on the phone to his editor—his polite way of calling me an asshole.

I didn't often bother with polite. I may have also mentioned that I considered the interview to be a waste of my time, which it was. I was buying companies, not running for office. I'd only cooperated because Dad had insisted.

Jenkins made a point of writing a note. "Getting a cooperative ear will be my action item." He looked up. "Including when you make progress with Charlie and have something positive on the relationship front."

I counted it as a major victory that dealing with the press didn't fall to me. But he'd said *when*, rather than *if* I made relationship progress, which triggered a question. "How successful is Charlie in that department?"

"One-hundred percent, if you finish the process. You do what she says, and I handle the spin. It's a piece of cake."

"Do people drop out and not finish?"

"They get kicked out by Charlie for not obeying the rules. Just do what she says, and everything will go smoothly."

Note to self: don't piss off Charlie.

"Let's get on to the corporate side of this. Outside of cleaning up your image, your part will be create something newsworthy for the company."

"Help me here, Bradley. Define *newsworthy*."

"Out of the ordinary. McAllister International needs to have an impact, make a statement, do something noteworthy."

"Like donate to breast cancer research, sponsor a golf tournament to benefit homelessness, or maybe add a wing to a hospital?"

"No." He made a note. "And no, and no." He likely considered me dumber than a rock. "Everybody donates to breast cancer research; that's nothing special. Golf could work, but a bunch of rich guys playing a game at a lush, green country club seems like you want to stay as far from the homeless as possible. Plus, setting up a tournament would be a next-year event at the earliest.

When he didn't seem ready to say any more I asked, "And the hospital

wing?”

“That’s a good suggestion, but a very pricey one. And it’s not newsworthy until the wing is ready to open. After normal planning and construction delays, that would be several years from now.

My shoulders slumped. “Yeah, that’s too far off.”

He checked his watch and stood. “I have another meeting.”

Now that we were finally on the topic of concrete actions I could take, I wasn’t ready for this to end. “If those three ideas don’t hit the mark, what would?”

He buttoned his blazer. “That’s for you to work on between now and our next meeting. You want to stand out from the crowd, which means excluding or at least modifying the traditional approaches.”

I sighed. After he left, I reached for my contact list and a pad of paper. There had to be an answer my girlfriend problem that didn’t involve calling an escort service.



ALEXA

I HADN’T SLEPT WELL SINCE MY ENCOUNTER WITH EVAN McALLISTER TWO days ago. For some reason I couldn’t get him out of my head. I knew I shouldn’t have tried to bullshit my way to a higher commitment from his company, but I hadn’t been able to help myself. Hopefully it wouldn’t impact Chelsea’s meeting with them.

I’d spent the day logging more hours of work credit toward my CPA requirement under Sidney Perlmutter. One day in the not too distant future, I’d be able to hang my own shingle and fulfill my dream of being Alexa Borelli, neighborhood CPA for the little guy. God knows the businesses in my neighborhood needed the help.

If I’d gotten my accounting degree sooner, maybe I could have talked Dad out of taking the risks he had, the risks that had broken him and our entire family.

My phone rang with Chelsea’s name on the screen.

“Hey, Alex,” she started. “I wanted to let you know I got a call from

McAllister International.”

My back spasmed. This had to be Evan calling off her Friday meeting. “I wasn’t thinking. I shouldn’t have—”

“They loved you,” Chelsea continued, ignoring my words.

I shut up and put the phone on speaker so I could move away from it. The device was clearly possessed if the words coming out of it amounted to praise from a McAllister.

“Alex?” she asked when I didn’t make a peep. “Did you hear me?”

“Who did you talk to?” I asked after a moment, still keeping my distance from the evil electronic.

“Why, Evan McAllister. You can’t get much higher up in their organization than that. Anyway, he said your explanation of our cause and everything about the way you presented yourself was the best he’s ever heard. Alex, the best. I’m so proud of you.”

“Really? He said that? He’s usually much more...” Several not-nice words came to mind: *cold, calculating, conniving, deceitful, underhanded, mean*. I settled for mundane. “He’s more reserved in what he says.”

“He suggested a dinner instead of the office to talk about cash support.”

“That’s great. I’ll bet it turns out great when you tell him your story. You’re so much better at it than I am.”

She laughed. “Sweetie, you don’t understand. He wants dinner with you, not me.”

My mind froze, and her words flowed right by me as she continued on about how great an opportunity this was for us. I couldn’t see him again.

“Is tonight good?”

“No, I can’t. I have a wedding tonight.”

“I’ll see what other evening work for him,” she said.

“Yeah.” Tomorrow I’d try again to talk Chelsea into taking the dinner meeting. She knew the numbers as well as I did, and the writing on the wall was unmistakable. The Three Sisters Fund was on a downslope that would soon enough make us irrelevant.



ALEXA

MY SISTER AND I WATCHED THE DANCING WHILE STANDING NEXT TO OUR table. I had a tequila in my hand. Rachel was sticking with champagne.

The ceremony had been sweet. Missy Jablonski and Donny Dunberry made a cute couple.

I didn't know them, but Missy had been Rachel's best friend in middle school and I couldn't refuse when she'd asked me to be her plus one to this. I loved Rachel, and there wasn't anything I wouldn't do for her.

I didn't hate weddings, but I had work I still had to finish tonight.

The dinner had been tolerable, although why anybody chose rubber chicken and vegetarian meatloaf as the two entree choices for a reception hosted above a nice Italian restaurant was a head-scratcher. Probably money.

"Can I be the maid of honor at your wedding, Rachel asked.

"Sure, if there ever is one. First, I'd need a fiancé, and to get one of those I'd need a boyfriend."

"Duh. And for that, you'd need to start dating again."

"I don't have the time right now to devote to finding a non-douchebag."

"Yeah, Ty was pretty bad." She looked around the room and then pointed. "How about the guy over there in the green shirt? His hair is clean."

I followed her finger. "That's a Jet's jersey, and it's not even football season." God help the woman who hooked up with him. Who wore a sports team jersey to a wedding? "I dated a guy like that once in college."

"I think it shows he's capable of enduring the low points in a relationship and hoping for the best. That's a good quality, right?"

"The guy I dated gave me kneepads and a hard hat with a flat spot on top for my birthday."

"Okay, that's weird."

"He said it was so he had a place to rest his beer while I... you know."

"Ew. Gross. But the right guy will come along for you." It was her unbridled optimism showing through.

The doctors had said that quality had probably been the factor that made the difference and helped her beat the disease.

"Hi there. Alexa, right?" the guy who approached from my side said.

I turned to find the happy couple.

The bride took me into a bear hug and sniffled. "We can't thank you enough for your generosity. It's going to make all the difference on our honeymoon."

"You're welcome," I squeaked from the tight embrace. I'd gotten them a

toaster that held four slices instead of two. How could that be a big deal?

The groom gave me a similar hug when the bride was done. “Promise us you’ll dance one dance, then stay as long as you want. By booking Thursday night, we got a deal, and we get to stay late.”

“Sure,” I said, now able to breathe again.

The obligatory couple and father-daughter dance had taken place and soon I’d be out here.

“Look who’s here?”

It was Evan McAllister, the Shark of Wall Street they called him. They saw a shark, but I knew better. Devil was a better fit. Tonight he wore a black tux, the only tux in the room. I laughed to myself—Devil in a tux.

The man was constantly in the tabloids and blogs, always with a different drop-dead bombshell.

Scanning the room, I wondered which woman he would choose tonight. He hadn’t seen us yet.

“I need to get home to finish my work,” I told my sister.

“You can’t. Not yet. You promised to dance and I need you here.” There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for my sister, but this was pushing the boundary.

I didn’t see anybody behind the bar. How did I get a refill on this drink?

He started toward us and a new question came to mind—was there a back way out of here?

He walked up with a smile that made him look incredibly handsome. Handsome enough to hide his true character.

“Alexa and Rachel, you both look lovely tonight.”

“Thank you Evan, it’s nice to see you,” Rachel said in a syrupy sweet voice. She gestured to his attire. “This isn’t black tie.”

He spoke to Rachel, but his eyes stayed on me. “I’m on my way to another engagement, but I didn’t want to miss seeing Alexa.”

“Then we won’t keep you,” I said, quickly bringing the glass to my lips, only to find it empty.

His deep voice sent a shiver through me. “Alexa. You owe me a dance.”

I would not be pushed around, so I met his stare with my own. “It’s very nice of you to stop by, but I don’t recall owing you anything.”

His attention shifted to Rachel. “You didn’t tell her?”

“Tell me what?” I demanded of my scheming little sister.

She cowered. “I promised him a dance for you.”

Shaking my head, I straightened out the misunderstanding. “It wasn’t my promise, so thank you for the offer, Mr. McAllister, but no thank you.”

Evan raised an eyebrow in Rachel’s direction.

She tapped me on the shoulder and leaned closer. “He gave Missy and Donny five thousand in your name for a dance with you.” Her words were soft and infused with guilt.

I gaped, having learned that my little sister had pimped me out to this Devil in a tux. I’d wring her neck later, but tonight all I could do was grin and bear it.

Evan held out his hand. “Shall we?”

Daddy had said the measure of a person was in how they handled setbacks. I could do this for Rachel and her happy couple.

“One dance,” I said as I accepted Evan’s hand. They say dancing with the devil changes you. I was about to find out.

I put my hands on his shoulders and kept a respectable space between us. The sudden tingle of his touch on my waist scrambled my brain for a few seconds. Did the devil have some chemical he applied to his hands to seduce women with his mere touch?

“Is this so horrible?”

I cleared my throat. “No.” It came out as a squeak.

“You look very beautiful tonight.”

I’d been looking at his neck to avoid looking anywhere more dangerous, his lips, his eyes. My eyes migrated to his face. “You too... handsome I mean.”

“Was that so hard?”

“What?”

“Being honest.”

“I was being polite.” Then I got my nerve back. “You know you could have just asked me to dance,” I suggested. “And saved the five thousand.”

“Would you have said yes?”

I cocked my head. “Probably not.” Piss off would have been my more likely response, or something cruder. “I hope you're enjoying this.”

“I am,” he said.

“Good because it’s costing you two thousand a minute and then I’m gone.”

His laugh was genuine, but I didn't join in. “I needed to talk to you and

have you listen.”

“Talk away.”

“I’d like you to have dinner with me tomorrow night—”

I couldn’t help but interrupt him with a laugh. “You just wasted \$5000. Because that’s a hard no.”

“You didn’t let me finish.”

“You wasted your money. There is nothing you can say now that will change my mind.”

“I think it was money was well spent. The newlyweds will enjoy a better honeymoon, and you and your sister get the enjoyment of helping them.”

His reminder about the money which went to Missy and Donny ate at me. They’d even thanked me. “That was nice of you,” I admitted.

“It’s just pizza.”

The music ended and I took my hand off his shoulders and backed out of his grasp. For some stupid reason, the loss of contact made me shiver. “Still no.”

“I want to discuss making a seven-figure donation to your charity.”

My mouth dropped open and my brain froze. I’d been wrong about there being nothing he could say that would change my mind. “You’re serious?”

The music started again and the couple around us resumed dancing.

“I need an answer, Allie.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll send you the details.”

I nodded, dumbfounded, as he walked away.

CHAPTER 7



EVAN

ON FRIDAY MORNING, I FELT BETTER.

It had been a fitful night of sleep, but at least I had a plan now for my respectable girlfriend, and all I had to do was execute.

Martin Graff knocked on my open door. “Got a minute?”

I motioned to the visitor chairs. “I’ve got lots of minutes in this job. What’s up?”

He rounded a chair and sat. “It’s about the Northern Aerospace deal. I have a question about the valuation on the instrument division.” He stopped when my phone rang.

It was my brother. “Can you give me a minute?” I asked him as I prepared to answer.

With a nod, he exited.

I leaned back in my chair and answered the phone. “Hi, Noah. Thanks for calling back. I think I have it figured out, and it was staring me in the face the whole time.”

“Lay it on me.”

“Alexa Borelli. She’s perfect.

He laughed for ten seconds straight. “Perfect except that she hates your guts. I think you’re better off getting back together with Hungarian model.”

“Natalia?”

“Yeah. You won’t have to pretend to be banging her, the papers will eat

her up. They like second chance stories, and her motivation is super simple.”

“Yeah, money.”

I’d dated Natalia Pataki a few months ago. She was gorgeous, there was no denying that. The papers had loved her. And the paparazzi wouldn’t bother her.

After a second, I was back to Alexa. “Natalia is too flashy, I’m still thinking Alexa would be better.

You’ll never even get to first base with her.” “Well, I may have my work cut out for me there. But she fits the non-bimbo category, and that’s the key.”

“Yeah, I’ll admit Alexa’s a nice girl. What did your consultant say you needed—the take-to-dinner-with-Mom type? Only problem is she’s likely to cut your balls off while you sleep. There’s no way she’d date you even once, much less for months.”

I smiled to myself. “I’ve got that covered.”

“Drugging her is not allowed.”

“She’ll date me willingly.”

He laughed again. “That dip in the fountain is messing with your brain. When is this happening? I want to be able to expect your call when she turns you down. We’ll go out and drink to how stupid this plan was.”

“I’m having dinner with her tonight at DiMaggio’s.” I would enter this negotiation with exactly the same mindset as any other, and I’d win.

“Did I tell you about this Croatian girl I asked out? I mean, she has a set ___”

“Noah, I gotta go.” I didn’t have time for one of his stories.

“Okay. Another time. I bet you a bottle of Macallan Twenty-five you crash and burn.”

“You’re on. Catch you later.”

“Yeah, you gotta go order my bottle of Macallan.”

“You wish.” I hung up and pivoted to the door. “Martin?”

He poked his head back in.

I waved him forward. “The instrument division, huh?”



ALEXA

THE SUBWAY RIDE HAD BEEN LONG, MOSTLY BECAUSE I WAS NOT LOOKING forward to meeting with Evan. The way I figured, I had only one reason to not turn around and head back to the safety of my office.

I was doing this for Chelsea. I owed her a debt I could never repay, and this was the first time she'd ever asked for anything. Besides, it was just one meeting, and after that I could walk away a free woman. I'd tried for lunch, but he'd insisted on dinner. Like Sliphorn said, give up small to win big.

The sign outside had the right name, DiMaggio's, but two guys in suits came out, followed by two more. It was Thursday, and the Yankees were playing this afternoon, so that was odd, even for a Manhattan sports bar.

Checking the street before entering, I didn't see Evan, although I did spot three guys across the street having a very animated discussion while pointing at each other's cameras—and not budget cameras, but the kind you hunted big game with, sporting monster lenses.

It was an odd place for photographers' convention, but who was I to judge? I palmed my phone, double checking the time. Since Evan wasn't here waiting, I pulled up the text message string just in case.

Evan: DiMaggio's at six for pizza and beer. Look forward to seeing you there.

ME: Lunch not dinner.

EVAN: Five is the earliest I can make it.

ME: It has to be lunch.

EVAN: Are you really going to pass up seven figures over the distinction? You can order off the lunch menu if you like.

ME: Five will be fine.

EVAN: See you there.

His mention of a million dollars had changed my mind. I'd never managed even one tenth of that before, and it would make a world of difference to Chelsea and the fund. I'd do anything to secure a gift of that size.

I pulled open the heavy door and passed into the darkened interior of the restaurant. I hadn't looked up the place before arriving, and now I realized that was a mistake. Based on the name and Evan's pizza-and-beer comment, I'd expected a Yankees-themed sports bar.

This was definitely not like my local haunt, O'Malley's. They displayed

the menu on the wall behind the cash register. Instead of TV screens in the corners with games playing and people shouting, this place had artwork on dark-paneled walls lined with booths and patrons having hushed conversations in suits instead of Yankees jerseys.

After my eyes adjusted, I surveyed the room but still didn't see Evan. I steeled myself for judgment from the maître d' behind the podium. This place had a friggin' maître d', in a black tux with a red bowtie, no less.

I didn't know the dress code, but judging by the other guests, I didn't measure up in my tank top over jeans.

His eyes narrowed as I approached. "Madam, I'm sorry, we don't allow..." His words were formal as he pointed at my ripped jeans, but the derision was clear. I was about to be bounced.

"Do you have a reservation under McAllister?" I blurted. I wasn't letting this pompous ass get between me and a chance at a seven-figure commitment.

Evan's family name did the trick, and his scowl immediately brightened to a smile. He didn't even check his reservation book. "Yes, madam. Just one moment." He raised his hand, and a gray-haired waiter in a black vest appeared out of thin air. He pointed at a chart on his podium. "Jerome, the lady will be joining Mr. McAllister."

Apparently because I was joining a billionaire, I was a lady, whereas a minute ago I'd been trailer trash about to be shown the door.

Jerome smiled pleasantly and pulled a menu from the stack. "Madam, if you'll follow me, please." His walk was thankfully sedate.

I followed him through tables to the staircase on the far wall.

A fair number of guests we passed gave me a look. The men checked me out, and the women were judgmental. I smiled back politely. Screw them if they didn't like me disgracing their restaurant in cheap Target jeans.

My heart raced as we started up the stairs. I was a tasty little fish, going to meet the shark of Wall Street.

At the door, I straightened up and composed myself as Jerome knocked once. A gold plaque labeled this the *Chardonnay Room*.

It was make or break for the single biggest donation we'd ever received for our charity. All I had to do was keep it together, be professional, and tolerate some McAllister snobbery. I reminded myself that this size gift for the children was worth any amount of misery I might have to endure.

After a moment, Jerome opened the door. "Mr. McAllister, your party has

arrived.” With a flourish he waved me inside.

Oil paintings of seascapes hung on the dark-paneled walls, each illuminated by its own light. A window overlooked the street.

Evan rose from his chair at the circular table set for two in the center of the room. “I thought you might prefer privacy.” He rounded the table, but instead of extending his hand to me, pulled out the chair opposite his.

“The man has manners,” I quipped as I slid down into seat and lowered my handbag to the floor.

Jerome stood aside.

“Manners enough to not respond to that,” Evan said quietly from behind me.

My cheeks heated unexpectedly. He’d called me on my rudeness, and of course I only realized it too late. “Sorry. That... that just slipped out.” I’d already failed in my resolve to be professional.

Jerome handed me the wine list and menu. “Would madam like to start with a glass of wine?” he asked, breaking the awkwardness between Evan and me.

“Sparkling water would be nice,” I said handing him back the wine list.

“The same for me, Jerome,” Evan said as he sat. “And the spring mix salad to start.”

It was my turn to mirror. Smiling up at Jerome I added, “I’ll start with that as well, please.” Another Slipform-ism: mirroring created empathy, and I needed all I could get for this large a gift.

I waited until Jerome departed to ask, “Come here often?” It hadn’t escaped my notice that Jerome didn’t have a nametag, yet Evan knew his name.

“On occasion.”

“You said pizza and beer.” I didn’t have to include the rest. We both knew he’d lied.

He shrugged. “They have beer, and there’s a caviar pizza on the menu—although I wouldn’t recommend it.”

I made a face. “Yeah. I’ll pass on that experience.”

Evan’s ice blue eyes held mine for a second. “I can tell you honestly, it was very nice to see you again the other day after all these years. It’s been entirely too long. I thought casual would appeal to you, and I’ll admit to being desperate for you to accept.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “It has been a long time,” I agreed,

without spitting out that it hadn't been long enough for me.

"Let me start by apologizing for my father," he said. "He didn't have bad intentions, but the way he handled himself—"

I put up my hand to stop him. "Let me save us some time here, McAllister. You don't bother apologizing for your father, because we both know he meant to ruin my family. Your dad's always been a..." I chose my next word carefully. "Dick, and always will be." At least I hadn't called his father the flaming asshole I knew him to be. "In return, I won't pretend to forgive you, because I don't give a shit about your father. How's that?"

Evan actually had the audacity to look stunned. "Perhaps it's best if we move on to the present."

I'd said way much already. This meeting was about the children. I vowed to stay focused. "I'm sorry. That was how I felt at the time. But it's history now, and you are not your father. Perhaps you and I should just let bygones be bygones." *Even if I don't believe my own line about you being different from your father.*

With a nod he agreed. "I can. Can you?"

The door opened, and Jerome reappeared with our sparkling waters, saving me from having to answer. He opened his pad. "Are you ready to order?"

I picked up the menu hadn't opened yet and took a quick glance. The prices were ridiculous, and I panicked for a moment, unsure who was supposed to pay for this meal.

Evan glanced over, reading my mind, or maybe my expression. "Everything is excellent here, and since I selected the establishment, I'm paying."

I nodded, hoping my relief didn't show on my face.

After Jerome left with our orders of the beef tenderloin for Evan and lamb for me, Evan tore off a piece of bread and offered me the basket. "So, how are things with you?" Clearly one didn't just jump into a million-dollar discussion.

Be civil, Alexa. "No complaints," I said, ignoring that the garbage disposal in my kitchen had stopped working two weeks ago and the super hadn't fixed it yet. Or that a small leak had developed in the unit above mine, resulting in an occasional drip from the ceiling in my bathroom, also not fixed. Complaints to the super hadn't gone anywhere, and even the note I added to my landlord's rent check had gotten it fixed. I'd moved my things to

the other side of the counter to compensate. That's what us poor people did. We adjusted and moved on. "How about you?"

An actual grimace appeared on his face. "I've been better."

"I'm sorry to hear that." The words spouted out of my mouth on autopilot.

He buttered his slice of bread. "I suppose you saw the pictures."

This was going in a much more real direction than I'd expected. I shrugged. "Sort of hard to miss." I'd enjoyed that karma had finally caught up to him, but with the way his face contorted now, I almost felt sorry for him. "It must be a hard thing to deal with—the public scrutiny, I mean. I assume that's why you're in charge of charitable giving now."

Jerome brought our salads, interrupting the conversation again. He left quickly after offering cracked pepper.

I settled my hands in my lap, closed my eyes and took three deep breaths.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I ignored him and continued with a very soft voice, "I'm grateful for the opportunity to discuss a very large gift to benefit the children." I opened my eyes, picked up my fork, and took a bite.

He studied me with curious, but not judgmental eyes.

I gave in and explained myself. "Each day before dinner, I tell myself one thing I'm grateful for."

"That sounds like a very useful exercise." Normally people's responses varied from a shrug to why?

This was the first time I could remember someone praising my ritual. "Thank you. I find it help me stay in a positive state of mind."

Evan nodded. "Your guess about what triggered my demotion was correct." He chewed a bit of his bread, and I did the same. "The board thinks I disgraced the company."

Ya think? "It didn't look good," I agreed, forking a bite of salad.

"No, it didn't. They've hired an image consultant for me."

I wasn't much of a salad person, but this one could change my mind. "Really? A consultant?" It made perfect sense that the rich kid would hire a consultant to fix his image instead of actually working to be a better person, but I kept that tidbit to myself. "I hope that works out for you."

Between bites of salad he said, "Thank you." His smile looked genuine. "That's where I think we could help each other."

"I don't see how." It wasn't like I had reputation pointers I could give

him. Well, beyond the obvious, like stop being a douche, keep your clothes on in public, don't frolic in fountains, and the most likely culprit, stop getting drunk with bimbos.

"How's your salad?" he asked.

I told him I liked it, and he shifted the conversation to our siblings—his brother, and my sister—without explaining any more.

I knew his reputation as a master negotiator, so I waited for him to return us to the subject of this meeting in his own time.

Jerome had been in and out twice, and I had finished my dinner when it finally came.

"The Three Sisters Fund," he said, "is important to you, correct?"

"Yes, very much so." More than he could know.

"If you agree, I can provide a very sizable gift to your cause, and you can help me with my problem."

It was the opening I'd been waiting for. "You mentioned seven figures in your text, so I assume you'd be willing to make a cash gift of a million dollars." Sliphorn would have chastised me for not setting the bar higher, but I didn't want to screw this up. I was either going to be elated, or find out he'd only typed that to get me to agree to dinner.

He finished chewing before answering. "That's correct."

I almost fainted from giddiness. "I don't know how to thank you enough. That's very generous."

Just then Jerome reappeared to clear our plates and take our dessert order. I deferred to Evan.

"The crème brûlée, please. One for each of us."

With a nod, Jerome left us alone again. I couldn't believe my good fortune. This was the best thing to ever happen to me. Bringing in a donation this large would mean Three Sisters wouldn't close down, and it would mean the world to Chelsea.

Evan took a sip of water and started again. "I told you, Alexa. We can help each other."

"I don't see how."

I'd given in to the urge to Google him after agreeing to this dinner. He had everything a man could want—a palatial penthouse overlooking the park, a cushy job at his dad's company, and half the female population chasing after him. Anything else, he could easily afford. What could a poor girl from Brooklyn do for him?

“I need a girlfriend,” he said flatly, without even looking up from his plate. “You need a sizable donation, which I can provide, and I need—”

“You need me to find you a girlfriend?” I finished for him.

He chewed for a second and swallowed before answering, “In a manner of speaking.”

“I’m not a matchmaker.” I laughed. “If you think I know anybody who wants to date you, you’re crazy.” That was a lie. Plenty of girls lusted after rich guys like him, regardless of the consequences. To them it was a matter of using their bodies to play the bedroom lottery. They only had to get lucky once to have a fairytale life, and if one guy didn’t work out, there would be another rich guy to seduce at the next party.

As he looked up, his eyes were now warm as a tropical ocean. “I’m not that bad.”

I shivered under that gaze of his. “Do you seriously expect me to find you a girlfriend? You can’t put conditions like that on a charitable contribution.”

He shrugged. “You have that wrong actually.” He stopped again when our desserts arrived and waited until Jerome departed. “Conditions are often attached to large gifts. The Zuckerbergs donated seventy-five million to the construction of a new building at San Francisco General Hospital, and the hospital is now named after them. And all I want is a fake girlfriend for a while.”

“Fake?” This was getting weirder by the minute.

“We wouldn’t need to be in an actual relationship. I just need to be seen around town with a respectable girlfriend for a respectable amount of time in order to change my reputation from playboy dilettante to respectable bachelor.”

He sounded like he thought giving his reputation a makeover was possible. “And you want a woman who can put up with you for more than a week or two. You know that’s a tall order?” Another lie on my part. Dozens of women would love to spend a longer time with a rich guy like him. Privileges of wealth and status, after all. But I wanted him to feel bad about how he treated women. I shook my head again. “I’m not a matchmaker.”

He put his utensils down and fixed me with a glare that froze me in place. “I don’t want a matchmaker. I want you.”

CHAPTER 8



ALEXA

MY MOUTH DROPPED OPEN. “ARE YOU INSANE?”

“It’ll just be for a few months.”

“No way in hell,” I hissed. “You can’t buy me.”

He sighed. “Settle down. It’s not like that.”

I slammed my spoon on the table. “You’re damned right it’s not. I’m not a prostitute.” I waved my hand over my body. “This is not for sale. You hear me?”

His jaw set, and his eyes narrowed. “Is Jennifer Lawrence, or any other actress you can name, a prostitute because she gets paid to make a movie and in it has to pretend to love a man who’s not her husband, even kiss him? Hell no. This is going to be acting.”

His mention of kissing made my lips tingle. There was a time when I’d thought Evan might be in my future. Maybe acting wasn’t so terrible.

“Well are they?” he demanded.

I focused on the word *girlfriend*. “That’s different.”

“How?”

“For starters, everybody knows they’re playing a character.”

“And I’m asking you to play a character. It’s absolutely the same.”

“And this is all so you can fool the public into thinking you’ve changed and aren’t still a douchebag.” *What the hell? Am I actually considering this?*

“I wouldn’t put it that way.” He blew out a breath. “But yes. I want them

to see me differently.”

I rolled my eyes. It was a milder gesture than I felt like. “What a noble goal.” He deserved to be told I thought it was a hopeless task.

“My job is as important to me as yours is to you,” he continued before I could speak. “To get my position back, I have to *rehabilitate* my image.” He said this like was some sort of dental procedure he’d have to endure, and once complete his reputation would be sparkly clean. *Fat chance.*

“Why me?” I’d drifted across the line from *hell no* to past *maybe*.

“Because I need somebody I can trust, and that’s you. Just now you had the strength of character to say no. Every other woman I meet in this city wants something from me. To most I’m a walking ATM machine. I know you’re not like that.”

I also knew I wasn’t like those other girls, but his backhanded compliment made my chest swell with pride. “And if I say no?”

My phone took that moment to vibrate, reminding me that I’d violated my own rule about having phones off at my meetings.

He dabbed at his lips with the napkin. “I’ll wait.”

The universe had taken this opportunity to shame me. The call was from my sister, Rachel. I declined it and shut my phone off. “Sorry.” Guilt tightened my stomach.

“If you decline,” he said, “I’ll give the money to the American Cancer Society and ask another woman to play the part—one whose favorite charity is herself, most likely.”

“But...” I couldn’t keep my face from betraying me. Losing this would be devastating to the fund. “But only three quarters of the money they raise goes to recipients, and with us it’s one-hundred percent. We’d be a much better use of your donation.”

He set his fork down. “Kim, you’re holding all the cards here. I’ve told you what I want. The question is, what do you want in return? It’s as simple as that.”

“We’re only pretending to date,” I insisted. “This is only a business transaction.” I’d accidentally used the present tense, as if I were agreeing to this. “That’s non-negotiable.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, nodding. “We’d only be pretending to date.”

“And what does that look like? I’m not getting in a fountain naked with you.”

He hissed in a breath through his teeth. My attempt at humor had missed

the mark. “We would go out to dinner and to events. We’d be seen together. I’d introduce you around as my girlfriend, gush about how wonderful you are, and pamper you with whatever you want. We’d act like a couple in love, doing things that couples do.”

“To be clear, I don’t have to become to be one of your high-society types, always dressed to the nines?”

“Not ‘high society’, as you put it, but you might feel awkward wearing sweats to a nice restaurant. You’re still you. The key thing is that you have to be available for dates and activities.”

“You want me to be your beck-and-call girl?” I asked.

“Of a sort. Yes. I have a very full schedule.”

I unclenched my teeth to say it nicely. “It’s rather chauvinist of you to suggest I’m less busy than you are.”

That got to him. He even looked ashamed for a second. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. Back to the acting analogy—I’m the one hiring you, which means I’m setting the role, the script, and the schedule. Can you live with those terms?”

I reminded myself of the rate I was being paid for my *services*. Even if I wasn’t getting any of it, the number of zeros on the total still astonished me. My sister’s errant phone call had reminded me how important our charity was to families in this city, and I couldn’t in good conscience turn down the opportunity to help so many. Rachel was alive because of our little fund.

In this situation, I knew what would Sliphorn say, so I went for it. “I want a two-million-dollar gift to the fund.”

“Done,” he said immediately. I’d misjudged how high he might go. He slipped his hand into his jacket and produced a check, which he slid over to me.

It was machine printed from McAllister International for twenty thousand, dated the day after I’d first met with him. It didn’t have seven digits, even if I counted the pennies.

Before I could question him, he produced a checkbook and pen. My knee started shaking with the excitement. This was happening, but I’d still asked for too little.

“One million now,” he said as he uncapped the pen. “And another million when we’re done.”

That was a minor change. I was going to uphold my end of the bargain, but putting an incentive in it for me to finish was a smart move on his part. I

watched nervously as he wrote. This was an insane amount of money.

He recapped the pen and slid the check over to me. It was for nine-hundred-and-eighty-thousand dollars. “And that makes one million even.”

“Thank you.” I slid the two checks closer with sweaty fingers. Sliphorn whispered in my ear again, and I went for the upsell, since it looked like I hadn’t reached Evan’s threshold yet. This one was important on a personal level. “And I’d like your help.”

“With what?”

“I’m working for a small business CPA firm in Brooklyn to get my experience hours in.” The state of New York required a year of full-time experience working for a licensed CPA before I could apply for my own certificate.

He nodded. “I know.”

I let that comment go. Too much was on the line to get sidetracked into asking how he knew where I worked. “Sydney, Mr. Permuter, my boss, is having trouble with the extension of his office lease. The landlord is taking advantage of him, and I thought you, being the ace big-shot negotiator that you are...you could help him negotiate.”

He quickly nodded. “I can certainly do that. In return I’d like your help with my PR.” Like the pro he was, he’d turned this around on me, and now I would look foolish if I didn’t agree to his additional ask. His lips turned up while he waited for my response.

“What kind of help?”

“Answering a few media questions, maybe interviews.”

That sounded about as pleasant as a root canal. “You mean lie about how wonderful you are.” I scowled and made him wait a few seconds, even though I knew I had to come through for Mr. Perlmutter.

He looked down, unperturbed by my insult, and picked the napkin out of his lap. “If it’s too much, we can forget it.” The man was a master manipulator.

I offered my hand across the table. “You have yourself a fake girlfriend.”

We shook on it, and I tucked a million-dollars worth of checks into my purse. I’d done it, and couldn’t wait to tell Chelsea.

Evan pulled out his phone and tapped it a few times. “I can meet with Perlmutter Monday morning, if that works.”

Swallowing hard, I tried to imagine how I’d explain this to Mr. and Mrs. Perlmutter. “Let’s put that on hold until I’ve had a chance to talk to them.”

Evan looked up as he put his phone away. “I’ll wait on that until I hear from you. And until then...” His lips turned up in a full-wattage smile. “I’m really glad we had a chance to reconnect.” He looked like a lion eyeing a tasty gazelle.

My new temporary boyfriend certainly knew how to make me blush. “When does this pretend-dating thing start?” I’d also forgotten to nail down an end date, but after a two-million-dollar donation, that was a detail we could hash out later.

“This can count as our first date, and we can talk about the rest tomorrow. Right now, we have to get going.” He fished out his phone again and spoke into it. “Albert, we’re done... Yes, two minutes will be fine... Are they out back as well? Then make it the front door.” He turned to me. “My driver.”

Of course he had his own driver while the rest of us added twenty bucks at a time to our MetroCards to get around.

I scooped up a dainty spoonful of the desert I’d barely touched. “But, I’m not done.”

He checked his watch and stood. “It’s time to go.”

I swallowed the spoonful of delicious pudding and didn’t leave my chair. “A respectable boyfriend would let me finish my dessert.” As thin as all the girls he’d dated were, they probably didn’t order dessert—another way I wasn’t like them. Being a fake girlfriend didn’t have to also involve being a doormat.

He sighed and retook his seat. “Of course, darling.”

If he kept calling me *darling* it would drive me batty, but that was a fight for another day.

I wagged my finger as I took another bite. “I can see you’re going to need some training if we’re going to turn you in to a respectful boyfriend.” He’d used *respectable*, but *respectful* was close enough for me.

He set his jaw, but didn’t take the bait.

Maybe this was going to be more fun than I’d thought. He needed me, and he needed me to cooperate. He was the Shark of Wall Street, but I could be the Porcupine of Brooklyn if I wanted—prickly and immovable.

“One more condition,” he said. “For this to be respectable, it has to be monogamous, so neither of us can see other people on the side.”

“Not an issue for me.” I hadn’t had male company of the intimate kind in quite a while. What was a few more months? “I assume you have a plan to *handle* your urges yourself? Or is that a *touchy* subject?”

He didn't laugh.

I set my spoon down and wiped my mouth with my napkin. "Thank you for this fine dinner, Evan. Shall we go now?"

His mouth hooked up into a grin as he nodded. "If the lady is ready."

Downstairs, the tingle of his hand on my lower back wreaked havoc on my brain waves. I clutched my purse with the monster checks inside like my life depended on it and concentrated on not tripping.

Slowly, I realized we were garnering stares, not glances, as we crossed to the front door. But this time the women were looking at Evan. Of course they were. Rogue or not, he was one of the most handsome and recognizable bachelors in the city.

He stopped us at the door and checked out the window first. "Okay, Albert is here with the car." He grabbed my elbow. "Look down at your feet. Don't say anything, don't answer questions, move fast, and don't stop. You got this."

"Got what?" I asked.

It was too late. He'd already opened the door and pulled me outside. The photographers were on us like a pack of wolves, snapping pictures and shouting questions over each other. Evan pulled at my elbow and shielded my face from the cameras at least a little with the other arm.

I tried to keep up, following his instructions to keep quiet as the questions were hurled at us. Why did people care what we ate, or drank, when we met, or what club we were headed to? We'd better not be going to a club the way I was dressed.

Then one with greasy blond hair grabbed my free arm. "Your name?"

I looked away and wrenched my arm free from the pervert. Being the klutz I was, I promptly tripped and twisted my ankle. The next thing I knew, Evan had caught me, and I was in his arms, looking up into that strong face as my vocal cords refused to operate.

The strength of his arms, the smell of his cologne, the feel of one breast against a wall of hard muscle and his hand on the other—it was too much to process. For a moment the world stopped and I was back on the beach in the Hamptons. And Evan had caught me when I'd fallen off the dock.

But he was no longer that skinny neighbor boy, he was an exceedingly handsome man half of New York lusted after.

He quickly steadied me, and the image melted away. He removed his arms. "You all right?"

The cameras kept clicking as I returned to reality.

“Sure.” My first limping step made me a liar.

So he picked me up and carried me to the car door his very large, dark-suited driver held open for us.

Now Evan’s conversation on the phone made more sense. By *they*, he meant these vultures with the cameras and the questions.

Albert closed the car door behind us and rushed around to the driver’s side. Things quieted down once he pulled away from the curb. “Nice dinner, sir?” He asked, as if our exit from the restaurant had been a normal occurrence rather than a mob attack.

When Evan didn’t open his mouth right away, I answered for us, “Yes, Albert, it was very nice. Thank you for asking. Next time you’ll have to join us. I really enjoyed the *crème brûlée*. I think you might too.”

Albert didn’t say anything, but Evan’s grimace said enough for both of them. Albert’s job obviously didn’t include dinner with the boss.

If so, Evan’s world sucked. It was going to be fun messing up this tidy place, and inviting the help to join us would be just the beginning.

“Where to, sir?”

Evan rattled off my address.

I could finally breathe again. “Albert, you can let me off at the subway station.”

Albert nodded. “Yes, Miss Borelli.”

“Albert,” Evan insisted. “Her house.”

“Yes, sir.”

I started to object, “But—”

Evan silenced me with a quick finger to my lips.

I hated being told what to do and felt like biting the finger off, but the checks in my purse argued against that.

“I,” Evan started slowly, “am a gentleman.”

“That’s debatable,” I mumbled against his finger.

“And a gentleman sees his date safely home.”

When he pulled his finger back from my lips I almost missed the contact—almost. “How does he know my name?” I whispered.

His breath caressed my ear as he leaned over. “I told him the name of the special lady I was meeting for dinner.”

“Oh.” I pulled back to a respectable distance. There was nothing wrong with that, but *special lady*? Our meeting had been planned, but that meant

he'd planned all along to drive me home too.

"Why did the pack of hyenas attack us back there?"

"It's my world, darling. Welcome to paparazzi hell."

"Is it always like that?"

"Not always."

I pulled out my phone and turned it on. I had just the one missed call from my sister. I'd get to that later.

"It's not safe to have a cracked screen." Evan eyed my poor abused device.

I quickly put it away. "It's still working."

He shook his head. "Not safe."

I looked out the window to avoid his disapproving eyes. After a minute of tense silence I asked, "Will Albert always be driving us, or do they rotate?"

"Albert is my driver."

I nodded. "Albert?"

"Yes, Miss Borelli."

"What is your last name?"

"Jensen, Miss—"

I cut him off. "You can call me Alexa, unless you want me to switch to calling you Mr. Jensen."

"Yes, Miss Alexa."

"And are you married?"

Concern registered on Evan's face.

"Yes, ma'am, I am. Six years now," Albert said.

I settled Evan with a hand on his shoulder as I leaned forward. "Any kids?"

Albert's voice became animated. "Just one. Jessica. She's five."

CHAPTER 9



EVAN

ALEXA'S ONLY QUESTION FOR ME ON THE DRIVE TO BROOKLYN WAS, "ARE you sure this is going to work?"

It had to work, so that limited my answer to, "Of course."

As I replayed the events of dinner during the silence, I kept coming back to her saying she picked something to be grateful for each day. I found that habit intriguing, and also a bit inspiring. Not many people surprised me, but she had.

Albert pulled up in front of the address I'd given him in Brooklyn. Maybe it was the current darkness, but the neighborhood had looked better on Google street view. I opened the door for Alex and helped her out. Just the feel of her hand in mine jolted me in a way I wasn't used to. I normally had better control than this. The view down her tank top as she leaned forward to get out didn't help.

"Thanks for dinner." She patted her purse and gave me a genuine smile. "And thank you again for your generosity. This will help a lot of families." She backed away, and her smile faded. "I don't know what to say..."

The awkwardness was palpable. "We'll figure it out." I knew feeling cheated was wrong, but that didn't stop it. Fake dates didn't end in kisses, or even hugs, I reminded myself. "I'll walk you up."

"No," she huffed. "You won't. That's reserved for people I like."

"But your ankle."

“It’s not that bad.” She balanced on one foot for a second to prove her point.

She looked ready to blow, so I avoided putting the match to the fuse. “Text me when you’re safely inside your unit.”

“Any other demands, boss?”

“Please text me, and be careful with that check.”

She nodded and clutched her purse tighter.

“I’ll call you. Oh, and…” I pulled a card out and quickly wrote Albert’s cell on it. “Here is Albert’s number if you need to go somewhere.”

She shook her head and backed away as I extended the card. “No, I can’t. This is too weird.”

I stepped forward and shoved it at her. “This is not optional. It comes with the territory.”

With a sigh she took the card. “I don’t like you or your territory, and I’m not going to use it.”

She hadn’t lost any of her stubbornness, but Shakespeare’s line came to mind. *Perhaps this lady doth protest too much.* I shrugged. “Just in case.”

The slight cock of her head wasn’t the same as agreeing, but without a verbal argument, it was close enough. “Goodnight, Evan.” She waved at Albert. “And thank you too, Albert.”

He nodded back. “My pleasure, Miss Borelli.”

“It’s Alexa, please,” she insisted.

I hadn’t noticed until now, but none of my dates had ever asked Albert to use their first names. They probably thought it was a privilege of rank to be addressed formally. *Interesting.*

“Good night, Allie.” I caught her smiling for a second at my use of her old nickname. As she walked to the door of her building, my eyes focused on the sway of her hips. She had a fine ass. Too bad she hated my guts.

Why am I thinking that? She was my fake girlfriend, the only woman in the city who was completely off limits. She’d been clear about that, and I had my own reasons anyway.

The question was, would she look back when she reached the door?

She did.

I waved before climbing back into the car.

A minute later, as we waited, a group of kids came out of the building yammering and yelling, shoving one another.

Albert locked the doors.

I waited for her call, phone in hand.

Albert glanced back. “I don’t feel good about this neighborhood.”

“Neither do I.”

He pulled up a number on his phone. “Hey, Stan, Albert here. I need a threat assessment.” He rattled off Alexa’s address. “Yeah... Thanks.” He hung up. “We’ll have it tomorrow,” he told me.



ALEXA

MY ANKLE WAS STILL SORE, BUT I MADE A POINT OF NOT LIMPING ALL THE way to the door of my building and inside. In the stairwell, I allowed myself to limp. I was jittery with excitement as I mounted the stairs to my floor.

Then I heard the voices. Teenage boys coming down from above—and drunk from the sound of them. When one of them called another Pinky, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end and the pain in my ankle was suddenly unimportant. Pinky had just gotten out of jail again. He was perpetually mad at the world—and bad news.

The police had assured me he’d be tried for a felony this last time and sent away for years. Instead Pinky had pleaded down to a minor charge, and the fact that I’d made a statement to the cops hadn’t set well with him or his friends.

I had a choice to make: up or down. Evan and his driver were surely gone by now, and encountering this drunken crowd at street level on a Friday night wouldn’t be any better than in the stairwell. So I hurried on up, pain be damned. I had to make it to my floor before they did.

Reaching my floor, I rushed into the hallway and gently closed the door to the stairs before hurrying to my door. Breathing heavily, I unlocked and then closed the door behind me. I turned the deadbolt and listened. I didn’t hear anyone in the hallway.

For a second, I considered bracing a chair against the door the way they did in the movies. But that was stupid. Nobody knew I had a million-dollar check in here, so the break-in potential was no higher than normal. Even so, I looked over to the corner, confirming that I still had the old baseball bat Billy

Boxer had given me.

I'd wanted a security bar for the door, but Billy said the bat was better because the real threat was from a killer posing as the cable guy, whom I would let in the door anyway because I was gullible.

I wasn't gullible enough to stay with Billy for long, but I had kept the bat.

Pacing nervously around my apartment, I stopped by the window. Evan's car was still parked outside with the lights on.

Crap. I'd forgotten to text him.

My phone had settled at the very bottom of my handbag, but I plucked it out. My heart was still racing when it finally lit up.

ME: Safely home

It was true enough. His response was immediate.

UNKNOWN: Thank you.

Since playing the part of fake girlfriend meant I'd have to be in touch with him, I hit the icon for his message and added Evan as a contact. *Fake girlfriend*—that had an odd ring to it. It almost sounded dirty.

My hands were still shaky when I pulled the checks out of my purse and stuffed them into an empty envelope. Then I noticed it—the front check, the big one, wasn't a company check. It was a personal check from Evan.

The almost-CPA in me wondered how the accounting department at his company would journal the entry for a nine-hundred-and-eighty-thousand-dollar expense report for a charity gift on behalf of the company. It wasn't a topic we'd covered in school.

Shrugging to myself, I sealed the envelope, folded it, and hid my prize in the pages of my latest romance novel. Adding a few older books on top, it was as safe as I could make it for tonight.

After taking a glass out of the cupboard, I lifted up hard on the fridge handle as I pulled the door open. Anything less, and it would refuse to budge. One of these days, the stupid door would fall off. The broken hinge squeaked annoyingly, as it always did.

"A feature to keep people from stealing your food," the super, Zhukov, had said when he'd shown me the apartment to rent. Why not admit the

landlord was too cheap fix anything?

I surveyed the various options for my parched throat. A partial bottle of unsweetened cranberry juice sat in front, left over from my health-food craze three months ago. After two weeks I was back to normal food. My God, that stuff tasted like crap.

But having lived through a period when my family could barely afford to feed ourselves, I never let food go to waste. I kept the bottle front and center to remind myself to take a sip of the awful shit once in a while. I had it down to half full. I was sure it hadn't grown mold because it tasted so bad even the fungus couldn't tolerate it.

I slid my purple-juice enemy to the side and pulled the box behind it to the front of the shelf. Pressing the button on the spigot. I watched my glass fill. One quarter, one half, three quarters—I didn't stop until it was full.

To keep my head clear, I'd passed on the chance to sample one the expensive bottles on the wine list at dinner. But now I could indulge in some alcohol to wash down the Advil for my ankle, not to mention calm my nerves. What came out of my box was probably only remotely related to what DiMaggio's wine list offered, but it had alcohol in it. It was so cheap the label only said *white wine*. But tonight it was the small print on the box I cared about. It promised thirteen percent alcohol.

I swallowed the pills, settled into the couch, and replayed the evening in my head as I drank. Tonight had been confusing as hell, a roller coaster of emotions from the fear I'd experienced entering the restaurant, to the elation of a two-million-dollar gift, to a different kind of fear in the stairwell of my building.

It took me the first half of the glass to come to grips with the concept that I had beaten the Shark of Wall Street and had a million dollars of his money to prove it. Plus he'd paid for dinner. Not a bad night.

He'd wanted something only I could provide, and I'd made him pay through the nose to get my help—two fucking million dollars. That was the right spin on it. I wasn't selling myself; he was buying my help.

After one more swallow, I lifted myself up and after a moment returned to the couch with my little silver goal journal and a red pen to mark the occasion.

This was the second iteration of my goals, written down so I couldn't cheat by changing them or forgetting them. My first goal journal had gone missing in the frenzy of boxing up our possessions to vacate the houses after

the bankruptcy.

Opening the book, I uncapped the pen and ran a nice solid red line through number eight.

8: Bring in a million dollars of revenue for Three Sisters Fund.

Then I crossed it out again, and once more. Each strike through the line made me feel better than the one before. This had been a goal I wasn't sure I'd ever complete. I'd thought it might become my white whale.

Today I'd achieved double the goal in one evening, and all I had to do was put up with Evan McAllister for a while. That would be a lot easier than number nine would be. Because that one didn't allow me to use rich people's money. I'd have to accomplish it with my own earnings.

9: Pay back the Twin Bridges Scholarship.

This had been a recent addition. They had given me the money to attend Columbia—tuition, books, room and board—all because I'd written an essay on what I hoped to accomplish with my education. Without the scholarship, I never could have gone to Columbia, and I might have even stopped after high school. They saw potential in me that, at the time, even I wasn't sure I had, and had allowed me the chance to complete one of my early goals in life. I'd recently decided paying back the scholarship would be a way to pay it forward and allow another deserving person to achieve their potential.

4: Graduate from a four-year college.

I'd been the first in my family to achieve that milestone, and all on my own.

Here I was, scratching off what I'd thought was my hardest goal, and I all I had to celebrate was boxed wine. Maybe tomorrow I'd splurge on one of those four-packs of individual champagne bottles.

One goal, two lines above number eight in my little book, was an ongoing one that I'd never complete, but I didn't mind.

6: Tell Rachel every week that I love her.

I'd added that goal after visiting in her in the cancer ward when we thought we might lose her. She was asleep, and it mortified me to realize my sister might die without knowing how much I loved her. My dad had felt terrible that he'd canceled our health insurance to save a few dollars, and forgiving him had been the hardest decision of my life.

He'd leveraged everything to make the Evergreen project happen, and in the end, his gamble had cost us everything—almost Rachel as well. The experience had led to my seventh goal. It had gone into my book even before we got Rachel's diagnosis.

5: Get a CPA

The way I figured, if Dad had gotten competent financial advice, we wouldn't have faced bankruptcy. No self-respecting CPA would have let Dad cancel the insurance either. Brooklyn, and our neighborhood in particular, needed a CPA people could trust.

Finishing my glass, I got up and added some more from the fridge. After slumping into the couch again, I considered calling Chelsea, but decided against it.

We had our normal Saturday morning brunch with Gwen scheduled tomorrow, and I wanted to surprise them with the news. But maybe a short text would be the respectful thing to do, so she didn't worry. I reached for my battered phone again.

ME: Dinner went well. Got a commitment for a cash gift - more tomorrow.

Sipping the wine more slowly now, I pondered the other side of what had happened tonight, the trade-off that allowed me to achieve my goal.

I was now Evan McAllister's girlfriend—scratch that, *fake* girlfriend. I didn't like putting it either way. Both made it sound like I belonged to him, and I was not a woman to be owned by any man.

The *fake* part of my new title was the most important part. It was easy enough to convince myself I'd been forced and had only done it to scratch this goal off my list. But now I realized I might actually be looking forward to this. A fake girlfriend could get away with things a real girlfriend wouldn't

attempt.

I sipped more wine for inspiration and decided to mess with Evan one more time.

ME: Thinking of you. I hope it's not hard getting to sleep.

I powered down so I wouldn't see if he responded to start a texting duel.

After getting in bed, I tossed and turned, unable to get my situation out of my head. Everything was backwards. For money, which wouldn't belong to me, I'd agreed to be a fake girlfriend who wouldn't have sex with the man, and also wouldn't date anyone else. So, I was getting fake paid to be fake promiscuous but required to be celibate.

Worse than that, when I thought of how Evan had looked tonight, and how he'd been concerned for my safety, I couldn't deny I felt a certain tingle. I pulled Thor out of my nightstand drawer. At least my mechanical boyfriend was real. And he didn't ask anything in return.

I flipped the switch and nothing happened—he was still broken.



EVAN

I LAID IN BED AFTER GETTING HOME. WITH IMAGES OF ALEXA RUNNING through my head, sleep had been impossible for the last hour.

I gave in, slipped my hand south, and grabbed my achingly hard cock. Instead of morning wood, I had evening wood as I wondered why I hadn't at least walked her to her door this evening. It wouldn't have been hard to lean in and maybe... No. A kiss would not have been on the agenda. No way.

Her clothes tonight hadn't been very sexy, but as I stroked, my imagination did the heavy lifting regarding what lay beneath them.

I came in record time, and panting, I cleaned up with tissue from the nightstand. She might hate me, but my dick didn't understand anything except how alluring I found her. My little brain was simple that way, and I wasn't going to be able to argue with it.

After my agreement with Charlie that I wouldn't date, I would have to get

used to this way of relieving my tension for the foreseeable future. It wasn't as satisfying as having Alexa as a real girlfriend would be, but that wasn't happening. Her hatred ran deep.

On the bright side, Alexa was intelligent, and our dates could include talk that went beyond the weather, the Kardashians, or the latest Birkin bag. That would be a relief. Most of my recent dates had graduated college, but you couldn't tell it from their conversational skills.

Alexa and I needed to go somewhere public next, where it would be appropriate to kiss—an *acting* kiss or two or three, of course. A paparazzo asshole or two could get pictures of us that would label her as my new girlfriend. And that would need to be followed up with more acting kisses on follow-up dates since Charlie had said our relationship needed to last.

I finally drifted off, wondering what things would have been like if our families' relationship hadn't blown up.

CHAPTER 10



ALEXA

MY ANKLE FELT BETTER THE NEXT MORNING. THANK GOODNESS IT WASN'T sprained. As I walked to Full Belly Bistro for brunch with the girls, I reread the text Evan had sent last night.

EVAN: Painfully hard because I'm thinking of you as well.

Now he was messing with me by being all nice. The shark was hiding his teeth—or more like the devil was hiding his horns. Good thing I'd turned my phone off before he sent it. With both of us trading erection jokes, this could have gone off the rails quickly.

I put the phone away and hurried down the sidewalk. I was a little late, as always, and needed the support of my besties after the whirlwind last night had been—that and the envelope with all the money in it felt radioactive. Three times on the way here, I'd been almost sure anybody eying me could tell I had a million dollars in the bag I clutched so tightly.

Inside the bistro I spotted my girls, Chelsea and Gwen right away.

"There's our badass girl," Chelsea exclaimed as she took me into a hug. "You look great."

I didn't understand the *badass* comment but would accept a hug anytime. "Have you looked in a mirror today?" I chirped. She always made black look powerful. She was going to be a kick-ass lawyer when she finished school.

“She’s trying to get out of the symphony gala she’s supposed to go to tonight,” Gwen said with her eyes on her phone.

I pulled my purse to my lap and opened it. “Maybe this will cheer you up.” I handed Chelsea the envelope with the checks.

I took a dainty sip of my drink.

“I can’t wait to hear how you managed it. He’s quite the catch,” Gwen said.

My brow furrowed. Somehow the cat was out of the bag.

Chelsea put the unopened envelope on the table, finished her drink, and put the glass down. “Nature calls.” She rose to go the bathroom.

I tapped the envelope. “First put this in your purse.”

“Sure.” She slipped it into her purse and departed for the ladies’ room. It stuck out the top.

Playing it cool had been my plan, so I didn’t announce that she really needed to look inside the envelope before she left.

Chelsea returned just as our server arrived with drinks.

Gwen placed her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. “So... inquiring minds want to know. Is Evan McAllister as hot a kisser as they say?”

I pretended to be busy swigging my drink to keep from answering.

Chelsea saved me. “Before I forget, you girls are still up for the Catskills trip in two weeks, right?”

Chelsea’s family had what they called a *cabin*, and the rest of us would call an *estate*. She’d invited us up for a weekend each of the last two years. They had been a very welcome respites from the city, and had included spa visits.

“Can’t wait,” Gwen said enthusiastically.

I nodded as well. “Yup. The highlight of my year.

Gwen’s phone chirped. “My sister wants to know if you’re really dating Evan McAllister.”

My cheeks bloomed hot. “Not seriously.”

Chelsea stared into her drink, ignoring us.

Gwen took one look at me and tapped furiously on her phone. A triumphant smile took over her face. “Really? That’s not what the pictures look like.” She turned her phone over and showed it to Chelsea.

Holy crap. Pictures? My leg started to shake.

Chelsea’s eyes grew wide and her eyes shifted to me. “You said you

hated him.”

Gwen turned the phone to me. Holy shit the picture on her screen told an entirely different story. They’d caught me as I’d fallen into Evan’s arms. Any normal woman would describe my look as closer to lust than disgust.

“Real hatred all right,” Gwen teased.

“It wasn’t what it looks like,” I explained. “I tripped. He caught me.”

“Sure,” they said in unison.

“It looks like you’re enjoying him using your boob as a handhold,” Gwen added.

I’d forgotten that embarrassing part of the fall.

Gwen started reading from the article. “‘And who is the latest shark meal, the latest McAllister minx? We don’t know yet, but we promise to find out.’”

Holy crap. *McAllister Minx*? That made me an official brainless bimbo like every other one on Evan’s never-ending list of airhead women.

I opened my eyes again when she finished the obituary to my reputation.

Chelsea’s mouth fell open. “Shark meal?”

“I tripped, and he caught me,” I said again.

Gwen’s disbelief was clear. “So, they’re wrong? You’re not dating the Shark of Wall Street?”

I definitely hadn’t planned to break the news like this. “Well, I’m certainly not anyone’s meal, but…” I stuttered. “Well, technically yes, I am dating him.”

Chelsea gasped. “You lied to me about hating his guts?”

“No. I did—I mean I do.”

“Hold on,” Gwen said. “Sleeping with the enemy? Since when?”

Chelsea put her drink down to yell at me. “Why on God’s earth would you do that?”

Before I could answer Gwen said, “Probably so she can take garden shears to his balls when he’s sleeping.”

“Triple secret?” I challenged them with three fingers extended to the center of the table. It was our old sorority’s highest level of secrecy. Nobody dared break a triple-secret trust.

Gwen was the first to add her three fingers over mine. “This better be juicy.”

Chelsea shrugged and added her fingers to the pile. “It better not be an orgasm count. Not the way my night—” Her hand flew up to stop her mouth, which had run out of bounds, fueled by mimosas.

Gwen and I shared a look, but neither of us asked for details.

I pulled my fingers away and pointed to Chelsea's purse. "Since last night. I thought it was worth it to secure the donation."

Chelsea reached for her purse. "Then we're giving it back. I'm not having you prostitute yourself for any amount. What were you thinking?" She pulled the envelope out.

Gwen put up her hand, volunteering. "He wouldn't have to pay me to have sex with him. I'd do it for free. Have you seen him? I'd even let him eat crackers in bed."

Chelsea looked around. "Keep it down. We're Alpha Kappas. We can't stoop to..." She didn't finish, but the sentence probably would have ended with *'whoring ourselves out* or worse.

I admitted the truth to them at a whisper. "For two million dollars, I thought it was worth it."

Both of them stopped talking, mouths agape and eyes wide.

"Open it." I pointed to the sealed envelope.

I hadn't thought Chelsea could get more shocked, but she did when she pulled the two checks out.

"There's another million coming when I finish," I said. "And no sex."

The *no sex* comment clearly confused Gwen. Chelsea might not have heard it. She was busy reading and rereading the checks.

"A million to not sleep with him?" Gwen asked with a scrunched brow. "Is this some kind of ritual torture? Is he practicing to join a monastery or some shit?"

"Count me as not understanding too," Chelsea said. "Why does he want a platonic girlfriend?"

I hadn't asked Evan how much of this was secret, so I didn't go into detail. "He thinks his image needs work."

"The ruthless businessman part or the manwhore part?" Gwen asked, cutting to the meat of it.

I cleaned up the wording. "His dating reputation. After the fountain incident this week, he's decided he needs a steady girlfriend, but just a fake one."

"Now that makes sense to me," Gwen said. "Why you?" she added after a moment.

Chelsea finished a swallow of her drink. "Simple. He knows he doesn't want to get serious or attached, so he picks the one woman in town..." She

pointed at me. “Who hates his guts, because she’ll be impervious to his charms.”

“What charms?” I hissed. I wasn’t about to admit that I’d found his attempt to shield me from the cameras and his waiting outside my building to hear that I’d made it to my apartment safely just an itsy-bitsy, little, tiny smidgen endearing.

CHAPTER 11



EVAN

I WAS BACK AT WORK MID-MORNING ON SATURDAY WHEN MY PHONE VIBRATED on my desk.

I turned it over, only to find an unknown number. I declined the call. The politicians always promised to do something about marketing calls, but so far they had failed.

The vibration started up again, so I reached over, answered the call with “No thank you,” and hung up again.

The third time, the caller got a word in before I did. “Why did I wake up to find more pictures of you and some bimbo this morning?”

“Charlie?”

“Oh, so you remember my name, but not a single thing we talked about. Didn’t we agree no more dating?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re on Page Six again, idiot.”

“Oh, that I can explain.”

“Don’t bother,” she hissed. “I don’t work for dumbasses who completely ignore my instructions. I thought we had an agreement. No more bimbos. I’m done with you.”

Sometimes fire had to be fought with fire. “Your resignation is not accepted—even though I hate working with idiots who jump to conclusions without any of the facts.”

“The pictures are right in front of me,” she said, shifting to a calm tone. “And I quote, ‘They arrived separately, hoping we wouldn’t catch sight of Evan McAllister’s latest conquest. We don’t know the name of the latest McAllister Minx. We’ll fill you and as soon as we do.’ End quote. So, you couldn’t keep it in your pants for couple of days?”

“She’s the one,” I blurted.

“I’m sure they all are until you get tired of them,” she quipped.

She was not understanding me. “I was supposed to find a long-term girlfriend who was, as you would say, *respectable*, and I have. Her name is Alexa Borelli.”

The tenor of Charlie’s voice ramped up again. “I give you instructions for a reason. I told you to call me as soon as you found a candidate.”

“I heard you, and I’d planned to call today.”

“My card says *twenty-four hours* for a reason. You should have called me before going out.”

“What’s the big deal?”

She sighed. “I thought it would be clear to you. To make certain the public is going like this girl, she needs to be the right kind of woman—not a gold-digger type or a groupie or a worthless socialite. I need to vet her, go through her social media and history like the press is going to. We need to be sure there aren’t any surprises, any fountains she’s been in.”

“You won’t find anything like that on Alexa.”

She let out a long sigh. “Okay, tell me about her. How did you meet her? Start with that.”

“I’ve known Alexa since we were teenagers. We hung out together a little.”

“And now you’re getting back together?” she asked. “That’s a good story. What broke you up originally, and how did you reconnect?”

“I said we hung out. It was summer in the Hamptons. We never dated, just grew up neighbors and went our separate directions later. She was younger.” The history behind her hatred of me could wait.

“What does she do for a living? Tell me she’s not a do-nothing, trust-fund socialite type, or an Instagram model.”

“You really have something against rich people, don’t you?”

“Not at all. I’d love to be one, but the public relates better to normal people who work for a living.”

“Then you’ll be pleased to hear she has an MBA from Columbia. She

works at Sydney Perlmutter Accounting in Brooklyn and is finishing up her CPA certification. She even helps out at her family's deli on weekends."

"She sounds encouraging. Previously married? Kids? Arrests? Rehab?"

"No on all counts."

"I'll still need to do some digging on her, though." She sighed. "But getting back to following instructions, what was it about staying out of the papers that you didn't understand?"

"It was an accident. The paps have never hung out at DiMaggio's before, and nobody knew I was going to be there."

"Okay, well..." Her voice carried clear disappointment. "It will be up to Bradley to figure out how to get control of the narrative while I do my research."

"I tell you, she's the one," I assured her.

"I'll be back in touch. In the meantime, keep your head down and promise me you'll follow my instructions in the future—all of them."

"I will. When can I take her out again?" At least Charlie hadn't quit on me. I knew enough to know what I didn't know, and this PR stuff was in that category. I needed her kind of help.

"What's the hurry?"

"Saturday night is the best time to be seen. You said we have to be seen together over a respectable period of time, and I want to get the clock started."

She was silent for a moment. "I'll do my checks as quickly as I can, but I'm not promising anything."

"I'm sure you'll like what you find. Alexa's as squeaky clean as they come, but I'll wait to hear from you."

"Damned straight you will. Have a good morning, Mr. McAllister." The line went silent.



ALEXA

ON SATURDAY AFTERNOON, MY PHONE RANG, AND THE NAME ON THE SCREEN was the last one I wanted to see today—Dad. Maybe he was confirming that I

was available for work Sunday morning at the deli.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“No daughter of mine is dating a fucking McAllister if I have anything to say about it. No fucking way.”

The conversation I dreaded had arrived.

“Daddy, it’s not what it looks like.” I’d always planned to start with that sentence. It was what came next that I hadn’t figured out yet. Funny how my first line of defense was the same as Evan had used after his fountain debacle.

“You’re going to tell me it’s not you in those pictures? And he’s not grabbing you?”

I couldn’t lie to him. “No. It’s me, at least in some of them. But we’re just good friends. That’s all. I fell, and he caught me... a little awkwardly.”

“I know what your generation means by *just friends*. You’re doing it on the side, but not shacking up. I won’t have it, I tell you. You have to stop that right now.”

I wanted to admit the truth to him, but that would make me a liar to Evan. Plus, if my dad let the truth out, it would jeopardize the second million for the children. I made up my mind that the children were worth enduring Daddy’s wrath. Maybe at the end of this he’d understand my motivation and forgive me.

“We’re not *shacking up*, as you put it—not ever. But we are dating casually.”

“And you intend to continue?”

I gulped down my fear. “For now, yes.”

“I don’t care if this is you being rebellious or just plain stupid, but I won’t let you contaminate Rachel with this kind of behavior. You are not welcome at the house anymore, and I don’t want you to have any contact with her.”

“Daddy—” I was talking to a line that had already gone dead.

Contaminate my younger sister?

The consequences of this fake-dating arrangement were worse than I’d feared.



EVAN

Twice today I’d declined calls from Natalia.

She had been a very pleasant distraction both times I'd dated her, and there was no doubt in my mind that for the right amount of money, she'd be happy to play the girlfriend part. But she didn't fit the take-home-to-mom profile Charlie had mandated.

The call I'd been waiting for finally came late Saturday afternoon.

"I'm impressed," Charlie said through the line. "You understood what we're looking for. I like her—especially the full-ride-scholarship angle for both her undergrad and masters. That will play well. It tugs at the desire for upward mobility and opportunities. The loss of her mother in an auto accident and the family's struggle after a bankruptcy will both generate sympathy. But..."

I waited for a distinct verdict. When it didn't come, I asked, "But what?"

"I found an old post from her sister that said her family and your family had a falling out."

"That's true," I admitted.

"Can you trust her?"

It was a question I'd already dismissed. "I think so."

"You think so isn't good enough. She can blow this whole deal for you by going along for a while and then pulling out and telling the press you planned it for PR purposes. I don't want you ruining my track record."

I took in a large breath before answering. "I know. And I'm willing to trust her. I told you, I know Alexa. Your track record won't be sullied."

"You knew her as a teenager. The kind of loss she's been through can change a person."

I shook my head. I understood Alexa's loss all too well. "I said I'm sure."

"That's my only concern," Charlie said after a moment. "Since it's your goose that gets cooked here, the call is up to you."

It never paid to show weakness or indecision. "She's the one," I confirmed. "And I plan to start tonight, as I said."

"Go ahead, but keep it toned down. Mild, sweet PDA. I don't care how handsy you are behind closed doors, but no boob grabs like the picture that they got last night. They're not handholds, in public at least."

"She tripped and I caught her awkwardly. That's all."

"It doesn't matter what you meant; it only matters what the camera catches. Hands to yourself. Can you do that?"

I gritted my teeth, not because it was hard, but because she obviously didn't believe me. "Of course."

“Good. Don’t give out her name. Keep the mystery alive. Bradley will be ready to leak it when the time is right—and the fact that you knew each other a long time ago. For this now, that’s all we want. Make sure there are pictures. This will mark the beginning of your renewed relationship for the press.”

“Thanks, Charlie.”

“Have a nice evening, Mr. McAllister.”

“It’s Evan,” I reminded her. But she was gone.

CHAPTER 12



ALEXA

I CHECKED MYSELF BEFORE HEADING OUT TO MEET MY NEW BOYFRIEND FOR our first planned date. Yup, tastefully elegant, by my standards.

I didn't count last night as a date. That had been a business meeting to negotiate terms. This time I had dressed more appropriately for dinner at a fine restaurant. With a scoop neck, the top wasn't office conservative, but it also wasn't anything scandalous. Not that I owned anything like that anyway.

Well, that wasn't true. I gone out for pizza once in a tank top loose enough that with no bra it qualified as a dangerous amount of side-boob. I'd been stressed about the CPA exam the next day, and was it my fault the underwire on my one clean bra had picked that morning to start poking me? I was behind on my laundry and running late—so shoot me.

My boyfriend at the time, Ty, hadn't learned to accept my lateness. So, when I was both late and "*half-dressed*" as he'd put it, he blew a gasket.

Today I wasn't making that mistake. A dark skirt—above the knee, but not too high—and yes, freshly shaved legs. I finished my look with the best simple black heels I owned, a pair that Gwen had picked out with me. The only things flashy were the rows of fake jewels on the straps of the shoes and the fake Gucci bag I'd picked up on Canal Street.

I arrived at the Golden Oak five minutes late and went inside. I was second in line. The young girl at the hostess station showed off her abundant cleavage with more buttons undone than I would be comfortable with. She

added giggles and a few bounces as she shifted side to side.

But Suzanne, according to her name tag, was wasting her display on the two guys ahead of me. They were close enough to the counter that she couldn't see they were holding hands.

After a waiter escorted them in, I walked up. "I'm joining Mr. McAllister, or it could be under Evan."

She grabbed a menu. "If you'll follow me, please."

Evan was the kind of man people noticed. That had to be why she didn't need to consult her table chart. Yes, the billionaire got the good table regardless of when he arrived.

She wended her way to the end of the room, past a partition, and then back to a table set apart a bit from the others, near a window facing the street—an odd choice of table, in my opinion. Perhaps distance from your fellow diners was the perk of privilege.

Unlike last night, I blended in well enough that I didn't get any of the what-are-you-doing-here looks I had at DiMaggio's.

Evan did three things when he saw me. He checked his watch—of course he did, he rose to meet me, and he smiled.

That last one made my heart flutter. His dimple was dangerously adorable, and *adorable* wasn't a word I'd ever associated with Evan before.

He held out both hands.

Not knowing if he meant for me to hug him or not, I grasped his hands rather than wrapping him in an embrace. We hadn't discussed anything about how we'd act together.

"Allie, you look stunning tonight."

The use of his old nickname for me threw me for a loop. "Uh... Thanks. That's...very kind of you." I sounded like a moron.

As we stood awkwardly, the hostess set the menu on the table. "Your server will be with you momentarily, Mr. McAllister," she said breathlessly, without even a glance at me.

Right. I was the sidekick to Evan's star, the nameless McAllister Minx.

He didn't offer so much as a thank you before she left.

I broke the standoff, rose up, and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for the invitation, Ev." It wasn't something I'd called him before, but I had to try something other than his full name.

He held out the chair for me. "Ev?"

"You bastardized my name first." I sat as daintily as I could. "And it

sounds more masculine than Evby or Evie, don't you think?" At least I hadn't used Dev as shorthand for Devil.

He ran his hand across my shoulder as he went back to his seat. The trail of heat unnerved me. I gestured to the window. "You didn't call early enough for a private room this time?"

"Don't look outside," he said sternly. "And smile."

"I'm not a trained seal. You can't just command me." His admonition had the same effect as telling a five year old to not look at candy on the shelf. Yes, I looked, and I caught sight of a guy with telephoto lens on the other side of the street. Shoot me now—more damned paparazzi.

"True, not a seal," he said with a grin a mile wide. "An actress, and a beautiful one who should know enough to not look directly into the camera."

Shifting my eyes back, I ignored his attempt to distract me with a compliment and did my best ventriloquist act by smiling and not moving my lips. "Why didn't you tell me we were going to be in a fishbowl?"

"You can talk normally. They don't read lips."

"Well, this is me talking normally. If you think I'm putting up with this every time we go out, you're nuts." I raised my hand at a passing waiter. "We need some champagne stat."

Evan laughed. "Calm down. We're here because we have to give the press a starting point for our relationship. Just act happy, and we'll get through this."

"Tell me, was this your consultant's bright idea?" I shot back.

"It was."

"I've got a better idea. I can show that jerkface with the camera a starting point—the tip of my middle finger. And then we make some pictures of our own and send them in as the starting point."

"I think it's a little early for a sex tape, don't you?" He smirked.

The titillation of that idea ended very quickly. The last thing I intended to do was let my guard down with this predator. "Not funny. Maybe the celebutantes you usually date are into that kind of thing, but I come from the real world where people would be ashamed of something like that."

"Sorry, it was a joke." He seemed contrite.

"Taking a sex tape off the table, what does being your *girlfriend*..." I added air quotes. "...mean on a day-to-day basis?"

"Very simple. I shower you with attention and compliments, and—"

"And what?"

“Name something that’s giving you a problem right now besides being here with me.”

“You took away the easy one.” I scrunched up my nose and thought. “Hmm... My garbage disposal stopped working, and I have a drip from the ceiling in my bathroom.”

“I can have people at your place in an hour to fix those things. It’s simple. You need something, I provide it—along with the occasional appropriate gift.”

It was time to draw a line as my blood pressure rose. “Thank you for the offer, but I won’t accept any gifts. I earned everything I have, and I plan to keep it that way. Your father taught me a hard life lesson. We lost everything because Dad owed money he couldn’t pay back. I’ll never owe anyone money or favors—not ever. The super will take care of my apartment just like everyone else, thank you very much.”

He pursed his lips, but didn’t argue further.

The waiter I’d flagged down hustled back to our table, interrupting my rant. He set down the champagne bucket, uncorked the bottle with a flourish, and poured for us. “I hope this is satisfactory, Mr. McAllister, sir.”

Was there anybody here who didn’t know Evan’s name?

Evan pointed in my direction. “Your question should be directed to my lovely date.”

Damn him. There was that compliment again. I downed a swallow and summoned my ladylike manners. “Your name?” I asked the waiter.

He settled the bottle in the ice bucket he’d brought and quaked in his well-polished shoes. “Stanley, ma’am.”

“Stanley, this is lovely. Thank you for bringing it so quickly.”

He bowed and backed away, disappearing between tables.

“What did I do to scare him?” I asked.

“You’re with me, and that makes you powerful.”

I scrunched my brow and tried to comprehend that while I gulped down the rest of my bubbly. This could be an upside I hadn’t considered to dating Evan McAllister, fake or not. I held out my empty glass. Evan was nearest the champagne.

He lifted the bottle. “Geez. Slow down. This isn’t a race.”

“This is my first,” I objected. “And if you think I’m putting myself out there to be plastered on Page Six again without a second, you’re demented.”

He poured a glass, not quite as full as I would have liked, but he didn’t

argue. “Point taken, and I’m sorry that happened. Just to be clear, last night wasn’t planned. I had no idea they’d be there.”

I appraised him over my glass. “I believe you.” I took a sip.

“Back to giving you gifts,” he said. “That’s what I would do for anybody I care about. And being the sensitive, sophisticated, understanding woman you are, you’d accept said gifts, not insult me by refusing them or any help I could provide. One of the perks of dating someone with my resources is that I can share them with you. So you *will* accept them.”

I’d be an ungrateful bitch if I didn’t agree, so I nodded. The argument could wait. Another photographer was outside the window, closer this time.

Evan’s head didn’t swivel, but his eyes did. “Don’t look,” he said between gritted teeth. It was that commanding tone again.

I sighed. “Might I make a suggestion?”

He lifted his glass. “Suggest away.”

“You know, it seems like you don’t take criticism very well.”

His jaw tightened. “Is that a suggestion?”

“An observation. Perhaps you could—”

He didn’t let me finish. “And you don’t take direction well. The job isn’t that difficult. Just follow directions.”

That right there encapsulated the problem. I’d agreed to be his admittedly fake girlfriend, but he wasn’t treating me like one. I was just a lackey to him. A prop. Even a director had more respect for his actors than he had for me.

I stood, rounded the table, and leaned into his ear. “I’m not an employee you can order around. You’re the worst boyfriend ever, cold as ice. It’s no surprise you can’t keep a woman a whole month.”

“What?”

“I’m outta here.”

CHAPTER 13



EVAN

MY HEART RACED. SHE COULDN'T LEAVE. THAT WOULD DESTROY everything. I jerked to my feet, strode after her, and grabbed her wrist.

She glared with dagger eyes and whispered, "Let go of me, or I'll start a scene that'll end up on page one."

I released her wrist and for the first time in my life, pleaded. "Please, Allie. I need you."

As the noise of the restaurant softened, she looked around at our obvious audience and then back to me, placing a hand on my chest. "On one condition," she whispered.

"Anything."

"We're partners," she said softly.

I pulled her hand up to brush a kiss across her knuckles. "Partners," I repeated.

"Well," she announced loudly, "if the crème brûlée is that good, we should stay."

The conversations around us started up again, and my thundering heart began to slow.

I held her chair for her, placed my hands on her shoulders after she sat, and breathed in her ear, "Thank you, partner."

When I retook my seat, she stood, and my throat went dry. What the fuck had I done wrong now? She pulled her chair around the table to sit by me.

“Scoot over a smidge.”

I moved. “A smidge?”

“A Brooklyn term for a little.” She slid into her seat and our thighs touched, sending a jolt up my leg. When her hand slid over onto my thigh, my cock jerked to attention.

Two could play this game. I kissed her ear. “What are you doing?”

“Getting cozy. Way over there, I wasn’t sure you could hear me. Was it hard hearing me from that distance?” Her hand tightened, and we both knew what was hard about this situation.

“A little,” I admitted. “I hear you loud and clear now.”

She leaned close. “My suggestion is that you warn me ahead of time what the plan is and what we might face. You didn’t prepare me for the vultures last night, or the fishbowl tonight. The next time you do that, I’m yelling something entirely inappropriate, and you’ll wish you’d only gotten caught in a fountain again. Got it?”

“Understood. Here’s the deal. Tonight, I knew they’d be camped outside and requested this table to be sure we could be seen. It’s just a romantic dinner date, for the record.”

She didn’t object to my arm around her, which I counted as progress. In fact, when she looked up into my eyes, what I saw could almost pass for desire. “What’s in tonight’s script?” She laid her hand in mine.

“A quiet dinner. We whisper sweet nothings in each other’s ears. Maybe a kiss, which we’ll both enjoy, and we drive off.”

“Isn’t kissing on the first date a little too forward?”

“This is our second date, remember?”

Her brows knitted. “You have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

“Problem solving is what I do.”

“Maybe on the cheek. I don’t know if I can pull off a full-on kiss without puking all over your very nice suit.”

I laughed. “Very funny. You had to kiss the leading man in your college play, didn’t you?” I’d been jealous of the guy at the time. “Actual kisses are a part of the character.”

I could see the wheels turning as she contemplated for a second. “Sweet nothings, huh?”

I nodded.

She leaned in, her breath hot on my ear. “If you use tongue, I’ll bite it off.”

Laughing, I whispered back, “We’ll go slow.” I wouldn’t kiss her deeply tonight, but I couldn’t promise we wouldn’t progress.

That provoked a giggle. “In your dreams.”

She had no idea how dirty my dreams could get.

We ordered when Stanley reappeared, and our conversation switched to a normal conversation about the weather, today’s events, and the Yankees versus the Mets.

When the food arrived, she closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Her voice was soft, almost inaudible. “I am grateful today that I landed a job to earn a million dollars for the children.”

When she reopened her eyes, I added. “And I’m grateful that you accepted, but wasn’t that yesterday?”

She shrugged and forked a green bean. “It happened after dinner yesterday, so it goes on today’s list.”

As we ate, she became increasingly at ease in her part. We held hands and exchanged laughs, while she whispered things that I could tell were generally meant to keep me from getting my hopes up that she would ever stop disliking me.

In retaliation, I pulling engaging blushes from her each time I told her how beautiful she was. Another of Gramps’ sayings made sense to me now. He’d told me once that bestowing a kindness wasn’t giving something away, because those things had a way of coming back around. I’d felt compelled to help Alexa in the past, and now she was helping me. There was a symmetry in this.

She leaned in again, “I don’t like you.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Allie.” I found her taunts amusing, and she was supposed to be a long-term girlfriend, so I had a lot of time to overcome resistance. Also, not liking was better than hating. So far, her most glaring flaw was that she was a Mets fan.

“I’m considering a different approach our charitable giving, and I’d like your help.”

“With this—” She circled her finger. “—thing were doing, I’m out of spare time.”

“I’d like to take a look at pulling back from all the national programs and reallocating to smaller charities, such as yours—local efforts that will directly impact our fellow New Yorkers.”

She looked at me over her glass. “You’re starting to sound like a

campaign speech.”

“I’m serious. But my problem is—rather, I could use your help identifying candidate charities in the city, maybe extending to the tri-state area. I’d need to talk to them first and decide if resourcing them more heavily made sense.”

She contemplated for a few seconds. “If you’re serious about this, I’ll draw up a list.”

“I look forward to it.” It seemed like the right time, so I snaked a hand behind her neck and leaned in. “I’m going to kiss you.”

She closed her eyes.

I felt her relax as our lips met. I kept it very brief, as a test. “I’m grateful that we came back together,” I breathed as I pulled away.

She sighed, and some doubt lingered in her eyes.

“Too soon?” I asked.

“I guess not.” She blinked. “But I have another question. Who have you told about us? I mean, the real story?”

“Only my brother...and Albert.”

“Not your father or this consultant person?”

“Nope, and its staying that way. What about on your side?”

“My two best friends, Chelsea and Gwen. But none of my family.”

I nodded. “What will your father think when he finds out?”

She rolled her eyes. “He already saw the pictures from last night.” She shook her head. “I told him we were dating, and he may have had an aneurysm over the phone. I’m not welcome in his house. He doesn’t want me to *contaminate* my sister is how he put it.”

I quickly changed the subject, and the rest of the dinner was quite pleasant. I was able to finally see how the Alexa I’d helped from a distance had grown up to achieve her life goals. She was particularly animated when talking about what she hoped to accomplish in her community as a CPA.

We finished this dinner the same way as last night, with orders of crème brûlée.

“Oh, and we’ll also want one to go,” Alexa told our waiter.

I raised a brow. “Still hungry?”

“For Albert. We’ll work up to having him join us for dessert.”

“Right.” I should have remembered that Alexa was different. Not a single one of my previous dates had ever suggested sharing with my driver. Nor had I thought of it.

“What should I expect when we leave?” Alexa asked after I called Albert to tell him to drive up in the front.

I finished signing the check. “They’ll most likely yell questions and want your name. Don’t answer. Trust me, you don’t want them to know yet.”

“No name. Anything else?”

“No matter what they say or ask, don’t respond.”

“The last time that guy grabbed me.”

I understood cameras and shouting were the norm, but touching or grabbing was out of bounds, and they knew that. “If it happens again, you scream my name, and I flatten the guy. Problem solved.”

“Hitting is never a good idea.”

“A gentleman protects his lady. No ifs, ands, or buts. Some people need a more forceful approach than others to learn a lesson.” I sealed this sentiment with a brief kiss on her knuckles that she didn’t pull away from. “You’re an amazing woman, Alexa, and I’d never let anything happen to you.”

I’d picked her because she was the opposite of the women I normally pursued. And after only two meals with her, I had to wonder why I’d ever gone after the others. Alexa was so much more real than any of them. She had a passion that extended beyond clothes, events, or the bank accounts of the men she dated.



ALEXA

THIS TIME, WHEN WE EXITED THE RESTAURANT I WAS PREPARED.

Evan’s prediction about the paparazzi was right. They were aggressive with their questioning and cameras in our faces. Only one was respectful enough to take the pictures from a safe distance. Calling them a pack of hyenas wasn’t far off, but at least the greasy-haired blond wasn’t among them. We hurried to the car. I kept my mouth zipped and Evan’s arm shielded my face from at least some of them. This time I paid attention to my feet and didn’t trip, thank God.

Albert opened the back door of the car and provided a buffer from the crowd as we got in. I slid in first, and Evan followed. It wasn’t until the door

closed, shutting out the yelling of the crowd, that I realized how rapidly my heart was beating.

Evan took my hand in his. “Deep breath in, deep breath out,” he said. He added his other hand on top of mine.

I was comforted by his composure and willed myself to take the breaths he requested. Slowly, my anxiety diminished.

Albert climbed into the driver’s seat. “Where to?”

“Brooklyn,” Evan said.

As Albert pulled away from the curb, I spoke, “Albert stop on the next block, if you find a spot.”

Evan shot me a questioning glance. “I’m sure we can find a more secluded place to make out.”

I slapped his shoulder. “Control yourself. We’re giving Albert his dessert.”

“No need, ma’am,” Albert said.

I pulled my hand loose from Evan’s grasp and handed the bag with the dessert over the seat.

Albert didn’t reach for it.

I shook the bag. “I insist.”

“Go ahead, Albert,” Evan said. “What the lady wants, she gets. We’ll wait until you’re done.”

“Thank you, Miss Alexa.” Albert took it and inhaled the custard so fast I was afraid he might choke.

It was delicious, but I realized he was most likely trying to appease me without getting in trouble with Evan for delaying us too much. “And one more thing,” I added, pulling a box of crayons from my purse. “For Jessica. I liked coloring when I was her age.”

Albert beamed as he accepted the gift. “Why, thank you, Miss Alexa. I know she’ll love them.”

As we drove back to Brooklyn, I felt a pride about this evening that I hadn’t known since receiving my acceptance letter to Columbia. My SAT scores hadn’t been great, so it had been a huge surprise and a real achievement to have done well enough on the application essay to get in. It had been the key achievement that led to all I’d accomplished since.

Evan was silent until we turned onto my street. “I’m sorry I didn’t warn you about the fishbowl dining experience.”

I shrugged. “Yeah. You said that.” I almost apologized for being bitchy

about it, but he didn't deserve that. I thanked Albert for the ride when he parked.

Evan helped me out of the car. "I'll walk you up."

"No, you won't." I pushed him aside. But touching was a mistake because the feel of that hard wall of muscle under his dress shirt made me reconsider my words. Maybe walking me to my door would be okay. It wasn't the same as inviting him in.

"Playing hard to get?"

"More like impossible. You won't be getting me, tonight or any other night, remember?" I reminded myself as much as him. "Besides, you're way overdressed for this building."

"That reminds me. Albert?"

Albert nodded and came around to open the trunk. He pulled out a garment bag.

"And what is that?" I asked.

"Those," he said slowly, "are wardrobe items for dinner."

"What's wrong with this?" I gestured up and down my outfit.

"Nothing. You look gorgeous."

There was that word. I took a breath. "You can't go showering me with gifts. Albert, put that back. I don't want any of them."

Albert looked at Evan, but didn't put the bag away.

"Consider these costumes on loan, if you want. You'll get more shortly," Evan said. "You can't wear the same outfit every evening. Albert will carry them for you."

I wasn't going to win this argument, at least not tonight, so I shook my head and put my hand out. "I don't need any help. Thank you very much."

Albert handed me the bag, and I slung it over my shoulder, uninterested in continuing to argue on the sidewalk.

Evan backed away. "Please text when you get safely inside your unit."

I nodded. "I will. Thank you for dinner." *Be strong.* I turned before I could give in and ask him to walk me up.

Tonight I'd bested the Shark of Wall Street. I hadn't meant it to be a test, but I'd pushed him to the limit when I threatened to walk out, and he'd given in. I'd won a round with him, something almost nobody could claim.

I'd reacted without thinking, and it would have been terrible to walk out on him and lose the second million dollars for the fund, but him calling me his partner had rescued me from that mistake.

Then there had been his request that I help him target charities to fund.

My first reaction had been that it sounded like he wanted me to do his job for him, but that had been quickly replaced by excitement that I'd be getting a say in the giving power behind his company and would be able to impact many more people than just those Three Sisters reached.

Were we really partners in this? That would take some time to figure out.

When I reached my door, I couldn't resist the temptation and unzipped the garment bag. "Son of a bitch. He can't expect..." More than a half-dozen dresses greeted me, and none of them was from Target.

CHAPTER 14



ALEXA

WHEN FRIDAY MORNING DAWNED A WEEK LATER, I FELT BETTER ABOUT HOW my life was going than I had in a long time. Things had been smooth at work, Chelsea told me we'd had additional donors approach us about the fund, and Evan had been good about warning me what to expect when we went out—which had been almost every night. And on the home front, I hadn't had any close encounters with Pinky again. I was four for four on safe returns in the evening. And then there was the expansion of my wardrobe.

The morning after our date at the Golden Oak, a delivery had arrived—another dozen dresses, all in the correct size and with labels I could never consider buying for myself. Calling Evan to complain had only resulted in a reminder that an actress wore what the wardrobe department provided and to not argue about his gifts. Running my hands over the luxurious fabric had squelched any further objections. Admittedly, I'd even smiled as I pushed my old things aside to make room in my closet. This part of being an actress I could get used to.

Though I'd definitely need to learn not finish every morsel of food we were served or I'd soon need a whole new wardrobe. Wouldn't that serve Evan right?

When I turned on my phone, it immediately chimed that I had text messages.

EVAN: Good morning, gorgeous.

That was his typical first-of-the-morning text, and what had originally annoyed me was growing a little bit more tolerable every day.

EVAN: I hope you have a wonderful day.

Rather than dwell on whether he was sincere or not, I opened the first of the websites I now checked every morning to see the latest progress in our joint operation to fool the public into believing Evan was a normal guy.

Several pictures of us exiting last night's restaurant popped up.

One week now and the latest McAllister Minx is still around.

This foxy lady and the devilish Shark of Wall Street have been seen out and about, every night. The latest pictures are from Le Cirque, where the couple was quite affectionate. We've learned she prefers lamb to steak, and her first name is Allie, but so far our sources have yet to come up with her full name. Rest assured we will find out. Stay tuned as we count the days she lasts. If the Shark's pattern holds, she'll be replaced by an old flame before the end of the month. Join the conversation below and vote for your pick as to who will repeat as a Minx and replace the Shark's latest meal. Bonus question, how long will she last? We'll share the results of our survey tomorrow.

A list of women's names followed: Natalia, Aurora, and Samantha. I stopped reading. Printing that my name was Allie meant someone had overheard Evan calling me that at dinner. Since nobody knew me by that name, it didn't bother me much. Vote on who was going to replace me? And how long I'd last? That was sick. I closed the browser window. Also what was wrong with liking lamb? They certainly had me pegged as a loser. But they were wrong. I'd see to that.

On the bright side, I'd completed a week with Evan and the paparazzi still hadn't found out my name, which was wonderful. Being mobbed outside restaurants was tough enough, but I knew the camera jackals also liked to

hang out around people's homes and work. Both of those scared the ever-living shit out of me, and having my name would be the gateway to them putting it all together.

Twice already we'd been followed, but both times Albert had lost them. How long would I be safe from them finding out where I lived? When I'd agreed to this, I had no idea how bad being in the spotlight could be. Now it was too late.

Pulling out my hair dryer, I recalled something my mom had always said, "*Winners look on the bright side; losers don't.*" At least this acting gig had a side benefit. I was well fed and saving on grocery money. That seemed bright to me.

I missed her. Before turning on the dryer, I wiped a tear away. I'd promised Mom I'd always be strong.



THE THREE SISTERS FUND HAD A TOP EFFICIENCY RATING BECAUSE WE ALL donated our fundraising and management time. Everything we raised went to the children.

That hadn't stopped Chelsea from giving me a big Starbucks gift card in appreciation of the McAllister gift, though. And when I opened the door to Perlmutter Accounting this morning, I carried fruits of that card, three steaming cups of Starbucks' best mocha latte from down the street. It was the second time this week.

Rita Perlmutter greeted me inside the door with a bright smile and her arms out. "You're an angel. Caffeine, just what I need."

"Not again," I said, spying the bouquet of flowers on the side table.

"Quite the admirer you have," Rita noted.

The first delivery had been sweet, and the second very nice, but flowers every day was going too far in my book. "I'll get him to stop." *Somehow...* So far my complaints had done no good.

She held the cup I offered her to her nose. "Smells heavenly. Is it mocha?"

I put the other two down. "Only the best for you and Sydney." I'd heard them lamenting once how much they craved mochas, but how irresponsible it would be to buy them from Starbucks. Sydney had done the math on two a

day and decided it was a luxury they could put off.

“What’s the commotion out here?” Sydney demanded, emerging from his office.

Rita held up her cup. “Look what Alexa brought us.”

“I don’t want one,” Sydney said, shaking his head. “Alexa, you have to stop this.”

Rita scooted the second cup closer. “Goody. Two for me.”

“I meant next time.” Sydney moved fast for a man his age, plucking the remaining cup from the table and scurrying back to his office.

“I say you can spoil us any day of the week,” Rita whispered as she handed me the remaining latte. “So tell me about him.” She pointed at the flowers.

“Just a guy who’s been hitting on me.”

She put a finger behind her ear. “And?”

I started simple. “He’s from Manhattan.”

“From Manhattan, you say?” Rita turned over the paper on her desk and tapped it. “Might he be tall and handsome like this man?”

It was a picture of Evan and me from two nights ago. I swallowed hard.

“The Shark of Wall Street,” she read from the paper. “Sounds like a proper rogue.” She giggled. “Not judging. I once dated this boy from the Bronx, and he had a motorcycle. My father was fit to be tied.” She fanned herself. “Before Sydney, of course.”

I spent the next ten minutes avoiding detailed answers regarding me and Evan before I finally made it to my desk and was able call the flower sender.

“Hey there, gorgeous,” he answered.

“You have got to stop with the flowers,” I told him. “It’s getting ridiculous.”

“Every day for a month would be ridiculous, but every day for a week is merely romantic.”

I hated that I agreed with him. “Does that mean you’ll stop next week.”

“No promises.”

CHAPTER 15



EVAN

I HIT MY HOME GYM EARLY THE FOLLOWING FRIDAY MORNING. AS I BEGAN lifting weights, my mind wandered. After three weeks of fake-dating Alexa, we were getting into a groove. We'd go out to dinner at a location that got us photographed and into the gossip rags. Then we'd drive across the river to Brooklyn where we'd argue about whether I could walk her up to her door or not.

She always won, or rather I let her win.

The yell came down the hall. "Anybody home?"

It was my stupid brother, Noah. Who else would be here before breakfast? This was one of those days I wished we hadn't given each other keys. "In here," I yelled back.

He came around the corner. "I can count for you if you run out fingers."

"Fuck off," I grunted at the top of a press. "What are you doing here so early?"

"That doesn't look that hard."

I rolled my eyes. "I'll tell you what, while I'm pressing, you can use the squat rack. It's open." I had my own full set of equipment to save time. I could fit in a session whenever I wanted.

"Nah. I got enough exercise climbing the stairs to this place."

"You're full of shit."

He shrugged. "Well, I thought about it. I only used the elevator because I

didn't want to be late."

"Late for what?"

He held up a binder. "Late telling you how photogenic you and Alexa are. There's so much material on you two, I started a photo album for you."

"Ass." I went back to lifting.

He produced a bottle from behind his back. "And, I'm paying off our bet."

"That's more like it."

He set the bottle down. "The album will be great to show people when they want to know how you two met, especially your kids. And then there's the grandkids."

"Kids?" I coughed as I lowered the weights. "What the fuck?"

"From what I'm reading here, you guys are hot and heavy. I mean, the way she looks at you in these pictures... It isn't platonic."

I pushed out another rep. "She's a good actress."

"Right. So what are you doing with her next week?"

"More of the same, I think."

He circled the rowing machine. "Ya know, Page Six thinks you'll be going out with that jewelry sales girl again for the third time pretty soon. Wow, was she hot."

"Natalia? They can think whatever they want. I'll be happy to prove them wrong. And her sister worked at the jewelry store. Natalia was a model."

"Whatever. When you get her horizontal, what she does during the day doesn't matter, am I right?" He sat down on the rowing machine. "How does this thing work?"

"A wimp like you can't handle it."

He put his feet up on the plates. "It can't be that hard."

"Grab the handle and pull while you also push with your legs. The seat will slide back."

He did a stroke and then dropped the handle. "Are you going to keep up this charade with Alexa as your—" He made air quotes. "—long-term, respectable girlfriend?"

"Yup," I grunted with another press. "You can't stop after one on that machine."

He did another stroke.

"The distance on the screen is in meters. Keep it up until it says you've gone a thousand."

As I expected, he quit after only a few strokes. “I don’t have time right now.”

“Right.”

“Did I tell you about Ursula?”

I didn’t bother answering. It wouldn’t do any good.

“She was German. Very organized and disciplined, those Germans. She had like a timeline and checklist for everything. She even typed out her recipes.”

I moved to the bicep-curl machine.

“Well, she broke up with me very suddenly. No notice. None.”

“Maybe the German girls are smarter than you thought,” I quipped.

Noah acted like he didn’t hear me. “I mean, we were having a good time and all—very good, actually. I even tried her recipes. Typed or not, they didn’t make any sense—grams and shit—but she still liked my cooking. At least she said she did. And showers with her were something else. She had this stroke she’d do with—”

“Is this going somewhere?”

“—with her hands and a bar of soap, and it was to die for. Like literally the best thing ever.”

“I get it,” I said, shaking my head.

“But she snored. And then all of a sudden it was over. I’d been a dumb fuck and hadn’t caught on. Call me clueless.”

“Okay, you’re clueless.” I moved the selector pin on the machine to add another five pounds.

“Real relationships are like pushing a rock up a hill. There’s no standing still. You gotta make progress until you get to the top, or splat.”

“Splat?”

“Yeah, the stone rolls back over you—*splat*, it’s over. Ya see, Ursula had this timeline in her mind, like by a certain time if I didn’t have her move in with me, it wasn’t a real relationship.”

“And you didn’t?”

“Like I said, she snored, and she’d hinted that she wanted to reorganize my closet. Are you kidding me? Organize my fucking closet? So, no. Then, *splat*. She moved on, ’cuz it was a rule of relationships I didn’t understand.” He pointed at himself. “Clueless. I still miss those showers, though.” He checked his watch. “Anyway, speaking of moving on, I gotta get going or I’ll miss my yoga class.”

I started laughing so hard I had to abandon the curl. “Yoga?”
“Don’t knock it. The class is like ninety-nine-percent girls.” Then he was
gone.

CHAPTER 16



ALEXA

THE NEXT FRIDAY MORNING I WAS NOW THREE WEEKS INTO MY ACTING GIG, and the tabloids still hadn't figured out my name. I'd finished preparing for work when I picked up my phone.

CHELSEA: Going to miss you.

GWEN: Chelsea has this coupon for free hot stone massages. I'm using yours since you'd rather stay around for your boyfriend than hang out with your awesome friends.

I'd forgotten that I'd canceled on the Catskills trip with them this weekend—another price I had to pay for dating Evan to benefit the children and cross off one of my life goals. *Fake dating*, I reminded myself.

ME: Enjoy the weekend, and don't come back with burn marks from those stones.

I was a bit bummed to miss our annual girl time, but I couldn't afford to be away from the scene for too long, if I wanted to make sure this continued to work. Now that I was established as Evan's latest conquest—God, I hated that term—we didn't have to be seen out together every night and were skipping one here and there. Allie, last name unknown, the latest McAllister

Minx, was no longer a daily item on the gossip sites, and perhaps with time it would all stop. I needed some actress with a substance-abuse problem to crash her car and cut all her hair off, or another Kardashian to get a divorce, so the paparazzi would move on.

Now that we'd settled into things, Evan had become less bossy and our routine was easier. We spent our free evenings discussing what we knew or had found out about the local charities on my list. Evan was a sponge, soaking up all he could on the subject.

Although I needed to leave early so I'd have time to bring the Perlmutter's a treat on my way in, I still took time this morning to engage in my new favorite activity: annoying Evan. I switched over to that text thread.

Evan's message had come in almost an hour ago.

EVAN: Good morning, gorgeous.

ME: Is it? I haven't opened the shades yet.

EVAN: Gramps used to say any day he was vertical instead of horizontal was a good day.

ME: He sounds like a wise man.

EVAN: The wisest.

ME: Are you at work already?

I knew the answer to that before it arrived.

EVAN: Naturally.

ME: How long have you been up?

EVAN: Tooooo long.

ME: Did you find it hard waking up that early?

I couldn't avoid the occasional erection joke to keep things light. At least Gwen had promised me it would keep things light. It took longer for the next message to arrive.

EVAN: Is Thor still out of action?

Not good. He was turning this around on me. This was the problem with following Gwen's advice. A while back, after I made two erection jokes in a

row, Evan had asked me about sex toys, and I'd had to admit to owning Thor, a Christmas gift from Gwen. But these days Thor with a busted motor, or whatever was wrong, wasn't as helpful as he had once been.

ME: Still broken.

EVAN: We should get you a replacement. I hear they're cheaper in three packs.

I was afraid his use of the word *we* meant I wasn't going to get a choice in the matter.

ME: Maybe later. Not the top of my list. So is your hand tired? Or any other part sore?

EVAN: What's your schedule today?

ME: I have a 9:30 with one of our clients. He's having banking issues.

EVAN: Sounds interesting.

ME: Loan applications are never interesting.

EVAN: I'm an expert on loan applications.

ME: What about you? Anything going on?

EVAN: Nothing much. I plan to spend the day finding a way to buy Luxembourg. And then dinner and play with my girl.

ME: Play with me?

I dialed his number before this became a problem.

"Hi, gorgeous," he answered.

"There's nobody around, so you can lay off the compliments."

"I have to keep in practice so it becomes automatic when we're out in public," he countered. "Anyway, it's true, and we agreed I'd be honest with you. Calling you anything less than gorgeous would be a lie. My Gramps said sometimes honesty hurts, but it's still the only way."

His grandfather certainly had a lot of pithy sayings. Evan's insistence that he meant his praise honestly warmed me more than it should have. "Uh-huh." But I had to draw a line on his after-dinner comment. "I refuse to be played with."

"Fat fingers. I meant *a* play. I have tickets to *The Lion King*."

“That sounds better.” Actually, it sounded great, but I wouldn’t admit that. I took us to the important topic.

“But you can’t just show up at my work to pick me up.”

“I’m not just showing up; I’m asking permission.”

“Why?”

“We have to eat early, before the show, and why wouldn’t a true dotting boyfriend want to come by his gorgeous girlfriend’s work for a visit?”

“The answer is no. The type of small-business client we have would be scared of a slick Manhattan shark like you. And besides, if the paparazzi followed you there, it would ruin everything.”

“I’ll skip the coat and tie. How’s that?”

I took a deep breath to calm down. “What part of no don’t you understand? I’ll get off early, and you can pick me up at my apartment.”

“Ouch. That’s harsh. You obviously didn’t sleep well. Maybe we do need to get you a replacement for that broken personal appliance of yours.”

A knock came from the door. “Someone’s here. I gotta go.”

“At this time of the morning?”

The image in my peephole was Mr. Zhukov, our building super, and someone behind him.

“It’s the building super. I gotta go—wait. Will there be photographers tonight?”

“No, and I’ll be by at five.”

As I unlocked the door, I seethed that I’d let my temper get the better of me, and Evan had rightly called me on it. I had to be better about that.

“Are you all right?” Mr. Zhukov asked when I opened the door.

“Fine. I was just arguing with my sister on the phone.”

“It happens. My brother and me, we sometimes argue too,” Zhukov said as I opened the door wider. “We’re here to fix that leak in your bathroom ceiling.”

I checked my watch. I was supposed to meet Mr. Perez at the office in a little less than an hour. “How long will this take? I have to leave for work pretty soon.”

The guy behind Zhukov scratched his gut. “No telling, missy, until I get a look at it.”

“Okay, take a look then.” I moved aside and waved them in.

“This here’s Frank,” Zhukov explained.

Frank went in the bathroom first, hitching up his pants, which had been

riding low enough to show his butt crack. Zhukov looked in from the doorway. “What do you think, Frank?”

“You said this was simple,” Frank complained as he hitched up his pants again. Somebody needed to educate him about the proper use of a belt.

“It is simple,” Zhukov said, pointing up. “That’s the leak, and there ain’t no leak in the unit above.”

Frank wasn’t amused. “I can see that, but until I get inside this ceiling, I don’t know what the fuck were dealing with.”

“We better get started then,” Zhukov said.

I backed away. “I have work today. How long will it take?”

Frank hitched up his pants. “Missy, like I said, until I get in there I don’t know shit.”

Zhukov turned to me. “Do you want us to come back another day?”

I nodded. “Tomorrow would be better.”

The scowl on Frank’s face telegraphed the answer. “I don’t work weekends.”

No weekday would be much better than this one. They were all bad, and the leak had steadily gotten worse. I remembered Evan’s offer to send someone over to fix this. His guys probably worked weekends. It was tempting, but that wouldn’t be true to who I was. I couldn’t compromise my principles and accept charity from him. And I couldn’t afford to pay Evan back for whatever he spent on plumbers to fix the drip.

“Fine, I got better things to do. I’m telling the owner it was your call to put it off,” Zhukov said, reminding me that this was most likely only happening because I’d sent a complaint about the leak over his head to the owner.

The decision was easy. I controlled my destiny, and I didn’t need a McAllister’s help. The landlord was responsible, so Mr. Butt Crack it was.

“No. Today is fine.” I picked up my purse. I couldn’t reschedule Mr. Perez again.

“You hurry off to work,” Zhukov said. “Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll lock up when he’s done.”

I was halfway down the hall when I heard Zhukov say, “I hate fuckin’ complainers.”

“I hear ya,” Butt Crack replied.



EVAN

MIDMORNING, I REREAD MY TEXT CONVERSATION WITH ALEXA FROM EARLIER for the fifth time.

The part about her broken vibrator aroused me every time I read it. She had named the thing Thor. Did that imply it was gargantuan?

With my curiosity piqued, I located an online store for such items and started browsing. *Gargantuan* was certainly one of the choices, along with more variations than I would have guessed.

“Got a minute?” Martin asked from door, surprising me.

I quickly closed the window on my screen. “Sure. What’s up?”

In the three weeks since he’d gotten my job, Martin had been down to my office several times asking for advice. In the past, I’d always thought he had more self-confidence than his lack of experience warranted. But his questions showed more self-awareness, and I liked the fact that he now understood his limitations better. He was therefore less likely to get the company into a bad position by rushing into a deal.

He walked in and leaned on one of the chairs opposite my desk, but didn’t sit. “Are you really sticking around?” He glanced around the office. “If my dad had stuck me in a shithole job like this, I woulda quit already.” It wasn’t the first time he’d suggested I was foolish for staying.

“Family.” It was the only answer I felt he needed.

“Okay then. It’s about Northern Aerospace.”

“Okay.” I motioned to the chair. “How can I help?” It also helped alleviate some of the boredom of this job to be thinking about the kind of deals I’d been immersed in before that unfortunate fountain incident.

He remained standing. “Could you spare the time to sit in on a meeting with them and give me your thoughts?”

This wasn’t as good as spending time with Alexa, but it was the next-best thing. I’d trained myself to keep a neutral tone when it was called for, and this was one of those times. “It depends. When?”

“Ten to noon.”

I clicked open my calendar, which only showed a call scheduled at three, and scratched my chin. “Yeah, I can do that, but I can’t stay if it runs late,” I lied. I had way too much free time here and was still working on the company-reputation plan Jeffrey had insisted I needed to come up with.

“Great.” Martin grinned. I’d made his day. “Upstairs, conference room three, and don’t tell your dad. I don’t want him thinking I lack confidence or anything.”

I nodded. “Not a word.” Especially since Dad had been adamant about me only involving myself in this community-outreach position until he thought the time was right.

Martin turned to go, but stopped at the door. “We missed you last night at the Golden Nugget.”

I’d accompanied him and Jerry there numerous times. It was his go-to bar for picking up girls, and he rarely struck out.

He put a finger in the air. “Oh, I forgot, you’re not available right now. You’re seeing that girl, what’s her name? You know going out too many times in a row with the same girl is going to ruin your rep.”

“I’m doing fine, thank you.” Sticking with Alexa rather than a rotating cast of arm candy was meant to improve my *rep* as he put it, but Martin was oblivious.

“Do I know her?” he asked.

“No. She’s an acquaintance from way back.” Just the word *acquaintance* made her sound more sophisticated than some of my previous dates. Oddly, I hadn’t chosen to use the word *friend*, although that’s what we had once been.

“From the pictures, she looks scorchin’ hot. What’s her name? Are her tits real? Last night I scored this chick with the biggest rack.” He held his hands out in front of his chest to emphasize the point.

I checked my watch. “I’ll see you at ten.” I picked up my desk phone.

“If not chicks, then we can get drunk and ponder the universe.”

“Not this week.” When he got the hint and left, I put the phone down. A month ago I would have found his exploits entertaining, but not today.

His suggestion that he was available to bat around my problem had some merit, though. He had even more experience with women than I did, and he might have some insight on how I could come clean with Alexa and not have her hate me. We often came up with novel ideas while brainstorming together.

Diane had left a note on my desk to call my brother, so I picked up my cell instead.

“Hi. Hold on,” Noah answered. “Give me a sec. I’ve got to take this,” he said to someone on the other end. “Sorry, I’m back. What’s up?”

“I’m returning your call.” I felt like adding *dipshit* but didn’t. My brother

was easily distracted.

“Yeah. Right. I was calling to give you a heads up. You’re coming to dinner on Sunday, right?”

“I think so.” Mom had called to schedule it, and I’d agreed. It would be a family dinner at Mom and Dad’s, just the four of us, which wasn’t unusual, but also wasn’t a frequent occurrence.

“Dad’s asked me twice now who you’re seeing, and I’ve told him I didn’t know anything. So, expect questions about that.”

“Thanks.” Noah’s warning suddenly made me want to schedule an out-of-town meeting for Sunday to conflict with the dinner. Dad wouldn’t be happy to hear I was dating Alexa, not one bit.

“But that’s not the big thing that’s bothering him,” Noah added.

“And what is that?” I asked, hoping this wouldn’t start him on a long-winded answer.

“He asked me if any of the board members had reached out to me after the last meeting—the phone one about your little fountain episode.”

Noah hadn’t mentioned it, but since the three of us were all on the board, it made sense that he’d been included in the call that resulted in me being demoted. Thinking of that day made my teeth clench all over again. “Why?”

“He thinks a group on the board are preparing to vote him out.”

I nodded along. “He mentioned that.”

“Evan, Dad is tough as nails, but this has him scared. So don’t be surprised if he seems a little off.”

“Thanks.”

“Also, I’ve noticed a lot of you and Alexa in the tabloids, so how—”

I was not going there. “Catch ya later. I’ve got another call coming in.” I hung up.

CHAPTER 17



ALEXA

I HURRIED DOWN THE SIDEWALK TOWARD MY BUILDING. IT WAS GOING TO BE tight getting home in time for Evan to pick me up. My final appointment had run late.

The high-end dinners with Evan over the past few weeks had been nice. I'd definitely gotten a view behind Evan's mask, and he seemed more appealing every evening I spent with him. I could even say I now saw him as a nice guy—not that I would admit that to anyone.

Every time he touched me, dangerous sparks of desire flared, bringing emotions I had to tamp down by reminding myself that this was just an acting job. Every time we ran the gauntlet of photographers and shouted questions, I remembered that being with him was work, and I was a prop in this show of his for the press.

But tonight—a night without them, going to a Broadway play on Evan's arm—sounded much more like a date than a photo op. Maybe that shouldn't have excited me, but it did.

As I trudged up the stairs to my floor, I considered my wardrobe for tonight. I'd Googled it, and there wasn't an actual dress code for the theater, but it seemed like it called for more than movie-night attire, so probably the black dress with the spaghetti straps he'd given me would be appropriate.

When I arrived, an envelope with my name scrawled on it was taped to my door. I tucked it under my arm as I dug through my purse for the key.

Once I unlocked the door, I pushed inside. It was dark and smelled odd. Hearing footsteps down the hall, I closed the door behind me, which made the space pitch black.

The light switch by the door did nothing, so I walked toward the switch for the kitchen light.

Something hit me in the face. I fell back, landing on my ass with a thud, and the hand I used to brace my fall landed on something wet and squishy. Almost immediately I felt the wet soaking through my pants.

Fumbling through my purse in the dark, I managed to find my phone and turn on the light. As I scrambled to my feet, I almost puked.

Fucking hell.

Parts of the ceiling had collapsed over half the space, and when I went to my bedroom to check, I discovered this included my bed. Everything was wet, especially the carpet. I'd run into the open closet door in the dark, and the pain around my right eye was blossoming into a major headache.

The bathroom door was also open, and water was visible on the floor there as well. Seething with anger, I let out the scream this scene deserved. How could this be happening to me? Everything I owned was in this disaster zone. I ripped open the envelope.

Frank told me he ran into a problem and needs a part.

He'll finish on Monday.

-Zhukov

Monday? Double fucking hell.

I squished my way across the soggy carpet to the bathroom and went through the implications in my head. I didn't have to touch my bed to confirm that it was a wet mess I couldn't sleep in tonight, or maybe ever again. Even if I'd had the money, which I didn't, I couldn't get a mattress delivered at this time of day. Last time I checked, all I could afford with the space left on my credit card would be a sleeping bag to go on the wet floor.

Chelsea had gone to her parents' place. Gwen was out of town for the weekend with Chelsea, and her boyfriend, Hugo, was at her place, I was pretty sure. Even with this tale of woe, Dad would turn me away at the door unless I told him I'd broken it off with Evan, which I couldn't do and wouldn't lie about.

In short, I was screwed. I could afford a one-night stay at the cheap hotel

in Flatbush, or maybe two if I raided my coin jar. Payday wasn't until next Friday.

As I teared up, I berated myself. Maybe my sister was right. Being proud and principled was okay most of the time, but sometimes I had to bend. Clearly, accepting Evan's help with my plumbing issue would have been the right thing to do.

I was such an idiot.

Loud running footsteps sounded in hallway. I quickly turned the lock on the door and slid the chain in place.

Someone tried the door handle, then banged on the door. "Hey, blondie. You owe me fifty bucks." It was Pinky's voice.

I stayed quiet, stifling my sobs.

"We'll be waitin' downstairs. Oh, and Dingo says you owe him fifty too."

A girl from the building next door had told me what that was code for—fifty bucks to not have to suck him off. I had that much in my wallet, but after the time in jail I'd cost Pinky, it might not end there.

Only after I heard their receding footsteps did I dare pull out my phone. Worried that one of them might still be listening by the door, I texted Evan instead of calling.

ME: Hurry please.

It was only a minute or two before I heard more noises from the hallway and then pounding on my door.

I sobbed too loudly.

"Allie? What's wrong? Open up." It was Evan.

"I stubbed my toe." The words flew out of my mouth before I had time to check that they made any sense. They didn't.

"Open up or I'm kicking down this excuse for a door."

He was right about the door. I could hear every person that walked down the hall through the thin thing. "Just a second." That was second stupid thing I'd said. It wasn't like straightening up would make my apartment look like less of a disaster. I unlocked the door but left the chain in place when I opened it a crack. "I can't go."

"What do you mean? I texted you from downstairs but you didn't answer, so here I am. Now let me in. We're going to a play."

Checking my phone, I saw the message I must have missed while walking

up. I gave in. “Sure.”

I slid off the chain and opened the door, and he pushed inside and gasped. “You live like this?”

“No—”

He didn’t let me finish. “What the fuck happened to your face?” He flicked up the light switch.

“The light’s not working.” I brought my hand up, and just touching my cheek hurt. “I ran into the closet door in the dark.”

He reached for my face. “Let me see.”

I pulled away. “It’s nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing.” He tried the kitchen light switch with no effect and turned on his phone’s light to add more illumination. “Why is there water everywhere?”

“The fuck if I know,” I huffed, as embarrassed as I was pissed. “The super brought in a plumber this morning. I just got back, and this is what I found.”

“The leak you wouldn’t let me help with?”

Shame forced me to look away without answering.

“This is fucking unacceptable.”

“Ya think?” I yelled, quickly regretting my temper. This wasn’t Evan’s fault; it was actually mine for being too proud to accept Evan’s help.

“Where’s your stupid super? This has to be fixed right fucking now.”

I shoved the note at him. “Yelling at him won’t do any good.” Mrs. Bitterman had tried that and gotten an eviction notice the following week for some bogus reason. Maybe going over Zhukov’s head to the landlord about my leak hadn’t been a great idea either. This felt an awful lot like retribution.

“Pack some now, and we’ll get the rest later. You’re coming with me.”

“What? No. I’ll go...” I closed my eyes as I couldn’t finish the sentence because I didn’t know where I could go.

Evan grabbed my shoulder, pulling me out of my stupor. Even in the little light provided by our phones, it was obvious his eyes were as firm as his grip. “You are coming with me if I have to carry you over my shoulder. Got it?”

Reluctantly, I grabbed my only suitcase from the closet and started packing. One thing I’d learned about the Shark of Wall Street from our dates? Once he made up his mind, there was zero payoff in arguing with him. He believed determination was a virtue.

“Do you have more bags?” he asked.

“Sure, my set of matching Louis Vuitton luggage is at the cleaners.”

He didn’t laugh.

I pointed. “Garbage bags are under the sink.”

He helped himself to a trash bag and opened one of my dresser drawers. Of course he had to choose my underwear drawer. He stuffed the bag full of a lot more than a weekend’s worth. “You like cotton?”

“It’s cheap.” Every dollar mattered in my life.

He nodded and moved to the next drawer, my bras. That one he didn’t comment on.

While I packed toiletries from the bathroom, I checked my face in the mirror. This was going to be an epic shiner, another reason to be pissed at Mr. Butt Crack and stupid Zhukov. The closet door hadn’t been open when I’d left this morning.

When we headed downstairs, Albert opened the trunk as soon as he saw what we were carrying.

As I moved toward the car, dyed red hair poking out below a ball cap caught my eye at the corner—it was Pinky, and three of his idiot friends.

I looked away.

“Hey, blondie,” Pinky called.

His voice made me cringe. When I glanced that way again, they were shuffling toward us, his goons following. My lunch threatened to come up.

Albert moved in front of us, and Pinky stopped. I was suddenly glad Evan’s driver was as large as he was.

With a look at Evan, Albert asked, “Want me to...”

Evan gave a quick shake of his head. “Not today.” Then, he pulled my arm, opened the door, and nearly shoved me inside. “Drive,” he ordered Albert as soon as the big man got in.

Pinky watched us drive away with that crooked grin of his. Only when we passed the intersection did I dare breathe again.

“Friend of yours?” Evan asked.

“I talked to the police, and he didn’t like it.” I looked out the window another moment and then asked the obvious question. “Can I stay at your place for the weekend?”

“Of course. As long as you need.” Evan took my hand.

His gentle squeeze made me feel safe. I wasn’t ready when he pulled it away. Instead of leaning into him for comfort, the way I wanted to, I contained my emotions and felt below my eye. My cheek was warm and still

sensitive to the touch. “Will the stupid camera vultures be there tonight?”
He sighed. “It’s not raining or snowing, so yes, maybe.”

CHAPTER 18



ALEXA

ON THE WAY TO EVAN'S PLACE, I QUELLED THE NERVOUSNESS BY REPEATING to myself that this was logical, and as he'd just mentioned, *safe*. Pinky had reminded me how important that word was.

Evan slid his hand over and took mine. His grasp was gentle and as warm as his eyes. "Want to tell me about that punk back there?"

I looked out the window. The truth was too ugly to put into words, and I refused to let my fear show. "Another time. He's just a bully."

Evan let the subject drop, but he gave my hand a light squeeze. "You'll be safe with me," he said, reading my mind.

I placed my other hand over his, and when I looked back at him, I saw a different Evan. His eyes were softer, his jaw less set than it had been at our dinners. Once again he'd surprised me by not acting McAllister-ish.

Just a job, just a job, just a job, I repeated in my head. But all the way to the East River, I kept a tight hold on his hand, perhaps too tight. Being clingy wasn't like me. I was the ultimate independent, self-sufficient woman, not needing or accepting help from anyone, least of all a man I hated. I did things on my own.

"I'll pay you back," I blurted.

"For what?"

"For saving me the hotel expense," I explained.

He choked back a laugh. "No, you won't. You're my girlfriend, and it's

time you came over to my place, or me to yours. And we both know your apartment isn't in any shape to entertain guests."

His statement made sense, but we didn't have an audience. "Your fake girlfriend, and—"

His hand came to my cheek, startling me as he pulled my gaze to his. "Allie, if you say that one more time, I swear, I'll take you over my knee and spank you. Do you understand me?"

I didn't know how to process the way he slipped into using my old nickname like we were still carefree kids and our families weren't mortal enemies. So I just nodded without really comprehending what I was agreeing to or why he'd gotten so angry at me for pointing out the obvious.

His eyes smoldered as they stayed locked on mine. "Good."

All I'd done was offer to pay him back for the accommodations. Well, maybe it had been more demand than offer, and I could tone it down a notch. "Thank you for your help. I'll be out of your hair as soon as I can."

His thumb traced my chin before he dropped his hand away.

Tingles ran all the way to my toes, paralyzing my vocal cords on the way.

"And why would I want that?" he asked. Then, it was his turn to look away, leaving me confused.

The man was an incorrigible womanizer, constantly trading in one beautiful model or socialite for the next. An impossible question filled my head. Did Evan McAllister, the man half of Manhattan lusted after, find me attractive? I turned toward the window on my side of the car, not daring to glance his direction for fear I'd ask him something inappropriate or start another verbal brawl.

"Which entrance, sir?" Albert asked.

"We'll need help, so street level rather than the garage."

Albert nodded.

As we turned onto Central Park West, I stowed my uncomfortable question away and focused on our surroundings. My friend Google had helped me find an article that told me Evan's address. The grandeur of a street that bordered Central Park in the asphalt jungle that was Manhattan was something to behold. I watched the park go by on one side of the car, elegant buildings on the other.

Albert stopped in front of a tall building with polished, brass-rimmed doors. An actual uniformed doorman opened the car door for us. "Good evening, Mr. McAllister."

“Evening, Troy,” Evan said as he stepped out ahead of me. “We’ll need a luggage trolley.”

“Right away, sir.”

Evan offered his hand to help me out, and I took it, looking both ways for paparazzi. I breathed easier when I didn’t see any.

“That’ll be all for tonight,” Evan told Albert, who’d opened the trunk and pulled out my suitcase.

The doorman, Troy, arrived with a helper and a cart. The helper, who Evan also called by name, Sylvester, managed to get the bags situated so they wouldn’t fall off.

It certainly was nice to have minions around. Just before we made it inside the building to safety, a camera vulture attacked. A series of flashes went off in my face. “Nice shiner,” he said, snapping another shot.

Evan pulled me through the door. “I guess that answers your question,” he said after it closed behind us.

Inside the lobby, with the door guarded by Troy, Evan released his death grip on my elbow. With my luck, he’d added another bruise, but it wouldn’t show under my sleeve.

First my apartment was trashed, probably on purpose by that asshole Zhukov, then I was accosted by Pinky, and now the fucking paparazzi. No way could this day could get worse.

A woman in a smart black suit behind a workstation spoke up as we approached. “Good evening, Mr. McAllister.”

Evan nodded as he marched on. “Evening, Becka. This is Ms. Allie. She’ll be staying with me and should be granted full privileges.”

“Certainly,” Becka said with warm smile. “A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Allie. Please call down if you need anything at all.”

Evan was almost to the elevators, his long legs eating up the distance like a man on a mission.

“Thanks, and nice to meet you too,” I called back as I rushed to keep up with my new...roommate?

I’d just made it inside the elevator he’d chosen when he slid a card into a slot and pushed a button. I didn’t see which one. I’d have to get the apartment number later so I could find my way back when I went I out for my run.

As the doors began to close, I noticed that Evan hadn’t held the door for Sylvester, who was slowly pushing our luggage cart across the marble. I’d have to take notes of these unwritten rich-guy rules.

Or not.

I pushed and held the *open door* button.

“I can take the next one,” Sylvester said.

I shook my head as I held the button down. “It’ll be cozy, but we’ve got room.”

As Sylvester maneuvered the cart and himself inside, I ended up pressed against Evan. Evan cocked a brow but didn’t berate me for inviting the help along, likely against Upper West Side elevator etiquette.

The door closed, and to keep my mind off how good leaning against Evan felt, I counted floors as we ascended. This was more contact than we’d had before. Until now we’d just held hands and shared simple kisses for the cameras. I closed fingernails over his thigh.

He gave a slight grunt without averting his gaze from the elevator door. I looked at this reflection and added a grin. Yep. Pushing Evan’s buttons was entertaining.

Too soon, the doors parted, Sylvester pulled the luggage cart out, and I followed. The heat I’d felt against Evan evaporated like smoke in the wind. Evan led the way to his door, one of only two on this floor.

Holy shit. It read P1, as in penthouse. I knew Evan was rich, but he owned a fucking penthouse bordering the park? It was easier to buy a ticket to the moon than one of these.

Evan swiped his keycard, and the door opened to the most beautiful sight I’d ever seen in New York. The ceiling was at least fifteen feet high, and a full wall of windows looked out over the lush greenery of Central Park. At my apartment, my tiny window looked at the brick of our neighboring building.

A cough from Sylvester reminded me I was blocking the way in, and I moved aside.

“Second room on the right.” Evan pointed down a hallway.

I wandered to the windows, passing a dining table off to one side—large enough for a party of twelve. With every step closer to the glass, the view of the park became more impressive.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” Evan said, sidling up next to me, his arm almost brushing mine.

“Calling this pretty is like calling the ocean a puddle. It’s beyond spectacular.”

He put a hand on my shoulder and guided me to the right. “Then you’ll

probably like this as well.”

Those damned tingles emanated from his touch again. “Uh...” was all I could manage.

He let go of me and reached for the door handle.

Two steps later, I was on a rooftop patio. “Yep. I like it,” I announced. Only a short metal railing separated us from the park, or at least that’s the impression it gave. A burbling fountain, a cushioned sitting area on teak-plank flooring, a grill on artificial grass, and another dining table set over tile filled the space. It seemed perfect. “What do you do when it rains?”

“Becka sends somebody up cover things or pack them away.”

Of course. Minions to the rescue.

Evan checked his watch. “We can still make the play, if you’d like...”

Tapping my sore cheek, I shook my head. “Would it be okay if we skipped it? I don’t really want to go out looking like this.”

He nodded. “Sure. We’ll get tickets again when you’re ready.”

I watched birds take flight from one of the nearby trees. “Can I look over the edge?”

“I wouldn’t. It’s a long way down.”

“I’m not scared of anything.” A useful lie.

A sixth floor walk-up was as high as I’d ever been, so I had no idea if I was good with heights or not. But his words were all the challenge I needed to find out. I strode to the edge focused on the vibrant green of the tree tops, just as another bird took flight. A hawk?

I looked up, following the hawk’s flight, and tripped on the edge of the artificial grass. Pitching forward, I tried to get a leg under me, but all I managed was to propel myself faster toward the railing. My hips hit the top of the rail, knocking the wind out of me as the force bent me forward. I tried to straighten back up too quickly, and my feet slipped and lifted from the floor.

What a stupid way to die.

CHAPTER 19



EVAN

HOLY SHIT.

I saw it unfold in slow motion. Alexa tripped and pitched forward. Her attempt to catch her fall only accelerated her toward the edge.

I don't think I've ever moved as fast as I did as I lunged and caught a handful of shirt. The fabric ripped, and Alexa leaned over the edge. With my other hand, I grabbed her arm with all the grip strength I could muster. *Fuck gentle.* With a yank that threatened to dislocate her shoulder, I pulled her up and back. Twisting her into me, I backed us away from the edge.

She sobbed into my chest, trembling.

I cradled her in my arms. I'd almost lost her. That thought terrified me, which explained my racing heart. What kind of man lets his girlfriend fall off the building two minutes after getting her home? Apparently one as stupid as me. I should have known better than to challenge her. My Allie was feisty with a capital F and would do almost anything just to prove a point.

It felt so natural to have my arms around her, like she was meant to be there—and not as an actress. “You scared me,” I finally mumbled.

She sucked in a loud breath and sniffled. “I scared myself.” She hugged me tight. “Thank you for—”

I didn't let her finish. “No thanks necessary.” I lifted her chin, and my eyes came to rest on her mouth.

She licked those luscious lips, tempting lips. Was this our moment? Was

that look a sultry invitation to a kiss not meant for the cameras? A true kiss? Or just the adrenaline rush of the fear she'd felt?

A knock sounded on the glass behind us. "It's all unloaded," Sylvester said.

"Thanks," I replied without turning toward him.

Sylvester closed the door behind us.

Alexa stepped back, and her shirt fell open, revealing a lacy bra and delectable cleavage. I'd ripped all the buttons off. She quickly pulled the sides together. "This isn't how I'd envisioned you ripping my clothes off."

I laughed. "Me neither."

She slapped my shoulder. "Pervert."

"I was only agreeing with you." I'd missed the crimson in her cheeks earlier.

"You should have tipped him," she said, shifting the subject.

"We don't tip in this building."

"What a quaint custom." Her words dripped with sarcasm. "The rich people stay rich by keeping their money to themselves and not sharing any with the little people who clean their toilets. Or carry their luggage."

"It's not like that." I sighed.

Her expression chastised me without words.

"Stay right here." I left to chase after Sylvester and caught him by the elevator. Pulling out a Benjamin, I offered it. "Thanks for the help."

"I'm not allowed," his mouth said. His eyes, however, never left the big bill.

I stuffed it in his vest pocket. "I won't tell Becka if you don't."

"Thank you, Mr. McAllister. Let me know if you need anything else."

The elevator arrived, and he pressed a button inside and added. "Anything at all."

That was more words than he'd spoken to me in the last year.

I walked back to my condo lighter on my feet. Alexa had reminded me how good it felt to follow Gramps's advice: *you can't help everyone, but you can help someone*. I remembered how I felt when I heard she got into Columbia.

I paused at the door to get control of my feelings. *Oh Allie, what are you doing to me?* I'd almost kissed her for real rather than show. With her tits pressed up against me and her shirt blown open, my mind had gone to all the wrong places, dangerous places. "This needs to stay platonic," I said under

my breath. My history with women was quite a few shades worse than terrible, and she deserved better than Manhattan's worst bachelor.



ALEXA

“STAY RIGHT HERE.” EVAN HAD SAID IT LIKE A COMMAND.

So what if I'd been a complete klutz and almost killed myself? So what if he'd basically saved me? I didn't do commands, edicts, or rules.

My heart pounded and blood rushed in my ears.

Evan had almost kissed me, because I'd almost invited him to. The idea of standing out here now, waiting for him to return so we could start up where we'd left off, terrified me even more than it excited me.

Years ago I'd yearned for Evan to be my first kiss. It hadn't worked out that way. Today was not the day to find out how it would between us after a real kiss. I wouldn't survive being one of his one-night or two-week flings. I wasn't built that way.

As soon as I heard the door to the hallway close, I rushed back inside the condo, penthouse, palace, whatever this was. Down the hallway, I turned at the first door, the one Evan had pointed Sylvester to.

This situation called for full cover-up. I closed the door and opened my suitcase. Not finding a sweatshirt in there, I tried two garbage bags before I located my old Columbia sweatshirt. It would do.

“Allie?” I heard Evan call.

I turned the lock on the door, more to keep me in than him out. “In here,” I yelled.

He was closer now. “This room is—”

“The room is fine,” I assured him. “I just need...” King bed, attached bath—what was not to like about this room? Even if the walls were bare, save a single landscape painting. What I needed was some alone time to decompress. “To clean up.”

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I guess so. I'm going to take a shower, if that's okay?” It was the best I could think of to buy myself some time—time to cool down and figure out

how to handle everything that had happened today.

“I’ll order some dinner for us. Chinese, Thai, what would you like?”

I leaned against the door. “You pick.”

“No way. If you don’t like those, I can get Indian, or how about pizza? You’re the guest. You pick?”

I was about to insist that he decide. But somehow, arguing with Evan seemed wrong after he’d kept me from becoming a stain on the sidewalk. I needed to tone down my inclination to dispute everything he said. “Chinese sounds nice.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked again after a moment. His voice held concern, something I never would have expected from Evan McAllister even a few weeks ago.

That voice almost made me open the door to tell him face to face that I’d survive and yes, dinner would be lovely. But I didn’t have the courage.

“Nothing a hot shower won’t solve,” I assured him.

“Give me a second, and I’ll leave a glass of wine outside the door for you.”

I heard his footsteps retreat. Once again, he’d offered a kindness, and I hadn’t even thanked him. When had I become such a terrible person?

Any and all of the guys I’d dated previously would have followed my saying I needed a shower with a suggestion that they join me. But not Evan. He’d said something sweet, and for sure a glass of wine would help right now. Maybe we weren’t in danger of crossing that line between fake and real. Maybe he was just worried about me completing the acting assignment without a breakdown.

It wasn’t long before the footsteps returned. “A glass of white and one of red. I forgot to ask which you felt like.”

“Evan?” I asked.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for everything.”

“Enjoy your shower. The food will be in the kitchen when you’re ready.”

After he left, I retrieved both glasses of wine, closed the door again, and shucked off my shoes. I gulped down the red before I even made it into the bathroom. Then I saw the tub. I hadn’t had a decent bath since I moved out of Dad’s. My apartment had the tiniest fiberglass shower in the corner. It was so small that I couldn’t bend over, and I had to put my foot up in the sink after getting out to shave my calves.

From the other room, my phone announced a text. I started the tub and went to get it.

GWEN: You have got to try the hot stone massage.

It had come in on our group thread.

I moved the bags of my clothes off the massive king bed and stretched out to message back.

ME: I'm envious.

I waited, and when I didn't get a reply, I stripped off my clothes and went to soak in the monster tub.

At the doorway, I decided on a candle-lit bath and switched off the bathroom lights. The tub was almost full, and the temperature had stayed just right. I shut off the water, grabbed the bar of soap from the sink, and set the second glass of wine on the edge after a good gulp. I tied my hair up, selected the candlelight app on my phone, and slipped into the water.

The picture on the screen wasn't as good as a real candle, but the water was heavenly. There were buttons on the tub, but I didn't dare mess with them in the near darkness. After a few sips of wine, another text arrived.

CHELSEA: You should have joined us.

Drying my fingers on a hand towel first, I typed out a reply.

ME: I couldn't - schedule.

GWEN: What have you been up to?

Oh, I just came home to an unlivable apartment because I pissed off the super. Then I got threatened with death if I didn't give a local crazy a blowjob, followed by nearly falling to said death because I'm clumsy. And then the hardest one of all to admit, I'd come very close to not-fake kissing Evan.

None of those was an appropriate answer. So I decided on a partial truth.

ME: I'm spending the weekend in the city so Evan and I can do some stuff.

CHELSEA: Don't do anything I wouldn't do.

GWEN: Wrong. Do anything and everything she wouldn't, if you know what I mean.

CHELSEA: Only what you're comfortable with.

We were all good friends, but that had never stopped Gwen from considering Chelsea too prudish.

ME: Thanks.

I left the message screen and went back to the flicker of my candlelight for mood when nothing more came in. Tomorrow was a new day. I'd survive and get things sorted out—I always did.

In my heart of hearts, I knew that in a way, I'd brought these problems on myself. It wasn't fair, but in retrospect, it was predictable. Yes, Zhukov was a vindictive asshole, and yes, Pinky was a punk criminal. And now I had to deal with the consequences of pissing them off. React first, think second—pretty much the story of my life.

Slowly, the warmth of the water eased my anxiety. After a half hour, I checked my prune-like fingers. The water had cooled, and it was time to get out before I became even more shriveled.

The tan towel I pulled from the rack was so soft it made my towels seem like sandpaper by comparison. When I flipped on the lights, I saw the things on the counter and froze—a razor, shaving cream, aftershave, men's deodorant.

Either Evan lived with another man, or...

Rushing out of the bathroom to the door across from the bed, I pulled open the closet. *Holy crap. Kill me.* It was a walk-in closet almost the size of my entire apartment. But that wasn't the problem. It was filled with suits, dress shirts, dress shoes—obviously Evan's clothes.

I returned to the bathroom, slipped into the bathrobe on the hanger, and paced, considering what that meant. Clearly, Evan had told Sylvester to put my things in his room. Then I noticed the golden bottle alongside his shaving cream—Chanel No. 5, my teenage obsession. Evidence of another woman

here scrambled my brain.



EVAN

AFTER DROPPING OFF THE WINE FOR ALEXA, I Poured myself a Macallan, went to my office, and closed the door. The whiskey was to calm my nerves, and the closed door was to create another barrier between me and the temptress who'd taken over my bedroom.

It wouldn't make it impossible to get to my room, fling open the door, and kiss her the way I should have on the terrace, but it would slow me down. Hopefully the delay would be enough for sanity to prevail and control to return.

At the moment, I'd been sorely tempted. Having her heaving breasts against me had been almost too much. But a kiss could have led to more, and *more* was not what the script of our fake relationship called for.

Since getting to work was the only way I'd get Alexa out of my head, I turned on my computer. Slipping on my headphones, I selected Beethoven and hit play. Classical music had always calmed me in the past.

A glance at the bottle of mezcal on my shelf made me change my mind about the Macallan. I'd drunk from that bottle the night of my fountain incident, and it was on display to remind me of two things. First, cut down on my drinking because I needed a clearer head, and second, never ever drink mezcal again.

I returned to my office after dumping the amber liquid down the drain in the kitchen. Chalk one point for self-control.

Martin had asked me to look at the latest material that had come in on the Northern Aerospace deal. It felt good to keep a foot in the acquisitions side, and this was my first time acting as a mentor. He was going much more slowly on this than I would have, but it was a good learning experience for him.

Two hours later, with a brief break to answer the door and put the food in the kitchen, I had a page of written notes for Martin. I preferred writing them longhand, as I was able to think through my comments more thoroughly that

way. After closing everything up and finding nothing interesting in my email, I left the office for the kitchen.

The containers had been opened, which meant Alexa had gotten some food for herself, but oddly, she had not come to find me so we could eat together. Or maybe not oddly at all. Had I scared her with that almost kiss? She had to have sensed what I was about to do before I pulled back.

I spooned out a plateful of the cold food and started on it standing at the island. The note that said I was in the office was still on the granite.

The girl confused me. She'd chosen my room to take her shower. She had to know it was my bedroom. Then, instead of finding me to eat, she had apparently decided to get in my bed and wait for me. All action and no talk. Normally that appealed to me, but not tonight.

If this had been a movie, she could have shown up at my office door in nothing but one of my shirts and asked me when I was going to join her. Then again, Alexa knew how important my work was to me, and maybe she was just being considerate—lying in wait, so to speak.

My blood rushed south as I envisioned these scenarios, but they also terrified me. We had to continue this play-acting as we had been. I couldn't let this grow into something else. Because the something else would be destined blow up in my face like it always did.

I'd undertaken this with a clear plan, which was my path back to my old job. And I had to get back to that job. That was priority one.

Once I'd finished eating, I cleaned up the kitchen and tried to figure out what words I could use to let her down easy. While I wanted her, she had to stay off limits. The stakes were too high to screw this up.

Should I claim a medical issue, perhaps an infection? Vanity put ED off the table, and it would be a lie to claim I didn't find her attractive. It didn't take me long to come back to Gramps' advice. Honesty could be hard, but it was always the right thing. I merely had to explain the stakes and why I thought it was too risky for us to get involved.

With my plan firmed up, I strode to my bedroom. The door was ajar. As I stepped inside, light from the hallway let me see that the bed was empty.

Then a toilet flushed, and the sound came from the guest suite across the hall.

She'd given up. That was a good thing. I let out a breath. I just had to be strong for a few days. That was doable.

CHAPTER 20



ALEXA

THE NEXT MORNING, I WOKE TO THE SOUND OF A SLOW HAMMER AND clanking metal. Who the hell did construction at this time of the morning? And on a Saturday?

I'd moved my stuff and retreated into this guest room last night, hoping Evan wouldn't follow me. That wasn't true. A part of me had hoped he would. Maybe it would be like in some of the romance novels I'd read—Prince Charming comes knocking on the door and...

It didn't matter. He hadn't.

Anyway, I was strong enough to face whatever or whomever came at me. After using the marble-on-marble bathroom, I wrapped myself in the bathrobe I'd found last night. It was pure white and the fluffiest material known to man, a reminder that I was in Evan's palace in the clouds, surrounded by the kind of opulence I'd thought only existed in magazines, or on movie sets.

I looked up after splashing some water on my face and confronted the ugly dark splotch on my cheek. I shook my head, running into the door in the dark had not been the worst thing to happen to me yesterday.

Back in the bedroom, I picked up my phone and ventured out into the digital wilderness to see what, if anything, had been written about me. Every day so far, I'd still been the elusive *current McAllister Minx*.

The poll results are in.

Who should the Shark of Wall Street return to after the current McAllister Minx?

Our readers favor Natalia Pataki by a two-to-one margin. Natalia has said her breakup with the Shark last year was only temporary. This would make a three-peat for her, tying her with Aurora Hays, who has also had three turns with the Shark.

We'll have to wait and see if history repeats itself. Stay tuned.

What drivel. To think people actually read this stuff and believe it. More clanging came from the other room.

I wasn't one to avoid things, so I cinched the robe up tight. It was time to search Evan out and thank him again for saving me from myself. Just thinking about what would have happened if he hadn't pulled me back from the edge made my stomach lurch so badly I had to steady myself against the counter.

When I felt ready to open the door, I realized the noises were coming from a room farther down the hallway.

When I reached the door, I found Evan on an exercise machine, pounding out reps of some kind of press. Of course it wasn't construction. Evan had his own home gym, outfitted with a dozen shiny, chrome machines, didn't everyone?

With a clang, Evan let go of the handles. "Good morning, Allie." He was breathing heavily and pulled the hem of his shirt up to wipe his forehead.

The sight of him sweaty, with bulging muscles everywhere, cut off the words trying to come up my throat. I'd only seen him in a suit, and that had merely hinted at the cut muscles on display now. He had six-pack or eight-pack abs and a happy trail leading down to...

Cut this shit out now, Alexa, and get control of yourself.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked as he stood from the machine.

"Sure," I squeaked. That was true if you excluded all the time I'd spent lying awake and wondering if I was doing the right thing, or if I should have been more open to his advances. "How about you?"

"Could have been better." Something clouded his eyes as he scanned my face.

It was the way he'd looked just before the almost-kiss. I couldn't decipher it. Was that a come-on line? Did it matter? I'd just admitted to myself that he

was the reason I hadn't slept well last night. He'd had Sylvester put my bags in his room—a signal, maybe a demand...

He motioned around the room. "Do you do any working out?"

I shook my head. I'd never been inside a gym, only seen this kind of equipment through the glass. Memberships cost money, and I didn't often have enough extra for coffee, let alone an expensive monthly membership to a place where I'd be ogled by a bunch of guys while I got sweaty.

"That's right," he corrected himself as he walked closer on thick, strong thighs. "You told me you run." He stopped just inside my personal space. "Maybe you'd like the treadmill."

I had to look up to meet his eyes, but I stood my ground. This close, his sweaty body was more magnetic than intimidating. I nodded. "Treadmill?" *Muscles, chiseled abs, happy trail, muscles, chiseled abs, happy trail*—my libido-soaked mind was on repeat.

His hand came up to my face.

When he touched my chin, I backed away. "No. We can't." The words didn't at all match my instincts, which were to move closer and wrap my arms around him—or maybe skip that part and jump up wrapping my legs around him.

"Don't be a baby. I'm just looking."

His tone challenged me. "Oh." I shifted back toward him, ashamed that I'd misjudged the situation again. "It's not that bad." It had to be the goddamned pheromones he gave off or something. They were messing with my brain.

He gently pulled my chin left and then right. "That door really didn't like you."

As keyed up as his proximity made me, all I could get out was a laugh. "Right now, the feeling is mutual."

He stepped away, giving me a little space, and cleared his throat. "The treadmill is over here."

A glance down at the bulge in his pants told me his body didn't think this had been a platonic review of my injury any more than my scrambled brain did. I didn't follow him. "About last night..." If he'd sent my bags to his room because he'd expected me to join him in bed, this had to be cleared up.

His mouth fell open. "Sorry. I got carried away in the moment. I mean, after... It's no excuse. I should have behaved better. I wanted to apologize, but you'd already gone to bed."

“I know you think you’re God’s gift to women, but that was too much, even for you.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged, looking only a bit sheepish. “It was entirely my fault. I couldn’t think straight after you almost...”

“Almost what?” I asked.

“Fell,” he said. That single word reframed everything he’d said. My God, he thought we were talking about the kiss that didn’t happen.

I settled my hands on my hips. “And that made you think I should be in your bed?”

“What are you talking about? You’re the one who tried to seduce me by announcing that you were going to use *my shower*.”

“Only because you had my things placed in your bedroom, like you expected me to sleep with you. And besides, when I said I needed a shower, I didn’t know it was your room.”

“You thought I wanted you in my bed?” He laughed so hard he doubled over. “If your bags were in there, it’s because that idiot Sylvester can’t follow directions—the guy you insisted I tip.”

I turned ten shades of red. This ranked as an epic misunderstanding, but somehow I was equal parts disappointed and relieved.

Anger boiled up inside of me as I realized he thought the idea of sleeping with me was laughable. But instead of letting loose the kind of verbal barrage I always sent his way, I bit my tongue. “I’m going for a run, and not on a treadmill.”



EVAN

OUR WEEKEND CONCIERGE, XAVIER, GREETED ME AS SOON AS I LEANED against the wall of the lobby. “Anything I can do for you, sir?”

I pulled out my phone. “No. Just waiting for my guest.”

“Miss Allie?” he asked.

I nodded, checking my email. “Yes.”

“The log doesn’t mention a last name.”

I looked up. “That’s right.” Alexa wanted to keep her name from the

papers for as long as possible. To be safe, I'd been using my old nickname for her and never mentioning her last name.

Xavier wasn't on the short list of people I considered trustworthy. It wasn't unheard of for staff to make a little money on the side by tipping off the paparazzi.

He looked down at his monitor and didn't ask again.

My email didn't contain anything of importance, so I switched to scanning the online *Journal* while I waited.

Once I'd made it clear that I hadn't expected her to spend the night in my bed, Alexa had turned on her heels and fled to the guest room like a scalded cat, with an excuse about wanting to go out for a run. Without Albert available to accompany her, that left me no choice but to wait in the lobby for her.

The going-for-a-run statement could have been merely an excuse to get away from me, and I'd soon find out. Confronting her upstairs would have been rude, not to mention probably leading to another fight I didn't need.

After a moment the elevator doors opened and she emerged, stopping as soon as she laid eyes on me. "What are you doing?"

I slid the phone back in my armband and walked over to her. "Waiting for you. You said you wanted to go for a run, so here I am."

"I meant alone," she said under her breath.

"After last night, if you wanted alone, you should have chosen the treadmill."

She thought for a second. "We should talk about that."

I took her hand. "We can talk while we run," I said loud enough for prying ears. I added not only a grin, but a nod in Xavier's direction.

She came along without complaint and even added a small wave to our audience.

"Have a nice run," Xavier called before the door closed behind us.

On the street, a glance back confirmed that he had picked up his phone. Once we were a few yards away from the door and our doorman, Alexa pulled her hand free. "I want to run alone."

I took her hand again. "We're in public," I said leaning in close enough to catch the strawberry scent of her hair. "And I said I'd keep you safe."

She relaxed her hand in mine. "I run alone in Brooklyn all the time without any problem."

"We are not going to argue about this."

“Why not? It’s what I do best.” As the light turned, she darted away, across the street to the park.

I jogged to keep up, but not to catch her just yet. The view from behind was too good. The way her legs looked in those shorts, and that ass—it was a sight I wanted to burn into my brain for later, when I was alone.

She turned down a path into the park.

I was an eminently eligible bachelor, if I did say so myself, and here I was reduced to memorizing a girl’s ass so I could jerk off alone when I got home to the privacy of my shower. Worst of all, she hated my guts.

Mentally I swore at my dad. It was because of him that I couldn’t be out tonight—or any night for some time—locating the next woman who’d beg to be ass up in my bed getting pounded. Life wasn’t fucking fair.

Alexa glanced back. “Can’t keep up?”

I knew it would rile her up, so I let the words fly. “Just admiring the view.”

“You’re pathetic.” She coupled those words with an acceleration I hadn’t expected. When she’d said she was an acceptable runner, she hadn’t been kidding.

Speeding up, I caught her before the next turn. “Nice try, but I can run too.”

Her breathing was heavier than before. “Talented, huh? Good. You take the north half, and I’ll check out the south.”

“We stick together. I’m your protection.”

“And who protects me from you?” she got out between ragged breaths.

“Pace yourself, gorgeous. It’s a big park.”

She slowed to her previous pace. “If you can’t keep your eyes forward, maybe we really should split up.”

The view from this angle was just as stunning as from behind. Her ponytail swayed and her luscious tits bounced in a hypnotic rhythm—another mental picture I filed away for shower time. Even the sweat appearing on her neck was sexy. “Why is it you can’t accept a compliment?” I asked between breaths.

“I hate you, remember?”

That seemed to be her answer for everything. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“Shut up. This is supposed to be a quiet sport.”

As our feet ate up the distance without words between us, my mind drifted. It was a damned shame that she hadn’t gone to my bedroom last night

on purpose. Seeing her sweating and panting now made me wonder what it would be like to have her underneath me, sweaty and panting from an entirely different sport.

CHAPTER 21



ALEXA

EVAN MAY HAVE STOPPED TALKING AFTER THE FIRST BIT OF OUR RUN, BUT I noticed him all the same. The man was impossible to ignore. More than once I caught him watching my chest. With my boobs, bouncing was an unavoidable consequence of running at any speed.

But I was guilty of the same as I pretended to be checking out turns in the path or couples we passed while eying him. He was so ripped that his pecs bounced as he ran. Was it weird of me to find that sexy?

He didn't have a runner's lean build, but rather the muscled physique of an athlete, maybe a football player, with arms that looked like he could lift a car if he wanted to.

"Right turn up here," he finally said. "My place is just ahead."

Calling his sublime home in the clouds a *place* was blasphemy. A penthouse on Central Park West deserved better than that. But, as I'd done our entire run, I kept my mouth shut.

The path we took met the street a half block from his building.

"About the play," he started as we waited for the light. "We could go tonight if you want."

I pointed to my cheek. "Not looking like this."

"Oh. Yeah."

I stepped into the crosswalk when the light turned. "Thank you for the offer, though. Maybe in a week or two." *See? I can be nice.*

As I reached the other side, the man jumped out in front of me, clicking away on his camera. “Allie, when did McAllister beat you up?”

Evan positioned himself between me and the jackal with the camera. “Keep walking.”

“Allie, how long has he been hitting you?” Camera Jackal asked.

We sped up, but didn’t run.

Camera Jackal ran backwards in front of us, continuing to snap pictures until Evan’s doorman blocked him. Finally we made it to the sanctuary of the building’s lobby.

“You can let go now.” I rubbed my arm after Evan released me. “How do you live with that?”

“Normally they’re not like that. Since they get most of their shots late at night, you never see them this early in the morning.” Evan’s voice turned soft, concerned even. “We’d better prepare for some ugly coverage after this.” He scuffed his shoe on the marble floor. “I’ll get my PR people on it first thing Monday.”

Evan’s words slowly sunk in. The photographer thought Evan had beaten me up, and if they ran the story with that slant, it could ruin everything for him. I’d be painted as the victim, but he’d be branded the abuser, and in today’s media climate that wasn’t a label that melted away. It would be a permanent brand on him.

I could read the dejection in his eyes. He’d come to the same conclusion. Suddenly I grabbed his wrist. “Come with me. I’ve got this. Just don’t screw it up.”

“Screw what up?”

Through the glass it was clear that our personal paparazzo still lurked outside, grinning as he checked the pictures on the back of his camera. What a jerk.

I pushed through the door, dragging Evan with me. Our surprised doorman promptly held it wide for us. The object of my ire looked up from his camera.

I let go of Evan and walked straight toward him, pointing at my cheek. “You want to know how I got this? You want to know about Evan?”

I stopped a few feet from him.

He pulled a recorder out, eager to add to his scoop.

“I’ll tell you about both. Evan wasn’t around. I got this from somebody in fucking Brooklyn, not him.” I turned up the volume. “Evan McAllister is a

better man than you'll ever be, and I'm proud to be his girlfriend. Proud. Do you think I'd agree to move in with him if he'd been the one to do this to me?"

My onslaught had the desired effect on the mousy asshole as he backed up a step.

"Well, do you?" I yelled, pacing forward.

"No," Camera Jackal mumbled.

"Damned straight that's a no. Evan offered to kick the guy's ass for me, but that's not my style. I'm a broad from Brooklyn, and we remember who wronged us. Then we get even. The guy who did this won't ever see me coming."

He nodded along, eating this up.

"Now leave us the fuck alone." I turned before he could ask anything more, and we passed back into the lobby. Inside, I was jittery with adrenaline. "I hope having people know you're dating a broad from Brooklyn won't hurt your reputation."

"I don't think we'll need the PR guys on Monday after all," Evan said, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. "You're a force to be reckoned with, Allie."

I leaned into him. "Thanks." I looked out the window again and scowled with an unanswered question.

Evan tightened his grip. "If you're wondering, I think you said enough."

I shook my head. "That's not it." I knew the paparazzi were relentless, but this was over the top even for them. Hanging out on Evan's block on Saturday morning didn't make sense. "How did he know to ambush us here?" I demanded.

"I think I might know." Evan's eyes turned to the young concierge on duty this morning. There was something distinctly dangerous in his stride and the clench of his fists as he approached the counter. "Xavier," he said with more frost than I'd ever heard in his voice.

"Yes, Mr. McAllister."

"You called them," Evan accused.

"No, I wouldn't ever," the boy stuttered. "I mean—"

When Evan's fist hit the counter, the sound reverberated in the lobby. "Don't bother trying to deny it." His words came out laced with venom.

The blood drained from Xavier's face.

"I won't put up with anybody ambushing my girl."

Xavier shrank a few inches.

Evan pointed upward. "You see that chandelier?"

Xavier looked up and nodded.

My eyes also followed Evan's finger.

"If you ever do that again," he hissed, "I will cut your puny little balls off and hang them up there. Do you understand me?"

The boy nodded, wide-eyed with fear.

"That was a yes or no question," Evan bellowed. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," Xavier squeaked. "Never again."

Evan pivoted, grabbed my hand, and pulled me to the elevator. He twined his fingers with mine as the doors closed and the car started its ascent.

"Thank you. Nobody has ever... Well, just, thank you."

"He's a little snot."

"Your girl?" I teased. "How many times have you given out that label before? Ten? A hundred?"

He looked up at the floor numbers.

A flicker of hope bloomed in my chest, but when he didn't answer, self-doubt extinguished that thought. I giggled to break the tension. "I'll bet the kid has to change his pants. Maybe you'd fit in on my side of the river after all."

He cocked his head. "You said it was a guy." He pointed at my face. "You didn't tell them about the door."

"How could I? Running into a door is the excuse every abused woman gives the nurse when she goes into the emergency room to get patched up."

He nodded. "Smart."

I relished the compliment. Three floors later, I asked, "You wouldn't really do that to him, would you? The chandelier?"

Evan shook his head. "A little messy for me."

The doors opened on the top floor, and he let go of my hand. "I'd have Albert take care of it."

My skin continued to tingle where our hands had met as I walked the hallway with my guy.

My guy had a nice ring to it.



EVAN

ALEXA WALKED AHEAD OF ME TO THE DOOR OF MY UNIT. “ME AND MY BIG mouth. I guess you’re stuck with me now for a while.”

Her ass swayed, and the look of her long legs in those running shorts took my breath away. I unlocked the door and stood aside for her to enter ahead of me.

She looked up at me and babbled a mile a minute. “Is it okay? I didn’t think to ask. If it isn’t—”

I settled a hand on her shoulder. “Of course. I’ve got room.” It was certainly going to complicate things, but the alternative of being labeled an abusive boyfriend by the press was worse. “Besides, you’ll be safer here than your...” I wanted to say *dump*, but that would have sounded condescending.

“My what? Disaster of an apartment?”

I closed the door behind us. “You never told me why it got that way.”

She made her way toward the kitchen. “I could use some water—you?”

“Evasion isn’t going to work, roomie.”

“Turnaround is fair play, they say. You never told me how many.”

I gave in. “You’re actually the second person I’ve called *my girl*.”

“Who was the first?” she asked.

“Claire. A girl in college.”

Alexa opened the fridge and pulled out two waters. “Was it serious?”

“It seemed so at the time.” I’d expected to propose to Claire until... Even now the memory of that day was too much. “You haven’t answered my question.”

She twisted the cap off her bottle and took a large swallow first. “It’s the super. I put in a note about the leak in my bathroom with the rent check, and he doesn’t like complainers. I’d bet it’s him making sure the message is clear.”

I wiped condensation off my water with a finger. “That sucks. You shouldn’t have to keep complaining. It’s the super’s job to take care of things like that.”

“Maybe in your world, but not in mine.” She sighed. “So what happened with her, the special girl?”

I picked up my water bottle and walked out.

She followed me. “Hey. We had a deal.” I hadn’t made it to my room

before she threw down the gauntlet. “Are you chicken?”

Nobody calls me chicken. I gritted my teeth and walked the remaining steps to my door.

“I knew it. You’re too chicken to tell me. Honesty only flows one way with you, doesn’t it?”

I reached for the handle. “She got pregnant.”

Her face dropped. “Oh.”

“But not by me.” The pain of that day washed over me again. I’d been betrayed. “Satisfied?” I’d learned the hard way about letting people get close. That was not the kind of experience I ever wished to repeat.

The look on Alexa’s face moved from shock to pity. That was exactly what I didn’t need. I pushed through the door and closed it behind me.

“I’m here to talk if you want to,” she said through the door.

I went into the bathroom and leaned against the counter. There were a lot of things I wanted to do with Alexa, to Alexa, and none of them involved talking.

Talking couldn’t fix what had happened. But the other things on my mind wouldn’t repair the damage either, and any temporary comfort with Alexa could lead to an even more hurtful ending.

And it would end. It had to end. As she’d reminded me numerous times, she hated me, and she was only doing this for the money. “*For the children,*” as she put it.

She might not hate me enough to prevent a kiss, or a passionate night, or maybe more, but in the fullness of time, history would poison her against me. Her father would see to that.

My body and my mind were at war. Our almost-kiss had proved that. I wanted her, desired her, but knew that giving in would lead to heartache and a million I-told-you-sos from my conscience.

Her declaration to the photographer that she’d moved in with me had fixed the immediate issue of her facial bruising. But avoiding additional emotional bruises was going to require more will power than I’d expected to need when I offered to shelter her for a few days.

The only thing clear about this was that my hand and my dick were going to become even better acquainted if I wanted any chance of keeping her at a distance.

CHAPTER 22



ALEXA

EVAN CLOSED HIS DOOR, AND I RETREATED TO MY ROOM TO SHOWER AND change. I had enough work to keep me busy on my computer for the rest of the weekend. After the episode with Camera Jackal, I wasn't in a hurry to go out in public again while I was looking the way I did.

The shower efficiently rinsed the sweat off me, but it did a shit-poor job on the guilt I felt. I'd badgered Evan into revealing a hurtful piece of his history that he hadn't been ready to disclose yet, or maybe ever. All because I insisted on pushing his buttons and didn't know when to back the fuck off.

His girlfriend had gotten pregnant by another man. And not just any girlfriend, but the first and only he'd referred to as *his girl*—obviously a very special one. That had to have fucked him up good.

I was the bad person here, the one with zero compassion. The man freaking saved my life yesterday, and I'd repaid him by being the worst possible guest in his house. Good thing we were faking it, because I was doing a terrible job with this girlfriend thing. *This has to change. I have to change.*



EARLY IN THE AFTERNOON, I LOOKED OUT OVER THE PARK AND WONDERED how I'd gotten so lucky. Here I was, outside on Evan's terrace, working on

my laptop above the bustle of the street with this magnificent view. Before I could finish another page, my phone came to life.

EVAN: What kind of sandwich would you like for lunch?

I hadn't seen him since pissing him off this morning. As a matter of fact, I was working outside specifically to avoid him. I typed my reply.

ME: I think pizza would be

Feeling self-conscious about his complaint that I always argued with him, I deleted the contrarian partial message. I really had to stop that.

ME: Roast beef and cheddar on sourdough, if they have it, with extra horseradish

I sat up straighter. That was much more lady-like.

Fifteen minutes later, I looked up when Evan opened the door, carrying two bags and two beers. From the first bag, he produced two wrapped sandwiches and handed me one. "Your lunch." He twisted the tops off the beers before setting them between us.

I closed the computer in my lap and opened up the sandwich. "You didn't need to do this."

He settled down next to me and unwrapped his sandwich. "What kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn't feed you?"

We didn't have an audience, yet he was referring to himself as my boyfriend. I let that rattle around in my brain as I bit into my roast beef and cheese. Warmth traveled to my chest as I chewed and chewed some more. "Thanks for this," I said when the silence became awkward.

My phone rang, and I closed my eyes a moment. It couldn't be a more inconvenient time for him to call.

"Go ahead," Evan urged. He'd seen the name on the screen.

"Hi, Dad," I answered.

"What is this about you moving in with that McAllister boy? Is it true?"

I shook my head, not believing my bad luck. "He's a man, Daddy, and a really nice one. I like him a lot."

Evan beamed a wide smile. I shoved his shoulder.

“I forbid it,” Daddy practically yelled.

Evan’s expression indicated he’d heard.

“Daddy, I’m a grown woman, and you can’t boss me around anymore. Besides, you should be happy that I’ve moved into a secure building where you don’t have to worry about my safety.”

“I don’t trust him,” he sputtered.

“Maybe not, but I trust him,” I countered. “I love you, Daddy, but this is my decision. End of discussion. Give my love to Rachel.”

“This is a mistake.”

“Bye, Dad.” I disconnected.

“Like me a lot, huh?” Evan teased.

I shrugged. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

Evan leaned in. “You really told him off.” He attacked his sandwich with a big bite.

“Had to.”

He finished chewing. “Is your sandwich good?”

“Good enough for Manhattan, I guess.”

“Not as good as Brooklyn, you mean?”

I shrugged. “Not as good as our deli, that’s for sure.”

He shifted closer.

When our legs touched, a zing of electricity went through me, but I didn’t flinch away.

“You’ll have to take me there sometime,” he said.

“Not right after that call. There are knives just lying around.” I had no desire to give Daddy a heart attack.

Evan finished another bite. “I’m the one who should be thanking you.”

The fact that I had my mouth full was the only thing that kept me from arguing with him. Well, not the only thing. There was the hum of excitement that ran up my leg from our contact. Our meals out in public had been prim and proper by comparison, the two of us separated by a table.

“If you hadn’t said what you did this morning,” he began, “the headlines on today’s stories wouldn’t have looked this good.”

I’d hated the thought that people would see my picture and view Evan as an abuser when he wasn’t. “What are they saying?”

He tapped his phone and handed it to me.

Somebody in Brooklyn better be watching his back.
Has the Shark of Wall Street met his true match? It turns out
McAllister's latest Minx is one tough broad from
Brooklyn. After an attack this week left her with a shiner,
Allie told us that as a Brooklyn girl, she doesn't need a
boyfriend to even the score for her. She'll remember who
wronged her and be sure to get even. The guy won't ever
see her coming, she promised.
Better watch out, whoever you are. This broad from Brooklyn
is one tough cookie, and she means business.

I giggled when I got to the bottom of it. The picture that showed my
bruising wasn't as bad as it could have been, and most importantly, Evan
wasn't in the frame.

"Thanks," he repeated.

"I was only looking out for my rep," I joked. "Making sure they didn't
paint me as a victim. I'm nobody's victim."

He held up his beer bottle. "To not being a victim."

I clinked with him and drank.

"Or looking like one." He handed me the other bag.

Tentatively, I opened it, a smile coming to my lips. Six different shades
of concealer were inside.

"So you can go into work," he said. "And not be judged."

My eyes got a little misty. "Thanks." I leaned over and planted a kiss on
his cheek. My heart did a little flutter at how considerate he was.

As I pulled back, his hand came around my neck to keep me close. His
eyes held that desire again and lingered on my lips, the same look I'd seen
yesterday.

Nervousness raged as goose bumps raised on my arms. He'd called me
his girl and explained how special a term that was to him.

"Excuse me. I have to sneeze," I lied as I pulled away. I brought my
fingers up and squeezed my nose, holding for a few seconds, pretending to
ward off the impending nasal explosion that didn't come.

He shifted away. "I should let you get back to work." He gathered his
sandwich and beer. "I'm going into the office. Call if you need anything."

I didn't want him to leave. "Can't you work from here?"

His expression shifted. "The materials I need are at work."

I couldn't decide if he looked happy or surprised that I'd asked if he could stay. "What are you working on?" Wasn't that what a real girlfriend would ask? She'd be interested in his work, in how he spent his time. "Is it anything I can help with?" That sounded desperate. How was I, the recent MBA graduate, going to help the successful business titan they'd named the Shark of Wall Street?

"I've been doing this a long time. I think I've got a handle on it. Today I've got to go over issues with an acquisition to help out the guy who's taken my place."

I nodded and looked at my lap. At least it was a gentle put down. "The Martin guy you mentioned?"

"Yes. Tomorrow I'm going to go over that list of local charities you gave me, and maybe you can give me more detail than I'll find researching online."

"I'd be happy to. And thanks for lunch," I said, saluting him with my partial sandwich.

He reached for the door handle. "I'd like to stop by your office sometime and take you to lunch."

I shook my head immediately "I'm not ready for that yet. I'll let you know."

"It's what a true boyfriend would do. Plus, you're the one who asked me to help on their lease extension."

He'd hit the crux of the problem. I needed to enough distance to keep this fake thing fake. "But we're not real. And besides a suit from Manhattan showing up would scare everybody."

He chuckled. "You think I'm that scary?"

"Not anymore, but they will. I need time to prep them."

That brought a smirk to his face. "I'll wait to hear from you. Enjoy the sunshine."

"For as long as it lasts," I quipped. Rain was due later today. "I have more work to get through. Is it okay if I set up on the dining room table?"

"Use my office. Mi casa, su casa."

"You don't mind?"

"Of course not. Let me know if you find that blow-up doll I lost." And then he was gone.

Why had he looked happy? While I worked on another bite of my meal I wondered what our trajectory was. But that was only half the question. Once

again, he'd been on the verge of kissing me. Why had I ruined it? Why had I run away?

The way we'd been talking on our dates, fake or not, had moved from combative to interesting. Evan had shown me a lot more depth than any of the other guys I'd been on dates with. They'd generally had the goal of hurrying up the talking and getting to the part where they learned if they could get into my pants or not.

With Evan, it was different. Since sex had been off the table from the beginning, we could linger and talk without the pressure to move to buttons and zippers. Somehow we'd gotten to a more personal, more intimate stage. Just holding hands with him was both exhilarating and scary. The slightest brush of his touch sent alarming shivers through me. My body wanted him more than my brain would allow.

Going back to what he'd said his image consultant told him made me laugh out loud. He needed a woman he could *bring home to mom for dinner*. That certainly wasn't happening with me. With our families' history, I was not going to be welcome.

My phone vibrated, pulling me out my mental question loop.

GWEN: Brunch this Saturday?

It had been several weeks since we'd gotten together.

CHELSEA: I can't this weekend.

They were bound to want an update on me and Evan. How was I supposed to explain our almost kissing? How was I supposed to explain my face? I didn't understand those things myself. Or what about me thinking he'd wanted me in his bedroom the first night?

That last one was sort of funny, embarrassing but funny. Still, Chelsea's message gave me an out. Maybe next week or the week after, I'd understand where Evan and I stood.

ME: Me neither.

I put the phone down, and once again my thoughts turned to Evan. He

was a dangerous commodity. I could sense that it would be easy to get lost in him—like the moth that sought out the flame only to learn too late that it was a very bad idea.



EVAN

CHARLIE STARTED RIGHT IN AS SOON AS I ANSWERED HER CALL. “YOU MOVE fast, Mr. McAllister. It’s a little earlier than I would have recommended, but good for you.”

After getting reamed by her before, I’d accept any compliment. “It’s Evan, and which good move are we referring to?”

“Moving the girl in with you.”

“She has a name, and it’s Alexa.”

“Yes, Mr. McAllister, Alexa. Now, how many women have you had at your place—and I mean living with you, not weekend trysts and the like?”

I held my temper. Her view of my lifestyle wasn’t very complimentary, but if it was born of reading the tabloids and blog sites, that explained it. “You’ve been reading up on me. What is John Q. Public’s take on that question?”

“Mr. McAllister, I can’t find a reference to you having live-in girlfriends in the past, but that kind of thing isn’t well reported, which is why I’m asking you. I don’t want to be blindsided here.”

“Since college, she is the first,” I stated coldly. “Is that good enough for you?”

“Quite. And I meant to be complimenting you. People expect to see a progression in serious relationships, and this is a good step.”

Where had I heard that before? Maybe I needed to pay a bit more attention to Noah’s rambling stories. “Thank you.” She didn’t need to know how the move had been forced.

“It’s also about time we let people know her full name. It’ll make her more human, easier to relate to when we can get her backstory out.”

I nodded along. This had been a recurring question. “I’ll ask again, but she’s not comfortable with that yet. She likes the anonymity.” There were

times in this town I wished I could get my anonymity back.

“The poor girl from Brooklyn gets into Columbia, goes on to get her MBA, graduates near the top of her class, and aspires to help others with her CPA. It’s a great story.”

“Charlie, I said I’d ask,” I repeated. “But it’s her call.”

“Of course, of course. I just have one more thing”

“Charlie, before we leave the subject, I have something.”

“Yes?”

“It’s not just a story. She’s a wonderful and talented woman, and I’m honored to be her boyfriend.”

She was silent a beat. “I’m on your side, Mr. McAllister. I was actually going to compliment you again. You came off in the latest pieces as very protective, and that also plays well with the public.”

“Thank you, and it’s Evan,” I reminded her again. I hated that she viewed it all as playing to the public, but I guessed that was the life of the public relations person.

“Right up until you take action,” she added. “Then it can turn around and you become the assailant. Words are fine, but don’t go creating trouble. That’s my advice.”

I suppressed a sigh. We were paying her for advice, so that was fine. “I understand.” I also knew I’d go to any lengths necessary to keep Alexa safe.

“Take care, Mr. McAllister. If you have any questions or concerns, please don’t hesitate to call. And if anything changes with regard to your relationship, give me a heads up.”

“Sure. Have a great day, Charlie. Oh, and one last thing. I’m hanging up the next time you call me Mr. McAllister instead of Evan.”

The line was dead silent. I couldn’t tell if she’d heard me before hanging up or not.

CHAPTER 23



ALEXA

THIS MORNING, A MONDAY, I'D WOKEN UP TO FIND THE CONDO EMPTY. EVAN had most likely gone into work early. Dressed in a bathrobe, I wandered into his kitchen. *Our kitchen?* It seemed that way.

It had been two weeks since we'd almost kissed that first weekend I arrived here, and I'd kept my distance from Evan ever since. As if it hadn't happened, neither of us had mentioned the episode or alluded to it.

This life still didn't seem real. After I found the right concealer treatment, Evan scheduled us to go out to dinner regularly, so we could be seen. The paparazzi were still there, but since I'd realized it was their job to try to get a sensational photograph or verbal reaction, I found them easier to ignore. Evan and I had played their game with some success. They still referred to me as the McAllister Minx, but had started leaving off the *most recent* designation.

When we didn't go out, Evan spent a large portion of the evenings holed up in his home office or going back into work. That he was helping his friend Martin deal with his new job was as much of an explanation as I got, and I didn't push. I found it admirable that Evan willingly gave him so much help. In the same position, I might have been hoping my replacement failed so I'd look good in comparison.

The toaster beeped, and I lifted my bagel out after starting coffee.

While I waited, I tapped out a message.

ME: I'm going to be helping out at the deli today.

It was a perfectly normal message for a girlfriend to send to her man to let him know where she was.

EVAN: Enjoy.

Very to the point.

I normally helped Dad and Uncle Luca at the deli on the weekends, but Uncle Luca had called to ask if I could help cover Monday. After a check in the mirror, I'd determined I was ready to face the world without concealer, so I agreed.

After I'd moved in, Evan had asked if I still wanted to go work at the deli. What he really meant was, how ready was I for my family's reaction to the news of us as a couple? I'd decided that not going would be showing weakness. The worst that could happen would be that Dad would get upset and leave for a while. I supposed technically, he could fire me, but he might need Uncle Luca's agreement for that. And ultimately, since I worked for free, I doubted things would get to that point.

Rachel waved as I came in the deli's door. The line at the counter was long. Dad looked over and then went back to what he was doing without a greeting.

Okay, so I was late. At least I was here. I went in back to get my apron, and after washing my hands, I started with the next customer in line.

By the time I finished, Dad had left.

An hour later, the rush had quieted down. I was slicing two pounds of roast beef for an order when Uncle Luca came out from the back.

His hand came to rest on my shoulder. "I think you landed a good one."

"Huh?" I played dumb.

"What? You think I don't read the papers?" He winked. "You stay with that McAllister boy as long as you think it's the right thing for you. Ignore your father. He's bitter and doesn't understand."

It felt good to have Uncle Luca on my side. I nodded. "I am doing the right thing. And besides, I'm old enough that it's none of Daddy's business."

"That's right. It isn't. And I know from experience that he's a good sort."

I stopped slicing. "You what?"

The bell over the door jingled.

“Good morning. What can I get you?” my uncle asked the customer who had just arrived.

I rang up the lady who’d wanted the roast beef and then busied myself wiping down the counter. I had to mentally remind myself why this shitstorm was worth it. I was doing the right thing by the children—those words said it all. It just sucked that I couldn’t explain that to anybody in my family, especially Daddy.

Rachel took the opportunity a bit later to interrogate me about Evan—where did I meet him, what was he like, tell her about his place, and if it wasn’t him, who hit me because she wanted to get in on the beat down?

It had become second nature to sidestep the media questions, mostly with silence, but with her I had to say a little more and found it awkward.

Then she let loose a zinger. “Maybe we can go on a double date.” That was a dangerous one, because fooling my sister would be much harder than the paparazzi.

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up,” I told her. “He’s a pretty secretive guy, but I’ll ask.”

“So Dad is right about him? He’s stuck up and mean?” She wasn’t buying the reclusive-billionaire angle.

“Not at all. The history between the families makes getting together difficult. It would be hard on Daddy.”

“I don’t see why. You guys are in the paper all the time kissing and…” Her face went red. “And you’re living with him.” She meant *fucking each other’s brains out*. “So Dad is already dealing with it.”

Now I was the one with cheeks on fire. It would be easier if I told her we weren’t sleeping together, but I couldn’t go there. If I did, she’d probably see right through me, *and* realize it was something I’d thought about, something I wanted.

“But I’m not living at home with Daddy and you. That’s the difference.”

“Whatever you say. Hey, we could eat at his place. It has a kitchen, right? Then Dad doesn’t have to know.”

“We’ll see.”

She nodded, smiled, and pointed a finger. “You’re afraid he’ll like me better than you.”

“That’s it.”

Maybe Dad hadn’t been the one I should have worried about seeing

today.



EVAN

IN THE TWO WEEKS SINCE ALEXA HAD MOVED IN WITH ME, I'D SWITCHED from staying late at the office to leaving in time for dinner with *my girl* when we ate in. Dinners out had slowed to two a week—enough to stay minimally in the spotlight, but not the hectic rate of the first weeks.

My girl—I wasn't calling her that out loud, except for that one time down in the lobby, but that was how I thought of her now.

Today I was running late when I left work to make my way back to my building, my home. I used to refer to my condo as my *place*, but after being chastised by Alexa that *place* wasn't an appropriate description for what she referred to as a *palace*, had recently decided that *home* was a fitting title. Alexa had made it seem like more than a collection of rooms and a place to hang my clothes at the end of the day.

"Good evening, Mr. McAllister," Becka said when I entered the lobby. "You have some mail."

I took the envelopes from her and sifted through them on my way to the elevator. I pressed the call button.

"Son." The familiar voice came from the building's front door.

I turned, and he strode toward me as I held the elevator door open. "Hi, Dad." It was odd that he hadn't summoned me to his office. That was his habit. Phone calls didn't suit Fergus McAllister, if he could avoid them, and his office was his power center.

"We need to talk," he said as he walked past me into the elevator car.

"Okay." I used my keycard to get the car moving. "I didn't know you wanted to see me."

"Spur of the moment," he said as we ascended, not saying another word on the way up. "This should be done out of the office," he added when the door opened on the top floor.

"Sure." I let us into my unit and closed the door behind us. Apparently I'd beaten Alexa home, which was good luck with Dad here. They'd be oil and

water together.

Dad stopped in the middle of the great room and swiveled to take it in. His eyes landed on the newspaper Alexa had left on the sofa this morning, along with her laptop on the coffee table. “Perhaps you should schedule your cleaning lady more often.”

Alexa had said when she first saw this space that it looked like a model home, that it didn’t look lived in, and she’d been right.

“I don’t see a problem.” Lived in and casual were growing on me.

“How do you expect to captain the family company someday if you’re leaving things like this?” he asked. “A captain sees to it that his ship is always clean and orderly. If it had been an investor visiting you instead of me, you wouldn’t want to present yourself like this.” His hand swept over the sofa.

There it was, the constant assumption that ruled my life—the one that had sent me to prep school and then to Yale before I joined the company. As the oldest, I was expected to take over as the head of the family company when Dad retired, just as Dad had after Gramps.

The English had a saying for it—*an heir and a spare*. Noah led a carefree life as the spare, without any of the expectations placed on me.

I dug my fingernails into my palms to contain myself. Dad never allowed anything messy in his house, but this was my territory, not his, and I wasn’t in the fucking Navy. “If an investor called on me, he wouldn’t show up unannounced.”

Dad’s jaw clenched, but he decided not to spar with me over this.

I relaxed my hands. After all that he’d put me through recently, I no longer cared that my comments annoyed him.

“Aren’t you going to offer me a drink?” Demanding and to the point, typical Dad. He wasn’t anything like Gramps.

“Macallan?”

“Naturally.”

I went to the liquor cabinet and poured a tumbler for each of us, his taller than mine. I still had work to do this evening with Martin on Northern Aerospace.

He took the glass, sniffed, and sipped. “Very good.” He motioned to the sofa and took the wingback opposite it for himself. He was probably put off by the mess on the cushions.

I folded the paper and set it on the coffee table before sitting. “So what

brings you by?”

He sipped his whiskey. “I’d like to know why you decided to disobey me.”

I twisted the glass in my hand. I don’t know what I was expecting, but those words weren’t it. “I don’t understand.”

“The Borelli girl.”

My blood boiled.

“Nothing good can come from any more interaction between our families.”

“It’s not what you think,” I said as my hand tightened around the glass.

“It doesn’t matter what I think. She’s not right for you. She’s not right for this family. Or you right for hers.”

His reaction was even worse than what I’d expected it would be. I recalled Alexa’s conversation with her father and decided the two men had at least one thing in common. They both hated the idea of us together. “It’s a good thing, then, that it’s not your decision to make. I like her a lot,” I said, mirroring Alexa’s comments to her dad.

His jaw set. “I don’t like it, I tell you. Screw a few times if you must, but this playing house has got to stop. The repercussions are beyond anything you would expect.”

Dad probably thought Alexa’s father would blow his top, but we’d already dealt with that. And the two of us could handle it. I took a slow sip of the whiskey and stared him down. “This isn’t something you can order me to do.”

He swirled his scotch before taking another sip. “You’ll do it. It’s for your own good,” he said, seeming confident that I’d comply, as I always had. He was the irresistible force in my life.

But tonight it was my time to become the immovable object. “No,” I said emphatically. “I will not.”

“I can fire you.” A vein throbbed on his temple. “I mean it.” His stare was steady, his jaw clamped shut. This made for an impossible choice.

“Evan, I didn’t realize we were expecting a guest.” Alexa’s voice startled both of us.

CHAPTER 24



EVAN

ALEXA WALKED IN.

I cringed with the realization that Alexa had been in the condo the whole time and then stood. “Dad, you might remember Alexa Borelli.”

Dad’s manners forced him to stand although he didn’t have the courtesy to say more than, “yes.”

Alexa rounded the couch and gave Dad a nod. “Fergus, very nice to see you again after all these years. Evan has told me so much about you.”

I caught the sarcasm because none of my words about Dad had been very kind.

“Will you be joining us for dinner?” she asked.

“Uh, I didn’t plan—” Dad stuttered. He never stuttered.

“I’m making mac and cheese.”

“I don’t really have the time,” Dad said for an excuse. He had a personal chef, and mac and cheese was nowhere on his menu.

“Are you sure?” I asked, adding to his discomfort.

“The cheese has calcium,” Alexa added. “Really good for bones as we age.”

I brought my glass to my lips to hide the grin.

Dad bristled, but spoke to me instead of her. “I think we should continue this in private.”

I wrapped an arm around my girl’s waist. “Anything you have to say, you

can say in front of Alexa.”

“I don’t think it’s appropriate at this time.”

I countered by pulling Alexa tighter against me. “I do.”

“Very well.” He retook his seat and gulped down half his whiskey.

Alexa snuggled against me as we sat. Alexa hadn’t said anything about his rant against her, which was a relief. It sucked having such an opinionated father. I waited for the next bombshell, whatever it was.

“You’ve disobeyed me, and I’d like to know why.”

My stomach turned over. That was exactly how he’d started his rant about Alexa, and now she was here to hear it.

“Didn’t I tell you,” he continued. “To devote yourself completely to the company’s reputation overhaul?” So not a repeat of the Alexa conversation but another complaint about me.

I sipped the liquid fortitude in my glass for the next accusation. “Yes. And I have.” It was technically true. I’d been requested.

“Then why are you inserting yourself into acquisition negotiations. It’s not your job anymore. I thought that was clear.”

Alexa placed a reassuring hand on my leg.

I hadn’t pushed my way in, rather I’d been filling in a hole in the organization’s capabilities that he’d created by promoting Martin before he was ready. “I was merely—”

Dad raised a hand. “I don’t want to hear it.” His voice rose. “There is no excuse. I told the board how I planned to deal with the situation, and now you’ve gone and made me look like I’ve deceived them. I told them you were completely off of acquisitions, and one hundred percent on the reputation project that we need.”

There was only one thing I could say without causing more problems. “I’m sorry.” I could see now what had gone wrong. Martin had told his father I was helping him. Neither of us had known that Dad had promised the board I wouldn’t interfere, which was how any help would now be seen.

“But, Alexa started.

I shut her down. “It won’t happen again.” My best option here was to stay quiet. Explaining that Martin had asked for my help wouldn’t solve Dad’s issue and might create a fight in the boardroom between him and Martin’s father if he brought it up as an excuse for me.

“And then there’s the matter of…” He paused looking between us deciding if he wanted to bring the other topic up or not. “The fact that you

haven't made any progress on the reputation front. So I'm going to need daily updates going forward."

"What?" Alexa challenged. "That's ridiculous."

"No," Dad countered. "It's a sound business practice when an employee has become distracted and isn't accomplishing the work."

Now I was a mere employee? And distracted? He had it all wrong. The only word to describe me now was *mad*. "I'm not distracted."

Dad barreled on. "It's obvious that you don't have your priorities straight. This..." He pointed between Alexa and me. "Relationship is affecting your work. Because no progress has been made on generating positive press for the company."

"But—" Alexa started.

"You've generated zero positive press so far as I can tell," Dad continued. "Or have you?"

Alexa's grip on my leg tightened. "Why don't you ask for the moon for God's sake," she hissed.

"This is family business, Alexa." Dad said. "You will stay out of it."

I'd heard enough, but it wasn't good to lose control, so I kept my voice down to a half-yell, "You will not talk to her that way. Apologize this instant." I stood quickly.

"I will not," Dad insisted. "This is matter for family, and she isn't family." She might not be a family member, but nobody talked to my girl like that.

I raised my arm to the door. "You've overstayed your welcome. Get out. Now."

Dad rose from the chair, but not before Alexa grabbed my arm. "Ev, darling, I've got this." Her nails dug into my arm with a silent demand.

Against my better judgment I stayed quiet while Alexa rounded the coffee table.

"What kind of bullshit is this?" she said more calmly than I'd been. "You expected results in the... what has it been, a month or so since you gave Evan this task?"

Dad's eyes narrowed. This was a new experience for him. He wasn't used to people talking back to him like this.

"For the last twenty years that you've been running the company, how many glowingly positive articles have you had?"

Dad stood there, his hand twitching.

“Wanna guess? I researched it and the answer is two, but the number of negative articles mentioning McAllister, there are dozens across Forbes, Fortune, and the Journal alone. Corporate juggernaut is as complementary as it gets, but the disparaging comments aren’t pretty.”

Dad’s jaw ticked as he turned red.

She pointed a finger at him. “That’s all on you. You have no right to criticize your son for not fixing in a month a reputation you destroyed over the course of decades.”

Dad’s jaw clenched. “I’ll give you a week.” He said the words to me, ignoring Alexa and walked to the door. “Son, you better get your priorities straight. You have a decision to make.” He opened the door and walking out.

CHAPTER 25



ALEXA

AFTER THE DOOR CLOSED BEHIND FERGUS, EVAN RAN HIS HAND THROUGH HIS hair and sighed out a huge breath. “I have to go out.” Evan was leaving and all that remained was for him to tell me be cleared out by the time he got back.

I looked down at my shoes. Fear or what he’d say next rooted me in place. Me and my big mouth. I’d yelled at his father and made everything worse for him.

Fergus had deserved it. I couldn’t just sit still and let him berate Evan unfairly, and even Fergus had known he hadn’t been fair. Understanding how mean his father could be, what he’d done to Daddy, to our whole family, I had no doubt that he’d use every tool at his disposal to ruin Evan’s life if he wanted to.

I’d once called Evan a Devil in a tux, but since learned that wasn’t at all true. The only real devil in the family was his father.

Why couldn’t I learn to control my temper and just let Fergus say what he wanted without responding? They were only words, and words couldn’t hurt us unless we let them, unless we believed them. It had been my job to help, not hurt. In the end, I’d failed Evan.

Evan sighed again and checked his pockets.

I blinked back the tear that threatened as I waited for the command to leave.

He came around the coffee table and took my hand. “We need to go.” Following along silently I was grateful for his hand, for the touch that bound us, if even for only a minute longer.

“Careful,” he said after he pushed the elevator call button. He wiggled his fingers.

Only then did I realize I was clamped down on his hand like it was my lifeline. I loosened my grip but didn’t let go. Hold his hand gave me strength. I needed this small contact with him, it was the only thing keeping my from breaking out in tears at what I’d done. “I’m sorry. I guess...”

“That was intense.” He squeezed my hand back, but it was his eyes that conveyed the message to stop talking—for a change.

We made it down to the street enveloped in a thick cloud of silence, but still linked by our hands. I was scared sick to ask anything.

Evan turned us left out the door. “This way, Brooklyn.” Then he took us left again at the first cross street. His steps were brisk, determined.

Almost jogging to keep up with him, I decided least this was better than leaving the condo and telling me to be gone by the time he returned—a little better. It looked like I’d get some sort of speech about how family was important, his job was important, and blah, blah, blah.

It would still amount to him explaining the decision his father had forced on him—choose disgraceful Brooklyn broad and family warfare, or choose family loyalty and keep his job.

“Almost there,” Evan urged as he pulled me forward.

Fergus was mean to the core, and would obviously do anything to get his way. I could only be glad that I wasn’t a part of such a dysfunctional family.

Evan lived for his job and knew it his destiny to run it some day. It easy to understand that I didn’t stand a chance in the choice he had to make. All that remained was the breakup speech.

What could I say anyway, what sway could I have against the force of his father’s threats. I couldn’t blame Evan for making the logical choice. Anybody in his position would be forced to give in to the pressure his father applied.

Just thinking about it fried my brain and made it hard to walk fast enough to keep up. Regardless, I resolved to stay strong, to not cry, to accept the inevitable.

Mid-block, Evan slowed. “We’re here.” The sign read Doomsday Pizza.

On the way here, I’d run through a half dozen ways for Evan to dump me,

and each made my stomach turn more than the last. Maybe the easiest way to avoid the heartache was for me to make a quick exit.

Thanks for the great dinners and keeping my name out of the papers, and letting me see how the other half lives. It's been great, but I get it. We are from families that are incompatible and it was never going to work once they found out. I'm going to leave before I create any more friction in your life and get back across the river where I belong. Take care of yourself, Evan.

In my head it sounded like the least painful alternative.

Evan led me inside before I had the chance to say anything.

The shop was narrow and deep like a slice carved off a normal store front. Dark with loud music and almost no lighting, Doomsday was a fitting name. Even by my standards this was a dive.

We waited near the door while Evan surveyed the space. After all the swanky dinners he'd taken me to, I couldn't picture Evan opening the door here, much less venturing in to eat.

The girl behind the counter wore black high waisted jeans and a tight black corset that gave her an impossible Barbi-like waist—Counter Barbi in my mind.

The guy in front of us leered at her when she leaned over to write down his order.

I looked away.

Evan said something to bring me back to the present in this dreary dive pizza shop.

“Huh?” I asked, confused.

Evan was looking straight at me but his words hadn't computed. “I said is pepperoni okay and what do you want to drink?”

Tequila would have been my choice, but I was so nervous I'd probably barf it up and make things that much worse. “Anything you want is fine, and just water.”

He pointed. “Grab the booth at the far back while I order.”

“What?” I was somehow behind in understanding what was going on as I'd concocted my speech in my head. I didn't want to draw this out. “Thanks for the great dinners and—”

“Not here,” he barked before leaning closer. “Go to the booth in the back,” he said slowly, “and sit down before someone else gets it.” He pushed me that way.

As my eyes acclimated to the darkness I could now make out the booth in

the far recess of the restaurant. So it was going to be a long enough speech to need to sit down and he wasn't going to let me go first. At least we'd be sequestered enough that nobody would see my tears.

"Hi. Good to see you again," Counter Barbi said as Evan moved up. "I'm off at nine if that works for you?"

Make me barf. I'd heard enough and left to get the booth as I'd been ordered. Watching a half dressed woman talk him up wasn't for me. Ten minutes, maybe a half hour and I'd be on a train back to where I belonged—the other side of the East River.

As I sat and waited, I couldn't decide if talking over a table was a good thing or not. Long meant he was going to try to sooth my feelings, that was good, but in the end it was still a we-had-a-nice-run-but-it's-over speech. But, it wasn't like we'd really had anything between us—we'd been faking it.

I'd known this would come to an end, just not like this. Not with his father manipulating us.

What was I complaining about? I'd gotten great meals and more importantly, a million bucks for the children, all for having to endure the paparazzi and Daddy's scorn. I'd go back to my place in Brooklyn and still have the same job as yesterday.

Evan would go back to his dates with Counter Barbi or whoever he chose.

Daddy would eventually take me back I figured, once he thought I was done committing the sin of sleeping with the enemy and life would move on. The fund would be a million dollars richer

I laughed to myself that I hadn't even gotten the pleasure of what probably would have been great sex with Evan, but still had to endure Daddy's wrath all the same. For the children I reminded myself, for the children

"What's so funny?" Evan asked as he came up carrying a tray with waters for both of us, napkins, a basket of potato chips, and two bottles I couldn't make out in the dim lighting and a number tag that read sixty-nine.

The number made me blush. Here I was the girl plastered across the Internet as having landed the sexiest bachelor in the five boroughs and not only had I not gotten tangled in the sheets with him, we'd never even had a proper kiss, one that was for us and not the cameras.

I twisted one of the bottles to look at it—a wine spritzer, then pushed it away. The basket gave me an excuse to try my vocal cords again. "Chips with pizza?"

“The place is gluten free, so no bread.” He grabbed a chip. “Dig in.”

As his lips closed around the chip I wondered what it would have been like to be that potato chip, to have his lips on me, his teeth, just for the experience. Years from now people would ask me what it was like being with this hunk of a man and I’d have to lie my ass off with vague platitudes instead of any real details.

“We should talk,” he said.

I closed my eyes and grabbed my knees bracing for the speech, the goodbye, the brush off.

Only silence filled the space between us.

Ten seconds later, Evan’s voice asked. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m waiting.”

“Pizza takes a few minutes to cook.”

I opened my eyes but focused on my lap to avoid the pain of looking at him. “I get it that I was a little too strong, a lot too strong, with your Dad. I’m waiting for the speech.”

“Speech?”

I looked up. “The it’s-been-nice-knowing you-but-I-have-family-responsibilities speech.”

He broke out in a laugh. “Is that what you think? After that you’re giving up without a fight?”

I lowered my eyes to the table. It hurt too much to say this while looking at him. “I heard what your father said. I heard it all, the whole exchange from when you walked in. I know what he thinks of me and what you have to do to keep your job.”

“And you think I want to send you on your way?”

Tears threatened again. “It’s the logical move.”

He shook his head and unscrewed one of the wine spritzer bottles. “I should have figured a girl from your side of the river would get it all wrong.” He slid the bottle over to me.

“Hey. That’s not fair,” I complained. “And I said water, I don’t think I’m up for drinking anything right now.”

He unscrewed the cap of the other bottle and lifted it. “We’re here to celebrate. They don’t have champagne here, so this was as close as I could get. It has bubbles.”

“Celebrate? Are you nuts? I just fucked up your life.”

He lifted his bottle in front of me and wiggled it urging me to replicate

the move. “To Allie, the one girl strong enough to speak truth to power.”

A bit of heat rose in my cheeks from the compliment. I clinked my bottle of faux champagne with his and took an ultra small sip before putting it down. We had to get back to reality. “And now I've complicated everything for you. Your father always hated me but now he's mad at you too.”

“That's not important. You had the balls to stand up to him and call him on his bullshit. Nobody ever has, not even me.”

“That's the problem with you rich people. Everybody either is afraid of you or sucking up to you and nobody ever tells you the truth. But, that doesn't give him the right to be an out-and-out asshole.”

He pulled another swig from the bottle. “Did you really look up twenty years of press coverage?” He asked, extracting a pen from his pocket.

“No. But I did look up two years worth to get an idea of what you were up against with that project he gave you. I didn't find any complementary articles, but I assumed there had to be at least one per decade.”

He pulled something else from his jacket pocket—a checkbook.

I pointed my bottle at him. “What are you doing?”

He scribbled quickly, then ripped it off and handed it to me. It was made out to our fund and it had six zeros—a second million for our fund.

I wanted to complain that I hadn't earned it because I hadn't, but this was too precious for the children to risk that. “Why?”

He pocketed the checkbook. “Simple. Because you're smart and blunt and gorgeous and oh so frank.” He glanced behind me. “You don't want to be waving that around in a place like this.”

Getting the hint, I folded it up and tucked it inside my bra.

“Do that again,” he teased.

“Perv. It's nothing you haven't seen a million times at all those strip clubs you frequent.”

“You have a very distorted view of my life, gorgeous.”

I heard Barbi at the counter propositioning you.”

“It's not what you think.”

“Right. It never is. Getting back to the obvious. This is very nice of you,” I said tapping my chest. “But, it doesn't change the situation with your father.”

He nodded along.

A server arrived also only dressed from the waist up in a tight black corset just like Counter Barbi. She carried a key on wooden stick and opened

the door across the aisle from us—a storage closet with bags of potato chips. Just like the girl behind the counter, her corset was tied so tight at the waist that it was a miracle she could breathe. It also made her boobs heave when she did attempt a breath.

“Odd dress code they have here,” I said when she left.

“It brings in customers,” Evan noted. The evidence of his comment came from every pair of male eyeballs in the place. It was proof of a first principles of marketing—sex sells.

I could have made a snide comment about tight clothing not equaling loose women, but it was time for me to cut bait as they said. “I have to go.” I was still going to have to return to my ordinary life and for him to be able to continue his and get back into his father's good graces. I pushed the bottle away. I finished my assignment and been paid even though we had been successful. Any more time with him was only going to remind me of that failure. And how I'd screwed it up for him with my out-of-control mouth. So, I stood to go and leave this fairytale life behind.

“Sit down, Brooklyn,” he said with a stern voice that sounded like his father.

But, coming from Evan it made me shiver.

“I said sit, listen, and for once in your life, don't fucking argue.” his tone shifted to something closer to the Evan I knew. He was hell bent on giving me the speech.

With a million dollar check stuffed in my bra, I owed it to him if it would make him feel better. So, even if it would make me feel worse, I sat and restrained my mouth. “Very well. I'm listening, Mr. McAllister.”

“Allie, I'm offended that you'd cut our date short. We haven't even been served yet. That strikes me as a bit rude, even for a girl from Brooklyn.”

I didn't understand his gibberish. “Date? It's over.” I motioned between us. “This thing. You heard your father.” I shifted down an octave to mimic Fergus. “Son, you better get your priorities straight. You have a decision to make.” It didn't take a Upper-West side upbringing to understand what he meant, or to understand that in a family like Evan's it wasn't even a choice.

Counter Barbi arrived carrying our pizza. Her ample boobs threatened to spill out when she leaned over. “Here you go, pepperoni mushroom olive on a cauliflower crust.” She laid it down in front of us and picked up the number tag. “Enjoy.”

“Thank you,” I added when Evan didn't say anything.

At least she left without some comment to Evan about sixty-nine being her favorite number.

I shouldn't have said anything. I didn't have any claim on him, we had been faking it and I'd known from day one the kind of man he was. But, my sarcastic nature got the better of me and the words spilled out. "Friend of yours? Got a date lined up for tonight?"

"It's not what you think."

"Right. Not high enough class for you?" I wasn't prepared for his eye roll. Once again I'd let my tongue loose when I shouldn't have.

He sighed. "Miranda's the owner and I've invested in this shop. She wants to discuss expanding."

"Oh." I failed at keeping the embarrassment out of my voice.

"It's strictly business. And, by the way, she's gay."

It wasn't like I could tell by looking at her or anything, but still learning that amped up my embarrassment.

He extended a hand my way, and when I didn't take it he waggled his fingers in invitation. "I dare you. Pizza and a movie."

I shook my head. "Don't change the subject. Your father didn't give us, give you, you a real choice."

"Chicken, Brooklyn? Bawk, bawk, bawk."

I couldn't let that pass, so I put my hand in his and once again felt that zing of electricity that passed between us whenever we touched. It was certainly something I'd never felt with Ty, or anybody else. "And if I take your dare, pizza and a movie? Then what?"

"I've made my choice," he said pulling my hand to his lips. "And, it's you."

"Right. Until next week," I scoffed. Pulling the check out of my bra and placing the folded paper on the table. "I'm not for sale."

He lifted my hand.

When he kissed my knuckles all rational brain activity halted. "You can't. We can't," I mumbled when I got my voice back.

"That check." His eyes shifted to the table for a second and then held my eyes like a supermagnet. "Gives you the freedom to say no. You keep it regardless. I've given you all the power now, Brooklyn. What do you say? Be my girl? And, not just for the week."

This was happening so quickly I couldn't process. And, the direction was not at all what I'd expected. His father had made it clear I'd be responsible for

ruining his life if we continued this. “But...” Words wouldn’t come.

Evan kept his eyes on me. “I’m waiting for an answer, Brooklyn.”

I cleared my throat. “Your Dad—”

“Dad is my worry, not yours. As for us...” He checked down the aisle and lowered his voice. “Maybe I’m not being clear. I want to remove the word fake from our relationship.”

My mouth hit the floor as the possibilities played in my head. His words went to my core and started an inferno. “Honestly?” I’d played out scenarios in my head after our almost kiss, but dismissed them all as impossible fairy tales.

“Scouts honor. I’ve wanted you for a long time.”

“You didn’t say anything,” I countered.

“On day one I promised to behave myself, and that’s been the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Now it’s your turn to give me some of that Brooklyn honesty. What do you want Allie?”

I glanced at the supply closet door. He’d laid himself bare and if he wanted honesty, that was what he’d get. I added the best smirk I could manage. “I want to rip the buttons off your shirt right now and go in there.”

He looked over at the closet door as well. “I’m not fucking you for the first time in a supply closet.”

CHAPTER 26



EVAN

I HAD THE PIZZA TO GO IN ONE HAND AND ALEXA IN THE OTHER AS WE SPEED-walked back toward my building. It was a short walk, and at the same time too long. Every glance at those luscious lips of hers made me wonder how they'd taste, how they'd feel wrapped around my dick. That particular thought did nothing to quell my raging hard on.

"Slow down," she begged.

"After waiting this long," I licked my lips. "And the way you look... I'm afraid slow is not how we're going to start."

Her cheeks went bright red. "Right back at ya big boy."

Becca raised an eyebrow as we entered the lobby.

"Hi. Bye," Alexis said as we passed by the desk.

I pressed the elevator call button and with one arm on either side of her caged Alexa against the wall waiting for the doors to open.

Her Gaze started at my eyes and traveled to my lips.

Just as I moved in for a kiss, the elevator doors opened. I fumbled the first attempt to get my keycard out, but eventually I managed to get the car moving. "Now where were we," I said is a positioned Alexa against the wall again.

"This seems familiar," she purred. Her hands moved to my waist.

"I wanted to kiss you so bad, ever since our first dinner."

Her eyes widened, and her tongue darted out to lick her lips.

I was lost in her eyes thinking back to that first night. She grabbed my shirt, pulled me closer got up on her tiptoes and kissed me.

Her lips were as soft as I imagined they'd be as they pressed against mine for a few seconds before I cupped her face and kissed her back.

She quickly melted into me and slid her hands up my chest and then behind my neck pulling herself up into me.

I was going to kiss the hell out of this woman. This felt better than I had imagined it would. Now that I had her, I wasn't going to stop. The sound of the elevator doors opening put a halt to that thought. Slowly I backed away. "To be continued."

The doors started to close on us. I barely had time to get my foot in the way.

"We could ride down and back up again," she suggested.

"Lady's choice tonight," I said holding the door open.

She pulled me out of the elevator. "I have a better idea."

I held her to me with an arm around her waist as we went to my door.

She welded herself to me and matched my strides to keep up.

This was finally happening and I couldn't get the door open fast enough. Kicking the door closed after us, I paused. We should have made our expectations clearer. "Are you sure?" I set the pizza down.

Her fingers did the talking for her as she shoved my jacket over my shoulders and attacked the buttons of my shirt. "You talk too much."

As soon as my jacket slid away I reached for the hem of her top.

She stopped working on my shirt only long enough for me pull it loose. Her body was made to tempt mere mortals. She had full lush tits that strained against the confines of her bra begging me to release them, to worship them. I cupped her through the fabric. Unlike many of the women I'd dated hers were ample, a full handful and judging by the feel, real.

As she battled with my cuff links, I slipped fingers inside her bra to retrieve the check. "We should put this some place safe."

She grabbed it from me when she got the second cuff link off and threw the lot on the pizza. "We can clean up later."

I went for clasp of her bra and had trouble with it.

She was equally impatient but more successful with the buckle of my trousers followed by my zipper. Winning our race, she knelt to pull my pants down. "So, lets see what we've got here."

I leaned over as she knelt to get the final hook of her bra loose.

She wrestled my throbbing cock out of my briefs and let her bra fall to the floor. "Holy cow, Ev. Do you have a license for this thing?" It wasn't the nicest thing a woman had said about my cock, but it still felt good to be appreciated.

The pert nipples of her tits drew me. I wanted to suck them, worship them. She resisted when I urged her to her feet. "Oh no you don't, McAllister, you said lady's choice." She grabbed my cock lightly.

I kneaded one boob and rolled the other nipple between my finger and thumb pulling a little sigh out of her.

I lost all concentration on her tits when she stroked the length of me with a firm grip.

"Let's see if I remember how to do this," she said only a moment before those luscious lips of hers closed around my shaft and popped as she released my tip. She pulled my hand away from her chest. "Stand up straight big boy, and tell me if I'm doing this right."

With my pants down around my ankles I braced an arm against the wall. The picture of Alexa in front of me on her knees staring at my cock was a fantasy come true. When she started stroking and it took all the willpower I had to not come all over her face into her hair.

Then she moved to using her mouth on me. She didn't start slow, but took me straight to the back of her throat and back out again, working her tongue in little strokes. Her eyes looked up at me wickedly as she hummed while taking me deep. My girl was a goddess with her tongue and lips.

"Slow down, or I'm gonna..." my words were cut off by a particularly masterful swipe of her tongue around my crown.

She sucked and then released my dick with a pop. "Or you'll what? Punish me?" she cooed.

With her lips off me I could talk again. "Fuck you so hard you can't walk tomorrow."

"That sounds like a challenge, McAllister." She took me deep again with a loud hum and tight grip of the base of my cock.

Any more of this, and she could empty me before we got to the main event, and I wasn't an early quitter. I pulled her to her feet.

She licked her lips grinning like a Cheshire cat. "I'm not done yet," she complained.

I toed a shoe off and extracted a foot from my pants. "That's right,

Brooklyn, because Lady's choice time is up, and I'm going to finish you."

She yelled when I picked her up.

The sound went straight to my groin.

Then she wrapped her arms around my neck and brought her mouth to mine.

Carrying her and kissing her at the same time was a challenge with my pants dragging behind one foot. But I managed to her to my bedroom and set her down without running into any walls.

She leaned over to get out of her sandals.

"Keep 'em on, but loose the panties."

She stopped. "I could change them to heels if that's what you're in to."

I shook my head as I pulled off my other shoe and socks, escaping out of my trousers. "They're fine."

After pulling down her panties, She hopped onto the bed and her look turned quizzical, but I had no need to explain what the footwear connoted.

"Are you going to stand there and look all night, or..." She spread her knees.

"Are we going to see if that fits," she teased, pointing at my bobbing dick.

"You're beautiful." It didn't answer her question but it was the God's honest truth. Alexa's body was gorgeous, and tempting as fuck.

Her cheeks heated red at the compliment.

I took in deep breaths. If I didn't hold back for a few seconds here to control myself ancient urges would take over, and I'd jump her this instant, bare, which was something I didn't do. McAllisters didn't take that chance. McAllisters had self-control, I reminded myself.

She crooked her finger to call me closer. Her eyes begged me to fuck her.

I moved quickly over her.

She laced fingers through my hair once again pulling me in for a kiss.

As our tongues tangled, I held some of my weight off her with one arm and the other roamed her body to her boob, taking a firm hold and teasing her nipple again. Her moan was all I needed to shift my kisses down her neck to her collar bone and continue down until I had a taught pink nipple in my mouth.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked, scratching her nails through my hair.

The nipple came out of my mouth with a pop. "Trying my damndest to go slow for you." I moved to the other side to lavish the same attention on the other tight bud, finishing with a light bite.

She writhed under me. “Ev, you promised fast.”

“We’ll get to that part.” I slid Down her body slowly kissing along the length of her stomach down over her hip bone and then to her inner thigh before traveling all the way to her knee.

She spread her legs for me and the view was magnificent looking up into her eyes from his position.

She spread for me as I slowly kissed up the inside of her legs switching from one side to the other. She shivered as I stopped just short of the promised land. “Oh, God, don’t stop.”

I got the moan I hoped for as I licked the length of her slit. I worked a finger inside her slick channel, followed by a second. Continuing to tease her with my fingers I moved my tongue up to her clit, circling, flicking, and sucking.

She writhed underneath me in speared her fingers into my hair, guiding my head, demanding more with gentle moans and words that only came out his sobs.

More is exactly what I gave her a she broke my hand in my mouth determined to chase down her release.

“Holy fuck, Evan.” Her walls trembled around my fingers and the convulsions came. “Evan,” my name came out in a broken sob.

I licked and finger-fucked her through each contraction of her release. I was aching hard and wanted exactly this a second time with her coming on my cock.

She panted out my name one last time before going languid

I lifted off and rolled to reach the condoms in my nightstand.

She looked over with hooded eyes. “Don’t leave me.”

“Trust me, we’re not done yet, Allie.” I pulled a packet from the box.

“Ready for round two?”

She closed her eyes. “Give me a minute.”



ALEXA

I SUNK INTO THE MATTRESS, THE AFTERGLOW OF MY CLIMAX STILL WEIGHED

heavily on my eyelids. Then I heard the unmistakable sound of a condom wrapper being torn open.

Looking over, a marvelous sight energized me. Evan fisted his dick and then started to roll the latex down his length with measured strokes. I didn't find many things sexier than a man fisting his own dick, even if this was only the third time I'd witnessed it.

“Tell me you want this,” he said, pumping his dick.

“I'm green lighting you. I've been ready for since the moment you said you wanted to take fake out of our relationship.” With those needy as he looked in the elevator, I'd been half expecting to rip my jeans off and take me on the entryway table.

He spread my thighs and positioned his tip at my entrance. “You'll tell me if I hurt you?”

I nodded. Anything was okay at this point.

“I've been waiting so long, I can't guarantee I won't lose it,” he said breathlessly as he pushed in gently at first then harder.

I hadn't had sex in a long time, too long, but the first bit of burn as he stretched me was still a shock. It quickly gave way to pleasure as he started to move in and out. The biological need to chase the next orgasm took over. I levered my hips up and wrapped my legs behind him to take all of him.

He leaned down, kissing me, nibbling on my ear in my neck with each thrust. “This isn't going to be enough. I need to explore every inch of you, feel all of you, taste all of you.”

Sweet talking wasn't what I felt like. With my first orgasm still echoing inside me, the cavewoman in me demanded another. “Shut up and fuck me harder.”

Obedying, he slammed into me and upped his pace.

Every time he did, I ground up against him, the way he filled me, the pressure on my clit, it all became too much, more quickly than I could handle. My breasts bounced wildly with the ferocious tempo of his pounding.

The way his eyes followed them, I knew I'd told him the right thing. I gripped his ass and clawed at his back, urging him in each time with my legs.

We were feral animals racing together, chasing down our releases.

With his jaw clenched, and his rapid panting he was a close as I was. The winner would make the other come first.

He slammed in deep and held with a grunt.

The pulsing of his cock as he came inside me set off my own climax. My

muscles clamped down on him and I clawed at his back, pulling him ever farther in, ever deeper, ever closer.

When the spasms of my orgasm milked him dry. I judged it a tie.

He collapsed on top of me with a slow groan, off to the side just enough that I could breathe. He pecked sweet kisses to my face and neck as the waves of my pleasure slowly receded. Still panting, he nibbled on my ear. "This is just the beginning, sweetheart." He slid out, rolling to the side with a leg over me. His hand cupped my breast.

I turned my head and more than our eyes connected. I swore he could see into me, see my fear.

When my breathing recovered, I admitted it, "I'm scared."

"I promise I'll try to be gentle."

I held his eyes and traced a finger over his arm. "Not that." I took in a deep breath. "I'm scared you'll come to your senses and change your mind tomorrow."

He chuckled. "If I do, I'll write you another check."

I slapped his arm. "You can't use money to fix everything."

He lifted up and brought his face over mine. "Sorry. That was a joke. Wild horses couldn't drag me away. Is that better?" If it was true.

"It's not horses I'm worried about." Family connections, family responsibilities held a sway people outside the family couldn't fathom.

"I've already told you that what my father thinks doesn't matter." He gave me a quick kiss, and disappeared into the bathroom. He returned with in a bathrobe and held one out for me. "Get up. We have to finish our date. Your pizza awaits."

"You know," I answered. "I like this a lot better than our other dinner dates. But, shouldn't the pizza and a movie have come before the sex?"

"We could try that next time." He held the robe up for me to slip into. "Did you mean what I thought you did about the potato chip room?"

"A little adventure never hurt."

We went for round two after the pizza and never got as far as the movie.

CHAPTER 27



EVAN

MONDAY MORNING, I PRESSED THE BUTTON FOR THE TWENTY-SEVENTH FLOOR in the McAllister building elevator and then moved to the back of the car. Other employees made room for me. I wiped my sweaty palms on my trousers. It was time to face the devil, or the music, I wasn't sure which it would be today. It was make or break time.

We stopped several time on the way up, and after letting the last of the others out on twenty-three, I decided I wasn't ready yet and pressed the button for twenty-five.

Diane looked up from her desk. "Good morning. Martin's admin called. He'd like to meet at nine." His admin was Rita, but for some reason Diane never used her name.

"Good morning."

Her head cocked to the side. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Your hand is clenched. You only do that when something is bothering you." She was way too good at reading everybody including me.

I consciously relaxed my hand. "I have a meeting with Dad this morning. Tell Martin's admin that I can't make his meeting."

"What time should I suggest for a reschedule?" Her pen hovered over a sticky-note.

"I'm not available."

She nodded. "Anything you'd like me to do?"

"Not yet."

She handed me sheets. Every day she printed out copies for me of the press coverage, if you could call the tabloids and various blog sites press. "She really likes you." Diane even read the body language off two dimensional photographs.

"I like her too," I admitted.

"I know." Of course she did. "That's been obvious for a while."

I shook my head and closed myself in my office to prepare.

Dad liked to play chess. He said it taught him to foresee contingencies.

I preferred poker because it involved reading the other party's weaknesses and gaging when to up the stakes.

Intending to make sure I didn't have a weakness I wasn't prepared to address, I called up Bradley Jenkins.

"I'm in a hurry this morning. What's your take on the approach I laid out last week?" I asked without any preamble.

He answered quickly. "In my opinion, it's very solid and it will play well."

"And we can get press with this?"

"Yes, so long as we're not competing with a school shooting, or a hurricane." He then went on to list the reasons he thought it would be newsworthy.

I thanked him and after checking my tie was square, I was ready.

When the elevator doors opened on twenty-seven, I stepped out with confidence. The last time I'd been up here to face Dad, things had not gone well, but then I also hadn't been prepared. Not so today.

I'd learned early on that preparation was key to success in any negotiation. I'd done a lot of thinking, since Dad's visit Friday evening and his ultimatum to dump Alexa or lose my job. I was as prepared as I was going to get for this showdown.

Anita looked up, a smile crossing her face as she noticed me. "Hi there. We've missed you up here."

"We?"

"I know I have."

"It's good to see you too."

She checked her monitor. "Is he expecting you? I don't have anything on the calendar."

I stopped next to her desk. “Nope. Is he busy?”

She lifted an eyebrow. “There's nobody in with him at the moment if that's your question. But you might want to try him later.” That meant Dad's mood was sour.

This couldn't be put off. “I'll take my chances.” Putting my hand on the door handle and added, “we don't want to be disturbed.”

Dad looked up when I entered. What started out as either a frown or grim determination shifted to something closer to amusement as the corners of his mouth turned up. He thought he'd won, but the game was just beginning.

I closed the door behind me. “Dad, is now good time to talk?”

He waved me in. “Anytime is a good time talk to my son.”

I closed the door behind me and sat in the leather visitor's chair opposite him. “I'm here to continue our talk from Friday evening.”

Since I hadn't committed to anything, he took the wise choice of merely nodding.

“As you requested, I won't be spending any time on acquisitions going forward.”

He smiled. “Good.”

“And, I understand how me seeing Alexa is problematic.”

“That girl has quite a mouth on her.”

“That she does,” I agreed. “She has an opinion about a lot of things.”

“I'm glad to see you've come to your senses.”

It was time to get to the image discussion. “You want me to continue working on rehabilitating, I think you called it, the company's reputation?”

He shifted forward, placing his elbows on the desk. “Yes. As I see it that's an item that we still need to take care of. I promised the board that we'd work on it.”

“The last time I was here, you mentioned that you thought. Let me rephrase that. You said specifically that the board threatened your job over my fountain incident.” I managed to keep a straight face while calling it an incident.

He nodded, but there was a shift in him, a narrowing of the eyes. “I did.” The mention of his vulnerability to the board unnerved him.

“Is that still a concern?”

“It is.” That validated Noah's observation.

Having Dad keep his answers short and specific so far worked to my advantage. “And you told me that in your estimation the way to head that off

was for me to improve the company's reputation as well as my own," I said laying the foundation for my argument.

"I thought that was clear." Annoyance tinged his voice.

I started with the good news. "I understand that you're impatient, but I've been working on that project. It will take some time to show results in print however."

He steepled his hands in front of him. "When might we see some results from this?"

"Before the board meeting." I didn't honestly know when we would be able to arrange it.

He tried to hide the grin. "So tell me what exactly are you doing?"

"It has to do with the profile of our charity giving, you don't need to know the details, but I've spent some time with the image consultants you sent my way and they think the approach is a solid one." Keeping the specifics away from him gave me the power in the situation.

"I want to know the details." Of course he did. Then he'd want to micromanage me.

"Weren't you the one who told me that family members were the only ones who could truly trust?"

The tick in his jaw confirmed that he remembered.

"You need to trust me on this."

He didn't say anything which was all the confirmation I needed.

"One other thing," I added. "I'm going to continue seeing Alexa Borelli and I expect you to treat her with the courtesy she deserves."

His nostrils flared. "That's not an option."

"It's not your decision to make."

"It would cause... Cause problems for you both that you can't foresee. There are things—"

"Dad," I said interrupting him. "Alexa and I both understand her father is as opposed to this is you are."

"You're not listening. You may not," he emphasized the word with a pointed finger, "continue with her."

I'd expected we might get to this point.

Dad's goal in life had always been to build up the company. He saw it as his legacy. If Noah's read on the situation was correct, Dad had no option here.

"I'm going to date her, regardless of what you say. Now your option, is to

allow me to finish this reputation project, and trust me to do it well. Or, you can fire me in which case, I won't finish the project, I'll resign from the board and you can take your chances with them.”

Real concern registered in his eyes. My resigning from the board would alter the balance with one less vote he could count on if it came down to that.

Dad cocked his head, and after a sigh his shoulders relaxed. He was as scared as Noah thought, and saw he had no choice. “Very well, but don't say I didn't warn you.”

I didn't understand the warning and didn't care. I'd made up my mind about Alexa and that was that. What I wouldn't tell Dad was that without his interference our relationship would probably still be fake.

Finished here, I turned for the door.

“One more thing,” Dad said when I paused. “I need you in Chicago for a few days. They need help with some logistical issues.”

“When?” I asked turning to face him.

“I'll let you know. Be ready.” His wording was decidedly more request than demand.

“You call. I'll make it happen.”

We were back to normal, our mutual threats forgotten for the moment.

CHAPTER 28



ALEXA

IT HAD BEEN A WEEK SINCE EVAN AND I HAD HOOKED UP AS MY SISTER would say. Connected would have been a better term because that's how I'd felt in his arms—connected and oddly fulfilled.

We'd combusted over that weekend in a way I'd never experienced.

Maybe it was because we'd gone slow with a lot of dinner conversation before jumping to the button and zipper pulling stage. Or, maybe it was because of all the built up sexual tension on my part over that time. He'd been the one I'd wanted and couldn't allow myself to have—*forbidden fruit* as they said.

Were all rich guys as sexually proficient as Evan? Did the expensive prep schools they attended offer sex education classes that taught a lot more than simple anatomy? If so, it would explain why women always chased after them.

As I turned the final corner one block from our meeting place, my nervousness ramped up. How was I supposed to explain that I'd bedded the man I hated? I didn't understand it myself, so if I didn't sense a good time to bring it up this morning, maybe it could wait until our next brunch.

When I pushed open the doors, the scrumptious aromas woke me from my contemplations. The bistro was as packed as always for a Saturday morning. I spotted my girls, Chelsea and Gwen right away.

"There's our badass girl," Chelsea exclaimed as she took me into a hug.

“You look great.”

I didn't understand the *badass* comment but would accept a hug any time. I'd checked my face and the concealer was doing its job so it wasn't that.

“Have you looked in a mirror today?” I chirped.

She always made black look powerful. She was going to be a kick ass lawyer when she finished law school. Today, her face was off. It was her eyes.

Three mimosas were already on the table.

Gwen opened her arms to me as well, seeking a squeeze. “You're glowing this morning.”

I hugged her and backed a step, at a loss for the sudden compliment she added. “You both look cute.” It was as true today as any day.

Chelsea grinned.

“Thank you,” Gwen said with an honest blush. Compared to my tired jeans and faded top. She looked like she stepped out of the pages of a magazine. Today's green top made her eyes pop and complimented her red hair. A coral skirt and mint green heels finished the ensemble.

Chelsea sat and I followed.

“We have to look our best,” Gwen said. “If we're going to be seen with you now that you've moved in with everybody's favorite bachelor. You never know if we might get photographed next to you.”

Moving in was only half the story. I'd been too nervous to tell then the rest until today. And just maybe having the second million in my purse had something to do with my nerves. “About that—”

“I've got one question,” Gwen asked with a twinkle in her eye. “Are the walls thin enough that you can hear him when he strokes the sex stick? Or, does he do it in the shower.”

“You can't know he jerks off to her,” Chelsea argued.

“Pfft. With our hot Alex here in his condo of course he is. I saw the picture of the two of them running. He's checking out her ass.”

A blush heated my cheeks. I'd seen the picture too.

Chelsea took a gulp of her mimosa. Her glass was almost empty. Maybe that explained the odd behavior. “It looks like you're surviving just fine.” Her reddened eyes blinked a few times. “Is his penthouse as spectacular as they say?”

I nodded. “It's nice. Have you been crying?” One glass of the mimosa they served here wouldn't be enough to cause the reddened eyes she had.

Chelsea wiped at her nose. “Never mind me. I want to hear about you and Evan.”

“She’s trying to get out of the symphony gala she’s supposed to go to tonight.” Gwen explained.

I pulled my purse to my lap and opened it. “I have two pieces of news.” They both perked up.

I handed Chelsea an envelope with the second million. “The second half of what he agreed to pay.”

“Already,” Chelsea asked as she took the envelope and looked inside. Her eyes bugged out.

I took a dainty sip of my drink.

“I can’t wait to hear how you managed that,” Gwen said.

Chelsea put the money away. “Yeah.”

“He didn’t want me to feel pressured,” I said.

Gwen lips pursed like she was concentrating.

“Pressured to do what?” Chelsea asked after and sip.

Unable to hold it in, I blurted it out, but in a hushed tone. “We’ve gotten intimate.”

Gwen beat Chelsea to the punch. “I knew you were fucking him now. You’ve got that glow. That platonic shit couldn’t last. Not living in the same space as a man that hot.”

I nodded through my blush. “It turns out he’s not at all the devil I thought he was.”

“Except in bed I hope,” Gwen said.

Chelsea stayed quiet.

“He has big hands,” Gwen said with a questioning look. “So, does he also have...”

Our server interrupted Gwen. “How are you ladies doing?”

“Fine,” I answered.

Chelsea pointed at her empty glass. “I’ll take another.”

Gwen placed her palm over her glass with a shake of her head.

“I’ll be right back with that drink.”

“Is he as good a kisser as they say?” Chelsea asked, finally getting into the conversation.

My smile said it all. “Better.”

“So how did this happen?” Gwen asked.

“Let’s see,” I started. “First he saved me from falling off his building,

then his father came over and threatened to fire Evan if he didn't break up with me."

Chelsea lifted her gaze from the empty glass. "How do you know?"

"I was in the other room. I heard it all."

"Almost sounds like my father," Chelsea mused.

I nodded while taking a gulp of my drink. I'd never cared for her father, but this news cemented that.

Gwen shook her head. "That's low. No wonder you hate that family."

I took a big swig before continuing. "Oh, yeah. Then I marched in and told his Dad to go fuck himself."

Chelsea's mouth dropped open. "You told off his Dad?"

I nodded. "Sure. How was I supposed to know that was against the rules? It's normal in my family to call an asshole an asshole. Apparently the rich think they're above that." I laughed. "He didn't take it well."

Chelsea shook her head. "I don't get it. Fire his own son? Why would he do that?" She stood abruptly. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"Small bladder," Gwen nodded after Chelsea. "If his dad is that angry, was this break-up sex then?"

That question shook my world for a moment. Had it been? "No. That was a week ago." I was positive break-up sex had to be defined as a single time or a weekend or something. I'd read it somewhere authoritative.

"And you've been hot and heavy since then?" she guessed.

I felt the heat in my cheeks as I recalled some of the places we'd done it. "Uh, huh."

"And you're enjoying being with him?"

I couldn't keep from smiling. "A lot."

"Be careful. His reputation is..."

"Pretty bad," I finished for her. "I know."

"The Shark of Wall Street," she quoted from memory has razor sharp teeth, he'll eat you alive, he's fearless, as mean as they come, and as compassionate as a great white."

"I've heard it all," I admitted. "Except I haven't seen that side of him. He's not that way with me."

Her look shifted to something I couldn't place. "And it's just hot sex, right?"

I looked away toward the restrooms wondering how soon Chelsea would return.

Gwen placed her hand on mine. “Tell me you’re not falling for him.”

Was I? I blinked away the mist in my eyes. “Of course not. He’s a player and he’ll move on after this little project of ours is complete.”

A sharp pang lodged itself in my gut. I canted my head toward Chelsea’s empty seat. “What happened to her?” With eyes that looked like she’d cried all night and already one drink down the hatch, something other than hearing about me and Evan was bugging Chelsea.

Gwen lifted her glass. “I’m guessing it has to do with Yates.” Yates was Chelsea’s boyfriend of the last half year, that neither of us were thrilled with.

“You’re not getting out of here without more details.” Gwen interrogated me some more about Evan and I told her about pizza and the check that Evan said removed his leverage so that I could be honest.

“A million bucks?,” she said too loudly for my taste.

I put my finger to my lips and looked around. Nobody seemed to have heard her. I nodded.

“You’re sure? A full six zeros?” she whispered.

“I *am* an accountant.”

She blew out a long breath. “Rip his buttons off? That’s a perfect comeback. I’ll have to remember that line.” Her gaze held mine with intensity. “Just enjoy the ride and remember to be ready for the end. He’s a player. He’ll move on.”

I nodded along. It was a truth about Evan that had been documented over and over again in the tabloids. I might not think of him as the devil anymore, but that didn’t make him a saint.

When Chelsea returned to the table I shifted topics. “Now that we’ve dissected my life. What happened to you.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “I moved back home yesterday.” Her voice came out as a squeak.

I reached for her hand. “Oh, sweetie what happened?” I had my suspicions. I had never liked Yates. I mean, a Yankees fan? Really?

Chelsea had moved in with him, a guy that neither Gwen nor I were enthusiastic about. Yates had been a rebound hookup after her with the prior dipshit. It wasn’t the first time she’d fallen for the first warm body to take an interest in her.

But, who was I to judge. Until Evan it had been a over a year since I’d woken up to a warm body next to me. Maybe her way would have been better. I’d settled for Thor, she’d had Yates. At least Yates could carry on a

conversation or pick up some ice cream from the bodega.

“What did he do?” Gwen demanded. “Do I need to beat him up?”

“More like who did he do?” Chelsea said with half a laugh.

Suddenly the balance in my mind shifted in favor of Thor. He never cheated. But this would be a second offense for Yates. I considered it a good sign that Chelsea was able to find some humor in it.

“I had a yoga class canceled and came home early. The bike messenger girl from down the hall...” She wiped at her eyes. “was riding him instead of her bicycle. In our bed.” She sniffled. “My God, our bed.”

I laid hand on her shoulder. “Oh, honey.”

Gwen took her hand. “You know—”

“We’ve got your back,” I interrupted. I gave Gwen the evil eye because it looked like she might bring up that we’d warned Chelsea about this guy.

Gwen got the hint. “Yeah, we’ve totally got your back. I’m going to get them both. Send me a picture of the cheating bastard and her if you have it. So I can murder him on social media.” Gwen would defend our friend in cyberspace, I was more likely to do it wielding scissors.

I decided I might have to add a line in my goal journal about getting retribution on Yates for twice hurting my friend. I’d read about one girl who got the guy super super drunk and took him to a tattoo parlor to have *cheater* tattooed on his dick.

It might not have been true, but it sounded appropriate for Yates. Evan’s explanation of how hard mezcal had hit him the night of the infamous fountain incident meant that was probably what to use on Yates.

“And, she’s a bike messenger?” Chelsea choked out. She didn’t get that a girl’s occupation had no bearing on how tempting that girl’s pussy was to a douchebag like Yates. “Maybe if I’d—”

“Back that fucking truck up right now.” I pointed a stern finger at her. “This is not your fault. You’re fucking amazing and you deserve better than that cheating douchebag. He’s the one who’s wrong here, not you.”

Gwen was determined to make sure everybody knew what kind of fucking dirtbag Yates was.

I hadn’t decided what I could do. One thing I knew for sure, I’d never end up in Chelsea’s position. One strike and you’re out was my motto and no waiting six months to discover that the dirtbag’s excuse had been a lie.

I put up my hand to wave our server over. “We’re going to need another round.”

We ended up needing two more rounds.

CHAPTER 29



ALEXA

AFTER A LUXURIOUS WEEK IN EVAN'S BED, I WOKE WITH A SLIVER OF LIGHT streaming in through a crack in curtains, a benefit of the east facing window high enough up that the sun wasn't blocked by neighboring buildings.

It was Monday, and ten glorious days since I'd moved in with Evan. Just over a week since I'd escaped from Pinky, Zhukov and that wretched building was the other way to look at it, and it was time I went back to retrieve more of my stuff.

Evan's arm lay over my waist, his breath was warm on the back of my neck, and his morning wood was nestled against my backside.

God, it was nice to wake up with a warm man spooning me. That, and the sheets on this bed were to die for.

Since I appreciated sleeping on soft material more than most, I'd stretched my budget to afford the best five hundred thread count sheets that Target carried. These sheets however were in another class. The thread count probably had as many digits as Evan's bank account.

I lifted my head enough to see the clock. It wasn't too late yet, but I couldn't dawdle and still be on time back to work across the river. The distance to work and the deli was the one big drawback of hanging out here with Evan.

As soon as I moved to get up, Evan's arm tightened around me. "Good morning," he breathed into my ear. "Did I tell you I like laying here with

you?” Who would have guessed that the Shark of Wall Street was a secret cuddler.

I rolled to face him and got a sweet kiss as my reward. “I have to get up.”

“I’m already up.”

I grabbed his erection. “I can tell.” His cock was hot under my touch, and rock hard. “Does this happen every morning?”

“Naw.” He stretched his shoulders. “Only with you here.”

I doubted that was entirely the case, but still took pride in the statement.

“If you stay for a while, I know something we can do about it,” he prodded.

“You mean with it.”

“That too,” he admitted.

I rubbed my nose against his. “You should have thought of that earlier. I have to get to work and, well, Brooklyn is a lot farther than your office.”

The problem with sleeping next to a super sexy man who didn’t need little blue pills, and boy did he not, was that not all of our bed time ended up being sleeping. Since getting up late wasn’t an option, it meant heading into the bedroom earlier than either of us was used to.

He groaned. “I need to find you a job that’s closer.”

I jerked away and levered up on an elbow. “You will do no such thing.” My voice echoed off the walls, louder than it needed to be. “I like my job, and experience hours aren’t transportable. I have to finish up with Sydney so I can get my certificate. Besides, if there’s any job getting to be done, I’ll handle it myself. Got it?”

He put his hands up in mock surrender. “I was just trying to to help.”

“I don’t need help. If I can’t do it myself, I don’t want it. I don’t need anybody arranging things for me.” Realizing how abrasive I sounded, I toned it down and added a kiss before pulling away. “Thank you for caring. It’s sweet, but no thank you.”

In the shower I replayed the interchange in my head and felt ashamed of my overreaction. Rachel had told me once that Mom had advised her to count to ten in her head before reacting to anything in anger. It sounded like a practice I needed to cultivate.

I was just over a week into the not-fake version of our relationship and I’d already bitten his head off. Not good.

I rinsed off my hair and had an idea, a fucking brilliant one. What I needed to do was to properly enunciate how I wanted to change this aspect of

my behavior and make it one of my major life goals by putting it into my goal journal. There was only one problem, well two actually.

First, I didn't think '*learn to control my temper and argumentativeness*' was specific enough. And, second, I'd left my journal back at my old apartment. That was another reason to go back there sooner rather than later.

As soon as I was out of the shower and drying off, Evan ambled in. He rubbed sleep from his eyes.

"Shower's all yours," I said leaning close to the mirror. My face looked good enough that I could now skip the concealer.

He came up behind me, pulled the towel off and wrapped his arms around me, cradling my boobs. "I have an idea."

I bumped my ass back against him. "Oh no you don't. If you want me to soap you up, you have wake up earlier." I'd learned the hard way, that if we wanted to shower together on a weekday, we had to start earlier than this or I'd be late.

"What put you in a bad mood?" he pouted.

"One of us has to be the adult."

He shook his head, still sporting his pouty face and opened the shower door. "You're a tease, tempting me with that body and besides the adult thing is overrated."

I rescued the towel from the floor and covered up again. "If you want to be nice, you can help me retrieve more of my stuff from the apartment."

He started to soap up. "Hey, I need to fulfill my part of our bargain. When am I allowed to come into the office to meet with your boss? Sydney, right?"

"Maybe next week. I need to check with them." I'd waffled too long already.

"Good, because I also intend to make that dream of yours come true and ravish you over your desk."

"With people in the office? Pfft, that's not happening. And, you're the one who dreamed it, not me."

He lifted his arm to rinse. "It doesn't matter who's idea it was, it's still a good one. Maybe we should visit the office sooner, say Sunday. It should be empty then."

The devil on my shoulder said 'go for it, you need something exciting.' "We can't it's being fumigated," I lied.

Our clothes had ended up on the floor last night. Out of habit I picked

them up to throw in the separate laundry hampers.

Evan had everything except his socks and underwear dry cleaned. Plus his cleaning lady did that laundry for him.

I was a do your-own-wash girl, another difference in our stations in life. He had money to burn on such things and if something of mine needed better cleaning it got spot treatment before the washing machine in the basement of my building. In Evan's palace the machines had their own little room in the unit.

I caught a familiar scent as I was putting his shirt and pants in dry cleaning hamper. Pulling his shirt back out, I sniffed until I found the source. His collar had a distinctive trace of Chanel No. 5.

Evan rounded the corner. "Ah, you should have told me you were waiting for my help getting dressed."

Startled, I dropped the clothes back into the hamper and scampered away. "Oh, no you don't." His hands on me while I was naked would guarantee I wouldn't be on time. "Stay away from me. I can't be late."

Downstairs, the tall blonde I passed as I exited the elevator had overdone it on her perfume—Chanel No. 5.

I returned her smile before waving goodbye to Becka behind the desk.

CHAPTER 30



EVAN

IT HAD BEEN THREE WEEKS SINCE ALEXA AND HAD ERASED FAKE FROM OUR vocabulary, and as good as things had gone between us so far, I had still had a problem to solve.

When I'd tried to think of anyone better to talk through my options with than Martin Graff, I'd come up empty. They all knew someone in my family or Alexa's, and a leak would be catastrophic. He was the only one I felt was insulated enough from all the players.

That's why I found myself walking into the Golden Nugget again. Martin and I had brainstormed plenty of hard problems in the past and this was a thorny one. I didn't know how to tell my girl about the past help I'd provided her without her blowing up on me.

Martin stood and waved me over to the corner table.

This was my first time back with Martin, or anybody else, in this or any other girl-hunting environment. Instead of feeling at ease, it seemed foreign to me.

The Golden Nugget was considered up scale by many, but seemed seedier than I remembered. Most of my memories of this place were in an alcohol induced haze that must have made it seem brighter and cleaner than it looked tonight.

Two girls at the bar watched me as I crossed the room toward Martin's table. I didn't encourage them with a smile.

Martin had a girl sitting with him, which was par for the course for him. Since we'd hung out together some, he'd dated a number of women I'd broken up with.

"I'll catch up with ya later," he told the girl as I arrived.

She stood with a less than pleased look on her face. "But—"

Martin wasn't having it. "I said later. I have business to conduct."

I knew that tone, I'd used it plenty of times myself.

She gave me the once over before leaving.

"I'm glad you called," Martin said as he pointed at the chair across from him. "It's been too long since we did this."

"I felt I should cool it for a while after the last time. Dad and all," I explained. Our last time had been the night the fountain incident. I wasn't sure if Martin was the right one to talk to about this, but I knew nobody in my family was and he'd offered to talk.

"Since we're away from the prying eyes at work maybe we can get back to Northern Aerospace. I've got this problem."

I held up my hand to stop him. "I told you, I'm staying out of that. You'll do fine."

He'd twice mentioned that after he flew out to Chicago to meet with them things had gone chilly with their chairman and he'd wanted advice, which I'd declined once already. If he was pushing again, maybe the deal was teetering.

He looked around the room. "There are no prying eyes here." Somehow he thought that getting caught was the issue.

"My dad would fire me if I had anything more to do with acquisitions. It's your baby now."

His brows rose noticeably. "No shit?"

I nodded. "No shit. He's serious about it."

"Maybe he's losing a step. He had conversation with me last week about something he thought I'd said that I hadn't. I didn't push it because I didn't want to embarrass him."

I wasn't involving myself in any gossip related to Dad.

"Fair enough then. No talk of acquisitions." He lifted a bottle up from the floor beside his chair and tilted it toward me—Glenfiddich 21. "Is this good enough for your snobbish taste?" He placed it between the rows of glasses he'd set up for us. "No worm."

I took the seat across from him. "Sure. You have good taste." Alexa was trying to teach me to be more cognizant of other people's feelings. It wasn't

Macallan, but it also wasn't that damned mezcal. I'd told him I wouldn't ever have that shit again.

The way we did this, it was his year to bring bottles he picked out, and next year it would be my turn again.

He poured a glass for each of us and quickly started on his.

I was more tentative and didn't down mine at the rate he was going.

Like always, he'd laid out three glasses each for us. It had been our system to get lubricated enough as he put it to get inventive in our brainstorming. We didn't get serious in our discussions until we were halfway through the third glass and the ideas flowed easily.

He finished his glass and poured a second and third for each of us.

"You're not keeping up."

I nodded "Gotta savor a thing like this, not just inhale it."

He pulled his notepad out. We'd learned to write down our ideas for the next day lest the alcohol make us forget a good one.

I guzzled down the last of my first glass. "No notes tonight." I wanted to vent and get advice, none of which was work related.

"Okay." He put the notepad away. "Not picking up a girl tonight, and not discussing work. I get it."

He glanced toward the bar.

"You're in a serious hurry," I said, lifting my glass.

"Yeah, I guess I am a little." His glance over to the bar had made his motivation clear.

The girl he banished from the table was waiting for him.

I pointedly looked over. "Her?"

"Yeah. I could introduce you to her twin sister," he said bring the the second glass to his lips.

"No thanks." I tried to make it sound as nonchalant as possible. "Not tonight." Although there had been a time when I wouldn't have declined an offer like that. Oddly the idea didn't have the slightest appeal to me tonight and it actually repulsed me.

"Good. I was looking forward to both of them, but I thought I'd offer." He laughed. "With as many girls as you've given me it would only be fair.

I nodded along without finding it entertaining.

Alexa had change my world in more ways than one without me fully realizing it. It was another thing that I'd have to ponder later.

I'd never given him a girl as he put it, or passed one on to him in any

manner.

But, he'd developed an approach that worked for him. It hinged on my habit of sending a girl to Hawaii when I broke up her. Martin would then go there for the weekend, and position himself to be the rebound guy. He'd claim to also have been wronged by me, and that was usually all it took. He scored more often than not.

It was deceptive of him, and I didn't care to hear about. But, if it provided some solace to the girl I'd just broken up with, who was I to complain about Martin's tactics

I was still working on the second glass, enjoying the slow burn when he finished his third.

He slapped his glass down. "So, if not work, what are we shooting the shit about?"

"It's about Alexa," I started.

"Who's she?"

"My girl."

"The one you've been seeing for quite a while now, at least by your standards? I thought her name was something else."

"Yeah, her."

"She must be something else in bed if you're still with her this long."

I didn't answer that. Alexa and I were burning up the sheets but that wasn't the reason I hadn't moved on. I hadn't explained my *image rehabilitation* project and that I wasn't cycling through women like before. Nobody knew, except Alexa of course, and it had to stay that way.

"Can't wait to sample her if she's that hot," he chuckled.

My jaw clenched and my hand tightened on the glass.

Sensing my anger, Martin put up his hands. "Sorry. I meant when you're done with her of course."

"I really like her." It was my best way of telling him that she wasn't going anywhere. "That's my problem."

"Get her a Hawaii ticket and I'll solve that for you."

"No." I shook my head. "I don't want her to leave."

"Some people consider that a good thing," he quipped.

I wasn't into his humor right now. This was a serious issue. "There's something about our past that she doesn't know, and it's going to piss her off."

"If you two have history we're going to be here a while." He pointed at

my third glass on the table. "Finish that and start at the beginning." He refilled my empty first glass.



"LET ME SEE IF I GOT THIS STRAIGHT," MARTIN SAID, TWISTING HIS GLASS ON the table. It was almost empty and he'd stopped refilling his a while back.

I was on my fifth maybe sixth. I'd lost track. We'd already gone over the details of my dilemma twice now and he wanted to repeat it.

"Your families hate each other's guts?"

I nodded. "With a passion."

"She thinks you destroyed her chance to go to college when you bankrupted her family, but she managed to anyway because of her hard work."

"Basically," I admitted. "It was really my dad who pulled out the real estate deal that bankrupted them, but she lumps me in with him, whole family and all."

"And," he continued. "She doesn't know that you got her into school and paid for it."

"That's right. The money came through a scholarship grant with no ties to me."

"Where any other girl would be saying thank you Evan, you think she'd hate learning about this because of this independent streak she's got."

I nodded. "She's got a lot of pride and is very self-reliance oriented. Even now she refuses to let me help her."

"And, you're sure she doesn't know about this Columbia?"

"Not a clue," I confirmed.

He lifted his glass and sipped the very last of his whiskey. "If you tell her and she bolts, what's the problem?"

"I told you she's not just any girl... woman. She's special. That's why we're here. I have to figure out how to go about this and not lose her."

"To recap, you want to keep her no matter what?"

"That's what I've been saying. She's special. A real spitfire."

"Got a temper?"

"You could say that."

He nodded. "Well then, you got no choice. You gotta forget you ever did

those things. You might be able to tell her in a few years and fix things, but with what you told me this thing between you can't last that long. Problem solved."

He'd said that before, but I didn't get it. "Sure it can."

"Her dad thinks you're wrong for her, and your dad thinks she's wrong for you. Sooner or later the family pressure will be too much for one of you."

I swished my whiskey around in my glass. I'd come looking for an outside perspective. It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but Martin made sense.

He pointed a finger at me. I bet you have it all documented, don't you? You're always so organized."

"You know me too well. Operation Overwatch"

"Cool name. On the bright side. You got a perfect way to get rid of her when you want to. After telling her your little secret, it sounds like it will be a permanent goodbye."

He laughed. "Give me a heads up when you buy her a plane ticket."



ALEXA

SCENE 52 PLACEHOLDER.

CHAPTER 31



ALEXA

THURSDAY MORNING, I'D WOKEN UP TO A COLD BED WITH NO EVAN BESIDE me, for the third morning in a row. But, he was due back today and that would change.

OVER MY MORNING BAGEL, I REVIEWED OUR TEXT THREAD WITH MY GUY again.

ME: Find it hard waking up on Central time?

EVAN: Only because I get to think of how soon I get to see you again. How'd you sleep.

ME: Restless. The bed was too cold.

I had a surprise for him that Gwen had suggested. I'd not gone with her idea of getting a Brazilian wax, but had opted to fully shave instead. She'd quoted from Cosmo telling me that it was sure to get Evan's engine revving. And, she said I'd really get him into turbo mode if I mentioned I was going commando just before he got home. I wasn't so sure about that one.

EVAN: Sorry I didn't get Thor replaced for you before I left.

ME: Have you gotten everything accomplished there that you wanted?

EVAN: Yes. What's happening at your work today?

ME: I have a 9:30 meeting The client is still having banking issues. It could be a problem.

EVAN: Sounds interesting.

ME: Loan applications make me nervous.

EVAN: Didn't I already tell you I'm an expert on loan applications maybe I can help.

ME: I'm afraid we're out of time with this client. I have to get it right today or we may lose him.

Maybe I should have picked his brain on loan applications before he left, because losing Mr. Perez was a very real possibility.

EVAN: You'll do fine. Miss you.

ME: Then hurry home.

EVAN: Do not open in public.

ME: Open what?

I never got a reply.



THE TRAIN TO BROOKLYN HAD BEEN IT'S NORMAL HASSLE, BUT AT LEAST I hadn't been late getting to work.

"I'm sorry to spring this on you," I explained to Rita after settling in. "But, I sorta promised my boyfriend that he could come by the office."

"You make it sound like he breathes fire or something."

"He's not from our neighborhood, but he's a nice guy."

She waved my concern away. "If he's okay by you, that's all I need to know."

"Package for K. Borelli."

I turned to find a delivery guy with a box in hand. I hadn't heard him open the door.

Rita pointed at me. "You found her," she singsonged.

He handed me his electronic pad. "Sign here."

I signed and accepted the wrapped box.

"Who's it from?" Rita asked.

The guy checked his device. "McAllister International is all I know."

"Ooh," Rita crowed.

"Have a nice day ladies." Then he left. No grass grew under his feet.

Rita's eyebrows winged up. "From your billionaire boyfriend. What do you think it is? This is a step up from flowers."

Evan had stopped the flower deliveries after the first week like he'd promised. This was new.

"Dunno." After our text conversation about replacing Thor, I wasn't going to admit to having any idea. My God, what if he'd sent me a three-pack like he'd mentioned once.

"Let's see what it is," she said, hovering. "Did he tell you he was sending something?"

"Nope. He's nothing if not surprising."

"It looks too big to be tickets to Tahiti. You said you wanted to go to Tahiti, right?"

"That was last year," I countered.

"Maybe it's a box of money. I hear that cash is coming back as a gift."

"Fat chance. The rich stay that way but not giving it away."

"Maybe it's jewelry, diamonds," she said insisting on keeping up the guessing game.

"Not likely." I couldn't explain that jewelry always had meaning, and there wasn't any serious meaning in our relationship. We were enjoying each other's company, but that didn't mean serious. Nothing that deserved diamonds. "More likely a box of chocolates." I had to stop this game before anybody mentioned sex toys.

"You know that science says chocolate is good for your heart. And, having chocolates would make this the best morning ever."

I nodded. "I heard that."

"The good book says sharing is virtuous." She made it clear where she was going with these comments.

"I'm not opening it yet. I have to prepare for my meeting and besides, if it's chocolate I can't go into a sugar coma."

"A sugar coma is only from donuts," she scoffed.

"Don't worry," I said, picking up the box. "If it's chocolate, I'll be

sharing. I can't afford the pounds."

"Or maybe it's shoes," Rita said. She clearly didn't want to end this guessing game. "Something you can wear is better than something that is gone after you eat it."

I held the box close to me. "I'm saving this for later. I have to get ready for Mr. Perez."

"You're no fun," She complained as I took my prize to the small closet-like space that was my office.

She followed me. "When are you going to open it? I'm curious."

"Maybe sometime later. Right now I have to prepare."

That convinced her to go back to her desk.

If this was battery operated fun, I was going to kill Evan for sending it to work. How did one even begin to explain something like that?

As I prepared for my meeting, the box taunted me and my continuing curiosity made concentrating impossible. Why did Evan have to do this to me? And why today?

There was a card attached in an envelope. On the outside it said personal and confidential.

I opened the card.

Brooklyn-

Red is a power color. Trust me, if you wear this for your meeting you will have more confidence and be more successful. Also, there is another important item inside that can be your explanation when your coworkers ask what you received.

Your boyfriend,

Ev

P.S. Open in private and then call me.

Red? Open in private? Really? The box was too small for a coat, and a red coat would make me look like I should be guarding Windsor Castle. Perhaps a sweater. Gloves didn't make any sense.

Evan often wore red ties, but a tie didn't fit my attire today. Besides, I had no idea how to make the knot, but that's what YouTube videos were for.

Maybe Rita was right. Red shoes would be nice. And power heels would be simple to wear for my meeting.

Making sure Rita wasn't lurking, I gingerly pulled open the wrapping on one end and then the other. Unfortunately the stiff paper made noise, but so far not enough to alert Rita.

When I got the wrapping loose, the box didn't tell me anything plain white, with no markings of any kind. I carefully checked my surroundings before lifting the lid for a peek

Holy shit. I quickly replaced the lid after spying red lace. Clear evidence that this wasn't shoes or a sweater. Was he insane? Sending me lingerie at work? I put the gift box in my lap, quickly removed the bra and panty set and stuffed them in a drawer. If Rita, or worse, Sydney saw these, I'd die. Admittedly a three pack of dildos would have been worse. A small white box remained at the bottom of the gift box.

Did Evan actually expect me to change into these today? He had said success was all about confidence.

With plenty of time before my meeting, I moved his lacy gifts to my purse, shoved the gift box under my desk and went to our bathroom. There wasn't any harm in trying them on to see if they did make me feel more confident. If they didn't, I'd stick with what I had on, practical cotton and a bra that had lost one of its hooks in the back.

After locking the bathroom door, I put down the lid and started undressing. Luckily we had a coat hook on the back of the door to hang my things off the floor. Before I finished I had an odd concern. If he'd gotten me crotchless panties I was going to murder him. Then again, nobody had ever gotten me anything like that before.

After getting the luxurious red garments on, I checked myself in the mirror, turning side to side. I'd never owned anything this soft, anything that made me feel so... sexy if that was the right word. Damn Evan had good taste, and thankfully he hadn't gone for crotchless. Maybe confident, or powerful were good words for it.

The realization that I was probably the hundredth woman he'd bought lingerie for dulled my mood for a moment. I was his girl, only the second o rate that distinction. That was worth something.

Yes, the red was powerful. *I am woman, hear me roar.*

"Kim, Mr. Perez is here," Rita said, knocking on the door.

"Be right there," I said as I pulled my blouse on. I'd save a minute by not switching back to my old underwear.

After dressing hurriedly, I barely managed to zip my purse closed with

my old garments inside. A swipe of lipstick, and a quick check in the mirror that nothing was askew, and I was ready. I'd swear my girls looked down right perky in this bra.

"I set him up in the conference room," Rita said as I passed her. "Are you feeling okay?"

I nodded. "Better now, thank you." I patted my stomach. "Sorry, too much chocolate at once."

Her brows went up in alarm. "You didn't?"

"Just kidding. I haven't opened it yet." I grabbed my file to join Mr. Perez in the conference room.

Sydney Perlmutter didn't pay me much, but at least the company only worked with small business clients. Having him take me on had meant I hadn't been forced to accept a job from one of the soulless big accounting firms who only worked for equally soulless large corporations.

This was exactly the experience I needed to be able to open up my own practice and help the small businesses that needed it most.

When I opened the door to greet Mr. Perez I only hoped that I didn't lose the account for them.



EVAN

UNUSUAL ANTICIPATION RIPPLED THROUGH ME. ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE other I told myself as I walked up the stairs to Sydney Perlmutter Accounting.

I could do this. I could do a million dollar deal over coffee, or a multi-million dollar deal over breakfast. I thrived on the tension of the negotiation, the self control they required to be both understanding enough to reach agreement and aggressive enough to close a deal on good terms.

I'd been away from my girl for three days and I had to hold it together for another few hours. This was her workplace and I had to remain professional. Slamming the door of her office closed and bending her over the desk to show exactly how much I'd missed her wouldn't do—not here, not today.

Smiling to myself, I thought that might be perfect for a non-work day.

Get it the fuck together, McAllister. Concentrate.

Calm, cool, collected, professional, I could be those things. I had to be those things. These people were like family to her and as such they got a vote on if was acceptable boyfriend material for Alexa.

As I reached for the handle, I took a fortifying breath.

Then just as quickly, I pulled my hand back. I'd almost violated Alexa's first rule—no suits.

Whipping my tie off, I folded it in my pocket and undid my top button. It was too late to do anything about the coat, so I opened the door.

Inside, the walk up office above the shoe store was clean, if smaller than I'd expected. Somebody liked penguins from the looks of the art on the walls, all enlarged photos.

One client was sitting in the lone chair inside the door. The way his lips curled after he eyed me made me wish I had gone back to the car to dump the coat.

The lady behind the desk put down her coffee cup. "Good morning."

"I'm here to see Alexa, and when we're done, Sydney Perlmutter," I told the lady, Rita Perlmutter, by the nameplate on her desk. "Sorry I didn't call ahead, but Alexa asked me to see him." A vase with three red roses sat on the corner of her desk.

"How is your morning so far, Mr. McAllister," she said rising from her desk.

"Very well, thank you. And you?" I hadn't introduced myself, but I was used to getting recognized, a symptom of being stalked incessantly by the paparazzi.

"No complaints. Alexa said you were tall, but the word doesn't do you justice. Do you like penguins?"

That explained how she knew my name. The penguin question signaled that Brooklyn office etiquette was different than Manhattan. Maybe a password phrase to be allowed in?

I had no idea what the correct response was.

Finally I had a use for one of my brother's long winded stories. "I think they're quite cute and I particularly admire the Emperor Penguin, because it is the male who incubates the egg for two and half months, balancing it on the tops of his feet and holding it against his brood patch for warmth while the female goes out to sea to feed. It's a shining example of fatherhood for the rest of us."

“Ain’t that the truth,” Rita agreed. “You men have it too easy if you ask me.”

I gestured at the roses. “Nice flowers.”

Rita stood. “Sydney gets them for me every month. Sydney should be free in a half hour or so. We don’t have much space. You can wait in Alex’s office. If you’ll follow me.”

“Very thoughtful,” I commented before heading down the hall after her. I followed her to the tiny cubbyhole she indicated.

“Can I tell Sydney what it’s about?”

“The lease extension.”

Rita studied me for a moment. “Hmm.” Maybe Alexa hadn’t prepped the Perlmutter like she’d promised.

“But first, I’d like to talk to Alexa if I could.”

“I’m sorry that Alexa’s in a meeting with a client now.” She checked her watch. “It’ll be about twenty minutes.”

“I was hoping to catch her before she finished. Could you please tell her that her banking consultant is here?”

Her eyes narrowed and her head cocked slightly. “Banking consultant, huh?”

I lowered my voice. “Yes. I’d rather not use my name. She’ll understand. And, ask her to bring the paperwork, please.”

“Banking consultant,” she muttered under breath as she left.

I sat down to wait in the tiny space.

Alexa had described her office as being closet-sized, but she hadn’t prepared me for this. The desk was child size and it was a tight fit to squeeze around to sit behind the desk. The visitor’s chair had to be sideways to the desk, or it wouldn’t fit, and forget about a file cabinet or credenza. How did people work like this?

Alexa had her two diplomas from Columbia framed on the wall, and several small inspirational posters.

If the plan doesn’t work change the plan but never the goal.

I liked that one. She’d had several goals and achieved them. I had a goal as well, getting back to my acquisitions job. We were more similar than she liked to admit. The second poster was similar.

Ambition is the first step to success. The second is Action.

The third was different.

Hurt me with the truth, but never comfort me with a lie.

I liked them enough to snap a picture of each with my phone. Perhaps I needed something like them in my new office. It was pretty bare.

This space was pure Alexa. It was about goals and pride in accomplishment just like she was. Yes, she was the whole package, looks, brains, and ambition. She was so much more than any of the women I'd dated before. She was what I hadn't known I'd been missing and it wasn't just the phenomenal sex.

That thought made my cock twitch. I'd fantasized about taking her over her desk, but that had been before I'd seen it. I'd have to shift my fantasy to a different, but no less risqué location.

I'd always chosen from the same pool of Manhattan socialites all of which had the same ambition, a gold plated life-style and a nice pre-nup. If they didn't land you as a potential husband they counted it as a win just to get some publicity with you that made them more attractive to the next potential husband bed-mate.

Alexa's ambition boiled down to bettering herself to put in her in a better position to help others.

CHAPTER 32



ALEXA

I WAS TWENTY MINUTES INTO MY MEETING WITH MR. PEREZ WHEN RITA knocked and put her head in the door with an announcement.

“Alexa. Your banking consultant has arrived.”

Banking consultant? It didn’t ring a bell.

“The one who sent the package this morning,” Rita added. “I put him in your office. He said to bring the paperwork, please.”

It took me a second to recall the gift box, Evan’s threat to stop by, and put things together. “Thanks. Tell him I’ll be right out.” I turned to find Mr. Perez alarmed.

“I thought we had a full forty-five minutes,” he said.

I put on my most disarming smile. “Don’t worry. We do. He has come by to see if he has any suggestions for your loan application.”

He crossed his arms. “This is expensive enough as it is I can’t—”

“It won’t cost you a dime,” I assured him. I’m paying for his expertise out of my own pocket to see if he can help. If he can’t, I’ll be right back.” I had no intention of letting Evan screw this up for me, but after Rita had interrupted us, I had to at least take two minutes and make a show of checking it out.

Perez’s posture softened. “Okay, then. But I still get my full time.”

“Of course,” I assured him. “Not a minute less.”



A MINUTE LATER ALEXA ARRIVED.

My dick stiffened when I caught a whiff of that orange blossom scent she usually exuded. I couldn't help but watch her ass as she hurriedly squeezed between the desk and the wall to sit. I wanted to reach out and touch her so badly it hurt.

"What are you doing here," she said in a low voice.

"Didn't you say your client had loan application problems? I told you I'm an expert in that area."

"He's my responsibility and I'm not letting you look at his confidential information. It's not allowed."

My cock got hard, concentrating on her wicked mouth. What was it about seeing my girl in her defiant mode that was so arousing?

"What are you looking at?" she hissed.

"You. Aren't I allowed to miss my girl?"

"Is it hot in here?" She smiled sweetly and then crossed her arms under her chest and lifted her boobs. "I know what you're after Mr. McAllister, and it's not happening."

"As temptingly as that thought is, that's not why I stopped by."

Her blush telegraphed that she hadn't forgotten about me telling her that taking her in office at work had been one of my dreams. It probably explained why she'd never let me visit her office before. "If you'll excuse me, I have to get back to my client."

"And violate your CPA oath?"

Her eyes widened and she switched instantly from sex kitten to wild cat. "How dare you. I do the best I can by my clients every single day."

"Of course you do, but denying your client the benefit my insight on his loan application would be providing less than the best service you can provide, now wouldn't it?"

She pursed her lips and tapped her foot under the desk. "Only if I think you can provide value."

I nodded. "I promise I can."

She laid a folder down and turned it to me. "This better be good."

I would have preferred to be next to her, but the tiny space didn't allow that. I opened the folder and started my perusal. "Patience, dear."

Her nose curled up at the endearment as it often did. "Make it quick. I

can't leave him alone for long."

"This will only take a second." I took a picture of the loan officer's business card paperclipped to the first page, then moved on to the second, third and fourth pages. "Good inventory ratios, returns are good, sales increase looks good to me." Then I found the line I was looking for and pointed to it. "Move these all down one and Change this first entry here to, Evan McAllister, McAllister International. Add my personal cell number. You have it."

She looked confused. "Credit references? You've never done business with him. You don't even know him. How can you be a credit reference?"

"I've looked it over. I like the numbers, and I trust you. You're the accountant. Do you think he's a good risk? Do you think his character is good?"

"Absolutely," she said without hesitation.

"That's enough for me. We can't both be wrong."

"And, that's it?"

"It'll get approved. Trust me. Banking is more relational than mathematical. Character is the most important metric. You trust him and I've reviewed the numbers. I'll vouch for Mr Perez. This will get approved."

"Just like that?"

"Absolutely. When I call this guy..." I tapped the loan officer's card. "And, he passes it up the chain, he'll protect himself by mentioning my name as a reference. You may not like the McAllister name, but it carries weight in banking circles."

"Did you get my package?"

"We're done here," she said standing quickly. Her blouse was too opaque for me to get a sense of the color of her bra, but from her body language I could guess. "You're wearing them aren't you?"

Her blush answered for her as she gathered up the folder. "I have to get back to my client before he bolts."

"You look great in them." And she certainly did. She entranced me more and more as we spent time together. "But we can talk about this later." I stood and exited ahead of her.

Rita was looking our direction.

Alexa glanced quickly in Rita's direction before straining up to give me short kiss on the cheek—way too chaste for my liking. "Now get out of here before your suit scares someone away."

“I did take off the tie,” I explained.

“I appreciate the big concession. I’ll talk to you later.” She turned and left.

I returned to Rita’s desk.

“Don’t listen to her,” Rita said. “Your suit doesn’t scare me one bit. And, anybody who likes penguins gets my seal of approval.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. I can use all the help I can get with her.”

“She’s a tough one our Alexa, but the way she looks at you, I don’t think you need as much help as you think.” Her words gave me odd comfort.

“Thanks. Does Sydney have a minute?”

“Hey Syd. You free?” she yelled.

“Yeah. I guess,” came from the far office.

Rita led me to the man himself.

Except for the decidedly casual attire, Sydney Perlmutter looked every bit the accountant, with his fingers on a calculator, a computer to the side, a pen in his pocket, and a multi-ruled pad in front of him. “Can I help you? Mr...”

“McAllister,” I finished, extending my hand to shake. “Evan McAllister.”

His grip was firm for the standard two shakes, and his eyes appraised me with caution. “You better treat our Alexa right.”

“I will,” I assured him. It was an easy promise to make.

“And you’re here because?”

Either Alexa hadn’t discussed our arrangement with him yet, or he didn’t like it and was playing dumb. Either way I waded in. “Alexa mentioned that you were having difficulties with your landlord regarding a lease extension.”

His eyes narrowed and he crossed his arms, but stayed silent.

“She thinks very highly of you, Sydney, and thinks the situation is unfair.”

His face softened after my words, but he didn’t utter a sound.

“Alexa asked if I could provide some help.”

He uncrossed his arms, a small victory. “I don’t see how.”

“I’ve dealt with a lot of situations such as these. If I could have a look at a your lease—”

“I don’t need help reading the fucking thing. Pardon my French. Our previous landlord Mrs. Quenton passed away and her son, Jason, is a...”

“Jerk,” I finished for him.

He nodded with a snort. “That and a hundred worse names.”

Sydney argued a bit more, but in the end I convinced him to let me leave with a copy of his lease. He clearly doubted I would come back with anything helpful.

After Albert picked me up downstairs, I dialed from the back of the car. “Hey Diane. I’d like you to dig up everything you can on a Jason Quenton.” I spelled it for her. “And then get a hold of him.” I read off the number to her. “Set up a meeting for this afternoon at our offices, four o’clock. Tell Anita I need the boardroom. Don’t take no for an answer.” Since dad was out of town, I would outrank anybody else that wanted the room.

“And what do I tell this Mr. Quenton it’s about.”

“A hush, hush. Super secret special opportunity.”

“And if he’s busy?”

“He’ll regret it if he misses this and tell him that he’ll need two forms of ID with him. Get security to post two guards at the boardroom and relieve him of his cell phone before he enters.”

She giggled. “I know the drill.”

Next, I dialed the bank.



ALEXA

MR. PEREZ SEEMED QUITE IMPRESSED WHEN I REPEATED EVAN’S LINE ABOUT how banking was more about relationships than math.

I suggested two other minor changes to his application before we were done.

He left happy, and I had my fingers crossed for him that this time he’d get through the approval process. The neighborhood would be well served by the bodega he wanted to add.

Rita was at my door as soon as I walked Mr. Perez out. “Now we can open it.”

I slid my purse to the side and pulled this morning’s box out from under my desk.

Rita was jumpy with excitement. “He likes penguins, so this is going to be good.”

“Penguins?”

“He new all about the mating habits of the Emperor Penguin. Do you have any idea how rare that is? He’s quite the catch if you ask me. Handsome and he likes penguins, just like Sydney.” To my mind, Evan and Sydney were polar opposites, but if Rita wanted to look at the world that way who was I to object.

I fished out the small white box, laying it on the desk. The Apple logo gave it away.

“Wow. A new phone. That’s super thoughtful of him. I told you it was going to be good. Not as good as a box of money, but much more personal.”

My blood pressure spiked. I’d told him my old phone was fine.

“Well, aren’t you going to open it?”

“But I told him my old one was fine.” I gave in and pulled out the shiny new phone. A card was in the box.

It’s been set up for you and ready to use. When you’re ready we can change you current number over to this phone.

It had a phone number on it and when I turned it on, it was fully charged and already had a text message

EVAN: Be mad all you want. Your old phone was dangerous. We can argue it over ice cream.

“What’s it say?” Rita asked as she watched me smile.

I turned the phone so she could read it.

“See. Thoughtful. And, he’s right, a reliable phone is important for a girl walking around in this city.”

“But you know my rule about not owing anybody anything. I wanted to buy one with my own money.”

“And you want to punish him for being nice? When Sydney gives me roses, do I turn up my nose at them. No way, I appreciate them for the thought they convey. Girl, you need to learn how to accept a gift from time to time. Do you honestly think he’s trying to bribe you to do something you don’t want to do?”

“No, I guess not,” I admitted. Except for sex on my office desk, I hadn’t

refused many things.

“I was sort of hoping for chocolates you could share, but I have to admit this is sweet.”

“Yeah.”

“Women have been thanking men for gifts in ways other than money for ages.”

“Yeah.” Heat rose in my cheeks. I hadn’t expected her to imply that I give Evan a blow job.

“Cook him a really nice dinner,” she suggested

After she left, I typed the message Evan deserved.

ME: Thank you.

EVAN: You’re welcome. I look forward to you modeling for me when you get home.

ME: I meant the phone. It was a nice thought, but I can’t accept it.

My phone rang instantly. I got the first word in. “It’s a thousand dollar phone. I can’t accept it.”

“Consider this a prop for the job,” Evan said. “Another part of the costume. You will carry it. You will put it on the table when we’re being photographed. Your piece of shit isn’t fitting for my girlfriend to carry around in public. When we’re done, you can give to a homeless person if it makes you feel better. But until then you will carry it because your’s isn’t safe.”

“Fine. I’ll carry it, but I won’t activate it. You can’t make me.”

“God, woman, you’re sexy as fuck when you argue, but it doesn’t change a thing. You’re keeping it.”

“It’s the principle of the thing. I earn my own way. I don’t owe anybody, and it’s a thousand dollar phone, not a few flowers.”

“It’s the least I could do for my girl.”

Every time he called me that a piece of my heart went mushy. “If you want to be helpful, I need some things out of my apartment. You could meet me there later and carry a few things for me with those big muscles of yours.”

“Let me know when.”

When we hung up, I sensed that our gifting argument wasn’t over.

CHAPTER 33



ALEXA

THURSDAY AFTERNOON, EVAN HAD CALLED TO SAY HE WAS BACK AND leaving the airport.

I left work early enough to meet him at my apartment. There would be more than I wanted to carry myself. I hesitated outside my old door, dreading what I'd find inside and waited for the message since I also didn't want to stay in there for long.

Mrs. Dorits from across the hall opened her door. "Did you lock yourself out, dear? I can call the super for you."

"No thanks." I held up my key. "I'm waiting for my boyfriend to arrive." It felt oddly nice to say the words *my boyfriend*. I should do that more often.

"I wouldn't stay in the hallway too long. That red haired kid is around."

"I won't." The mention of Pinky made my skin crawl.

She shook her head and retreated back inside her unit. She probably thought I was crazy.

EVAN: Be there in about five.

He was close, so I turned the key.

Inside it was just as bad as before, except now it stank of mildew. Going further in, I caught a drip hit the bathroom counter. The leak hadn't been repaired, and neither had my ceiling.

After closing the door, the first thing I grabbed was my silver goal journal. Thank God it was in good shape. I started adding things from my closet to the bag, then stopped to make a call.

“Mr. Zhukov, this is Alexa Borelli. My apartment, well it looks like the leak still hasn’t been fixed and the ceiling—”

“Missy, I’ve been waiting on your call to set a date when you can let us in.” It was bullshit. He had a key.

I kept my voice calm. “Then we can do tomorrow.”

It sounded like he spit something on the other end. “Sorry. The only day Frank has available is Friday.”

“Tomorrow is Friday,” I reminded him.

“He’s already booked for tomorrow. I got ya down for next Friday.”

“How early?” I asked.

“Can’t say. Sometime Friday before the end of the day.”

Since getting mad at Zhukov might have been what got me here I kept my answer to one word, “Friday.” I didn’t scream until after hanging up. This was worse than dealing with the cable company.

I pulled open a dresser drawer, but yanked it too hard and it ended up on the floor. I started packing it up anyway, swearing at fucking Zhukov in my head.

“The place looks even worse than last time,” was the first thing Evan said when he and Albert arrived.

“It was better before this.” I raised my hands to the destroyed ceiling.

“Why hasn’t that been fixed, and this carpet...” He kicked at it. “Should have already been replaced. It’s not healthy.” He went on like that the whole time we packed things into trash bags.

Albert merely worked quietly and shrugged when I looked to him for a comment.

Five minutes later we had as much as we were going to carry in this trip, and with the smell I didn’t want to stay any longer than necessary.

I locked the door after we exited.

The yell came down the hallway. “Hey there Blondie.”

The day just got worse. Even in the dim lighting Pinky’s dyed hair was easy to make out. He and four of his thugs sauntered toward us from the stairwell door. “You owe me fifty bucks, or you and me gonna go on a date.”

Two more of Pinky’s crew came out of the stairwell door—not good odds.

My leg started to shake. This was the nightmare scenario.

Albert dropped the bags he carried and moved in front of us. The big man took up almost the entire width of the hall, but there were now seven of them.

I dropped my bag as well when Even set his down.

“Who calls the shots?” Evan asked me quietly.

“The guy in front. Pinky.”

The group moved toward us. “We got a tax on strangers in this building,” Pinky announced.

Before I could say anything to stop him, Evan tapped Albert on the shoulder. “Let me talk to him.” Evan took out his wallet. “What do we know about him?” he whispered to Albert.

“A younger brother, Timothy,” Albert whispered back.

Pulling cash from his wallet, Evan walked forward. “Pinky. You and me should talk... Alone.”

Pinky snorted, but then as Evan pulled out more bills, he told his guys to stay back and walked up to meet Evan half way.

The only words of Evan’s I could make out were “poached or fried?”

Pinky got jittery, sneered, and spat on the carpet. He took the money and shoed his guys back into the stairwell.

Finally able to breathe again, I picked up the bags and followed Evan and Albert to the stairs.

As we reached the door to the stairwell, Albert motioned for us to stay and went in first to check. “Clear,” he said.

I took the time to ask Evan, “Pinky looked pissed. What did you say to him?”



EVAN

WE STOPPED AT THE STAIRWELL DOOR AND ALBERT WENT AHEAD TO CHECK IT out. If the turd with the red hair want to ambush us, this is where it would go down.

I tapped Albert on the shoulder.

He nodded and went ahead to check the stairwell.

“Tell me,” Alexa insisted.

This was not the place to sit around arguing. “I paid your red-haired friend to make sure nothing happens to your place,” I explained.

“Not enough detail,” she said.

Albert reappeared. “It’s clear.”

I nudged Alexa ahead of me and took the rear as we started down the stairs.

Alexa stopped at the first landing. “Keep going.”

“And, I told him that if he so much as looked sideways at you again I wouldn’t like it.”

She laughed and started down again. “I bet that went over well. You said fried or poached. You planning a breakfast meeting with him?” she asked. Apparently she’d heard more than I wanted her to.

“I explained that if I got angry, I would cook his little brother’s balls and feed them to him.”

She gagged and her hand went quickly to my mouth. “You’re insane,” she blurted out when she recovered.

“He needed to understand fear,” I countered.

“And you’d really do that?”

“Of course. It’s a language he understands.”

“Evan, he is not somebody you want to piss off.”

I shrugged and urged her forward. “We’re fine. I made him look good in front of his guys.”

She blew out her cheeks in frustration. “Nothing having to do with him is ever fine. He doesn’t have a screw loose. He has a dozen screws loose. You can’t trust him.”

I waited until the next landing to continue. “Look. He can brag to his guys how much money he got from me and not mention the rest. If I’d threatened him directly, his macho pride wouldn’t let him back down, but mention his family, and he’s smart enough to step back and not take the chance that I could get to his little brother.”

She thought about that for a second. “That’s risky. He’s a lot less predictable than the people you usually deal with.”

What was done was done. “Why did he say you owed him money anyway?”

“You don’t want to know.”

When we reached the ground floor, I asked, “Where is the super’s unit?”

Alexa turned. "Why?"

"I want to talk to him."

"Trust me. You don't."

"Humor me. What's his name?"

She started walking. "Zhukov.

Last door on the left, but you're wasting your time. He's worse than useless."

"Wait for me on the street," I told her, and nodded to Albert who went with my girl.

When they were out of sight, I knocked.

A short man in an undershirt with a horseshoe ring of gray hair answered the door with a beer in his hand. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Zhukov?"

"Who's asking?"

I opened my wallet and pulled out a C-note. "Benjamin Franklin."

He appraised me for a second before answering. "I'm Zhukov." He held his hand out.

I gave him the bill. "I'd like to contact the building owner." I pulled out another bill. When he didn't budge, I added a third.

In the end it took another hundred to get a dirty business card from him with the name and number I wanted.



ALEXA

ONCE INSIDE THE CAR WITH THE FEW BAGS OF MY BELONGINGS IN THE TRUNK, I snuggled up to my man. Clung to him was more like it. My leg still shook from the experience.

He rubbed my back. "You're safe now. He can't hurt you."

I merely clung to him tighter.

"It's what any boyfriend would do," he joked.

But Pinky was no joking matter. "No. Not when dealing with that guy."

His only answer was to hold me close and run his hand over my back.

As always, he wore a suit, but when I ran my hand inside his coat over

the ridges of muscle they didn't know about, I could picture him a shirtless Tarzan, protective, fearless, and king of all he surveyed, including this concrete jungle.

He'd taken on Pinky without any hesitation, just like Tarzan taking on a lion. Nobody else in my neighborhood had the guts to do that, or was crazy enough. But my Evan didn't flinch, didn't hesitate.

It was clear why they called him the Shark of Wall Street. Gwen was right, with sharp teeth and no fear he'd take on anyone. And attacking Pinky's little brother? The comment that the man had no compassion was spot on. Evan hadn't tried to hide it from me this afternoon. He was dangerous in his own right.

With me he cuddled, but I had to remember that there was also the stone cold side to him, like the articles had said, he had the compassion of a great white, and that was what made him so invincible in the business world. His willingness to threaten Pinky's little brother was evidence enough of that.

After today I could add another instance of Evan saving me, this time from something every woman dreaded. If I'd been alone in that hallway carrying bags of clothes when Pinky arrived it could've turned out quite differently.

But after Evan's threats against Pinky, this was likely to be a more dangerous place for me to live when Evan and I were done. Fifty bucks might not buy my way out of trouble in the future. That was a troubling thought. How far would I have to move to be safe?

CHAPTER 34



ALEXA

LATE THE NEXT MORNING, RITA YELLED DOWN THE HALL, “SYDNEY, COME here. You’ll never believe what just arrived.”

She hadn’t called me, but curiosity forced me out from behind my desk to investigate.

Sydney was paging through a document. “I don’t believe it.”

“It’s real right?” Rita asked, looking over his shoulder.

“Let me finish it,” he said.

“Well?” she asked again.

“Quiet, dear. I need to read this before I sign it.” After two more pages he laid it on the desk and pulled out his pen. “It looks right to me.”

“What changed his mind?” she asked.

I still had no idea what this was.

“Not what, but who.” He turned to me. “Alexa, I had my doubts, but your Mr. McAllister is a miracle worker. I like him. I don’t know how to thank you. Or, him for this.”

“Mr. Quenton signed the lease extension,” Rita explained. She raised a hand. “I know. We can get him an aquarium membership so he can visit the penguins any time he wants.”

They had become like a second family to me, and seeing them this happy melted my heart. Then there was the odd feeling of pride I felt that I’d had a hand in my boyfriend helping them with this huge problem.

“That’s fine dear,” Sydney said. “But we should at least invite him to dinner as well.” He was looking at me. “What do you think, Alexa?”

I didn’t have any choice but to say what they expected. “I’ll ask. I think he’d like that.”

Bringing my boyfriend to dinner with the Perlmutter? This was getting my two lives more tangled than I’d counted on. I’d always thought I could go to work in the morning as the normal Brooklyn girl on her way to her CPA and go home at night across the river as the girlfriend of the Manhattan businessman people called the Shark of Wall Street.

They traveled in completely different circles. They didn’t talk the same, dress the same, or even eat the same way. When we started dating, Evan even used silverware on pizza.

Rita had been won over by Evan’s penguin knowledge, but Sydney’s distrust of what he called ‘slick downtown types’ ran deep, and Evan clearly fit in that category.

After they were done thanking me, I closed myself in my tiny office and dialed.

“What did you do? I mean how did you do it?” I asked as soon as he picked up. “We just got the lease extension. Thank you for helping. This means the world to them.” I only took a breath after I got it all out.

“Good morning, to you too.”

“How did you manage it? It hasn’t even been a day.” I blurted out like I was looking for the answer to a magic trick.

“Ah, yee of little faith. It was a part of our deal, and I always come through on my promises, gorgeous.”

I closed my eyes for a second and let his low voice ooze out of the phone and over me like warm chocolate. *Why does the word gorgeous from his lips still do that tingly thing to my insides?*

The lease extension had been part of our deal. But, that didn’t make it less impressive or any less helpful for the Perlmutter.

A second later, I backed up to remember my manners. “Good morning dear boyfriend. I’m doing very well, thank you. How are you this fine morning?” I really needed to pick a better phrase than *dear boyfriend*.

“Much better now that I get to hear your wonderful voice without an erection joke.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t get too used to it. Now that we’re done with the fluffy stuff, how did you manage the lease extension? Rita said it just showed up. I

thought you were going to go with Sydney to help negotiate it or something.” When he didn’t answer I wondered for a second if we’d all jumped to the wrong conclusion. “You did get involved, right?”

“I only have one thing to say. If you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“That’s not an explanation.”

“I told you before, I fix problems. That’s what I do. My Gramps, had a saying. You can’t help everybody, but you can help somebody. You asked me to help them. They are important to you, so that makes them important to me. That’s all there is to it.”

At least I hadn’t made a fool of myself. He had done something. It seemed I wasn’t going to get any more out of him for now. “Please don’t laugh at Rita when she says she’s getting you a membership to the aquarium so you can see the penguins.”

“That’s very thoughtful of her,” he said with zero sarcasm in his voice.

“And they want us to come over for dinner. I’ll figure out some excuse later, tell them you’re busy buying Luxembourg or something.”

He laughed. Are you afraid I’ll embarrass you?”

“No. Not really.”

“A dinner would be lovely.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I’d expected him to decline. The Permutters were pretty much the opposite of his kind of people. Sydney told me once the only suit he owned didn’t fit, but it didn’t matter because he only wore it to funerals.

I got off the phone with an excuse that I had to work while what I really had to do was contemplate my man. My feelings for him had gone from hate, to intrigue, to infatuation, and admiration. Where I’d once dreaded how long I might have to endure him to earn the second million for the children, I was clearly in different territory now.

Gwen had warned me that Evan was a player and he’d move on. Did that include from me? Page Six said I’d already lasted longer than most of his women. Now I could only wonder how long I’d get to stay the McAllister Minx.

Evan had originally said I wouldn’t have to play his girlfriend for more than a few months. What signs would I see that he’d grown tired of me, signs that Gwen, who knew a lot more about men than I did, was right?

The pit in my stomach from those questions told me an awkward truth. I’d fallen for my enemy.

An hour later, when I ventured out of my office and by Rita. I got the shake of the head and the evil eye. With her it didn't pay to wait, so I asked, "What did I do?"

She shook her head again. "I'd be ashamed of you if you were my daughter."

Slumping down in the seat next to her I admitted it. "He'll come to dinner, but I need to warn you that he's... different from what you're used to."

Rita added a large sigh to her still shaking head. "You should listen to yourself, Alex. He seems to be a really nice man. He sent you flowers for a week, he came into the office specifically to help us, which by the way he did, and he thought enough of your safety to get you a new phone. What do you do? You get mad and yell at him—"

"I did not."

"You did too. In the future if you want your conversations to be private, you should shut your door."



EVAN

I'D DONE A FAIR AMOUNT OF THINKING ABOUT DAD'S REQUEST REGARDING Martin and Northern Aerospace. With as little as I'd talked to Martin recently about anything in his purview, his antenna would be up if I asked him any direct questions.

I waited for the results of Diane's visit upstairs.

The elevator door dinged and she appeared moments later. "Here you go, the full file." She placed two file folders on my desk. "He's off playing nine rounds with somebody this morning, so I figure you have a good two hours before I need to get them back."

"Any trouble?" I asked.

"Not at all. His admin is clueless. Very pretty, but clueless."

Martin's criteria for picking an admin had never been the same as mine. Diane closed the door on her way out.

"I'm sure glad mine isn't."

She shot me a smile on her way out and closed the door behind her.

I opened the first folder and started through the Northern Aerospace notes and correspondence. I didn't know what exactly I expected to find but found it near the end--a second folder. The letter was addressed to me, but I'd never gotten it.

Checking the date, it had been written weeks after I'd left that office.

Mr. McAllister;

I hope that we can handle this matter discreetly, but if nothing is done about that Grap pervert you sent to meet with us last week, I will have no alternative but to terminate our transaction.

I understand that a company should not be judged merely by the actions of a single individual, however your handling of this matter will tell me all I need to know about you, your father, and McAllister International.

I never have and I never will do business with a man of his sort. He plied my daughter with alcohol and took advantage of her. All she can remember about the night is waking up in his room naked the next morning.

My daughter is fragile and so I don't intend to get the police involved in this matter as too many days have passed for a definitive test regarding drugs.

If this person ever sets foot in my city again, he may rest assured that a father's justice will be visited upon him with extreme prejudice.

I expect to hear from you within three days.

The signature was illegible, probably from extreme hatred.

The guy probably expected me to put a hit out on Martin for him. I'd have to confirm it, but Grap had to be a bastardization of Graff.

The FedEx envelope paperclipped to the back explained why I'd never gotten it. It was addressed to me at mail stop 26-2, my previous office, and Martin or his admin had opened it and not sent it on for obvious reasons.

You could never be too careful, so I made five copies of the letter before returning the file folders to Diane. "You can put these back now. Oh, and I need Martin's travel schedule for the last two months. No. Let's widen the

net. Everybody in Martin's department for the last two months."

She looked at the folded pieces of paper I held in my hand. "I take it from your expression you found what you were looking for."

I nodded. "If you could be so kind as to get a roast beef sandwich sent up, I feel like lunch on the terrace."

She picked up the folders and stood. "Right away. Would you like me to join you?"

"Sorry. Not today."

This was a fucking mess and I had thinking to do.

Alone.

AT THE END OF THE DAY, I'D CONCLUDED THAT MY FAMILY HAD TO BE MY most important consideration. As despicable as this allegation against Martin was, addressing the issue before the board meeting would look like an attack on the Graff family. It would for sure instigate a fight with Martin's dad that my father couldn't afford right now.

The hardest part was that it was all my fault. I'd gotten drunk off my ass with that fucking mezcal, swallowed that fucking worm, and frolicked in the fucking fountain with that redhead. I fucked up big-time.

For the family's sake, for my father's sake, dealing with Martin would have to wait.

CHAPTER 35



EVAN

ALEXA: Coming over. Don't go anywhere. I'm bringing food.

HER MESSAGE WAS CURIOUS, AND A BIT EXCITING. IT WAS DEMANDING, WHICH was new, and although I'd offered, Alexa hadn't been to my office since our first meeting.

Without a clue about how long I had, until she'd arrive, I set out to straight up my normally messy desk. I worked best visually, distributing things about the space of my desktop and small meeting table.

"Did you lose something?" Diane asked from the door.

"I never lose anything." I looked up. "Alexa's bringing lunch." The lunch part was a guess.

"Stop that. You're not a neatnick."

I ignored her and moved to the next pile of papers. "I need you to make sure she can get through security downstairs without a hassle."

"You don't need to impress her. She wants you, not some fake neat organized version of you."

'Wants me' had a very nice ring to it.

"Besides," she continued. "Since she lives with you, she already knows you operate like this." She swept her arm around the room.

I stopped and straightened. "Now you're a relationship advisor?"

"Don't you pay me to read people? Plus, I'm a woman. I wouldn't want a

guy to be inauthentic to try to impress me if I was into men in the first place that is.”

“Don’t you have somebody downstairs to call?”

“Already taken care of.”

“When? I just mentioned it.”

“Just after she left here that first day. It was obvious you were into her and wanted her to come back, so I gave security her name and picture.”

I shook my head. She’d surprised me once again. “You’re amazing.”

“Just remember that when it’s time for my raise.”

An hour passed before the door opened, and there she was, my girl. “We don’t want to be disturbed while we eat,” she said to Diane, holding up a deli bag.

“You got it,” Diane said with a lilt in her voice. “Enjoy.”

With mischief in her eyes, Alexa leaned back against the door.

I closed the spreadsheet I had open and heard the click of the lock, or rather my cock heard it. Being alone with my girl behind a locked office door had been one of my fantasies for a while. “This is a surprise,” I said, taking in the beautiful site, staying seated to hide my growing arousal. “A pleasant one.” I could be cool.

She quickly reached the desk. “I’m here to say thank you.” She set the bag down.

“You don’t need to.” When she undid the first button of her blouse, my cock went instantly from intrigued to fully hard. My fantasy had missed this part.

“Yes, I do. You sent me this,” she said as she slowly undid more buttons. “And you were right.” She shrugged off the top and dropped it to the side. “Red is a power color. It did give me confidence.”

I swallowed hard, not wanting to say or do anything to stop this.

“But what you didn’t say,” she added, cupping her boobs, “was how decadently soft this was. And, how well it supported me. I put this on, and you know what I thought?”

I gulped and shook my head.

“I thought that they look almost fuckable.”

I adjusted myself to a slightly less painful position in my pants.

A raised eyebrow joined her smile. “Got a problem down there, big guy?”

“You know what you do to me.” I started to stand.

“Sit,” she growled. “I’m not done.”

I settled back into the chair.

“I was thinking if they were just a little closer.” She pushed her boobs together. “Like this, then I could let you fuck them.”

I growled at how great that sounded.

Moments later she was lowering her pants, and the thong that matched the bra came into view. She stepped out of them. “You know what Rita said about this morning?” She rounded the desk and turned my chair. “Stand up.” She pushed me back against the edge of the desk.

When she knelt in front of me, all the blood left my brain. I was transported to fantasy land as she started working on my belt. No woman before had ever come to my office to offer to blow me and my voice wouldn't cooperate. “No.”

“Rita thought I wasn't being appreciative enough and that I needed to thank you appropriately,” she said as she finished with my zipper and wrestled to pull my dick free. “Mr. Perez was very impressed as well and said I should thank you.” Her tongue played over the tip of my cock.

“And, Rita suggested this?” I squeaked.

Alexa parted her lips and quickly took me in and out again.

I closed my eyes. The sight of her on her knees taking me into her mouth was too hot.

She grabbed my shaft with both hands and stroked. “No. she thought I should cook you dinner.”

I opened my eyes for a peek but shut them again as she looked up at me and grinned. Locking eyes with her like this would make me shoot my load way embarrassingly fast, so I looked up.

She took me to the back of her throat and hummed, the vibrations going straight to my balls. She licked and sucked, pulling away with a pop. “Mr. Perez got the loan by the way. Thank you very much, and they increased the line by twenty thousand.”

Her hands kept up their action.

“That's good,” I groaned.

“So, what are you thinking? Dinner?” she asked, before flicking her tongue against the crown of my cock. “Or this?” She circled my tip with her tongue and then took as much of me as she could into her mouth and back out again.

“Both,” I got out between hitched breaths as I threaded my fingers into her hair.

She stroked her hand up and down my shaft, smacked her lips, and ran her tongue slowly the length of me.

I fucking lost my mind when she added both hands, stroking and twisting in synch with her mouth and tongue. Baseball wasn't I supposed to think about baseball to hold off the explosion?

She grasped my shaft tighter, moving in harmony with her mouth in and out, twisting with her hands on each stroke.

I was losing control, I couldn't even spell baseball now. My muscles tensed, ready to shoot my load down her throat. Air only entered my lungs in short gasps. It was too much. I fisted her hair.

My wicked girl hummed again, almost sending me over the edge.

"Enough," I croaked out as I pulled her off me and up to stand.



ALEXA

HE YANKED ME UP FORCEFULLY. NOW, WITH A HAND IN MY HAIR, OUR mouths were an inch apart. "I get the message. You want to say thank you. But, what I'm going to do is fuck you so hard on this desk that you want to thank me and come back tomorrow for more." Then his mouth was on mine.

I closed my eyes and gave in. I'd gotten across that I was truly thankful—mission accomplished. And, the sight, the feel, and the taste of his cock had built a need in my core.

Our tongues tangled, one velvety smooth muscle competing with another for control. I closed my eyes and gave in to all the sensations as his hand found my breast and he spun us around so I was backed against the desk.

Pulling free of the kiss, I went to work on the buttons of his shirt.

"My God you're gorgeous." He lowered his mouth to one breast and then the other, sucking and nipping with his teeth.

"Back at ya, big guy." Losing patience with the shirt buttons, I ripped the last one loose and it flew off. I pulled his shirt off.

"Shhh," he said in a low voice, reminding me that his admin was outside. He pulled my thong down hard, and I lifted one leg out.

I reciprocated by shoving his pants down, and they pooled at his ankles.

After a quick search of his wallet, he threw a condom on the desktop. With one quick move, he lifted onto the edge of the desk

He didn't waste any time, kneeling in front of me and spreading my legs. With one hand kneading my breast, his tongue delved the length of my folds, reaching my clit, and circling the engorged bud. His stubble scratched my inner thighs as he moved.

I gasped. "Fuck, Evan." I wasn't prepared for the sensations as he started his oral sorcery on my defenseless clit. I threaded my fingers in his hair to pull him in for more pressure, more everything.

He pulled away slightly. "I love hearing my name from your lips, baby."

I urged him back but was surprised as a finger entered me followed by a second and found that special sensitive spot. I couldn't hold back the moans after a particularly masterful crook of those wicked fingers. "Oh fuck, Evan."

"That's right, baby. I'm going to fuck you over my desk and you're never going to forget it."

Gripping his hair, I rocked my hips into him and spread wider. As the sensations ramped up, my panting became short and shallow. With little notice, my toes curled and the spasms overtook me.

He brought his thumb to my clit and pressed in synch with the waves that crashed over me. The orgasm grew to a brilliant fire that enveloped me, forcing out loud moans I couldn't contain. Moans that were way too loud, but I didn't care.

As the waves mellowed, I released my death grip on his hair, and my legs melted into relaxation. I'd come here intending to give him this experience and he'd turned the tables on me.

He moved up showering kisses on my breasts. When he backed away, his rock-hard erection bobbed in front of me.

I grabbed for it, giving him a little tug as he tore open the condom packet. I waited expectantly as he sheathed himself.

A pile of papers fell to the floor as he swept a section of the desk clear. "Turn around."

I did, and with my hips against the edge, I spread my legs and grabbed the far edge of the desk. The cold wood against my nipples was a shock after the warmth of his mouth.

He positioned himself behind me. "My God, you're wet," he said as he slowly pushed in. He thrust into me again and again. "Baby, you're so fucking tight, so fucking good."

I was drowning in a sea of desire. I wanted him to feel good, great, even better than great. I matched his rhythm, rocking back against him as he speared me deeply. His balls slapped forward against me with each powerful thrust. I threw my hair to the side and looked over my shoulder. The cords of his neck stood out. He was lost in the throes of passion, grunting, straining.

“I love when you look at me like that.” He slowed his pace and pushed my legs together, putting his knees outside of mine.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re begging me to fuck you harder.”

“What are you waiting for?” I thought he’d emptied my pleasure reservoir with his incredible tongue work but I was wrong. He sped up and was so far inside me, and filled me so completely that the tension built quickly to a higher plane.

He switched from a firm grip on my hips to pull my hair back for leverage. The sound of slaps of flesh against flesh filled the room as I bit back my moans.

I felt him tensing, pulling me tighter to him. My toes curled as he throbbed inside me. Like a rubber band that had been pulled too far, I snapped, and he sent me once again over the cliff as we came together.

My inner muscles milked him until he collapsed over me, mingling his sweat with my own.

CHAPTER 36



ALEXA

I WOKE IN AN UNUSUAL POSITION, WITH MY HEAD IN THE CROOK OF EVAN'S shoulder, my arm draped over his chest, and my leg over his waist. Normally we'd be spooning, but this morning, my pose was like I was clinging to Evan... no more like claiming him.

What hadn't changed was his hard morning wood, which poked at my thigh instead of my backside. My palm detected the steady beat of his heart, a good heart.

Early morning light snuck past the curtains at the edge. Without moving anything except my eyelids, I contemplated yesterday.

I'd learned a lot about Evan since agreeing to be his fake or real girlfriend. Between our long talks and observing him, I'd seen both the Shark of Wall Street public persona and the man behind the mask.

If there'd been a Wikipedia page about him, it would have described him as cold, calculating, and ruthless. Just like a shark, he circled his prey, sizing them up, before darting in to attack. His sharp teeth were impossible to defend against and made quick work of any target.

Compassion would have been nowhere on that list of attributes, which of course is what his charity project was meant to remedy. But I'd just been taught how serious he was about helping people.

How had I gotten so lucky to end up in the bed of Manhattan's most eligible bachelor? No in his bed didn't fully describe it. I'd done exactly what

Gwen had warned me against. I was in a relationship with Evan and real feelings had snuck up on me. I was... holy fuck... I was in love with the man. I gasped.

He woke from my sudden movement and turned his head toward me. “Hey there, gorgeous.”

My heart melted a little more every time he said that.

He flexed his hips jutting his erection against me. “Maybe you could help me solve a hard problem.”

I ran my hand over his chest. “Maybe.”

This didn’t mean that the same feelings had snuck up on him. He could be horny with or without feelings. I blinked back the moisture in my eyes.

“What’s wrong, Allie?”

I took in a breath. “I...” what could I say without scaring him?

The alarm clock sounded, and I rolled over to swat it.

He pulled on my wrist after I shut the beast down. “What do you say we ___”

“I don’t have the freedom to be late to my appointments.” I pulled my hand free and rolled off the bed. “You need to wake up earlier.”

“Or next time we could set the alarm clock to give us time,” he countered.

I straightened the sheets on my side of the bed. “Or, you could not wake me up in the middle of the night for another round of sex.”

He rolled to the side and lifted on one elbow. “I didn’t hear you complaining.”

I most definitely hadn’t complained. “Not complaining, just pointing out options and consequences.”

“Do all you CPAs insist on being so logical all the time?”



AT EIGHT AM I SAT IN OPULENCE OUTSIDE JULIA THORPE’S OFFICE. THE low-rise building Thorpe Holdings occupied in Midtown looked understated from the outside, but from where I sat it screamed old money.

The plush comfortable chair was no catalog office furniture buy. The rug under my feet was not from Carpet Outlet, but an antique Persian from the look of it. The wood paneling was no cheap wallboard.

And, the one art history class I’d taken had taught me enough to

recognize the painting on the wall opposite me as Renoir or one of his students. The cracks in the old paint made it unlikely that it was a recent knock-off.

Horrors—what would the clients say if one displayed a reasonably priced facsimile instead the real thing outside one's office?

Even now that the million dollars from Evan's company had been deposited and allowed me to cross off my personal goal, I was still working through the list of potential donors I was responsible for. Anything less would be letting Chelsea down and I always followed through on my commitments.

Thorpe holdings made a minor contribution last year. When I'd called to make this appointment, I'd been horrified to learn that the man I'd dealt with last year, Phelps Winklemoss, had left the company, and nobody had replaced him.

The assistant who'd answered my call gave me the bad news that charitable giving was now under the Strategic Marketing umbrella. Then came the worse news. She informed me that the founder's daughter who ran that department could fit me in for fifteen minutes as opposed to last year's one hour.

None of this boded well, but here I was anyway. The children deserved no less than my best effort.

I checked my watch. Five minutes of my allotted fifteen had already passed and I was still waiting outside the office, staring up at a painting worth enough to take care of dozens of children. What a waste.

When I'd asked Evan before leaving this morning, if he knew anything about Julia Thorpe, he'd winced. "Ouch. She's a ball buster. Don't let her stare you down."

Would I be able to get a repeat of last year's contribution, or would Julia be more tight-fisted with the family's money and send me off with a pat on the head mumbling something about next year?

The assistant's phone dinged. She read the message and stood. "She's ready for you now Miss Borelli."

I entered the large office as the assistant held the door for me.

Julia stood and rounded her desk. She was everything I'd expected, fitting into the successful businesswoman stereotype. Early forties I guessed, in a conservative navy suit and hair pulled back in a chignon. A diamond tennis bracelet adorned the wrist of the hand she offered. Large diamond studs in

her ears matched the short pendant around her neck.

I shook her hand with the firmness that Evan had made me practice with him. “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, Ms. Thorpe.”

She motioned to the guest chairs. “My pleasure, Alexa. Please have a seat, and it’s Julia. Ms. Thorpe is my mother.”

I answered with a light laugh. “Julia it is then.” I waited for her to re-seat herself behind the desk before sitting myself, another hint from Evan. “I know our time is short, so I’ll give you a quick overview of our charity.”

She nodded, and I went through the shortest version I could of how we started and our mission. All the while maintaining eye contact per Evan’s advice.

She nodded once when I finished. “That was an excellent summation, Alexa. I’m proud of you.”

Proud of me? All I could manage was a confused expression. “Uh, thank you.”

She waved her hand. “I thought I recognized your name after you called for an appointment so I looked you up. You wouldn’t have known it at the time but I was on the admissions committee when you applied. You had the most glowing recommendation letter and I’m glad we accepted you.”

I nodded along. She’d worked at Columbia?

“It’s men and women like you that add to our school’s reputation.”

I’d thought it had been my application essay that had made the difference, but instead, it had been one of my teacher’s recommendations—interesting, but off the point. Nervousness soured my stomach. This digression was using up what little time I had left with her and we hadn’t gotten to discussing a donation yet. “Thank you,” I repeated.

She checked her watch before I could say any more. “I have to run.”

My hopes died with her words. “Perhaps we could meet again before the month is out.”

She stood. “We’ve discussed your charity with someone whose judgment we trust.” She fetched a check from the drawer of her desk. “And we’d like to make a donation.”

Swallowing hard, I read the amount on the donation she handed me and almost fainted. “Thank you. This is very generous.” It was another one million dollar gift.

“You keep on representing our school with grace and integrity. That’s all the thanks I need.”



EVAN

I HEARD THE DISCUSSION OUTSIDE MY DOOR BUT COULDN'T MAKE OUT THE voice that wasn't Diane's.

She opened the door and peeked in. "Martin Graff would like a moment of your time."

I waved her in. "Sure. Join us."

She grabbed a notepad off the credenza by the door as she entered.

Martin followed. "It's a personal discussion. I think we should keep it private," he said looking pointedly at Diane. His expression was unreadable.

Hopefully, this would be something quick. I nodded to her. The less I said to Martin in front of anybody the better. I was livid over the Northern Aerospace letter and holding off until after the board meeting to confront him wasn't easy.

Diane relinquished the notepad and let herself out, closing the door as she went.

I motioned to a chair without bothering to stand. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" My voice sounded cryptic even to me. After that letter, I had a completely different view of Martin. The review of his travel records had confirmed it. He'd been the one that they'd complained about.

He took the seat. "First you should know this gives me no pleasure." The ghost of a smile contradicted his words.

I didn't respond in the slightest—poker wasn't the only use for a passive face.

"You know the company's reputation took quite a hit the after your little swim session in the fountain with the district attorney's daughter."

My fist closed on the arm of my chair remembering that incident.

"I'm here," he said. "To ask that you resign from the board so that we can get past that."

I almost couldn't believe the audacity of this prick. "No," I said with emphasis. "And, it's not your position to suggest that. If my father wants me off the board. He'll be the one to tell me. Not you."

The ghost of a smile had transformed into a full smirk that I was tempted

to wipe off his face with a good solid punch. “That might be true if it was his idea. I'm here at the request of my father, not yours. He disagrees with your father that you're redeemable and Dad wants you off the board. He feels your a disgrace and a distraction.”

My blood boiled, but once again—poker face.

“The district attorney has reached out to Dad to resolve the issue without resorting to the courts.”

I hadn't seen this coming, but now it made perfect sense. They wanted me off the board because they intended to force a vote on dad's contract renewal and didn't want me there to support him. The comment about the district attorney resorting to the courts was complete bullshit. I hadn't more than kissed her. The only possible charge would be public lewdness, and it would rope in the DA's daughter.

I took in a breath. “Thank you for the visit. The answer is no. And if your father wants to ask me directly. The answer is still no. Or was he too scared to come here himself?” I regretted that last sentence as soon as I'd said it.

“In that case,” Martin said, with evident glee “I'll need to tell that girlfriend of yours exactly how you ruined her life.” You told me she'd hate you if she knew that you'd gotten her into Columbia and she couldn't make it on her own. And gotten her into the business school, and she couldn't have made it on her own either.

I felt the heat of anger rising on my face. The nuclear weapon in form of that letter from Northern Aerospace was in my drawer, but I couldn't use it without endangering Dad.

“You told me she doesn't take handouts well. So how would she feel knowing that you personally paid for her scholarships and that this CPA job she wants to do couldn't have happened without you pulling strings all along the way.”

When I didn't respond he continued. “How would she feel knowing that you gave her inside track because you didn't have what it took to get where she wanted on her own?”

A bluff was my best move. “And what makes you think that she'd listen to you anyway? She's graduated, she's about to get her CPA, she's home free now.”

“She'll listen long enough to figure out that she should ask you. What are you going to tell her? If you lie about it, I'm sure I can find some records sooner or later that prove it. Then what will she think of you?”

It had been stupid on my part to confide in Martin, and now the bill was coming due.

He stood. “You have a week. I’ll expect your resignation from the board by then,” he said as he moved to the door. “And how will she feel...” he said with his hand on the handle. “when she finds out you’re the reason her mother died in that car accident?”

That was the worst thing I’d told him, and something I wouldn’t be able to get past with Alexa in any scenario, so I reached in my drawer. “And how are you going to explain this to your dad...” I held up a copy of the letter. “this letter from the Northern Aerospace chairman basically accusing you of date rape.”

His hand came off the handle in a flash, jaw open, he froze for a second. “How do you have that.” It was a stupid thing for him to say.

I looked at the letter and back to him. “It’s addressed to me. Why shouldn’t I have it?” *Checkmate*. “If you say one single thing to Alexa, or communicate with her in any way, this...” I waved the piece of paper. “Will go to the papers and your father.”

“She wanted it. She’s trying to cover with her father for her own mistake and make me look like the bad guy.” His voice faltered and I knew I had him.

“I’m staying on the board and neither of us is airing dirty laundry.” It was half statement and half proposal. We had a standoff.

The letter was my ace and he knew it. He left with nothing but a sneer.



ALEXA

AFTER THE DEBACLE OF THE GALA, I’D DECIDED TO WORK FROM HOME Monday, and yes this palace felt like home now much more than my dingy apartment did. The fresh air of the terrace was also a bonus. I’d also probably stay away from work for the rest of the week.

Giving out my full name at the gala and then making that tongue comment to the blogger had unleashed the hellhound squad of paparazzi to seek me out and I didn’t want to create a circus outside the Perlmutter’s building.

Sydney had been good enough to not complain directly when he suggested that I wait until things had “quieted a bit” before coming back in.

The rain started just as was about to set up outside, so I moved to the office.

That stupid bottle of mezcal was still on the shelf. It even had a yellow sticky note on it that said ‘DON’T’ twice in large letters. A double reminder from the fountain debacle Evan had told me. Don’t drink to excess, and don’t drink mezcal ever again.

After finishing my latest spreadsheet, I used his printer to make a hard copy. His stapler was empty, so I tried the drawers and found a box of staples in the first drawer I tried, along with several folders with military-like names—Operation Overwatch, Operation Fedora, and Operation Spike.

They made sense in a way. He told me how he’d planned a few of his acquisitions, and he approached them with military precision, down to planning contingencies.

I moved on to the next client.

CHAPTER 37



EVAN

“DO I REALLY HAVE TO GO TO THIS?” ANGELA COMPLAINED FOR ABOUT THE fiftieth time this week.

I laid the garment bag quietly on the dresser and peeked into the walk-in closet. “Of course not. It's up to you.”

She was trying on the black dress she'd worn to one of our dinners previously. “Yeah,” she said smoothing down the sides of the dress. “If I don't, everybody will be like, where is your girlfriend Evan? Breakup with her already Evan? Grow tired of her already Evan? I'll be ruining your wholesome image for you.”

I leaned against the door jam. “Not everybody will be thinking or saying that.”

“Right,” She snorted. “I forgot your father will be there. He'll say something like I told you she couldn't fit in.”

Her judgment on the conclusion Dad would draw likely wasn't far off. “If he does I'll let you hit him or stomp on his toes.”

“Hard to do if I'm not there,” she quipped. She turned in front of the mirror with a grimace. “And, in this dress, they're going to see right through me, as the poor girl from Brooklyn who didn't know how to dress for a gala.”

“I have a solution for that.”

Her face brightened. “Please tell me it involves staying here in sweats with the box of greasy pizza in our laps.”

I grabbed the garment bag and held it up in front of me. “Maybe this dress will make you feel more like you fit in.”

With a hand on her hip, she shook her head. “I thought we agreed that you were going to stop buying me shit.”

I pulled the zipper down the side of the bag and stepped forward with it hanging from my fingertips. “Good thing this isn't shit then.”

Her mouth went wide when she withdrew the dress from the bag. “Oh my God. Where did you get this?”

“It’s amazing what you can find at the thrift store the week after the Met gala every year.”

She slid her hand over the fabric. “Ooh,” she cooed. “What is this made of?”

“That’s your department, not mine.”

She attached the hangar to a hook on the wall and started searching the interior of the dress. Eventually, she found a tag. Her mouth gaped open. “Versaci? Are you fucking kidding me? You can’t buy me something like this.”

“Would you rather it said Old Navy?”

She fished a shoe off the floor and threw it at me.

I ducked in time. “I thought you'd think it was nice.”

“This isn’t nice, this is exquisite. What did I say about buying me expensive gifts, Ev? You have got to cut this shit out. It’s not fair because you know I can’t reciprocate.”

“I don’t need anything from you except your company.” I ventured closer now that she didn't have a shoe in her hand. “But I do have a reputation to uphold and in this dress, you’d look stunning.”

“So, all I am tonight is arm candy and I’m supposed to shut up, smile, and hang on your arm?”

“And laugh at my jokes. You forgot that one.”

“Don’t hold your breath for that.”

Once again, she was trying to instigate an argument, but for a reason, I couldn’t discern. “People expect me to bring the most beautiful woman in the five boroughs. Would you rather wear this and be that woman or something less and embarrass us both?”

She ran her hand over the fabric again. “I guess embarrassing you wouldn’t be right.”

I took her face in my hands and gave her a quick kiss on the forehead.

“That's my girl. You might even enjoy yourself. Remember, I'll have to leave you to spend some time schmoozing old man Hartford by myself?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I remember. Translation, you need to ditch me so the menfolk can talk business.”

“Unless you want to join me while I listen to him pitch his proposal about his idea for new medical cream that doubles as a cure for both jock itch and toenail fungus.”

She rolled her eyes. “Having zero experience with either of those, I think I'll pass.”

“I thought so. And, I didn't want you to be alone, so I arranged for security.”

“That's ridiculous. What am I gonna do with you?”

I winked at her suggestively, “I can think of something.” I stroked a finger down her shoulder.

She backed out of reach. “No way, Mr. Horn Dog.” She touched the hair at the back of her neck. “I had to endure an hour of torture to get this hair, and I'm not letting you screw it up before we even arrive. No hands, no hickeys, no nothing. I mean it.” She waved me away. “Don't you have something to keep you busy while I finish, money to count, or cuff links to polish?”

When Alexa announced that she was finally ready, she was truly a sight to behold. She twirled for me and my mouth watered, I wanted to kiss her and taste her so badly. “What do you think?”

“I think we better make sure the event has its medical coverage all paid up. You're going to be giving everyone there whiplash when you walk in.”

She went ten shades of red. “Stop it. I'm just a poor girl from Brooklyn playing dress up.” She moved closer and straightened my bow tie. “You clean up pretty well yourself, Mr. McAllister.”

“I'm serious, Allie. You've taken gorgeous to a whole new level tonight.”

Downstairs, she stopped just outside the elevator. “Go to the desk and wait for me.” She pointed.

It wasn't the oddest thing she'd ever said, so after a shrug, I crossed the lobby to the concierge desk.

Once I turned, Alexa strode confidently my way.

“She's stunning,” Becka observed.

Everything about her had me salivating as she walked my way. “Yes, she is.” She was that and a whole lot more. She was mine.

“How’s my wobble?” Alexa asked.

Good enough to eat was my first thought. “Like I said, with that jiggle, every guy in the room is going to be wishing he was me.”

She slapped my shoulder. “Pervert. I said wobble, not jiggle.”

“Just fine,” Becka said. “You look like you were born to wear them.”

“You’re too kind,” Alexa looked down and lifted a foot. “They’re taller than I’m used to.”

I finally caught up to the topic. “When the dancing starts, kick them off if you like.”

Alexa lifted a shoulder considering it. “We’ll see how the night goes.”

On the street, Albert was ready and smiling with the limo.

I slid my arm around her waist and guided her to the car. “You’re smiling. I thought you were dreading this.”

She leaned into me. “I was,” she admitted. “But it’s too late to back out now. And wasn’t it you who told me to never show weakness?”

“If you get too uncomfortable, we can cut it short. Just as soon as I conclude my business I can ring Albert any time you like to bring us back to our building. We can put on a movie change into sweats and order a nice greasy pizza.”

Albert held the door open for us. “You look radiant tonight, Miss Alexa.”

“Why thank you, Albert.” She slid in across the seat.

I climbed in behind her. “Thank you for coming to this.”

She looked past me and waved at our doorman. “Did you mean what you said?”

I leaned closer for a kiss. “What part?” I’d said a lot of things today.

“I told you, no messing up the hair or the makeup.” She pushed me away. “Did you mean that part that we could come back to *our* building early if I wanted?”

“Of course.” Then the context of my words hit me. I’d called it *our* building. I’d given her a closet, drawers in the bathroom, a side to the bed. She had a side in *our* bed. Without me noticing, this had become *our* building. She was mine and I was hers.

She looked out the window. “I like the sound of that.”

CHAPTER 38



ALEXA

MY HAIR, MY MAKEUP, AND ESPECIALLY THE DRESS WERE CERTAINLY GALA worthy. Not that I'd ever been to one before, but I'd seen pictures. The shoes had been the one questionable part of the ensemble.

If I couldn't walk in them like I went out in sky-high heels every night, I'd surely be branded as the fish out of water at tonight's event, the poor girl crashing the swanky upper-class event. The snide comments would be hidden behind smiles and discreet coughs, but they'd hurt all the same.

Evan had picked out the gorgeous footwear to go with the gown, but I wasn't used to such astronomically high ice picks. As we passed the intersection, I wondered what the deductible was on my medical insurance for a broken ankle. I could already see the headline.

What color will the McAllister Minx choose for her cast? Inquiring readers want to know.

Barf.

I looked and couldn't see any woman using the crosswalk, or anyone on the sidewalk, tempting fate with heels this high.

"Is something bothering you?" Evan asked.

I turned to him, finding true concern on his face. "A little nervous I guess. I've never been to one of these before, but I'll be fine." Armed with Becka's

assurance that I didn't look too wobbly in these shoes, I was ready for tonight. With this dress, these shoes, and this hair, I was ready to be seen. I even had the smile down that said eat your hearts out girls, I'm Evan McAllister's girlfriend.

"A warning—the press will be at the door. They'll want to know your name, and just ignoring them and walking past won't work tonight. There won't be a car door to escape to." He'd mentioned this when he'd invited me, but not in such stark terms.

"Why does my name matter?"

"It matters to their vapid readers. It's clickbait."

"I've gotten quite used to being called *the latest McAllister minx*, and *Evan McAllister's girlfriend*. Can't we just stay with that?"

"Not any longer."

At the time, I felt I couldn't say no to this invitation, and now was too late to back out.

He took my hand and squeezed it. "Another thing you should be prepared for."

"What could be worse than having my name plastered all over the Internet as gossip fodder?"

"My father will be there."

I laughed. "I'm surprised he didn't threaten again to fire you if you brought me"

Evan was quiet.

"He actually did, didn't he?"

"He tried, but you're more important to me than he anticipated."

"Can I punch him when I see him? Or, maybe dig my heel into his toes?"

He snorted a laugh. "Your Brooklyn lineage is showing. On this side of the East River, something a little less physical would be more appropriate."

"That's the problem with you rich people. You're all trying to be too subtle. So, tell me, if I can't throw a drink in his face, what would be more appropriate in this borough? Keep in mind I want him to know it was me."

Evan stroked his chin before answering. "Say something outlandish to the press. Having his peers know that his son brought somebody uncouth to the event will drive him up a wall."

"Like admitting I do my own laundry and clean my own toilets?"

He snorted a laugh. "Whatever you want."



WHEN WE REACHED THE EVENT, I COULD SEE WHY ALBERT HAD BROUGHT THE Limo tonight instead of the town car—appearances.

When Evan had mentioned the press, his comment hadn't prepared me for this. We were fourth in line behind other limos depositing couples at the base of a literal red carpet.

Red velvet ropes kept the public at a discreet distance, but the camera hyenas were inside the ropes accompanied by newsies with big microphones. As I watched, the guest couples moved from one gaggle of press to the next.

We inched forward, and the next thing I knew, Evan had extracted me from the car and towed me along with him to the first group of press. "Smile constantly, and it'll be over in no time," he said into my ear. "Her name is Zenia."

Zenia, I repeated silently to remember it.

"And here we have Evan McAllister," Zenia said before shoving her microphone in his face. "Evan, so nice to see you again. Tell us, why are you here supporting big Apple Helping Hands tonight?"

"Thank you Zenia," he said with the polished grace only repetition could provide. "My mother is a founding board member of the organization. Providing assistance to the less fortunate in our city is a worthy goal that our family has proudly supported from the outset of this program."

"And who have you brought along tonight?" Zenia asked.

Evan canted his body toward mine. "This lovely lady is my girlfriend, Alexa."

"Not Allie? I must have had it wrong."

Evan looked at me for permission.

I nodded slightly, keeping my mega-smile in place.

"Alexa Borelli is her full name, but I've called her Allie for years."

Xenia pulled the microphone back. "It seems you've been dating for quite a while now, at least for you." She added a cackle.

Evan didn't miss a beat, pulling me close against him. "Alexa and I are just beginning." Then he pulled me away in the direction of the next inquisition. "That wasn't too bad, was it?" he asked softly into my ear.

I nodded while hoping my smile muscles could hold out long enough.

By the fifth of these, I was getting tired of the same old questions. Tell us how you knew each other before. Where did you meet up again? What was

the most romantic place he's taken you? Who are you wearing tonight? And my personal favorite, who did your hair tonight? As if anybody cared.

"How do I get these idiots to cut it short?" I asked Evan as we moved to the next blogger or whoever the hell she was.

He leaned in. "I don't know. Maybe barf on the microphone."

The next one, a girl with a purple streak in her hair asked the same inane questions as the others and I repeated much the same answers. Then she surprised me. "What do you call Evan when you're alone? Anything like Sharkey? You do know they call him the Shark of Wall Street, right?"

"I've heard that, but I think it's only related to his business dealings." I put my finger up to Evan's mouth. "Show us your teeth, Baby."

He smiled for me.

"See. His teeth aren't that sharp."

The girl kept at us. "If not Sharkey, what's your pet name for him?"

"I call him Thor because he's really strong and he has a reeeeealy big..."

Evan yanked me away. "Gotta move on. Thanks for the time."

I looked up at him and batted my eyelashes. Serves you right, big guy for making me go through this shit. I didn't say the words out loud, but his tightening grip on my hand indicated he got the message.

"Wow," the girl said, as we left her. "We'll try to catch up with Alexa again later."

The next girl had a pink streak in her hair. Somehow color streaks had become a thing without me noticing. She started with the same questions and we answered on autopilot and even managed to avoid any eye rolls.

I was explaining our childhood meeting when Evan whispered into my ear. "Bogey two o'clock."

I looked over.

Fergus McAllister glared at us.

I kept my smile on and waved back to him. "What's his problem?" I asked my man.

Pink Hair looked that way

Fergus pointed over to the corner.

"It looks like he wants to talk to me," Evan said as he pulled away.

I pulled back. "We should finish here first."

"And who is that?" Pink Hair asked.

"His father. He probably wants Evan to adjust his hearing aids."

Pink hair didn't get the joke.

My attention split between keeping a tight grip on my boyfriend's hand, and watching the glare his father shot us as he checked his watch.

"For my part, it's because she's very special," Evan said, giving me that grin he reserved for me. "What do you say, honey?"

Pink hair shifted the microphone toward me, looking expectantly for an answer.

I'd missed the question. "Could you repeat that, please?"

"I was asking what the secret is that has allowed you to stay with Evan so long?"

"I'm not that bad," Evan complained.

Fergus determined that we weren't going to meet with him, at least not on his schedule, and with a shake of the head he left.

Pompous ass.

Evan had told me how to stick it to his father, I just wasn't quite sure what to say. "Well, he's very sweet when you get to know him," I stalled. Toilet cleaning wasn't going to work, so I improvised. "It's simple really. Evan likes it when I... We're all adults here right? Okay. I have this thing I do with my tongue..."

Evan yanked me away. "Thanks for your time Glenda."

I trotted to keep up as he bypassed the remaining press gaggles to the entry door.

"Really?" he hissed. "Tongue thing?"

"Your father was glaring at me like I didn't belong here and you said outrageous was the way to get back at him," I explained.

"With something silly like your housekeeping abilities. Now the press will be after you for weeks to finish that sentence."

"Sorry," I sighed. "You're the one who invited me."

Inside, I snatched a flute of champagne off a passing server's tray, as did Evan.

"I think we should go slow on the booze tonight," he said.

"If you think I'm getting through this on one glass, you're nuts." I tipped down a large swallow of the bubbly. "Hey, this is good shit."

Evan rolled his eyes. "Just a little moderation would be nice, and we say good stuff."

I recognized Noah McAllister as he walked up.

Noah saluted Evan. "Reporting for duty." Turning to me he added, "Has he told you how lovely you look this evening, Alexa?" before giving me a

kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you, Noah.” I looked between the two brothers for an answer.

“What’s going on?”

Evan answered first. “I promised to provide security while I had to leave you alone.”

“And, I volunteered,” Noah said.

I rolled my eyes. “Where I come from, they only abduct rich people, and that leaves me out.”

“Well, you look like a million bucks,” Noah said laying it on thick.

“I have to talk to a few people.” Evan gave me a quick kiss on the lips.

“Remember which of the bothers you’re dating while I’m gone, and nobody gets more than a single dance.”

After Evan left, Noah explained. “I’m your chaperon to keep the eligible bachelors at this event at bay. Shall we check out the silent auction before you accept a dance?” He held out his elbow and I took it.

“A dance?”

“Trust me. I know what I’m talking about. They’ll be lining up for a dance with you.”

“Why? I don’t know anyone outside of you and Evan.”

“They’ll want to get you to get them an audience with the great white shark. We’ll keep it to six.”

I stopped him. “No thanks.”

“Evan wants you to fit in. I told him I’d show the ropes. Don’t you want to please Evan?”

“Okay. What do I do?”

We reached the first of two long tables of expensive-looking items. “First, you pick out something you’d like in the auction here, and I’ll put down Evan’s name with an absurdly high bid.”

When I gave him a questioning scowl, his response was “Trust me.”

I nodded. “I’m still looking. And these dances? I really have to do that?”

“They each get one dance to talk to you. Ask them two or three hard questions and see which one’s answers match up most with Evan. It’s only six dances.”

I moved past the crystal goblet sets and gold-plated utensils. “That’s it?”

“That’s all.”

By the end of the first table, I hadn’t found anything. “I think he needs a new toaster, one with a lot fewer buttons.”

Noah's laugh boomed through the room.

CHAPTER 39



EVAN

IT TOOK A WHILE, BUT I FOUND DAD. “YOU WANTED TO SEE ME?”

He nodded and sipped what I surmised was a Macallan by the looks of it. It was the only whiskey he drank without complaint. “Yes.” He held his whiskey glass toward the corner with fewer guests. “Perhaps over here would be better.”

When reached the corner his eyes swept the nearby tables and space before he spoke. “What’s the problem with the Northern Aerospace deal? Why would it be falling apart at this stage?”

That wasn’t anywhere on the list of things I guessed he might want to talk about. “You told me to stay out of acquisitions, and I have.”

“George says a source on their board told him the deal is likely to die.”

This was a surprise. “Did he get a feel for how likely?”

“*Cold day in hell* was the phrase mentioned. They plan on running out the clock on our option to buy and then pull out.”

“What does Martin say?” I asked, wondering why Martins’s dad was talking to my dad to talk to me instead of asking his son directly.

Dad lowered his voice. “He said he went along with all of your suggestions and doesn’t know why there would be a problem unless you read the situation wrong.”

Now it made sense. Martin was in trouble with the deal and was setting up a scenario where I was the problem, and maybe by extension Dad. He had

me in an impossible position.

If I tried to defend myself to baseless accusations without having been in the meetings with Northern that Martin had attended I'd only create division between Dad and Martin's father right when Dad needed all the board support he could get on account of my fountain *incident*. The damned fountain splash was still fucking up my life.

If I even mentioned that Martin had felt the deal had gone squirrely weeks ago, Dad would question Martin about it and the same fight would occur between our two fathers.

I sighed. "I don't know. My best guess would be that they have another outside offer and want to take that one instead of ours."

Dad sipped his whiskey silently. "Could be."

"Do you want me to poke around?"

Dad shook his head. "No. You need to stay out of it." He scratched his chin and his eyes narrowed. "On second thought maybe you could talk with Martin and get a more honest take on the situation. I think I scare him."

"Probably," I agreed although it was a certainty, not a probability.

"You're on thin enough ice as it is. George and the board were clear about you focusing only on this reputation project. They are already going to be tough in evaluating you as it is, so be careful about it."

The words *evaluating me at the board meeting* implied that my future with the company was more tenuous than I'd thought.

One of Dad's golf buddies called out to us, "Fergus. Glad you could make it."

"Wouldn't miss it," my dad said, striding away without waiting for an answer from me.

That left me to do a quick search of the room.

Noah was still talking with Alexa.

She looked radiant as ever even from this distance and I decided that regardless of the board meeting, the future looked pretty damned bright with her in my life.

If I ended up out of the company and suddenly had much more free time, how would she respond to that? It might be worth a discussion.

I started checking the room for Hartford. He was the discussion I had to have this evening even if he was crazy.



ALEXA

WE WERE ON THE DANCE FLOOR WHIRLING IN A BALLROOM STYLE I'D SEEN IN the movies, but only attempted twice before tonight. Since I was following instead of leading, I'd figured it out well enough.

Baldy was my sixth dance partner arranged by Noah and I was growing very tired of this.

"I think Evan would really like the potential of this project," Baldy said for the third time.

"Yes. Yes. But, how many teeth does a blue whale have?"

"None," he answered confidently. Surprisingly he was only the second man to answer this correctly.

I'd have thought the group attending a save the whales fundraising gala would be more informed.

"I don't see how that pertains to my project."

I ignored his attempt to take control. "On an application for a bank loan, what is the most important metric."

"Uh... total debt I would think."

"Now, let's say you're visiting a sketchy part of town, not Manhattan—"

"I avoid the outer boroughs except to see the Yankees play."

I should have guessed. "Hypothetically if you were to visit a bad neighborhood and were in a seedy apartment building with your girlfriend when a known criminal shows up, He threatens her and demands money from her, what would you do?"

"I'd call 9-1-1."

"They're too far away, and the criminal has five of his buddies with him."

"Then, I'd run the other way."

The music ended and I brought the dance to a halt. "Thank you for the dance, Mr...."

"Barts," Baldy supplied. "Perhaps another?"

I pointed in Noah's direction. "Sorry, Evan's brother is waiting for me."

"Thank you Lexi," I heard as I walked off. It wasn't worth correcting him.

When I reached Noah my expression should have said it all. "That's a half dozen, and I'm through."

"Score?" Noah asked as the music for the next dance started.

“One out of three.”

I settled into people-watching, noticing how different this was from anything I'd been to. Most of the people here were a notch past tipsy by this time of the evening.

Noah had just left for the bathroom when the man approached.

“Hi. You must be Alexa. You must waltz with me. I'm Martin Graff, Evan's friend. Actually, we also work closely together.” The way he said closely struck me as odd.

“Hi,” I said awkwardly.

He offered his hand.

I looked around for either Evan or Noah.

“No thanks, I'm not very steady in these shoes.”

He didn't get the hint. “I'll catch you if you stumble. And if you're worried about Evan, don't be. We're good friends. It'll be fine.” If he was a good friend, declining might be rude, so I took his hand and followed him onto the dance floor.

I didn't care for his occasional leering at my cleavage, but then a lot of people here had at least one glass of champagne too many under their belt. The heels were tricky, but after a lap of the floor, I got the hang of the rhythm and followed his lead reasonably.

“I haven't been able to take my eyes off you tonight,” he said. “You're very beautiful.”

I hadn't noticed him. What was I supposed to say to that? “Thank you.”

“I'm also very generous,” he said with a waggle of his eyebrows.

“That's very nice. I fundraise for a charity you might be interested in.”

He ignored my invitation. “My family always wins.”

“Good for you.” I tried again. “It's a pediatric cancer charity.”

His grip on my waist tightened. “Evan is going to lose.”

I kept my mouth shut and my chest away from his as we danced.

“You know Evan and I share a lot of things.” This guy sure liked to talk more than he liked to listen.

I glanced to the side looking for Noah. He should have been back by now, but wasn't.

“A lot of his girlfriends have found my bed warmer than his. What do you say we meet up for drinks sometime? Don't you want to be with a winner?”

I felt like vomiting on him, but then rage boiled up inside of me. Two steps later I planted the heel of my stiletto on his foot with my full weight.

“You stay away from me.”

He went down with a scream.

My hands went to my face. “Oops.”

Couples around us stopped and gasped before deciding I wasn’t worth their time.

A woman had her phone out videoing me.

Screw the fucking bloggers.

“Damned heels,” I explained when I found Noah on the edge of the floor.

“I guess I should have zigged instead of zagged.”

“I don’t know how you girls manage them, but they do look nice on you.”

I shrugged. “I don’t either, and thank you.” I tipped one foot up. “These are cute.”

We watched Martin hobble off the dance floor.

“I don’t like him either,” Noah said in a hushed tone.

Martin glanced in our direction and sneered.

I rubbed the corner of my eye with my middle finger, flipping Martin the bird.

Martin sneered and limped away. One of the bloggers was already by his side talking to him. Great, this was going to blow up into a huge mess for Evan.

Noah leaned closer. “So what did he do?”

“Pardon?”

Noah smiled knowingly. “You did that on purpose. I’m only curious what he did.”

I checked that no one else was close enough to hear. “He told me he was Evan’s friend, and that they shared... things, and then he propositioned me.” I sniffled back my humiliation. “Do you think Evan will be mad that I hurt his friend?”

Noah let loose a reserved laugh. “No way.”

“Good, because I’m not apologizing. He implied... never mind. It was insulting.”

“It seems to be Martin’s thing, but I’m with you. Next time put that heel in his crotch, that’ll do some serious damage.”

“If there’s anything there to damage.”

Noah’s booming laugh drew the attention of nearby guests. “You’re something else, Borelli.”

I considered Evan’s threat to our weekend concierge, Xavier. “Don’t tell,

Evan. I'm fine with a broken foot, but I don't want to be responsible for real bloodshed."

After a few minutes of searching for Evan, I gave up and dialed him—no answer. So, I dialed Albert. "I want to leave."

CHAPTER 40



ALEXA

ALBERT HAD DRIVEN ME HOME WITHOUT A SINGLE QUESTION.

I'd tried calling Evan's phone again without success, so I sent a message.

ME: Went home early.

I should have switched to water, but my nerves were shot. I poured a glass of wine and looked out the window onto the dark park. Without any idea how to tell Evan about the spectacle I'd caused, I settled onto the couch and closed my eyes.

A message arrived.

EVAN: On the way.

He was about to have a giant PR problem—one I'd created because I couldn't control my temper. It only proved that I couldn't fit in here. I was Brooklyn trash, not Manhattan high society.

When the news broke, probably half the ladies at that event will claim that they'd known I was trouble the moment they saw me.

On my second glass, I checked the first blog site I remembered and there it was.

Evan McAllister's girlfriend turns Manhattan fundraiser into Brooklyn brawl.

And, there were pictures of me in the press line with Evan, me standing over Martin on the dance floor, me giving Martin the finger, and Martin on a stretcher being loaded into an ambulance.

The next one was just as bad.

Evan McAllister's girlfriend attacks prominent businessman.

A moment later the front door bounced loudly off the wall as Evan raced in. "What happened? Albert said you looked upset."

"I shouldn't have gone," I said, peering into my wine glass.

He sat beside me. "Did Noah say something he shouldn't have?"

"No. He was fine."

"Then what's the problem." His arm came around me and pulled me to his side.

"I ruined everything for you. I'm sorry, but I couldn't help myself."

He gave me a squeeze. "All I know is that you're the best thing that ever happened to me, Allie."

"Maybe not after tonight." I brought the blogs back up on my phone and handed it to him.

"Is that Martin?"

"I know you work together and all, but what he said, it was..."

Evan was reading the article. "Hospitalized. What happened?"

"He said you shared girlfriends and I'd find his bed warmer than yours."

"You're kidding."

I sighed. "There's video."

Evan started the video, and I cringed when it got to the section where I stomped on his foot. My words, "You stay away from me" and "oops" were clear enough. From the video, even a third grader could tell that I stepped on his foot on purpose. It skipped to Martin the douche being carted off on a stretcher.

Evan broke out in laughter. "I hope you broke his foot."

"This isn't funny," I screeched. "I'm ruining your reputation, and now everybody knows I'm from Brooklyn, and that I don't belong here. They

know my full name, and everyone's going to be laughing at me.

He restarted the video and tugged me closer, his hand wrapping around to stroke the side of my breast. "This is hot as fuck." He giggled as it went along.

Something about the video was odd, but I also couldn't understand Evan's reaction. "How can you be okay with this?" I asked when it finished. "It's going to be a PR nightmare. Will your dad fire you now?"

He hauled me onto his lap. He was hard underneath me. With my face cradled between his hands, he held my eyes. "I love it when you stand up to a bully. I love... I just love it."

I wiggled my butt over his erection. "What's going on down there?"

"What can I say? Seeing you in fight mode turns me on."

The guilt clawed its way back up. "Tell me you're not upset with me."

I yelped when he suddenly rose up, carrying me toward the bedroom.

"I'm going to show just how not upset I am."

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pulled myself up to kiss his neck with a giggle. "You're weird."

"And you're hot." I remembered back to our first torrid night together. It had been right after I told his dad off. "Easy on the dress," I warned him when he set me down.

We got naked fast, but the dress survived to be worn another day.

"Get on the bed," I ordered him.

"Bossy." He jumped onto the bed spread-eagled on his back, with that magnificent cock standing at attention. He watched my breasts bounce as I sashayed to the foot of the bed, and climbed up between his legs.

I made sure to have my boob swing as I crawled toward him and got the smile I'd been aiming for.

His cock twitched as I licked up it from base to tip.

His eyes devoured me as he held his arms up cup my breasts and tweak my nipples when I straddled him.

"Down boy," I said when he started to raise up.

He smirked and did as I asked.

I leaned over, grazing my nipples lightly over his chest.

He strained upward to meet me, but I pushed him down.

I was determined to be in charge.

The lust in his eyes had me dripping wet.

I slid down to his legs and sucked in the crown of his shaft. I started to

suck and lick. Cupping his balls in one hand, I squeezed the base of his cock with the other like a cock ring. I watched his eyes as I licked the underside of his shaft, slowly arriving at the tip and taking him into my mouth again.

The smile on his face, the way his eyes hooded, and the hitches in his breathing, all told me all I wanted to know--this was driving him crazy.

I kept it up and brought him almost to the edge before stopping. After a moment's rest, I began again, teasing him right up to his breaking point.

“What? No stamina?” I teased.

He averted his eyes in an attempt to control himself, but I didn't let up.

I loved how I could drive him crazy like this, that I could control his pleasure.

I released his cock and moved slowly up his body, scraping my nipples against his skin as I went. I dangled my breasts over his mouth, letting him take in the nipple and nip and suck in the way that drove me crazy.

He kneaded each breast as he sucked the other.

I moved down and slid my soaked folds over his length, teasing his tip against my clit, sending shocks through me. I was barely able to hold back, I wanted him so badly.

I reached toward the nightstand. “Condom. I've got to be inside you.”

Pulling his hand back, I leaned over to whisper in his ear. “I'm on the pill.”

His smile broadened. “I'm clean if you're sure.”

I kissed him. “I'm sure.”

The gleam in his eye told me he was looking forward to the skin-to-skin contact as much as I was.

I lifted up and reached between us to guide him in. I slid down on him bit by bit until I'd taken all of him, relishing the wondrous moans my man made.

“Holy fuck, Allie.” He arched up into me, his eyes conveying raw desire.

I pushed down and leaned forward, grinding against him to get the clit pressure I sought. I rocked as he pushed up and we quickly found our rhythm.

“You're so fucking good, so fucking tight, oh my God,” he got out between ragged breaths.

I loved the dirty talk we sometimes engaged in. We fit so well. His cock was made for me and I for him.

I leaned forward, offering my breasts again, and we worked ourselves up to the edge.

He took the weight of my breasts in his hands and fondled me gently

before tweaking my nipples. Each time he did, sparks raced through me.

“You have the greatest breasts. Have I told you that?”

“Never,” I lied.

He had complimented my boobs a few dozen times, along with my eyes, my lips, my pussy, my ass, and my legs—maybe not in that order.

His hands guided me for a few strokes, grinding me against him. Then he took his thumb to my magic button. Working my clit he sent quickly over the precipice. The suddenness of my climax surprised me. My blood sang as electricity rattled through my bones and spasms overtook me.

A second later, I felt the throbbing inside me as he reached the end of his rope. With a roar, he came with me. It was a sound I’d come to love.

Maybe Tarzan was a better nickname for him than shark, but I wasn’t telling anybody. The king of the jungle was all mine.

As the waves receded, I collapsed onto his chest, panting and fulfilled. I could feel his heart beating with mine, as linked as two people could be.

The pulsing of his cock inside me slowly diminished. I relished the connection we had as a true couple. We had become partners, the Shark of Wall Street and me. He had made me feel things I never expected to feel, either physically or emotionally.

Sex with Evan had become more than soul-blistering orgasms. The connection bonded us tighter every time. It was something I’d been slow to realize. It was something I’d never understood until now. This had to be what love was, a word I’d known, but not truly understood.

My breathing slowly returned to normal, and I slid off of him. After returning from the bathroom with a warm washcloth for my man, I snuggled up against him, one leg over his and my head on his shoulder, listening to my man’s heart.

I was his and he was mine.

CHAPTER 41



ALEXA

EVAN WAS OUT AT THE HAMPTON'S PLACE DOING SOMETHING OR OTHER, SO AT ten, I took a break and decided a nice hot cup from Starbucks was what I needed.

I was a few blocks from the coffee shop deciding between a cappuccino, a latte, or just a simple mocha when he ambushed me.

"Hi there," Martin, the slimeball from the gala, said as he pushed off the building and hobbled alongside me in a walking cast. How could this guy have ever been Evan's friend?

I increased my stride. "How's the foot, Morton?" The nerve of this guy to proposition me at the gala over the weekend and now show up outside our building.

"Martin, and it's broken. I can't drive for another six weeks thanks to you."

"Maybe it'll remind you not to hit on another man's girlfriend."

He skipped to keep up. "I can see why he likes you. You're a spunky one."

"Leave me alone unless you want your other foot to match."

It didn't faze him, and since I was in Nikes it wasn't my best threat. "I didn't get into Columbia like you. Did you know that?"

The coffee shop was still two blocks away. "Didn't know and don't care." If I jogged the distance, I'd be free of him, but running away from assholes

wasn't my style.

"I went to Buffalo State because I didn't have a sugar daddy to get me into Columbia like you did."

"I worked hard and got a scholarship. Maybe you should have tried that, the work hard part I mean."

"You got in because somebody pulled strings for you. That same person paid for your scholarship. That same person pulled more strings to get you into the business school later."

I came to stop. "Bull fucking shit. My Dad went broke before I went to college. Now, I'm going this way." I pointed toward the Starbucks. "If you know what's good for you, you better go the other way. I may not have the heels on to break your other foot, but my toe is fast enough to send your balls all the way to Buffalo before you even have time to scream."

He backed up a step and put his hands up. "Whoa there. I'm just telling you your boyfriend isn't the cool guy you think he is."

Now he was making zero sense.

"He's been working this plan to get you in his bed since you were a teenager. So I guess that thing with your tongue must be really good."

That comment to the blogger hadn't worked out well for me. I pulled my fist back ready to smack him.

He backed just out of reach "He really planned ahead to get you the things you wanted so he could pursue you now. Go ahead and ask him."

"I said leave me alone." I started back on my original path and gave him a middle finger salute over my shoulder.

He followed behind. "Ask him about Operation Overwatch," He taunted.

I slowed for a second remembering that I'd seen a file with that name in Evan's office. Then, I pulled out my phone. "If you don't leave me alone right this second, I'm calling 9-1-1."

"If you don't believe me, ask him." Finally, he turned and walked away. Then he started to whistle. *Fucker.*

When I glanced back, he was getting the passenger seat of a red Ferrari. *Snob.* The driver's hair almost matched the car's. I felt sorry for any woman unlucky enough to end up with that slimy fucker.

I wondered if any of what Martin had said could possibly be true. He'd been twisted enough to proposition me on the dance floor with my boyfriend there, maybe he was trying to poison my relationship with Evan because he was the one who wanted into my pants.

I turned around, with a plan to get to the truth.



EVAN

I WAS OUT ON LONG ISLAND CHECKING ON THE HAMPTON'S HOUSE AS DAD had asked.

Against my better judgment, I answered Martin's call. "Yes."

"That's exactly what you should have said when I gave you a chance to leave the board and keep your lady friend. Now it's too late. She knows all your dirty secrets." He laughed like a hyena.

My gut clenched. It shouldn't have gotten to this. I knew he had too much to lose to take this step.

"You were too fucking bull-headed," he snorted. "You thought you had all the angles covered."

I seethed but kept my words cold and clipped. "If it's war you want it's war you'll get. Or, have you forgotten about the Northern Aerospace letter?"

"That won't work a second time. I've already gone to Dad and explained the situation." What he meant was he'd provided an alternative explanation that made him look blameless—a lie.

"I'll see you in the boardroom, and we'll see."

"You brought this on yourself, Evan. You should have taken the deal. Now you lose both ways. Dad negotiated a sweetener to the deal for Northern, and they're not so angry anymore." What a pair of fucking sleazeballs both father and son. Make it three with Northern Aerospace's chairman.

"Like I said, I'll see you in the boardroom Martin." I hung up after that bluff. I had no backup play.

Instead, what I had was a problem with Alexa, a big fucking problem. I called her. No answer and I got the same result three more times. I dialed Albert. "I need to get back home right now."

CHAPTER 42



ALEXA

I WALKED BACK TO THE PENTHOUSE WITH TREPIDATION AND INTO THE OFFICE I'd been using—his office.

The red file I'd come across while looking for a stapler was right on top in the upper right drawer, exactly where I'd seen it before. The lettering on the tab taunted me—Operation Overwatch.

Could Martin be messing with us, trying to get me to accuse Evan of something horrible with no evidence? Could he be trying to get me to start a fight?

I felt dirty, lifting it out of the drawer, but Evan had told me I had the 'run of the place' as he called it. Besides he'd had some of his work folders out before, and it was all gibberish to me. If this wasn't what Martin had said, I'd save us from falling for Martin's trap.

I opened the folder and felt the room go cold as I turned over page after page. There were letters of recommendation for me, promises of continuing gifts to the college, and instructions about providing me a scholarship and hiding the funding by routing it through a shell company, Davenport Partners.

I almost didn't make it to the bathroom in time. The latte and my breakfast made a mess in the sink and on the counter. I hadn't had time to lift the lid to the toilet. Several dry heaves later, there was nothing left to come up. I felt as drained as my stomach was now.

It was true—every dirty bit of it. What the shark of Wall Street wants, he

gets. He'd manipulated everything, pulling invisible strings in my life for years.

Nothing about my life had been real.



EVAN

AS SOON AS I PUSHED OPEN THE DOOR TO THE PENTHOUSE I REALIZED I WAS in trouble.

Alexa sat on the couch, a bottle of my whiskey in her hand pouring a glass. She glanced at me briefly, her eyes not holding mine.

My stomach roiled at how badly I'd fucked this up. "Hi." It was the best I could manage as I walked forward. "Drinking alone?"

My Operation Overlord folder was in front of her on the coffee table. She responded without looking up. "Why?"

Martin had suggested I burn the folder, but that wouldn't have prevented this moment, not after I confided in the asshole.

She tapped the folder. "Want to explain this?"

"I thought I was helping."

She drank down a long swallow. "Helping? Is that what you call it?"

"Let me apologize."

She looked up with teary eyes. "Let you? Why didn't you tell me this before? There's no excuse for keeping this from me."

"I didn't mean any harm."

"Lots of harm." Her words held anger. "Have you learned nothing about me? How many times did I tell you that I didn't want any help?"

"I was only looking out for you, trying to help after what you'd been through," I explained.

She sipped the whiskey this time. "You know what my dad told me after the bankruptcy?"

I waited rather than say anything that would get me further in the hole.

"He told me they can take money, all of it, they can take things, but they can never take our pride, our self-worth. That's for us alone and nobody can take it away." She sniffed. "I've guarded my pride fiercely ever since. I

thought it was true. I've never accepted anything from anybody." She sneered at me. "You proved him wrong."

"I didn't mean—"

"Don't I didn't mean me." She slammed her glass down so hard whiskey spilled over the edge onto the folder. "With this." She tapped the folder. "You stripped me of all the accomplishments I thought I made, the things I could be proud of, the things I'd done by myself, for myself, with nobody's help. You have no idea how this feels. And then, I have to learn from your creepy friend Martin that you've been pulling strings like a puppet master the whole time to get me what I wanted, rigging the system. Do you have any idea how fucked up that is—how much that hurts?"

I got down on my knees in front of her, my hands on the couch cushions to the sides of her legs.

She looked away.

"Alexa, I was only trying to help. Let me fix this, please. Tell me what I can do to make it right."

"You thought you could keep this quiet and I'd never find out, at least not until after you were done with me. Did it even occur to you to tell me yourself and try to explain?"

"I never told anyone about this. I wanted to tell you, but I didn't know how not yet. I couldn't bear to lose you."

"You told your creepy buddy Martin," she shot back.

"I was drunk. I was looking for advice." I unclenched my teeth. "He's not my fucking buddy. He's a worm, an asshole. He and his father want to ruin my dad and take away the company he spent his life building. He needs me off the board, and threatened to tell you if I didn't agree to leave the board."

"Then why didn't you tell me yourself? Come clean and hope to work it out?" she sobbed. "Why did I have to find out from him of all people?"

"I have leverage. I thought he was bluffing."

She gasped. "My life is not a fucking game. I won't be a pawn in your fucking corporate chess game, pissing contest, poker game, or whatever. That's the problem. You see me as just another piece to maneuver in some contest."

"Alexa that's not it at all. I didn't know how to tell you yet."

"Well, problem fucking solved McAllister. He took care of that for you. I'm done being used. So, lay it out. What else haven't you told me?"

There was no putting this off for another day. "Yes. I'm the reason your

mother died in that accident.”

Her mouth opened and then closed. “Go on.”

“I found that silver book of yours.”

“My goal journal?”

“You left it at your old house next to ours. I called and reached your mother. She wanted me to bring it into the city and I said I couldn’t for at least a week. She wanted it right away and said she’d drive down to pick it up. I was the reason she was on the road in that storm. If I’d driven it in…” The sentence finished itself.

She sat there glumly. “And you tell me this now because your hand is forced.”

“I didn’t know how to tell you. Your mother wanted the book so she could make sure all your dreams came true. After the accident, I decided to take on that responsibility.”

“I’m done being manipulated and used.” She stood.

I got up with her. “Please Alexa. Tell me how to fix this. I fucking love you.” I saw the shock in her eyes.

“You do not fucking get to say that now.”

“But I do. I love you. Please, don’t let this pull us apart. We belong together.”

“That word is not something you whip out when you get in trouble.”

“I didn’t know how to say it earlier. I was afraid I’d scare you off.”

“What makes you think that would have scared me?” She asked. “What do you think? I’ve been here with you on this side of town a long train ride from my work, my family, from everybody who means anything to me. Don’t you get that? I loved you too.”

“Then we can make this work,” I said, reaching for her hand. “We have to.”

She pulled away. “I told you I’m done being used and played.

That very first night, you promised me two things. Partners, and honesty. And you couldn’t come through on either of those.”

She picked up her backpack and suitcase. “I’m leaving, and I don’t want you to follow me, I don’t want you to call me. We’re done.”

The door closed behind her.

My world went dark.

CHAPTER 43



ALEXA

I WAS A TOTAL IDIOT. AND I COULDN'T BLAME THE ALCOHOL. SURE I'D HAD champagne at the event and Evan's good scotch at the penthouse, but I could still walk—almost straight.

The elevator dinged, and the doors opened onto the ground floor for the last time. I wiped under my eyes. I had no idea what I was going to do next. I just knew I couldn't stay here with Evan. I rolled my suitcase behind me.

“Good evening, Ms. Borelli.” Becka greeted me with ten times more cheer in her voice than I felt—make that a hundred times. “How can I help you?”

“It's Alexa, and I need to go.”

“Certainly Ms. Alexa. Which airport?” She spoke into a small radio. “Troy, Please have Albert wait. Ms. Alexa will be right out. She needs a ride to the airport.”

I hadn't considered how I'd look in this dress, lugging a backpack and towing a suitcase. Riding the train to Brooklyn in this outfit would be... interesting.

I made a snap decision. I'd trust Albert, get drunk enough to dull the hurt, and then make a plan. But first, this dress would attract all the wrong attention where I intended to go. “Becka, could I please change in your office first?”

“Certainly,” she answered, as if crazy ladies always made requests like

this.

A few minutes later, I left the building in jeans and a T-shirt. Ignoring the two photographers snapping pictures, I wheeled my suitcase to Albert, who lifted it into the trunk. Of course the camera lizards would be shadowing me after the drama at the gala.

“Why the suitcase? Did he give you a ticket to Hawaii?” the first one asked. “Is it over?”

God, these guys could be assholes.

“How do you feel knowing you broke a man’s foot?” came from the second one.

I ignored them, as Evan had taught me.

After we were both in the car, Albert turned around. “Where are we going, Miss Alexa?”

“Away... Home.”



I SAT IN THE FAR BACK BOOTH OF THE DARK TREE TAVERN ONLY ONE BLOCK from my apartment. “So, what do you think?” I asked my drinking partner. “Have I had enough yet?” I couldn’t see him very clearly. The lack of response was probably a yes, but I poured another short glass anyway.

Mr. Eighty Proof didn’t answer. He never did.

“Big lot of help you are,” I told the bottle.

I’d decided my old apartment was too depressing to face sober. I’d chosen this bar because they were willing to serve whole bottles of tequila, my memory eraser of choice tonight.

After knocking the glass back, I screwed the cap on the bottle, left a tip, and shuffled outside.

Albert was waiting and opened the door for me.

“Thank you much,” I said.

“Where to now?”

I pointed. “My apartment.” I put my partial bottle of tequila in my backpack with the two extras I’d sent Albert out to buy for me. I wanted supplies in case the camera lizards decided to camp out at my building after my Martin encounter, which they had already named Heelgate. I hated that I’d trained myself to pull up their stupid blogs on my phone, even here.

After the short drive, Albert hefted both my suitcase and backpack up the stairs.

We reached my floor, but the hallway looked different. It was brighter. All the light bulbs were working for a change—a first for Zhukov. And the carpet was different. *New?*

Albert got the door open for me when I couldn't manage it. "The new super fixed up your unit," he told me. "You should be safe here for the night. Get some rest and call me if you need anything."

I flopped down on the bed.

"Water and pills in the morning," he said, and closed the door.



I WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING TO A SPLITTING HEADACHE AND PRIED ONE EYE open. It didn't feel like morning, but the light around the window shades told me it was. It took a few blinks to figure out where I was—my old apartment, the place I'd called home before... Before the part of my life I didn't want to think about now.

I was face down on a pillow. It didn't feel like my old pillow. And hadn't the old one been water damaged? Maybe it was the same one because my cheek was on a wet spot. Nope. That was drool.

I had to pee in the worst way, so I went to the bathroom and back to bed without turning on one of the lights.

Sleep would be my refuge. I couldn't hurt when I was asleep. I had a vague recollection of instructions to drink the water and take the pills by my bed in the morning, so I did that and went back to sleep.

CHAPTER 44



ALEXA

THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR WOKE ME. THE ASPIRIN HAD HELPED, BUT I NEEDED more. The knock sounded again.

“Who is it,” I yelled.

“The super.”

Fucking great. The last time I’d pissed off Zhukov hadn’t worked so well, so I rolled out of bed and went in search of my bathrobe. It should have been on the back of the bathroom door.

When I switched on the light, I found it on a hanger in a dry cleaning bag. None of this made sense, but I ripped open the bag, wrapped the robe around me, and went to the door.

I had to blink a few times. The view through the peep hole wasn’t Zhukov. “Who are you?”

“Sorry, Ms. Borelli. I should have explained. My name is Franks. I’m one of the new supers. Sorry to bother you, but I heard you returned last night, and I wanted to check and see if you were happy with the repairs to your unit.”

Definitely not Zhukov. I unlocked and opened the door. “Franks you said?”

“Yes, ma’am. May I come in?”

The man was massive, Albert sized. I stepped aside. “Sorry, I’m a little groggy. I got in late last night.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know how that can be. When I took over, I was informed of the damage to your unit, and I want to personally see that you are satisfied.”

No longer drunk, I started to take in the changes.

“I replaced the bed,” he said. “I hope it’s satisfactory. The ceiling and the original leak have been repaired. I had the carpet replaced, and all of your clothing that was out or hanging was dry cleaned. The refrigerator was also replaced.”

“Thank you,” was all I could think to say.

“I didn’t want to go through your drawers, but if any of that needs to be cleaned, just let me know. All this is on the landlord’s tab.” He offered a sheet of paper.

I took it.

“It’s the rent reconciliation. You’ve been credited for the time the apartment was uninhabitable.”

Compared to Zhukov, this treatment was like living in an alternate universe.

“So, what do you think?” he asked.

“How about I let you know later.”

He moved to the door. “Sure thing. I’ll be downstairs, if you need anything. My cell is on the sheet there.”

New bed, new carpet, cleaned clothes, courteous super—I’d caught a break for once. All I needed was for the shower to work.

Then, my eyes landed on my suitcase and what it meant. The fairy tale was over. Worse, my entire life had been a lie, thanks to one Evan fucking McAllister. It had all started to unravel with after dance with the devil in his tux. If only I’d said no, I’d still have my pride.

Ignorance would have been bliss, at least by comparison.



EVAN

“Alexa?” The yell woke me, and then the headache hit.

“Oh, Evan, Evan, Evan.” The voice was familiar, but my brain was foggy.

I raised a hand over my ear. “Stop fucking yelling,” I mumbled.

“Time to get up,” the voice said. Yup, the voice was Noah’s.

“Leave me alone,” I pleaded just before the blinding light assaulted me. “What the fuck?” I shielded my eyes.

Noah laughed and grinned maniacally, his finger on the button of my remote-control blinds. “You should be up and torturing yourself in the gym already.”

I closed my eyes again “Fuck you.” He smelled like barf.

“Alexa,” he yelled again. “We need a little help in here.” He jostled my shoulder. “What are you doing sleeping on the couch anyway? Did you tell her she needed to diet or some shit?”

I sat up and reached for the bottle of whiskey, but it wasn’t where it should have been.

“No more of this today.” He held up the bottle I wanted—no, needed.

“Give me that.” I reached out.

“No way,” he said, backing away. “I’m going to pour it down the drain.”

I rested my head in my hands. “You can’t. That’s expensive shit.”

“In your condition, it’s poison shit. I’ll take it home and drink it myself.”

“You can fucking leave now.” I pointed to the door.

“Not until you tell me what’s going on.”

“Aspirin,” I said for two reasons. My head was killing me, and thinking about how I’d fucked up hurt even more.

My brother shrugged. “Sure. Then you’re telling me why you’re trying to kill yourself.” He went to the kitchen.

That’s when I looked at my shoes and caught the smell. I’d puked on myself.

“Yeah,” he said, handing me a mixing bowl. “I almost stepped in it.” He pointed to a large spot on the carpet. “Next time use the bowl.”

I shook my head, but regretted it when the movement made my skull want to split open.

“Here.” He handed me tablets and a glass of red shit with some floating yellow shit.

I downed the aspirin with a swallow from the glass. It burned like hell. “What the fuck is this?”

“My hangover cure. Bloody Mary mix with extra Tabasco. The heat makes you focus on something else besides your headache. Fixes the hangover and clears the sinuses. Drink up.”

I shook my head very slowly this time. “No.”

“It’s either that, I turn up the stereo to full volume.” He moved toward the audio system.

“Okay.” I gulped down the awful liquid. “This is vile.”

“That’s probably the raw egg I added.” He held his hand out for the glass, and I handed it over. “Now, tell me why Alexa isn’t here.”

“She left me.” I wiped my dripping nose on my sleeve. Clear out the sinuses was right.

“You should send her flowers and practice your groveling.”

“That won’t fix it.”

“Then throw those clothes out and get in the shower. I need to hear all the gory details of your stupidity.”

I stood slowly. My stomach roiled, but it was the hole in my chest that hurt the worst. I was a terrible human being and deserved how bad I felt. I’d gotten really drunk, which had been the objective last night. I’d wanted to lose the memory of Alexa leaving me, but it hadn’t worked. I should have tried the mezcal, because that had sure wiped my memory of the fountain night.

New plan: kick Noah out and guzzle that bottle in my office. Would it work without the worm?

“Did you pee in your pants?” Noah asked.

“No.” I looked down. The stain said yes. I guess I’d gotten really, really drunk. And it hadn’t been enough.



ALEXA

“HEY, WAKE UP,” MY SISTER SAID, JOSTLING ME. “YOUR SHIFT STARTED TWO hours ago.”

“No.” I pulled the covers over my head and moaned. I should’ve taken more aspirin. I also shouldn’t have given my sister a key.

She jostled me again. “You never miss a shift at the deli. What’s up?”

“I can’t.”

She pulled down the covers and put her hand on my forehead. “You don’t have a fever, so what’s going on?” She lifted the mostly empty tequila bottle

by the bed. “Is this what you’ve been up to?”

I rolled over and hid under the sheets again. “Can you get me some aspirin?”

“I’ll take that as a yes, and you can have some aspirin as soon as you tell me why.”

“Why are you being mean?”

She didn’t budge. “Why are you not talking to me?”

I wasn’t getting her out of here without an explanation. “We broke up.”

“Oh... Shit,” she said slowly. “Why?”

“I’ll get it myself.” I started to sit up, but my sister’s hand stopped me.

“Where do you keep it?” she asked.

I relaxed against the pillow again. “Top right drawer in the bathroom.”

She disappeared for a moment. “Here.”

I swallowed the pills with the water she’d brought.

She sniffed the air. “The place looks better. Have you been painting?”

“The super.”

“Well, it looks a lot better. Now, what happened with you and Evan?”

I rolled over. “I don’t want to talk about.”

Then I heard her say, “Hi, Gwen. This is Rachel. We’ve got a situation. It’s Alexa, and she really needs help, I think. We’re shorthanded at the deli, and I have to get back... That would be great... She and Evan broke up is all I got out of her... No, nothing more... Yeah, pretty shitty, and she’s been drinking... I don’t think so. She hasn’t been staying here, so you’ll probably have bring over the ingredients... I’ll leave the key with the lady across the hall. Thanks. Talk to you later.”

She put a hand on her hip. “Gwen’s headed over. I expect to get a full report on whatever Evan did so I can get his brother to kick his ass.”



GWEN WASN’T ANY NICER WHEN SHE ARRIVED. “TIME TO GET UP, SWEETIE.”

I gave her the same answer I’d given my sister. “No.”

“We’re going to do this the right way. Take a shower, then you explain things, and we have a pity party, the two of us. We’re doing the party here, because you don’t look ready to go out in public again yet. Then tonight you get to wallow, if you want, but only after fixing your attitude by watching a

good rom-com.”

“I’m not done wallowing right here.”

She yanked the covers off, catching me by surprise “First order of business is a shower.”

I didn’t move, playing the immovable object to her irresistible force.

“If you don’t get up, I’m going to bring the water to you, and you can bathe in bed.”

I rolled out of bed, not because she’d threatened me, but because I didn’t want to abuse my new mattress. “Why is everybody being so mean to me?”

“Because we love you, and you need it.” She wrinkled her nose. “Puke last night?”

“Maybe, but I made it to the toilet.”

“Here’s a hint. Pull your hair out of the way next time.”

Maybe a shower was a good idea.

I stayed under the water until it ran lukewarm. It did feel nice, but more importantly, the longer I stayed in here, the longer I avoided talking about Evan. Thinking about him made the hole in my chest raw.

Eventually I wrapped my hair in a towel, cinched up my bathrobe, and left the sanctuary of the bathroom. “Wow.” It was all I could say when I saw my little table set with burritos and mimosas for two.

“I figured you didn’t want to go out to brunch, so I brought brunch do you.” She pointed. “Straight from the bistro. Our normal breakfast burritos, maybe a little soggy by now, and mimosas, virgin of course. Chelsea’s in Europe, so it’s just you and me until she gets back.”

“I don’t really feel like eating anything.”

She held up my partial bottle of tequila. “If you drank this much alcohol last night, you definitely need food and liquid. Now sit your ass down, sweetie.”

The virgin mimosa did taste good going down. As soon as I finished it, she topped me off with some from her glass.”

I was halfway through the burrito when she put down her fork. “Stop stalling. I’ve seen two year olds eat faster than you.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I insisted.

She tapped her fingernail against the tequila bottle. “This bottle says otherwise.”

I should have hidden it.

“So, sweetie, tell me what happened.”

It took me three long breaths before I could say anything. “We broke up.” She rested her chin in her hands. “And which one of you is we? Did he ask you to leave, or did you choose to?”

“I left.” The explanation was short and sweet, the feelings the word forced were not.

“Why? What did he do?”

I fiddled with my fork. “You’re right. These are a little soggy.”

“Stalling,” she singsonged.

“It’s not what he did—well, yes it is. It’s what he didn’t do. He didn’t tell me what he did do.” I sounded like a raving lunatic. “It’s over. That’s all there is to it.”

“You’re confusing me. This is the same man who was virtually perfect when you were telling me about him two weeks ago.”

I was confused as well. “Everybody can be fooled.”

“What did he not do that brought this on?” She said it like I had a cold I could get over.

“He got me into school.” I listed the recommendation letter, the promise of money to the school that implied a bribe to get me in, and the scholarship targeted at me. Then I took a breath.

Gwen raised her eyebrows. “All this is about Columbia?”

I nodded and sipped my drink.

“Do you feel like shredding your diploma?” she asked. “I mean, he did all the work, so it’s not really yours.”

“I see what you’re doing, and it won’t work.”

“What is that? Pointing out that being accepted is only the first step to graduating? You did all the rest.”

“I know that,” I shot back. “I don’t need a devil’s advocate here, and he is the devil.”

“He’s the devil because he helped you.”

“You’re twisting my words. It’s not like I’m complaining that he opened a door for me or pulled out my chair.”

“Or stared down a gang of armed hoodlums to keep you from being raped in your own apartment building.”

I’d forgotten I’d told her that. “That was nice. But it doesn’t change the other stuff.”

She pushed her plate to the side. “Now that you’re free of this devil, you must feel better. So why did you get drunk last night? The truth now.”

I'd known the truth since the moment I opened the bottle. "I felt so bad, I wanted to forget it all. Stop feeling."

"Now we're getting somewhere. You certainly didn't feel good. What did you feel bad about?"

I pushed my plate away. "I think we're done."

"Maybe because you threw away something good?"

"So now it's my fault, and you're trying to convince me I did something wrong?"

She reached across the table for my hand. "Of course not, sweetie. He's responsible for what he did, or didn't do. But..."

I waited for the *you're a dumbass* comment, but it didn't come.

"You're responsible for your emotions," she said instead. "Listen to them."

I stood. "Well, that's when I didn't know what he'd done."

"So your requirement now for a man is that he be infallible?"

It stung because it sort of sounded like what I'd said. "Stop trying cheer me up with logic."

She took her plate to the sink. "I have to work, but I'll be back tonight so we can gorge ourselves on ice cream and binge Netflix." She pointed a warning finger. "No more drinking until I get back."

CHAPTER 45



ALEXA

IT HAD BEEN A WEEK SINCE I WALKED OUT OF THE BUILDING ON CENTRAL Park West, a week since I woke up with a warm body next to me, a week since I'd been happy. It had been a week since I'd been blissfully unaware that Evan had been pulling my life's strings for years.

The flowers had started the next day.

I knew because Rita told me when I called in to say I needed to take the week off. I would have made it a month, if I could have afforded it.

Evan had also called every day, just once each day.

I'd told him not to, and he couldn't even grant me that. I'd refused every call, but I hadn't been able to quell the temptation to listen to the voicemails. I usually lasted an hour before giving in. They all said the same thing. He was sorry, and he missed me.

I knew Evan felt legitimately bad because his brother kept telling me. I accepted Noah's calls because he hadn't done anything to me, and I couldn't be a total bitch.

Either Gwen or Rachel had come over every evening to keep me company. We'd indulged in ice cream and reruns on Netflix. I knew it was all a plot to keep me from resorting to my bottles of tequila again. Their concern was comforting, but it only distracted me from the ache in my chest until they left for the night. Then I was back to the cold loneliness of my empty apartment. I had a fresh carpet, and a new bed, but it still lacked warmth.

A knock had woken me this morning. It had been a messenger dropping a package at my door, no signature required, return address Central Park West.

I miss you, the card read. Inside was a package of new sheets for my bed—Evan’s brand of million-thread-count, soft-as-silk sheets. I hesitated a moment, but put the package in my closet, the one with the evil, black-eye-causing door.

Out of sight, out of mind. Those sheets would only remind me of the life I’d left behind. No way could I sleep on them without thinking back to Evan even more than I already did.

Evan, or the lack of Evan, dominated my thoughts whenever I was alone. But I knew I’d done the right thing.

Mom had told me once that I should never settle for anything less than the best. I’d thought Evan passed that test, but it had been a lie.

His asshole worm of a buddy, Martin, had proven that by telling me the truth Evan had kept from me.

I left for my morning walk, and my thoughts became darker with every block. What had I accomplished in my life that hadn’t been engineered by Evan? Had Martin been right that it was an elaborately planned plot over years to land me in Evan’s bed?

I turned back before reaching my normal spot.

This sucked, I sucked, and I was changing things.

I would get back to work, finish my hours, get my CPA, and build the accounting business to help my fellow Brooklynites the way I’d planned. That company would be mine, and I’d be able to stand tall knowing I’d built it—not him, me.



EVAN

“YOU GOTTA STOP THIS SHIT,” MY BROTHER YELLED AT ME. “AT LEAST SLEEP in the bed.”

It had been a week of the same thing. Noah would jostle me awake, yell at me, and take my booze away. I couldn’t even look at the bed, let alone sleep in it, without thinking of her, mourning her. Even the shower held

memories I'd tried to scrub away.

"I'm fine," I complained. I wasn't fine, but I'd figured out how much whiskey I could down every night, getting myself properly drunk, but still having a hangover that could be managed in the morning.

"Take your fucking pills," he bellowed. "Or don't. You know, if you want to kill yourself, just jump off the bridge. It'll be quicker, and I won't have to waste my time watching you destroy yourself."

I sat up on the couch and swallowed the pills with water from the bottle I'd placed there last night. See? I could plan things like a functioning adult. But I hadn't been into work in a week, because *adult* and *functioning* were two things I wasn't good at with a hangover.

"Did I tell you about the fight I watched last year at the Garden?"

"Shut the fuck up," I yelled loud enough to hurt my head. "I can't take another one of your stupid stories this morning."

"Right. One hangover cocktail coming up." He returned a minute later with a glass of his awful hangover cure. "Drink this or else."

I took it, because if I didn't, he'd pour it on my head and it would sting my eyes like a thousand bees. I'd learned that the hard way.

He stood over me. "Down the hatch."

Holding my nose, I took several large gulps. My nose started to run right after the burning became almost unbearable.

"Has she taken one of your calls yet?" he asked when I handed the glass back.

I shook my head. "Nope." I'd sent flowers and arranged for her to get a set of the sheets she'd raved about this morning.

"You're doing this all wrong."

I snorted. "Look who's the relationship guru all of a sudden."

"Ya see, this fight I watched—"

"Get the fuck out of my place with your asinine stories."

"Fuck you too. Make me."

Normally I would have been up for that challenge, but not the way I felt this morning. "At least make it quick, and then leave me alone."

He took the hangover cocktail glass to the kitchen and returned with some water. "I'll skip the story and get to the point."

"Thanks," I mumbled.

"The point is, Alexa is a fighter, and every fighter has a style. Alexa, she's a counterpuncher. You push her, she pushes back. Martin pushed her

buttons, she broke his foot. Dad criticized her, she gave it right back to him.”

I didn't see the point. “So?”

“You've got to stop pushing her, because it only makes her resist more.”

I didn't like where this was going. “I'm not pushing anything.”

“You are too.” Noah sighed like I was the dumbest fuck around. “Stop sending her flowers. Stop calling every day.”

I stood up and stretched. “Where does that get me?” I asked, bracing myself against the back of the couch.

“It keeps you from digging a deeper hole. She's a pusher, I tell you.”

“Don't reach out?”

“Not at all. It can't be any worse than what you've been doing.” He pointed down the hall. “Now off to the shower, and you have to get back to work.”

He was probably right about the work part. Under the water, I slowly accepted Noah's logic. Backing off went against everything I'd learned, everything that had made me successful, but I'd try it. What I'd tried so far hadn't gotten me anywhere.



ALEXA

GETTING BACK FROM MY WALK, I FUMBLED FOR MY KEYS. MRS. DORITS across the hall opened her door.

“I sure am glad the building changed hands,” she said as she closed her door behind her. “Our new super is so much better than that worthless Zhukov piece of... Well, you know what I mean.”

I nodded. “Mr. Franks does seem nice.”

“The best part, I think, is that he got rid of that red-haired kid.”

“Pinky?” Thinking back, I realized hadn't seen him or any of his crew in or near the building since I'd returned.

She laughed. “That punk learned the hard way that you don't mess with the NYPD. Did you know my uncle was on the force back in the day?”

My curiosity begged to be satisfied. “I didn't know. Tell me what happened.”

“Well, the kid hassled Mr. Franks wife. Nice lady. And did I say the super is retired from the NYPD? Well, anyway, the super, he goes and talks to his buddies, I’m guessing, and the next day, the cops catch the kid dealing on the street corner and go to arrest him.”

I nodded.

“But the kid, he pulled a gun and shot one of the cops in the leg. He’ll be okay—the cop, thank God. Now the kid’s in Rikers, and we won’t be seeing him around here, not after shooting at a cop. They don’t mess around on things like that.”

The story rolled over me like a warm wave of relief. “Thank you for telling me. I hadn’t heard.”

She locked her door. “I baked some cookies for the super. You take care now, dear.” She walked down the hall while I located my keys.

Being rid of Pinky meant being able to come and go without constant fear. This qualified as a good day.

Inside, I decided to follow her lead. Franks and his wife deserved cookies. The rent was due tomorrow. Maybe taking cookies down with my check would be a good idea. Fixing up my apartment and dealing with Pinky certainly deserved some thanks.

I located the paper Franks had given me that first day and fished my checkbook out. The number on the line that read *credit for time uninhabitable* was sizable by my standards and would help my meager bank balance.

As I wrote out the check, I read the name of the landlord again and again. *Davenport Partners*—I knew that name from somewhere. *Fuckety, fuck, fuck.*

I snatched my phone and dialed.

“Hi, gorgeous,” Evan answered. “I’m glad you called.”

“Did you buy my building?” I demanded without even a hint of politeness. Davenport Partners was the company he’d used to fund my scholarship.

“My dad and I are going to lose the company he built to those Graff assholes,” Evan said. “Other than that, I’m doing fine. Thank you for asking. How about you?”

Anger demanded I not get derailed. “Answer the question.”

“I had to make sure you were safe.”

That answered it. Once again he was messing around in my life. “I told you, you can’t buy me.” I hung up.

The phone rang right away.

I sent it to voicemail, and I did the same thing the next two times he called.

When the phone stopped ringing, I reluctantly listened to the message Evan had left.

“Yes, I bought the building to kick out that stupid super who tortured you over the water leak. No way was I letting anybody treat you like that. Not ever. Plus, Albert suggested an ex-NYPD friend of his to be the new super. He said he’d keep you and the other tenants safe. I won’t apologize for using my resources to keep you safe. If all that makes me a bad guy, then I plead guilty... Please apologize to your neighbors for me if they wanted your friend Pinky to stick around. Explain that I’m not from Brooklyn and I didn’t understand... I miss you.”

Damn him. He’d turned my anger around, and now I felt like a shit for my behavior.

ME: Thank you, and I’m sorry I yelled at you. Please don’t do anything more for me.

Guilt replaced anger to join the ache in my chest. It had lodged there because I missed him too and couldn’t admit it.

I signed the rent check and went looking for my bag of chocolate chips. Work could wait until the cookies cooled.

CHAPTER 46



ALEXA

IT HAD BEEN TWO WEEKS NOW SINCE I LEFT EVAN—I'D KEPT TRACK. HE'D stopped calling and sending flowers. I should have been relieved that he had accepted my decision, but somehow it didn't help.

I was behind the counter of the deli after the lunch rush had subsided. I wiped down the counter on my side, next to Uncle Luca, who was refilling the chicken-salad pot at his station.

"Don't forget to check for gum," he told Janice, who was cleaning the tables.

"On it," she replied.

Why some people thought sticking their used gum under tables was funny eluded me.

"How are you doing on chicken salad?" my uncle asked me.

I lifted the lid. "Mine's fine." I flipped the rag I was using to clean the counter.

"It's a damn shame," he said.

I looked over to find him still spooning chicken salad from the large container into the small pot. "What is?"

He finished filling the pot and put it back in its place. "That McAllister boy breaking up with you."

I could've kicked myself for falling for his trick to get me talking. But I couldn't take the reputation hit that I'd been dumped. My uncle would spread

it far and wide. “You have bad information.” I put the rag down and faced him. “I broke up with Evan, not the other way around.”

“Why would you do a fool thing like that?” he asked.

I’d asked for these hours specifically so I could avoid my sister nagging me to realize my mistake and call Evan. “Maybe.”

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe you should date him if you think he’s so wonderful.”

His jaw dropped. *Didn’t expect that, now did you, uncle?*

“Are we done here?” I asked.

He burst out laughing. “Alexa, I’m glad still you have your sense of humor, but he’s not my type.”

He put the spoon back in the chicken-salad pot and added the lid. “The guy’s richer than God, a handsome devil—from what your aunt tells me, not that I’d know nothing about that—and he comes from a good family.” He shook his head.

I didn’t want to continue this conversation, but I wouldn’t let it end on a note as false as that. I put the rag down and my hand went to my hip. “How can you say that after with his father did to Daddy?” I asked with attitude in my eyes.

He carried the chicken-salad container back to the refrigerator. “You college kids think you know everything, but you miss the most basic stuff.”

“Like what?” I asked. I was the first one in my family to go to college and damned proud of it.

He closed the refrigerator. “Do you want to know? The real story?”

“Yes,” I said before I realized I’d walked into his trap again.

“Janice, can you handle things for a few minutes?”

She picked up her cleaning basket. “You got it.”

Uncle Luca motioned, and I followed him through the door to the back and into the office.

“Close the door and take a seat.” His words were colder than before.

I closed the door, and he rounded the desk to his chair. “I love this store—meeting the people, feeding them—it’s a good business, one we can all be proud of. Do you remember when your dad became my partner?”

It was etched solidly in my brain, because it had given Dad purpose when he needed it most, after losing everything. “Vividly. Isn’t that when you moved to this location?”

“It sure was. The old space was too small, and it never would have

supported us both. Coming here..." He tapped the desk. "...was key."

"It's a good location," I agreed.

"Why do you hate his family so much?"

"Because his father intentionally ruined our family."

"You mean the bankruptcy?"

"Duh."

He wagged a finger at me. "Don't take that tone with me, young lady. You went to college. Now act like it."

"Sorry. Yes, I mean the bankruptcy."

"And why did it happen?"

I'd been told a dozen times. "Daddy said Fergus McAllister pulled out of the Evergreen project, guaranteeing it would fail."

"Your father was very ambitious and always working with a lot of borrowed money. Each project was bigger than the last. Everything was mortgaged to the hilt. He was addicted to the risk, like a gambler who didn't know when to quit. When the Evergreen project fell apart, the whole house of cards followed."

I nodded. I'd known Dad had become overleveraged.

"Did you know that your father and Fergus had been best friends before that?"

"Seriously? I understood that they were friends, but not best friends."

"Well, they were. Now, what I'm going to tell you can never be repeated to anyone, understand?"

I nodded. "Not a soul."

Uncle Luca leaned forward, elbows on the desk. "Have you heard of the Romanov family?"

I nodded. There weren't many people in this part of town who hadn't heard of them. It seemed that every year there was a local killing where the whispers in the neighborhood pointed to the Romanov brothers.

"Your father had an even bigger project than Evergreen he wanted to pursue, but he didn't have enough borrowing power to get it done. He told me he planned to get money from the Romanov brothers."

I shivered at the thought of Daddy getting involved with the mob like that.

"I couldn't," Uncle Luca continued. "I just couldn't sit back and do nothing. I couldn't watch my brother risk his life with them and have you and your sister be fatherless. I had to save him."

“I don’t understand.”

“I asked, no *begged* Fergus to pull out of Evergreen.”

My hands flew to my face. “You what?” I couldn’t have heard that right.

“I had to get your father out of the real estate business and have him join me here at the deli. It was the only way, and I’d do it again in a second. It was also Fergus who gave me the loan to get this location. It was the only way to save him.”

My head spun with the implications. I’d had it wrong this whole time, because my uncle had hidden the truth from us, from all of us. “Does Daddy know?”

Uncle Luca shook his head. “Nope, and it has to stay that way. He can’t know about Evergreen, the loan, any of it.”

I leaned back and took a deep breath.

My uncle smiled. “The truth puts a different spin on Fergus McAllister’s character, now doesn’t it?”



TRUDGING BACK TO MY APARTMENT, I TRIED TO WRAP MY HEAD AROUND what I’d learned from Uncle Luca and was having trouble. I’d held Evan’s last name against him because of what his father did.

It was hard to learn now that Uncle Luca had instigated it, begged for it, forced it. No matter how I worded his choice, it came out the same. Fergus McAllister and Uncle Luca had done it together to save Daddy from himself and from a terrible mistake. And Daddy had no idea.

I’d given my word I wouldn’t tell him. Uncle Luca was probably right about that. Telling Daddy would mean revisiting that time of his life and his compulsion for risk. It would tear his pride apart, and that was the thing he held most dear.

CHAPTER 47



ALEXA

I PULLED OPEN THE DOOR TO THE FERNDALE OAKS. THE CALL I'D EXPECTED had come in this morning. Chelsea was back in town, and I couldn't turn down a meeting with my best friend for lunch.

She saw me and waved from the table near the back. I cinched up my big-girl panties and walked over. This was going to be hard.

Gwen had given me a heads-up on Chelsea's reaction to my breakup with Evan, and it wasn't good. I'd tried to call her to explain, hoping that if it got too bad, I could *accidentally* lose the connection. But she'd refused to discuss it over the phone. *Real friends didn't do that* or some such nonsense.

"There's my girl." She greeted me with a fierce hug and kiss on the cheek.

She didn't start in on me until after our water and breadbasket had arrived.

"So," she said, interlacing her fingers. "Why haven't you called Evan?"

"I called him," I admitted.

Her lips curved up. "And what did you say?"

"I yelled at him for buying my building." I wasn't going to sugarcoat it.

Her smile disappeared. "You what?"

"He knew I didn't want anything from him, and then he went and bought my building so he could fire the super because he was shitty to me. He bought a whole building."

“And you’d rather he hadn’t done that?”

“Of course. I can’t accept help like that.”

She shook her head slowly. “You are unbelievable. Tell me one thing. This super, was he only mean to you, or was he an equal-opportunity asshole?”

Knowing Chelsea, this was a trap, but I answered anyway. “He was a total jerk.”

“That means Evan did something that benefited you *and* everybody in the building, and you’re mad about it because you wanted everybody else to suffer so you didn’t have to accept his help.”

That made me sound pretty shitty. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

A server showed up to take our orders, letting me off the hook for a while.

I braced myself when he left.

Chelsea shifted in her seat. “Gwen said this was about Columbia?”

I nodded and spent several minutes explaining what Evan had done, how he’d pulled strings to get me in and paid for my scholarship.

Chelsea politely nodded along and sipped her water. When I was done, she picked up a breadstick. “Is that it?”

“Yes. And he should have told me himself.”

“To sum up,” she said. “You’re pissed at him for being nice and helping you at a time when you needed help.”

“Not exactly. I wanted to achieve those things by myself.”

“He was nice to you. He provided help at a time you needed it, right? And you’ve decided that’s bad. It’s not like you to be unfair.”

I gave in. “I’m not being unfair.”

“Now you’re lying to yourself. I don’t see why you’re interested in Three Sisters then. We should shut it down.”

I couldn’t believe she said that. “We can’t.”

She ignored me. “But that’s what we do. We help people when they need it most, and you think that’s wrong. While we’re at it, there’s a soup kitchen ten blocks south of here. We should go tell them to close because they’re ruining people’s self-esteem. Remember, just like Evan, they’re helping because they want to.”

“It’s not like that.”

She pointed her breadstick at me. “Right. Because you’re a special case.” She waved the breadstick. “You’ve got to get your head out of your ass about

his family name. You have a nice guy, doing nice things for you, the kind of things that any other woman in this town would die for. But you're focused on how evil his father was, and you're letting that sabotage this." She sighed.

Our lunches arrived, stopping her accusations—accusations that were hitting their mark with almost every word. I was a worthless excuse for a human being. And what's worse, she didn't even know the full story.

I cleared my throat. "It turns out his father isn't as bad as I thought."

She forked a bite of her salad. "That's the kind of introspection I've hoped for. You know until this, I thought you were really smart. But now, I don't know. I'd give anything to have a guy like you had."

The fact that she put Evan in the past tense lodged in my chest and burned. I couldn't even stomach a bite of my lasagna. "How was Portugal?"

She finished chewing. "It was very nice." With that, she took the hint, and we got off the subject of me while we ate.

With every bite, I had to mull over her perspective that I was being unreasonable. Equating my feelings about shutting down our charity to how Evan had helped me get into Columbia stung. I hated being called out as unreasonable.

The lasagna felt heavy in my stomach as it mixed with guilt.

After her description of Lisbon, I asked, "It sounds like a long trip. Are you happy to be back?"

"It was fun, but yes I am. Are you happy to have dumped Evan?"

I'd set myself up for that, and I looked down at my plate, afraid to answer.

She plucked another breadstick from the basket and waved it at me. "Honesty, now."

I sighed. "I can't sleep. I miss him. I feel like a piece of me has left the building. Am I a terrible person for sticking up for myself?"

"Not terrible, just misguided," she said. "Gwen said some idiot business rival of his started this whole thing."

"Yeah. I was mad because I had to find out from that creep Martin he works with."

"And this Martin creep told you this to hurt Evan?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"That's what I don't understand. You told us Evan stared down these hardened criminals to protect you one night in your building, right?"

I nodded and smiled, remembering the night my personal Tarzan had

saved me.

“Then this Martin guy tells you shit to break you up so he can hurt Evan, and you fall for it. The Alexa Borelli I know fights back. What have you done to protect your man after all he’s done to protect you? You should be out there attacking this Martin asshole however you can. You know he did this to hurt Evan by hurting you.”

Shame forced my eyes closed for a moment as I sucked in air through gritted teeth. Chelsea was right. Evan had confided that the Graffs were out to destroy him and Fergus, and I hadn’t lifted a finger to support my man.

“You’re right. I’m a terrible person.”

“Misguided,” she corrected. “When you know better, you do better.”

“You’re a philosopher now?”

“It’s a quote from Maya Angelou. The question is, what are you going to do about it?”

“It might be too late,” I admitted. “He stopped sending me flowers, and he stopped calling. I think he’s forgotten me.” It hurt to say that last sentence. “He’s probably moved on.” Self-loathing forced me to add that.

“That’s a quitter talking, and you’re not a quitter, Alexa Borelli. You should probably remind him of that. Now what do you think about dessert?”

CHAPTER 48



ALEXA

THE TV WAS ON BEHIND THE COUNTER WHEN I WALKED INTO THE DELI. IT was tuned to the depressing local news.

“Good to see you’re ready to join the living,” Rachel quipped from the register. “Has he called?”

I shook my head, not wanting to say anything in the deli. I’d told her I was done wallowing, and even admitted I’d been at least half wrong in leaving Evan.

Uncle Luca waved while building a sandwich for a customer.

I waited until he finished. “Can we at least change it to sports or something?” I knew news hadn’t been Rachel’s choice.

“When it’s over. It’s important to know what’s happening in the city.”

I shrugged. It was a battle I’d attempted before, and been no more successful than today.

“You’re a woman. You should be interested in what’s coming up. The DA is going to talk about how he’s doing to deal with the rise in date-drugging cases.

I understood he meant date rape, but couldn’t stomach the words. “I’m careful.”

Rachel scowled at me. “So you think it’s the victim’s fault?”

“Of course not. I say we hang ’em all.” I meant *by the balls* but didn’t utter the words. That thought sent me right back to remembering Evan’s

threat to Xavier the weekend concierge.

Chelsea had been right. I needed to help my man, but *how* was the question? Once my mind started on Evan, I couldn't stop feeling bad that I hadn't a clue how to help him deal with Martin or the elder Graff. If the fuckers were attacking him, they were attacking us.

"Here it is," my uncle said as he turned the volume up.

I watched as a short, balding guy took the podium and became taller—probably standing on a box. The text at the bottom of the screen said he was District Attorney Archibald Cotts.

He droned on about some statistics and how he would leave no stone unturned to make the city safer, blah, blah, blah. He talked about how the problem had been severe for some time now.

If so, then why didn't you do anything earlier? I thought.

"Just like you, I have daughters," Cotts said. Two girls stepped forward.

I squinted at the picture. "Freeze it." When Rachel didn't move fast enough, I repeated it. "Hit pause."

She gave me a look, but she did it. "Why?"

I moved closer to the screen, and then I was sure. "I've got to go," I said as I rushed for the door.



WHEN I'D CHECKED WITH HIM, ALBERT HAD ASSURED ME EVAN WASN'T home.

Xavier was behind the concierge desk when I walked into the lobby. He didn't make a move to stop me.

I waved.

He smiled. "Good afternoon."

A good sign.

Upstairs, I breathed easier when my keycard still worked. I copied the papers I needed from Evan's desk and put the bottle in a plastic bag before stuffing it into my backpack.

I had to hope it would be what I expected. I needed these pieces to fall in place.

When the elevator opened for me on the ground floor, I marched straight to the concierge desk. "Xavier, I need something from you."

The smile came off his face, probably due to my tone. I didn't care. Today was about results rather than niceties, so I didn't soften my approach one bit. "I need the name and number of that paparazzo you called when I first arrived."

"But ma'am, I didn't call anyone."

I leaned on the counter and let out a loud breath. "Look kid, I've had a tough week, and I don't have the time for this shit." I pointed up. "Maybe you've forgotten what my boyfriend will do to you if you try to bullshit me."

He glanced up and went ashen. "But I can't..."

I took out my phone and pressed the contact to dial my sister while turning down the volume.

"Hi," she answered.

"Hi. Is Evan there?"

Xavier waved me off, mouthing, "Anything you want."

"You got the wrong number, sis," Rachel said.

"Hold on, Evan," I said into the phone.

Xavier was busy scribbling on a message pad. He handed me the sheet with a name and number.

"No," I said into the phone. "No message." I clicked the call off before Rachel could reply.

"Thank you, Xavier," I said sweetly as I tucked the number away. "One more thing."

He looked at me expectantly, finally seeming to breathe again.

"Don't mention to Mr. McAllister or anyone else that I was here. I'm setting up a surprise for him."

He nodded like an excited puppy. "Yes, ma'am."

Out on the street, I pulled out the paper and dialed the number. "Hi, Dietrich. Xavier gave me your number. How would you like to make some easy money on the side? Cash. A lot of cash." I'd borrow whatever I needed from my sister to afford this.

CHAPTER 49



ALEXA

IT TOOK ME FOUR DAYS TO GET ALL THE PIECES PUT TOGETHER, BUT CATCHING the girl for the interview finally completed the ugly picture.

Today I'd loaded up my credit card with a trip to the salon that Chelsea had recommended. After spending a ton on hair and nails, I slipped into the gown I'd worn the night of Heelgate. All the other nice ones were at Evan's penthouse.

I snapped a selfie in the mirror, then decided it would look better with the neckline adjusted to show plenty of cleavage and a semi-exposed nipple. After taking the second picture, I sent the text.

ME: I have a present for you.

ME: Dinner - DiMaggio's at 6:00 followed by...

I sent the more seductive picture followed by another message.

ME: Oops, I forgot the tape.

Then I called and booked the private room Evan and I had used that first night.

His return text came quickly.

MARTIN: Can't wait to unwrap my present.



I MADE MY WAY INSIDE DIMAGGIO'S WITH A LARGE BAG SLUNG OVER MY shoulder. This time, I fit in with the upscale crowd, and the only glances I got were admiring.

I gave my name to the hostess and pointed him out. The picture had done its trick and he was early, sitting at the bar with a half-empty drink in hand.

"I was wondering when you'd call," Martin said. "I read that you left him. Good move. He's a loser." That was the refrain I'd heard right before I broke his foot.

"I booked the private room upstairs," I explained. "It's more intimate." Nothing about this weasel made me want to smile, but I forced one anyway.

We followed the hostess upstairs, and they had the table set up as I'd requested—rectangular with place settings opposite each other on the long sides.

"Albert will be your server this evening. He will be right with you." the hostess said before closing the door.

"I'm very glad you called," Martin said again, lifting his eyebrows. "You look great, by the way."

"Thank you. I've been looking forward to this all afternoon," I answered with my best acting smile. Actually I'd been nervous as hell. Everything hinged on the next few minutes. I pulled the bottle from my bag. "Would you like a drink?"

His face scrunched up, and he lifted his glass. "I'm working on this."

Twisting the bottle so he could see what it was, I poured some into his empty wine glass. "I hear this has a real kick."

His eyes narrowed as he took in the label. "No thanks."

"Go ahead. It's a real man's drink."

"I said no. Maybe you'd like some."

"I prefer tequila." I pulled out the first piece of paper he wasn't going to like and slid it across to him.

He started reading and quickly slid it away. "What is this?"

"My super is a retired NYPD detective. He's been very helpful, by the way. Anyway, he knows people at the crime lab. That's the report on this

bottle. It contains GHB.”

He shrugged. “What?”

The door opened and Albert joined us, but instead of asking about drinks, he stood against the wall.

“It’s a date-rape drug,” I said. “And don’t pretend you don’t know what that is.”

Martin stood. “We’re done here.”

“Sit down, please.”

Instead of sitting, he walked toward the door.

Albert blocked the exit and crossed his arms. “The lady said sit.”

Martin froze in place.

“I’d sit if I were you,” I called to Martin. “My friend Albert knows five different martial arts. In three moves, he can break four different bones.”

Martin scurried to the side and pulled out his phone. “I’m dialing 9-1-1. You guys are crazy.”

With speed that surprised even me, Albert snatched the phone away. “The lady said sit.” His growl was ferocious.

I motioned to the chair. “I have a few more things to show you. Then we’re done.”

Martin took his chair again and gulped.

I pulled out the second piece of paper and tapped the bottle with it. “You served this bottle to Evan the night of the fountain incident.”

“I did not. The bar supplied it.”

I gave him the paper. “Fingerprints don’t lie. Yours are all over it, and I checked with the bar. They don’t stock this brand.”

Tiny beads of sweat were growing on his forehead.

“You drugged him, and Myra Cotts got him to splash naked in the fountain.”

“Who?” he asked.

“Why do you rich assholes believe people like me can’t do their homework?” I pulled out the pictures of him kissing the redhead on the street. “Myra Cotts, your girlfriend.” My leg was jittery from the adrenaline.

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Maybe not anymore.” I laughed. “Her fingerprints were on the bottle as well, by the way.” I added two more pieces of paper to the pile.

He shoved the pile away.

“You might want to read that top one. It’s her sworn statement that you

put her up to it, and confessing the whole plot to have Evan photographed in a compromising position. It also includes that you paid her.”

He glanced at the paper and then away. “So what? Nobody got raped or anything. It was just embarrassing pictures.”

“What about the girls in Chicago, Dallas, Albany, Jacksonville, and Seattle?”

The blood drained from his face.

“Yes, she admitted in writing to joining you on those business trips where you paid her good money to help you drug women and take them to your hotel room. You thought limiting it to out-of-town trips would keep you safe.”

“That’s a lie,” he sputtered.

He could thrash about all he wanted, but he was trapped. “I’ve got your travel schedule.” I pulled that from my bag and added it to the pile of evidence. “And I’m sure your expense reports will match up. Plus Myra wrote down their names. If we call the women, what are they going to say?”

“It was Myra’s idea, all of it. I only helped her.”

“Albert, did you hear that clearly?” I asked.

“Certainly did.”

I lowered my voice. “Martin, Martin, you do realize you just confessed to participating, don’t you? That’s a federal conspiracy charge, because you and Myra crossed state lines.”

He slumped, defeated. “What do you want?”

“I’m glad you asked.”

When I looked over, Albert had a smile a mile wide.

“First, you’re going to come to a financial arrangement of at least two million dollars with each of these women.” I tapped the paper stack.

“I don’t have that kind of money,” he protested.

“Your daddy does.”

His eyes went wide.

“If you don’t come to terms within a month, I’m taking this to the FBI.”

“None of them reported anything,” he said.

I cocked my head. It was interesting that he’d tracked that. “The local authorities may not be able to prosecute you after this much time for lack of physical evidence, but that won’t hamper the FBI on the conspiracy charge. Your daddy won’t be able to get you out of this.”

He took a slow, defeated breath. “What else?”

“You are going to resign from the company, and your father is going to support Fergus McAllister at the next board meeting and then resign from the board. Neither of you will have any contact with, or attempt to influence anything related to any of the McAllisters ever again.”

“Anything more?” he asked, trying his best to look bored.

“Yes.” I picked up the glass of mezcal and slung the contents at him.

“What the fuck?” he sputtered as he backed away.

“That’s for these five women. I’ll have people watching you, and if you start up again, I’ll know, and I’ll publicize the hell out of this little pile. With the press shit I can stir up, the FBI will be all over you.”

I grabbed my bag, placed the mezcal bottle and papers in it, and walked toward Albert. “Now get started,” I said, looking back at Martin. “You have two deadlines. I want to hear that you’ve left the company by the end of the day tomorrow, and you have a month to settle with those women and their families, not a day longer.”

Albert threw the phone on the table. It skittered across the surface and fell to the floor. Then he opened the door for me. “You are quite something, Miss Alexa,” he said after the door closed behind us. “I only know one martial art.”



EVAN HAD TOLD ME PLANNING WAS KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL ACQUISITION, AND I knew that included good contingency plans. Any counterpunch needed to be kept secret. Otherwise, the other party could plan a defense, a counter to the counter.

That was why I now stood next to Evan’s admin, Diane, riding the elevator in the McAllister building. She’d scheduled the appointment for me.

The final ding of the floor counter sounded, and the doors opened.

I followed Diane’s purposeful steps with my heart in my throat. The man we were to see had a reputation as a ruthless negotiator, and I wasn’t certain to prevail. *Hold eye contact and control your breathing*, I chanted to myself.

It had been two days since my ultimatum to Martin, and so far no news. He’d stayed with the company. That meant things were not going as I’d hoped—not yet.

Breath control was well and good, but my deodorant threatened to lose

the battle to keep sweat from dripping down my sides. I was already a wreck, and I hadn't yet faced my nemesis again.

"Hi, Diane," the admin said with genuine warmth in her voice.

"I have an appointment," Diane announced.

"He's been busy, and I haven't had a chance to check with him. Can I tell him what it's regarding?"

"No," Diane said with brutal efficiency.

The admin's brow lifted, but she didn't challenge us. Clearly, Diane had clout around here. "He's inside, if you're ready."

"We are." Diane opened the door and ushered me inside, following and closing the door behind us.

Fergus McAllister sat behind a large desk, scrutinizing me and then Diane. The master negotiator showed only the tiniest bit of aggravation at my entrance. "I don't recall inviting you, Ms. Borelli."

I sat in one of the leather visitor chairs opposite him without it being offered. "Fergus, I invited myself because I doubted you'd believe me without seeing the evidence for yourself."

"Whatever it is, I'm not interested. I think it's best if you leave of your own volition." Translation, he'd call security to escort me out. Old-school gentlemen like him didn't yell or get physical; they called in pawns to do their dirty work.

"We are going to have a frank discussion about the upcoming board meeting," I said maintaining the posture Evan had taught me.

His eyes narrowed at my mention of the board meeting. "Diane, you may leave us."

"She's my witness. She stays." I waited for Diane's reaction. Would she stay or buckle under whatever threat Fergus came up with?

"Mr. McAllister," she said. "I'm staying, and I think it's best if you listen to what Alexa has to say."

He took in a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. He checked his watch. "Five minutes. No more."

I opened my bag. "I have evidence of a conspiracy to remove you and your son from the company."

"A what?" He was suddenly leaning forward, forearms on his desk.

I re-established control. "Since I only have five minutes, you will have to hold your questions until after I'm done."

I laid out what I had against Martin, including drugging Evan with the

help of his girlfriend Myra Cotts, as well as the five women we knew about across the country.

Fergus became more interested as the evidence piled up.

I brought out the final piece. “Then there’s this. It’s a second sworn statement by Myra Cotts indicating she was present at the meeting to plan the fountain incident. Martin’s father, George Graff, was also present, and the chief planner. The senior Graff stated that the objective was to discredit your family and force you out of the company.”

“May I see that?” he asked.

I slid it toward him.

He moved it out of my reach. “This is no good. The signature at the bottom is cut off.”

“I have the original in its complete form,” I assured him. “I think it would be quite persuasive in removing your enemy from the board. You can have it, and the rest of this...” I tapped the pile. “...on three conditions.”

He raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

“First, you fire Martin Graff immediately and move Evan back to his old job.”

He nodded. “I certainly wouldn’t want to keep him.”

“Second, you hire legal counsel for each of the five women in these papers so they can get equitable settlements from the Graffs.”

“That also seems fair, given what young Graff has been up to.”

Then came the hard one. “Third, you explicitly tell Evan that you approve of our relationship and you won’t disparage us as a couple. You will send us on a tropical vacation to make up for being such an ass.”

“No, it’ll never work.”

No? I couldn’t believe he would give up the company over this.

“I’ve been in your shoes,” he said, “where each set of in-laws was hated by one in the couple. Trust me, despite all the best intentions, it becomes hellish. That’s why the boy’s mother is out of our lives. I won’t allow Evan to get himself into such a situation.”

Evan and I weren’t planning marriage, not even close. Still, his reason for *no* surprised me. He’d been trying to save his son some of the agony he’d endured.

“Fergus.” I held his eyes. “I admit to disliking you in the past, but now I don’t at all. In fact, after a long discussion with my uncle, Luca, I’ve decided you are a very honorable man.”

His eyebrows winged up again. “Really?”

“Yes. Very enlightening discussion. I’m going to date your son, if he’ll have me back. I’m only asking that you don’t object.”

“Hmm…” What passed for a smile grew on his lips. “How long before I can have the originals?”

I patted my bag. “Right here.”

He rose and extended his hand. “Alexa, we have a deal.”

I shook with him. His hand wasn’t slimy or cold or scaly or any of the other terrible things I’d once imagined.

He clasped his other hand over mine as well. “You have my seal of approval, for all that’s worth. Evan has been miserable since you left.” He broke contact and reached for his phone. “If you’ll excuse me a minute, I have an employee to fire.”

I stood. “Thank you, Fergus.”

“Thank you, Alexa.”

Diane followed me out and closed the door firmly.

His admin wasn’t at her desk.

“He likes you,” Diane said.

“Really? You think?”

With a nod, she continued. “Absolutely. He has always respected strength. And I’m impressed. Now tell me, how did you get all that material on Graff?”

I beamed at the implied compliment. “I went to college. I know how to do research.”

CHAPTER 50



EVAN

We only had two weeks until the board meeting and the showdown with the Graffs.

I sat at my desk, examining my bullet points yet again for my meeting with the *Globe*. An article in the Sunday *Globe* was to be centerpiece of the media blitz about our charity initiative.

Dad and I had discussed his impending vulnerability at the upcoming board meeting. He thought George Graff's likely plan was to have a vote to censure me and kick me out of the meeting before Dad's contract was addressed.

I had to deliver on this and keep from being pushed aside. I had to preempt the argument that the fountain incident, and Alexa's actions at the gala, made me a liability to the company.

Heelgate—what a name. And the fact that Alexa had to endure the public scrutiny when Martin had been the asshole was so unfair. George Graff had mentioned Heelgate to Dad the following morning, which meant I couldn't set the record straight with the press without creating a problem. I hated that aspect of needing to support my father.

Diane appeared at the door. "Miss Minx is here to see you."

I double-checked my schedule just in case, and it was empty. "I thought we agreed, no interruptions."

Diane retreated, and when I looked up again, in her place Alexa stood in the doorway.

"Alexa?"

She wore a tight tank top and miniskirt instead of her normal demure

blouse and jeans. Everything about her made me want to run over and hug the hell out of her—for finally coming, for finally responding, for being here so we could finally talk. But my brother’s warning echoed in my head. *No pushing*. I merely stood, both elated and dumbfounded. “Hi.”

“May I come in?” She closed the door and walked to a visitor’s chair when I didn’t respond. “May I sit?”

By all means, of course, please do, I’d love it, ran through my head. But Noah’s warning to take it slow and not push overrode them all. I nodded instead.

“I have a friend with a new business who needs an investor,” she started.

What the fuck? I didn’t want to talk investing in somebody’s venture or other. I wanted—no needed—to talk about us, talk about my mistakes, my misdeeds, ask for forgiveness, if that would help.

I’d imagined at least twenty-three different scenarios for us meeting again. They ranged from a chance meeting at Starbucks or on the street all the way to me pounding on the door of her apartment at midnight.

My favorite number was number eleven, where Alexa used her cardkey to enter the penthouse and then slid back to my bedroom and naked into my bed. Number twelve, where she snuck in while I was taking a shower, was just as hot. It was clear now that neither of those was ever happening.

“It’s a new firm,” she continued, crossing her legs.

Begging wouldn’t help me. Alexa didn’t want a man who begged. What hurt the most was that she didn’t seem to want me the way I wanted her. All it had taken was a slight to her pride—that occurred years ago—and then she couldn’t stand to be around me or answer my calls.

“If somebody wanted to invest in it, what would they need to know?” she asked. “What would you want to know, if you were to put money in?”

How long would this continue before we got to the subject we had to confront? I sighed. “First, you said it’s new. How new?”

“Just starting up.”

“How many clients?” I asked, wondering what she was after.

“Minimal.”

A few of my scenarios had included her coming to this office, but certainly not to pitch me an investment deal, and a shitty one at that. They’d all involved fewer words and more tongue action. God, was I an idiot.

“How many is minimal?” I asked.

“One,” she said sheepishly.

I couldn't hold back my laugh. "You're kidding. What your friend has is a dream, not a business."



ALEXA

His laugh almost made me cry. Maybe this whole thing had been a mistake. In my mind, this had gone a hell of a lot smoother.

I'd thought sitting on the opposite side of the desk from him would help me keep my distance, keep me focused on the end goal, keep me from giving in to my desires and launching myself at him, and keep the negotiation professional.

I couldn't allow him to see my weakness, so I blinked back the mist in my eyes and took a cleansing breath. I was tougher than that.

He'd said more than once when we'd talked about his successes, that they depended on motivation and planning—sticking to the plan. *Focus, Borelli. You can do this.*

I sat up straighter. "How much would you pay to be rid of Martin?"

His jaw clenched. "If he's involved in this business, it's not worth a single fucking penny. As a matter of fact, I'd pay to destroy it."

"How much would it be worth to you to get him out of your company? This company."

"I don't understand."

"How much? In dollars." Sliphorn had always said to have the opponent be first to name a figure. "Give me a number."

"You're serious?" he asked, frustration evident in his voice and his posture.

"Goddamn it, Evan," I said too harshly. Reeling back my temper, I tried again in an even tone. "Evan, you told me he was a worm. And, by the way, that's way too generous. You said you wished your Dad had never hired him, and you wanted him out of the company. How much would you pay my friend to make that happen, if it was a part of the deal?"

His phone rang. He glanced at it.

My heart pounded in my chest. "Answer the question, not the phone."

He silenced the phone. "Ten thousand, but how can—"

"Not enough," I countered. Sweat glued my shirt to my back, but I kept

my face composed. Evan had always said a poker face was vital. “She needs more to get the business going.”

“Hypothetically, twenty thousand. But how can she—”

“Acceptable,” I stood quickly and extended my hand across the desk to shake on the deal. I smiled, having won the first battle.

He rose with a quizzical look. “What are we doing here, Allie?”

The electricity that passed between us, the feel of my hand in his, brought back a rush of memories and broke my resolve. “I can’t do this.” I pulled my hand away.

“Allie, don’t go.”

I was halfway around the desk toward him when we collided. I wrapped my arms around him and buried my face in his chest.

“I missed you,” he murmured into my hair.

I held on to him for dear life. “Just hold me, please.”

He ran a hand through my hair and over my back as he hugged me and stayed silent. I kept my face against his chest, fearing I wouldn’t get the words out if I looked up into those eyes. “I’ve been a terrible girlfriend.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true,” I insisted. “When Martin told me your secret, he did it to hurt you. I should have kicked his ass, defending you to the death. But instead, I got mad and made it about me. That’s what I mean.”

He stroked my head. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier.”

“That’s not the point. I was selfish and terrible. I should have defended you the way you defended me. You’re not at all the way they portray you. You’re smart, and thoughtful, and sweet, and generous to a fault. It’s all my fault. I let Daddy’s dislike of your father bias me against you from the beginning. I’m so fucking sorry I walked out on you when I should have had your back and slowed down to see it from your point of view.”

“Are you done?” he asked when I stopped to take a breath.

“No. Do you remember our first date?”

He breathed deeply. “Yes. You yelled at me because we were seated at the window and I hadn’t warned you. You called it a fishbowl and threatened to leave.”

I nodded against him and smiled. “That was our second date, dummy. The first was at DiMaggio’s where we negotiated me helping you out as your fake girlfriend.” I felt his erection growing with every word.

His phone vibrated on the desk. He nodded. “Now I have to say

something.”

“Let me finish,” I countered. “I thought I’d come here and negotiate with you to come back to the penthouse.”

He shook his head. “Allie, I wasn’t kidding when I said I fucking love you. You’ve always been welcome back. I thought you knew that.”

He wanted me, my nickname was back, and damn, if it didn’t feel good. But I wasn’t finished. “I want to bring something to the table and get some money in return to start my business. I want us to be partners.”

He lifted my chin. “All you had to do was ask. I told you before, you can have anything you want. I enjoy giving you things.” The eyes didn’t lie.

He was telling his truth, but I had to add mine. “But you know I have to earn things.”

He laughed. “Right, the self-sufficient woman.”

“It’s not funny.” I pushed at his shoulder. “I can’t change who I am.”

His hand cruised up to the side of my breast where his thumb caressed me. “And this hypothetical friend is really you, isn’t it?”

I nodded, doing my best to ignore the heat his roaming hands were building inside me. It had been too long, way too long since I’d felt his touch. “Yeah. It hurt when you called it more of a dream than a business because it’s my dream, my business.”

He cradled my face in his hands. “Tell me. Did you really find a way to get Martin out?”

I giggled. “What kind of girlfriend would I be if I didn’t destroy my boyfriend’s enemies? I also gave your father the material he needs to get rid of Martin’s father.”

“No shit? How?”

I shook my head. “First answer me. Can I come back? I promise to be better, to always fight for you, to support you in—”

His mouth crashed down on mine, cutting me off.

I strained upward to match his ferocity as our tongues tangled, and I lost my train of thought. But I had the answer to my question—I was his minx again. I was back with my man, the way I was meant to be.

When we came up for air, I pushed to get a little space. “I’m not done.”

He swooped in for another kiss.

I turned to give him a cheek instead. “I have to finish. I will support you in anything and everything, all day, every day.”

“God, I missed you. I love you so much.”

“And I love you too, Sharkey.” It felt good to get the declaration out in the open.

“Sharkey, huh?”

“We have to keep the mystique of the Shark of Wall Street alive, now don’t we?”

He let go of me and started gathering up papers. “Let’s get out of here. Where do you want to go? Nobu, Le Cirque, Tavern on the Green?”

“How about pizza at Doomsday? And maybe it’s time we checked out their chip room.”

He stopped working on the papers and adjusted himself in his pants. “These can wait. Let’s go.”

After the elevator doors closed, I hiked up my skirt and stepped out of my panties. “Do you have a pocket you could put these in?”

“Goddammit, Allie, are you trying to kill me?”

“What? Is that too hard?” His grip on me tightened, and I wouldn’t have had it any other way. I had my man back.

I also had a feeling that once again pizza would have to wait until other hungers had been satisfied.

EPILOGUE



THOUGH SHE BE BUT LITTLE, SHE IS FIERCE. –
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

EVAN

I WOKE SLOWLY AND CRACKED OPEN AN EYELID. THE LIGHT FILTERING INTO the bedroom told me it was time to get up, but I no longer felt the urge to. This was the best time of the day, snuggled up against my little firecracker.

Alexa had taught me the pleasure of a leisurely morning time with my arms around my woman. This morning, her breathing was slow and steady.

I didn't move a muscle even though my morning wood ached to be inside her. My hand, the one that always cradled her breast as I fell asleep, urgently requested permission to reach for her, but permission denied, I kept it still.

I'd ended up moving my morning workout time later so I could stay in bed with this woman.

She liked to sleep in and hated alarm clocks.

Lately things didn't always go well if I woke her too early. She could be feisty when I robbed her of too much '*brain recuperation time*' as she put it.

We didn't make love every morning, but when we did, she brought an appetite that matched my own. There had been a time in the past when I quickly became dissatisfied with a lover and grew restless for a change. Not with Alexa, we were a good fit.

As I lay with her, I thought back to yesterday, rereading the folder of material that she'd used masterfully against Martin and his father. Pride filled me. My woman was a true lioness. She radiated strength that continued to surprise me.

Alexa had become my everything, arguing with me about things that required it, and consoling me over the minor things that didn't go right in my day. It was impossible to imagine going back to my life before her.

While she slept, I stayed immobile and mentally reviewed my task for this morning, which was another press interview.

Jenkins had been right, and my local charity emphasis had been well received. Unveiling my Helping Hands Around the Apple initiative had mostly changed the press narrative about me. The idea had been innovative enough to generate lots of new material for the press.

I'd gotten a large number of major companies with New York headquarters to participate. And now when Alexa checked the blogs and whatever we found fewer and fewer references to the Shark of Wall Street.

My dad had said he approved of me dating Alexa now. I was back at my old job in acquisitions and so far, shedding the Shark persona hadn't hurt, but I'd keep an eye on that. All was good with the world.

Alexa roused with a start and a groan as she stretched. "What time is it?"

My hand, freed of its restraint, moved to cup her breast, my best handhold. My cock surged against her. "Playtime I think."

She rubbed her ass against me. "That sounds good, but I meant the clock time."

Twinking her nipple with my thumb and forefinger, I reminded her, "The clock's on your side now."

She had moved it last night. She levered up on an elbow. "Shit." She settled back down and twist around to face me grabbing my achingly hard cock. "We don't have time."

I pulled her close. "Sure we do."

She pushed away. "How would it look if I didn't open on time on my first day in business? Thor is going to have to wait." She'd thrown out her broken electric pleasure toy and transferred the name to my cock.

"I could soap you down in the shower while I pound you into forgetting about the time."

She kissed me quickly and slipped away. "No way Casanova. I know how you operate, and I don't have that kind of time."

"I love you, but next time, I'm not letting you sleep in."

She trudged into the bathroom. "Fine. But this morning is my first day and how would it look if I didn't open on time?"

A minute later I heard the shower water start and planned a different

attack. “What time are you closing today?” I yelled.

“Noon. I need time to get ready for our fundraising dinner tonight.”
Tonight was the Three Sisters Fund dinner that she’d mentioned that first day we saw each other again.

“I’ll have Albert pick you up,” I yelled.

“Thank you.”



ALEXA

IT WAS ALMOST TIME TO OPEN FOR MY FIRST DAY OF BUSINESS ON MY OWN when I ran my hand over the glass frame that held my framed CPA license on the wall. It hung in the middle of the wall behind my desk, flanked on either side by my two Columbia diplomas that I no longer felt ashamed of.

Chelsea’s logic that I’d earned my graduation through hard work and diligence even though Evan had helped me get accepted to school had never completely won me over.

Gwen’s idea though had solved my dilemma. She said that getting in was only the first one percent of the journey and that I owned the remaining ninety-nine percent.

With that in mind, I’d carefully trimmed one percent off the edges and re-framed them—problem solved.

Yesterday Evan had helped me set up the small space. As I looked around, it wasn’t much, but it was mine. This morning Brooklyn Accounting would open up for business for the first time.

My one client, Mr. Perez was scheduled to come over at eleven thirty. How to bring in more business now loomed as a problem that I hadn’t addressed.

Mr. Perez had said he’d recommend me to his brother in the Bronx, but I wondered if this was too far away for him.

Pushing that aside for today, I let pride of accomplishment fill me. I had my own space with my name on the outside. I had a real office, one with as much space as Sydney had. I’d made it. I wasn’t a student any longer, I was now an independent Brooklyn businesswoman.

Evan had insisted I splurge and get a real office chair, so I had a new one with a mesh back and almost as many adjustments as his.

Even though everything else was second-hand, the office was luxurious in my view with space for three visitor chairs, two file cabinets, and even a credenza. Outside, I had more file cabinets and even a desk for my assistant when I had the business to justify one.

Someone knocked on the glass and I went out to find Daddy and my uncle on the sidewalk.

“We thought we’d stop by,” Daddy said as soon as I unlocked the door.

He took me into one of his bear-hugs, the kind I was always happy to receive. “You have no idea how proud I am of you,” he said into my hair.

“Thanks. I’m a little nervous.” My heart caught in my throat when I saw the misting over of his eyes as he released me.

“Hey, don’t I get a turn?” Uncle Luca complained.

After hugging it out with my uncle, Daddy handed me a piece of paper. “This is your schedule for the morning.”

“What?” I opened it to find a list of people with times spaced out every half-hour this morning.

“When we told people you were opening up shop,” Uncle Luca explained. “We got like a million people in the neighborhood who wanted to sign up. We thought it made sense to space them out. Mrs. Tannenbaum is first. You remember her, she has the crafts store down the street.”

Now it was my eyes getting teary. I threw myself into hugging and thanking them again.

“We gotta get back to the deli,” Daddy said.

“Good luck,” Uncle Luca added.

I sniffled. “Thank you so much.”

“Family,” Daddy said as they walked out.

Now I had twenty minutes to dry my nose, check my mascara, and get ready. I started by looking up Mrs. Tannenbaum’s business on Google.



THE BELL OVER THE DOOR TINKLED A FEW MINUTES AFTER MR. PEREZ LEFT.

“Albert?” I called.

“Allie?” It was Evan.

I rounded my desk, and we collided in the doorway.

His arms instantly encircled me and a second later the kiss began.

I ravaged him as much as he did me. It was a kiss of longing like we'd been apart for much longer than the few hours since I left the penthouse this morning. With each intake of the scent of him, I clung to him tighter, reveling in the feel of his hardness against me and my breasts flattened against his muscled chest—the chest that contained the heart I'd almost thrown away.

“Hi,” he breathed when our lips finally parted. “I've missed you.”

I moved a hand down to grip him through his pants. “I can tell.”

“It's what you do to me all the time. You have no idea how gorgeous and sexy you are.”

“Only because I'm not wearing the green eyeshade.”

“I'm here to collect.”

“On what?” He'd lost me.

He pulled my chin to the side. “That.” The only thing there was my desk.

“You left your old office before I got a chance to bend you over your desk there, so this will have to do.”

I grinned back, liking the idea. “We don't have time. I have to get ready for tonight.” I knew he liked a challenge.

“I already locked the door. We'll make time.” He nodded in the other direction. “Or the one out there.”

“In the daytime? Are you crazy?” I pulled him back into my office and started on his shirt buttons. It had to have taken longer, but it seemed like only seconds before I had my blouse and bra off and my jeans around my ankles, backed against the desk.

He toed off his shoes and stepped out of his pants, fisting his dick. He smiled, knowing just how much seeing him do that turned me on. “Are you sure we don't have time?”

“Positive,” I breathed as heat pooled in my core at just the thought of what was to come.

Evan's warm blue eyes hooded with desire. He threaded a hand in my hair bringing my lips almost to his. The other hand cupped my pussy. “Are you saying I won't find you wet enough?”

“Of course not, we don't have time, so it wouldn't be logical.” I gasped as a finger parted my folds and dipped inside. My gasp was cut short as he started kissing me again.

The strokes of his kiss matched his magic fingers. He broke the kiss and

his nose rested against mine. “Wrong. You’re so fucking wet this won’t take long.”

I breathed in deeply. “Then I guess we do have time.”

He turned me around and I parted my legs as far as my bound ankles allowed. I took the length of him in one languorous slide.

He started to thrust. “God, Allie. Have I told you how much I fucking love you?”

I matched his movements as he thrust harder, pushing back into him. “Not since this morning.” I looked over my shoulder to catch the sight I loved—my man losing control, letting the beast out of the cage.

A moment later, he pulled out and yanked me up.

“What are you doing?”

He sat me on the desk, spread my knees, and stepped over my pants. “I want to watch you come.” The desk was low enough that he had to bend his knees to line up and push in again.

I brought my heels up and pulled him in. “And I want to watch you.” The drag of him against my walls pulled me toward my climax with amazing speed.

It had to be hard on him half-crouched to match the height of the desk, but in no time the feral eyes of the beast were back as he drove home again and again. “I want you with me, babe,” he panted out.

I nodded and held his eyes. We didn’t need words when our gazes locked like this in the throes of passion. Not when our souls connected in this primal dance of love.

He drove in with power and tensed up.

I squeezed him as tight as I could and felt the spurt of his release. My climax bloomed with each throb of him inside me. I clung to him through the waves, repeating that I loved him.

My man gave me so much more pleasure than I had ever imagined in my hottest fantasies.

“I love you too, Allie, more than you can know.”



EVAN

WE WERE FINISHING OUR FOOD AT THE THREE SISTERS FUNDRAISER. THE silent auction results were about to be announced.

Rachel sat next to Noah, and Diane next to Miranda. Gwen hadn't brought a date. And Albert was also alone tonight because his wife had a shift at the hospital.

I glanced over to the table three rows over. "Did you put something in your father's drink?" I asked Alexa. "Or, my dad's?"

She glanced toward the table she'd assigned both our fathers to sit at. "Nope."

"They're talking." I'd wondered how big a problem it could cause, but she'd assured me there wouldn't be one.

She nodded. "I think that's good don't you?"

Dad was on the opposite side of the table from her father and uncle, but were clearly engaging in conversations with each other, which floored me. Alexa's lack of surprise was odd.

I knew her father and uncle were here to support Alexa, but a question remained. "How did you get my dad to come?"

She sipped her water. "I told him I wanted him here and he agreed." Her smirk said there was probably more to the story than that.

"And that's all?"

She nodded. "Maybe he's mellowing."

I let it drop.

She would have told me if there had been a breakthrough, wouldn't she?

Alexa stood and placed a hand on my shoulder. "I have to go check in with Chelsea."

I nodded. "Sure."

Diane pointed her fork at me. "You're plotting something. What is it?"

Rachel piped up. "If he's got a surprise planned, you can't ask him."

Noah disagreed. "Why not?"

"Because if he told you, it wouldn't be a surprise anymore," Rachel answered as if logic would work on my brother.

I stayed mum.

"Are you sure?" Gwen asked Diane.

Miranda nodded for Diane. "Never doubt her instincts on stuff like this."

I looked at Albert. "Don't you say a thing."

He raised his hands. "I won't. I like my job."

It went on like that for a few more minutes, with the girls insisting I had

something planned and trying to guess what it was.

“What’s going on?” Alexa asked when she returned and caught a snippet of the questioning.

Gwen pointed at me. “He’s hiding something.”

“Really?” she asked sitting down.

“Diane says so,” Miranda added. “And she knows this stuff.”

“Do you know what he has planned?” Noah asked.

“If he told us it wouldn’t be a secret, now would it?” Alexa answered.

Rachel nodded. “That’s what I said.



ALEXA

THE DINNER PLATES HAD BEEN CLEARED, AND THE SILENT AUCTION RESULTS announced.

Evan had bid on and won a Cartier watch for me. We’d had the argument before arriving, and I’d lost. Since the money went into the fund, I wasn’t allowed to complain about what he got me.

Chelsea stood on the small stage, microphone in hand. She was into her wrap-up speech. “Thank you all for coming to support Three Sisters Fund.” Her voice carried well through the speakers. “I promised to keep this short and not bore you to death.”

A few people laughed.

She went on to quote our statistics for the year, and our plan to add another New York hospital to our coverage area. True to her word, it was much shorter than last year.

“Now, before we start the dancing,” she said. “We have an event for you that was added late and therefore isn’t on tonight’s program.”

The crowd grew restless, with side conversations starting up.

“Wish me luck,” Evan said as he stood up.

“You’ll do great,” I assured him.

Evan started toward the stage.

“Ladies,” Chelsea said from up front. “We have one more item to auction tonight which wasn’t in the catalog—a chance to dance with one of New

York city's most eligible bachelors. Three gentlemen, have volunteered tonight, Duke Draper, Francois Martin, and Evan McAllister."

The sighs from all the women present almost covered up Chelsea's next words. "And yes, it'll be a slow dance."

Evan was the last to step on stage and drew the most catcalls and applause of the three.

That at first made me jealous, and then proud, because I was the one going home with him tonight.

"First up is Duke Draper. We will start the bidding at one thousand," Chelsea said.

The bidding quickly took on a life of its own, and got up to twenty-five thousand.

The bidding for Francois reached thirty-one thousand.

Evan was last. The dance with him was won by Tracy Dimple, with a bid of fifty-three thousand.

Evan took the microphone from Chelsea, and my best friend made her way off the stage.

"Now, there goes a woman of not only great compassion and commitment as it relates to this cause, but also impeccable judgment. I should know." He coughed once. "Because she's one of only a few dozen women on this island we call Manhattan who has refused to date me."

A raucous round of laughter rose from the crowd.

"In all seriousness," Evan continued. "Let's give a round of applause to Chelsea and all of the other women of Alpha Kappa from Columbia, NYU, and Fordham who started the Three Sisters Fund, and continue it today by volunteering their time."

The crowd applauded.

Chelsea stood up and took a bow, and I couldn't be more proud of my friend.

Rachel tapped my shoulder. "You too."

I rose from my seat as did the others of our group.

"As a proud donor myself," Evan said. "I'd like to thank all of you here tonight who have dug into your pockets to support this worthy cause. As you know Three Sisters Fund is one of the few charities in the country with no overhead because it is staffed entirely by volunteers."

As I looked around, most but not all of the guests were still paying attention.

“We also have a special set of volunteers serving your drinks and food tonight. Can I get all the waitstaff up here, please.”

Chelsea looked at me confused and mouthed “What?”

I shrugged.

Evan had wanted to keep this next part a secret even from her.

The crowd got restless with the delay as all the young people in catering uniforms made their way to the stage, forming a line of sorts.

“My Gramps had a saying, you can't help everybody, but you can help somebody.”

More side conversations started up in the audience.

“Boring,” somebody behind me said.

Evan pulled over the first girl in line. “What's your name honey?” He held the microphone in front of her.

“My name is Nicole, and I would like to thank you all. Your donations allowed me to become a cancer survivor.”

The crowd hushed.

The next one in line was a boy. “My name is Jose, and I would like to thank you all. Your donations allowed me to become a cancer survivor.”

Evan went quickly through the group, each one saying a similar line and thanking the attendees. The special moment for me was when it was my sister Rachel's turn to repeat the line on stage.

At the end they joined hands and said together, “Thank you. Your donations allowed us to become cancer survivors.”

Applause erupted, and when I looked around there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

“These young men and women,” Evan said. “Are the somebodies that you have helped to survive this awful disease. We all thank you.”

After the applause died down Evan added one more thing. “Tracy Dimple where are you? it's time for your dance. Let's get this party started.”

A woman with huge breasts almost spilling out of her dress found Evan and they started the dance. She looked oddly familiar.

“She's at it again,” Rachel said.

I hadn't noticed my sister come up behind me.

“Who?”

“Don't you recognize Tracy Peacock?”

“Where?”

“She's dancing with Evan.”

I kept the yell of exasperation to myself.

Tracy Peacock had stolen my boyfriend in high school and here she was bidding on the dance with my man. Her boobs had grown even bigger since then.

If I were any less of a lady I would have marched up and yanked Evan away, but this dance auction had been my idea.

Evan had his back to us and I couldn't tell, but I would have bet that slut was rubbing herself all over Evan.

The dance ended and Evan waved to me from the far side of the dance floor.

I waved back.

"Well she didn't get him this time," Rachel noted.

"If she tries again, I'll kill her."

No Morals Tracy was already twenty feet from Evan starting a dance with another man.

His father grabbed Evan's arm and towed him off.

Twenty minutes later, Evan was still talking with his father when Chelsea bounded over to me with her purse on her shoulder.

"I can't believe it," she squealed. "After that thing, Evan did with the kids dozens of people have come up to me. And..." Even though many of them had grown up, she still considered the children we helped kids.

"And what?"

She opened her purse. "We've taken in an extra four million tonight. I can't believe it."

Having seen the emotional impact Evan's speech had on the crowd, I could believe it, and it made me all the more proud of him.

All excited, Chelsea bounced on her toes. "Where is that boyfriend of yours? I have to dance with him and thank him for this."

"No," I said firmly, grabbing her arm. "I have first dibs on him." I pointed. "He's busy with his father at the moment."

"Of course. I'll catch up with him later." She bounded off like the energizer bunny.

Evan broke free of his father and waved to me. After stopping by the DJ, and then had a word with Albert before he found his way to me. "How about a dance?"

"I'd love to." I followed him onto the dance floor and clung to him as we swayed to the music. "What was that?"

“It seems Dad put some private investigators on Martin. They found other women.”

My blood boiled. “That, that fucking asshole. I’m gonna—”

Evan put a finger to my lips. “Hold on Tiger. Dad and I feel the same way. He took what he had to the FBI this morning. He wanted to give us a heads up. He won’t buy his way out of this.”

I took in a large breath to calm myself. “Thank your dad for me. Martin deserves to be hanged.” Just saying his name made me angry again.

“Stop thinking about him. Tonight is about us.”

“And the children,” I added. “Also Chelsea wants a dance to thank you.”

“She’s not getting one.”

“Why not. She wants to share really great news.”

He brought our dance to a halt and released me. “Because I’ve danced my last dance tonight.” He raised an arm.

I was about to argue with him when the music halted abruptly. I looked toward the DJ, bewildered.

The DJ shrugged and then pointed.

When I looked back, my legs almost buckled.

Evan was on one knee. He opened the small box he held out.

The ring took my breath away. *This can’t be happening, not to me.*

The crowd around us quieted.

“I’m all out of speeches tonight. Alexa, I’d like you to be my wife. What do you say?”

I nodded with tears in my eyes, and my heart pounding. “Yes, a thousand times yes.”

He slipped the ring on my finger and the people around us broke into applause.

Ten minutes later we were surrounded by everybody and getting congratulated.

When we finished getting hugs and congratulation from what seemed like the entire city, Evan pulled me away and into an embrace. “I love you so much, I just want to hold you.”

“Love you too,” I answered with wet eyes. My dance with the devil had ended in the most unexpected way. I hadn’t even been fishing, but I’d landed the Shark of Wall Street and found my man.

I put my hand over his heart and felt the steady beat of Evan’s heart. The man who would always protect me. “I’ll always have your back.”

“Right back at ya, Brooklyn.”



THANK YOU FOR READING EVAN AND ALEXA’S STORY. DELETED SCENES ARE [available online here](#).

In addition, the following pages contain excerpts of two more Erin Swann stories.

The Billionaire’s Trust, [available on Amazon here](#).

He needed to save the company. He needed her. He couldn’t have both.

And, *Caught by the Billionaire*, also [available on Amazon here](#).

She thought putting the Billionaire in jail would be easy. Then he changed the rules.

SNEAK PEEK: THE BILLIONAIRE'S
TRUST



CHAPTER 1



BILL

MONICA HAD COME BACK. THE LAVENDER SCENT SHE WORE FLOATED IN THE air as she leaned in. The din of the other customers receded for a moment when her warm tit brushed against my arm, intentionally for sure.

Her weapon of choice tonight was a sexy red dress cut even lower than the last one, showing cleavage deep enough to create its own gravity well, deep enough to get lost in.

She licked her lips. “I always know what I want,” she said in a husky voice.

Two nights ago, when she had first appeared at the restaurant, she’d asked to speak to the owner to gripe about her scallopini and then flirted with me when I came over to hear her complaint. The dish had been prepared just the way it should’ve been, and it had been hard to focus on her words with her cleavage right over the plate. Was she a D or maybe a double-D? Who knows, but certainly more than a handful, and with nipples protruding through her tight black dress, it had been difficult to keep my eyes up. Distracting as hell.

In college, my fraternity brothers had kept up a running debate on whether more than a handful was wasted. Even though I’d attended an all-boys Catholic high school, my vote always surprised them. I was firmly on the *more is wasted* side. They generally favored the *more is the better* option, and Monica definitely had more.

Ever since I'd broken up with Cynthia last year, my mode of operation had been *C-E-D*: charm, enjoy, and discard—though I wasn't into one-night stands. It took more than one night to truly enjoy a woman, to learn what pleasures she had to offer, and to show her the pleasures I could offer her. A week or two was good, but beyond that, it was time to move on.

However, the last few weeks had not allowed me the time to even get through *C*, much less to *E* with anyone. Too much work and too little play had made Bill grumpy...and horny.

Monica wore too much makeup for my taste, but she was certainly a willing candidate. My usual rule was to avoid entanglements with any of the guests at our restaurant, but she looked like she would do her best to be an *E*-ticket ride—something to distract me and allow for some exercise. Taking things in hand, so to speak, had been okay for a few days, but it didn't get the job done over the long haul.

Getting to the question of her place or mine took but a millisecond with Monica, and she managed to put her hand on my arm twice and my thigh three times on the short drive over. This girl was beyond eager.

Once we arrived, I turned the key and held the door to my condo open for her.

Once again, she managed to brush against my thigh as she passed. She sashayed over to the full-length window overlooking the city, swaying her hips seductively. No doubt this woman knew I was watching her, and she knew precisely what she was doing. What man could resist?

"This is so beautiful," she called from the window. "Look at that view."

I had become rather immune to the skyline. "Sure is, and it looks even better when the wind clears out the smog layer."

"I don't see how it could get any better. You're so lucky to see the city like this."

I opened the wine fridge and took out two bottles. "White or red?" I held up one of each.

She hesitated. "Red, so it won't matter if I spill on my dress." She giggled.

A real genius, this one, but that wouldn't matter when her clothes came off.

I carried over two glasses of the well-aged cabernet and motioned to the couch.

As soon as I sat, she kicked off her heels and drained her glass with one

hand while the other found my thigh, inching up little by little. I was already getting hard.

Her left hand made its way to my crotch. “My, what do we have here?” she purred as she licked at my ear and rubbed her tit against me again.

I grew harder by the second. This vixen liked to take charge, but little did she know that would change in a few minutes. I got up and sipped more of my wine as I led her toward the bedroom.

Such a waste. I had opened a superb cabernet, but we had no time to enjoy it.

She put her glass down as we entered the bedroom. “Why don’t you use the bathroom first, and I’ll go second?”

“Just make yourself comfortable,” I said as I rounded the corner into the master bath.

I could hear her unzipping her dress as I slid out of my jacket and brushed my teeth. When I returned, she was removing her lacy red bra, and she looked me up and down hungrily, finally focusing on the bulge in my pants.

“Ooh la la, am I going to have fun tonight,” she announced.

Clad in only a pair of panties that read *ALL YOU CAN EAT* in black lettering, she traced her finger across my chest on her way to the bathroom, rubbing the tip of her tit against my arm yet again as she passed. It didn’t look it, but it felt real.

Eager for her return, I picked her dress up off the floor, folded it, and placed it on the chair along with the bra.

Then I saw it.

She had placed her phone on the shelf up behind the chair and balanced it oddly on edge. I picked it up. It was recording video, and she had pointed it straight at the bed.

The fucking bitch.

Of course. This had been way too easy. She’d planned to set me up for blackmail. I killed the recording and turned off the phone, placing it right back where it had been. I clenched my jaw. After those panties, what a temptation she had become.

I fished out my phone and started the audio recorder to protect myself, placing it face down on my dresser.

Two can play this game.

I composed myself just as she rounded the corner, returning from the bathroom.

I handed her lacy red bra back to her. “Put this back on. You’re moving a little too fast.”

Her perky smile faded to a frown.

“Put it back on and let’s do this right.” I pointed to the kitchen. “Let me get the champagne.”

A smile returned to her face. “Aren’t you the charming one?”

I found a bottle of Moët, uncorked it, and returned from the kitchen with two glasses. I poured the champagne and handed her a glass.

“To fame and fortune.” I lifted my glass to hers.

“To fame and fortune,” she said with a devilish smirk.

She was hoping for a quick fortune in her future. After a sip, I traced across her thigh with my free hand and stood.

“Do you like caviar?”

She shivered at my touch. “Sure.” Her eyes lit up.

I returned to the kitchen with a smirk of my own, grabbing a can of Beluga caviar from the fridge along with the cream cheese. I picked up her clutch from beside the couch as I got a box of water crackers and put six on a plate.

“What is taking so long? I’m getting lonely in here,” she called from the bedroom.

“Doing caviar right takes a few minutes,” I answered. I spread a bit of cream cheese on each of the crackers and placed them around the tin of caviar on the plate. A small spoon in the caviar finished the preparation as I located her driver’s license in the clutch. Rather than *Monica*, she was Katya Droznic from Pasadena, and she had turned thirty-one last month. I replaced the license and carried the caviar toward the bedroom.

“I think you’ll like this,” I told her. “Fresh Beluga.”

She was sitting up on the bed with a refilled glass of champagne. “Took you long enough,” she pouted, patting the bed beside her. She had put her bra back on.

“Like I said, some things can’t be hurried.” I set the plate down on the nightstand and took up my glass. “Hold still.” I dabbed my finger in the bubbly and traced a circle of champagne over the swell of her left breast. “Don’t move.”

She trembled and giggled.

I sniffed the champagne circle, taking in her scent as she blushed and giggled some more. “You smell delectable, but you need to hold still.” I

repeated the procedure with the other breast, getting another shiver from her. I licked the champagne off her breasts to even more giggles.

I took a cracker and dabbed caviar on top. “Do you like caviar?”

She smiled. “You bet, and I can think of something better to lick it off of than a silly cracker.”

This one was full of the devil. “Well, Monica...” I said, raising my glass to hers for another toast. “To truth or consequences.”

“Truth or consequences,” she repeated with an amused look as we both sipped.

“Want the caviar, Monica?” I held the cracker up in front of her. “What’s your last name?”

“It’s sort of silly.” Another giggle.

“Go ahead. Try me.” *Will she go with truth or consequences?*

“Dempster, and don’t laugh.”

Consequences it is then. “Strike one.” I pulled back the cracker and put it in my mouth, savoring the salty taste.

“What the hell?” she almost screamed. Her amused look was now more dumbfounded.

“I can tell when a woman is lying to me.” I spooned caviar on another cracker. “Next chance, Monica. Where do you live?” I held the cracker up but pulled it back as she grabbed for it. “Now, now, hold still. Where do you live?”

Indecision clouded her eyes as she pondered her answer. “Santa Monica,” she said with a quiver.

“Strike two.” She had chosen consequences again. I slid the second cracker into my mouth.

Her demeanor was moving steadily toward angry as she gulped down more champagne. “Why’d you bring in that damn caviar if you’re not going to give me any?” She painted a pout on her face and slid her hand up my thigh.

I brushed her hand away. “You need to follow the rules, Monica.”

“I don’t like these rules. I want to play.” She reached for me again as I got off the bed.

I spooned caviar on the third cracker. “Monica?” This was going to be the killer question, the hardest for her. “How old are you?”

“You should be able to tell I’m not jail-bait,” she spat, the anger surfacing again.

“How old, Monica?”

“Twenty-seven, if you must know.” She looked like a frightened little girl trying to put one over on the teacher.

This time, I put the cracker back on the plate and laid the plate down. My aching cock was going to have to wait another day. I stood and grabbed her phone from the shelf. “Strike three.”

I walked over and dropped her phone in my aquarium.

She shot up off the bed. “You fucking asshole. That’s a new phone,” she screamed.

I threw her dress at her. “Get the hell out of my house, thirty-one-year-old Katya from Pasadena.”

The shock instantly turned her white. She slipped the dress over her head and shimmied into it.

“You can zip it up outside. Get the hell out,” I shouted, pointing to the door.

Her face was priceless. She rushed to the aquarium.

“Those are lionfish in there. Their sting is deadly.”

The color drained from her face. She hesitated as she peered into the tank.

“Put your hand in there and sign your own death warrant.”

I was exaggerating. The sting hurt like hell and might kill a small child, but a grown woman would just be miserable for a few days. Very miserable.

She continued to gaze into the tank. I didn’t think she could get any whiter, but she did.

“You fucker. Who keeps fish like that?” For a second, it appeared she might tempt fate.

“The kind you don’t mess with. Now get the hell out.” I grabbed her wrap, opened the door, and threw it into the hall. “Out!”

“Fuck you.” She stopped trying to get her heels back on and scurried out the door as I swatted her on the ass. “Fucking asshole,” she added as I slammed the door behind her.

“I may be an asshole, Katya, but I didn’t fuck you.”

CHAPTER 2



LAUREN

I WAS RUNNING LATE AGAIN. THE LINE AT STARBUCKS HAD BEEN LONGER than usual this morning. I held a grande, five-pump hazelnut, half-caf, soy latte, extra hot, with a dash of cinnamon for my boss in one hand as I juggled my purse and the marketing presentation I had worked on last night in the other.

As I rounded the corner into marketing, Marissa Bitz, my boss at Covington Industries, tapped her foot, waiting for me. She greeted me with her usual charm.

“You're late again, Zumwalt.” She was only about three inches shorter than me, but all of us towered over her in the flats she wore to work—something about bad ankles that we didn't care to have explained to us.

Welcome to my world. This job offered the best pay in the city for somebody at my level, but the worst boss. She was a total bitch and lazy as hell, but it could have been worse. At least she didn't have BO, a pot belly, a receding hairline, and hit on me.

Thank God for small miracles.

Her Highness waited for me to deliver her coffee, eyeing me over the ugly horn-rimmed glasses that made her look even older than her forty years.

“I'm sorry, Marissa. The new barista was a little slow today.” We'd been told to call our boss by her first name. It was too easy for her last name to come out sounding like the *bitch* we all knew she was.

She took a sip of the latte I handed her. Her face curled into a sneer as she spat it into my trashcan. “This isn’t right. How many times do I have to tell you five pumps, not four, and definitely not six?” Her face reddened. “Take this back right now and get it right.”

She shoved the cup back at me, a splash of coffee landing on my blouse as I grabbed it before it hit the floor. Two weeks ago, I hadn’t been fast enough, and I’d been the one blamed for the spill on the carpet outside my cubicle.

I bit my tongue briefly. “Right away, Marissa” came out of my mouth, while my brain said, “*get it yourself, bitch.*” I had learned the hard way that she did this about once a week to exert power over us peons.

The first time she’d done it, I’d protested that I *had* gotten it right, and Mt. Vesuvius had nothing on the Marissa eruption that had ensued. I was not going down that road again today. Brandon needed me to keep this job.

Jimmy, the other newbie in the office, gave me a consoling look as I turned and headed back to the elevator on my assigned coffee run for the witch. Harold had been the most recent marketing grunt to graduate out of coffee runs, and he had confided in me that it went easier for him when he learned to bring back a venti on the return run instead of the original grande.

I will not be trained so easily.

She had such rotten taste in coffee. I always dumped the “bad” latte in the trash as I left the elevator and headed across the street for the second cup. I contemplated my revenge as the elevator passed the floors with a series of dings. I could swat a fly or two and add them to her coffee next time she sent me back like this, or maybe I’d add a worm.

The door opened, and I started out. I looked down at the cup, smirking to myself. Flies in her latte. That would serve the witch right.

I ran straight into him.

The lid was still on the coffee, so it didn’t spill on his jacket or my blouse. But I lost my grip on the cup and jumped back instinctively. The collision with the floor was too much for the plastic-and-cardboard contraption and its contents splashed, getting both of our shoes. I was so caught up in my revenge fantasy, I hadn’t been looking where I was going.

“I’m so sorry, miss,” he said.

“No, it was my fault. I’m the one that wasn’t looking.” I still wasn’t looking up.

I used the one napkin I’d been carrying to blot the coffee off my shoes

and ankles. Gus, the security guy from the front desk, rushed over with some paper towels.

The guy I'd bumped in to handed me a handkerchief. "Here, use this." His voice was low and cool like a chocolate sundae.

I nearly melted when I stopped long enough to get a look at him: not a guy, a man, Adonis in the flesh. He had a chiseled jawline, short stubble, kissable lips—the lower one a little pouty, a crop of slightly windswept light brown hair, and wide linebacker shoulders, all covered in a blazer with no tie and the top few buttons of his shirt open, showing just a hint of chest hair. I lost my breath and all rational thought. Blue eyes, like warm tropical water, smiled back at me. A smile to die for. A smile to make your pants fall down, and dimples cute enough to cause instant paralysis.

He introduced himself as Bill.

I couldn't get my brain-to-mouth connection to work for shit with my few remaining functioning neurons.

"Lauren," I mumbled, trembling as I leaned over to concentrate on mopping up the witch's coffee before I made a bigger fool of myself.

When I looked back up, the elevator door was closing.

He was gone.

Shit.

I was a complete fucking dork. I didn't even get his whole name or what floor he worked on.

Gus and I finished the cleanup, and I realized Bill had disappeared without retrieving his handkerchief. As I walked across the street to Starbucks, I wondered how I could find out where Bill worked in the building? I would have to get his handkerchief back to him—after I cleaned it, of course.

What a fucking klutz.

Could I possibly have made a worse impression?

SNEAK PEEK: CAUGHT BY THE
BILLIONAIRE



CHAPTER 1



VINCENT

THE MAN IN THE SUIT HAD FOLLOWED ME ALL THE WAY HERE FROM WORK THIS evening. It was the third time I'd noticed him in the last two weeks.

I stepped inside Holmby's Grill and peeked out the tinted window after the door closed. After a few seconds of not seeing the suited man, I found my way to my usual table in the corner. I mentally kicked myself for not getting a picture of him for our security team to check out.

Less than a minute later, *she* walked in atop her tall black heels with the self assurance of the runway model she'd once been. Her tits jiggled under the thin fabric of her low-cut dress—a dress that flaunted her ample braless cleavage and threatened to open just a bit too far.

Unfortunately for me, it never quite did.

Holmby's had been her choice tonight, and fine by me. Steak would be a welcome change, and the meat here was arguably Boston's finest.

Half the men in the restaurant stared as she greeted me with a warm, tight hug—and not the lean-forward-to-avoid-touching-your-tits-to-the-guy type, but a real hug. As we parted I breathed in the faint hint of jasmine perfume she'd applied to her neck.

No doubt the male onlookers wished they were me, and rightly so. Staci Baxter and I would be getting hot and heavy between the sheets before the night ended. She had a body to die for, and knew how to work it. A night with Staci never disappointed.

Her makeup was subtle and nicely done, accentuating the high cheekbones she was proud of.

“Vince,” she purred as I pulled out her chair.

A quick peek down her dress before I rounded the table to my seat jolted my cock. Staci had no doubt gotten a million teenage boys off via her body-paint pictures in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue.

As I sat, I noticed her jaw showed an uncommon tenseness this evening.

“You okay? I asked.

She glanced down. “I’m a little nervous is all. I could use some wine.”

I waved our waiter over. “That I can help with.”

He arrived quickly.

“A bottle of Opus One Proprietary Red, please,” I told him.

She managed a pasted-on smile after the waiter left and sipped her water—this was a definite off night for her.

I inquired about her sister, and that seemed to calm her while we waited for the wine.

When the bottle arrived, I approved it, and Staci guzzled down most of a glass.

She fiddled with her silverware. “I’m not sure I’m ready.”

Since retiring from modeling, she had devoted all her time to her new clothing line. It was understandable that she felt apprehensive about tomorrow’s meeting.

“Don’t worry. The meeting with the bank will go just fine with the presentation you’ve got.”

“Vince, you’ve been such a help. But I just don’t know if it’s good enough.”

Asking for a two-million-dollar bank loan to expand her business would stress most anybody. But for a woman with the confidence to walk a runway nearly naked with cameras flashing, this should be a piece of cake.

“You’ve got this,” I assured her.

Our waiter returned, and I ordered the gorgonzola truffle-crust New York strip steak, while Staci chose the lamb chops.

“Would you like to go over it one last time?” I asked.

She smiled. “Please.” She pulled the presentation folder from her oversized purse.

She placed it on the table and smiled. “Gentlemen...” She began the spiel I’d worked out with her.

The food arrived just as she finished her mock presentation.

I topped off our wine glasses and raised mine to hers. “Sounded damn good to me. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

An enticing blush rose in her cleavage.

I cut my first piece of steak. “Now, tell me more about how your little sister is getting on in New York.”

She perked up and started in about how hard it had been for her sister to find a place to live in the city.

An hour later, we had finished dinner and decided against dessert.

We had long since left the topic of Staci’s presentation tomorrow, but the undercurrent of nervousness in her demeanor hadn’t dissipated. This was more than an off night for her.

“Staci, do you want to talk about what’s really bothering you?”

She hesitated before retrieving her purse. After a moment of rummaging, she pulled out a piece of folded paper and extended it across the table with a shaky hand.

I opened it.

Stay away from Vincent Benson unless you want to become collateral damage, the note read.

My stomach turned over.

“What’s going on, Vince?”

I sighed. Someone was messing with me and using her to do it.

“It’s probably nothing... I can arrange some security for you, though.”

“I live on the safest street in town. The chief of police lives next door. It looks like *you* should be the one watching out.”

I took a picture of the note before grasping it with my napkin and folding it up. “Mind if I take this?”

She shook her head.

There might be nothing worthwhile on it, but I folded it inside the napkin and stuffed it in my pocket nonetheless.

I turned the conversation back to her clothing business while I mulled over who would be messing with me. No faces came to mind, except the nameless suit who’d followed me.

When we’d finished the last of the wine, I offered a very nice bottle of port I had at my place, just a few blocks away.

She wiped her lips with her napkin, but her eyes telegraphed the answer before the words arrived. “Not tonight, Vince. I’ve been stressing over this

presentation all day, and I'm bushed. How 'bout a rain check?"

Begging off from our after-dinner gymnastics *was* unusual. This was a standing date we had pretty much every Monday night—no strings attached, just a good time.

Neither of us did commitments, so neither of us expected anything more than companionship and physical pleasure. "Casual intimacy with friendship on the side," she had once called it. She seemed to be the only woman in town who didn't want or expect anything more from me—except Barb, of course.

I had a more commercial situation with Barbara. Gifts changed hands, but never cash. She made attractive arm candy when I needed it and an enthusiastic bed partner when I wanted some variety, but the side of friendship I had with Staci wasn't there with Barb.

"I'll call you," Staci said when we made it to the door.

"Don't forget the LA trip is coming up," I reminded her.

I was counting on her for that, and it wasn't a trip I could make alone.

"Sure," she said in a less-than-enthusiastic tone.

I opened the door for her and waited while she hailed a cab. I checked up and down the street for the suited man. All clear, for now.

After Staci entered the cab, I checked again in the direction of my condo on Tremont Street. Its safety was not far away.

Before starting out, I felt in my pocket for the coin I always carried.

CHAPTER 2



ASHLEY

“I’M GOING TO BEAT YOU OUT FOR THAT LA PROMOTION,” MY OPPONENT, Elizabeth Parsons, said as she stepped sideways on the mat, looking for an opening to attack me.

I slid to my left and dodged her first attempt. “Try all you want, Liz. But you know they only take blondes in California.”

She sneered and lunged at me again, grabbing my hair.

It hurt like fuck, and I ended up on the mat.

I patted out ten seconds later. “That’s against the rules. That one doesn’t count.”

She got off me. “Get over your rule hang-up; winning is what counts.”

I got up, massaged my sore scalp, and tucked my ponytail down the back of my T-shirt.

She came for me again, ever the aggressor.

We tumbled to the ground, and she initially had the upper hand, but I had the leverage and weight advantage and pinned her fifteen seconds later.

She patted out.

“That makes three,” I said.

“Best of seven?” she asked.

As the only women in our section of the FBI’s Boston field office, we usually sparred against each other—and Liz hated losing.

I checked the wall clock in the gym. “Out of time today.”



FORTY MINUTES LATER, WE ENTERED THE BULLPEN UPSTAIRS ON OUR FLOOR OF the Boston field office precisely at eight. Special Agent in Charge Randy White checked his watch. “You’re late.”

Liz started to complain. “But—”

“New rule: no less than three minutes early, understood?”

Anybody else would have accepted our arrival or told us five minutes early. Only SAC White would come up with something asinine like three minutes. He invented another stupid rule every few weeks—something my partner, John McNally, called Caesar moments. And I suppose he should know. John and Randy—excuse me, SAC White—had been partners previously.

“Yes, sir,” Liz and I said in unison.

From across the room, John rolled his eyes just enough for me to see.

White had been promoted six months ago to the SAC position. Before that he’d been one of us in the bullpen, and only a little difficult to get along with. Now he was the boss, and beyond difficult. *Randy* was no longer allowed. *Sir* had replaced it. The running joke was that the next budget would have to have a remodeling line item for new doors his ego could fit through.

The special agents had started betting on how long this phase would last. My bet had been six months—that’s how long it had taken SAC Sinella, the previous occupant of that office, to settle down. Sinella’s transfer to Nashville had triggered White’s promotion to Asshole Behind the Glass.

Liz and I both had to kiss up to him, because he would ultimately recommend one of us for the Los Angeles opening that was coming up.

White motioned for Liz to join him in his office. “Parsons, new assignment.”

She followed him and closed the door.

I moved over next to John. “What the fuck’s with the stupid three-minute rule?”

He shrugged. “He told us just before you two got here.” He shook his head. “I’m changing my bet to nine months. The guy should be over his stupid Caesar routine by now, but he’s definitely not.”

I shrugged and settled at my desk, opening the first folder at the top of my stack.

“I’ll call the agency,” Liz said as she left White’s office a few minutes

later. “Sweet undercover assignment,” she mumbled as she passed my desk, trying to get a rise out of me.

I didn’t take the bait. I wasn’t letting her get to me today. My last undercover had netted me a month in a cockroach- and bedbug-infested cover apartment that still gave me the shivers when I thought about it. When your cover persona was down and out, the bureau went out of its way to make the entire experience realistic, and the latest budget cut had us going even further down-market in arranging cover locations.

Recently, Liz had been snagging the easier undercover assignments.

The men in the office seemed oblivious, but it was clear to me: White had gotten balls-deep into Liz during that ski weekend in New Hampshire last year before he’d been promoted.

She’d denied it when I confronted her about it, but the shift had been easy enough to see. Back when we were all in the bullpen together, she would walk in front of Randy’s desk on her way to the coffee room, and although he tried to hide it, his eyes would follow her.

And now, although his eyes didn’t follow like they used to, White had given Liz another plum assignment. It was mean of me, but I couldn’t help hoping that when his wife found out, she had a sharp implement handy to fix him for good.

I closed my eyes and silently counted to ten. I had to let it slide—again. The Bureau didn’t reward people who rocked the boat. If Liz was still seeing him on the side, it would be wrong on so many levels. But in this tight-knit family, back-stabbing wasn’t allowed. An agent that snitched on another was a bigger problem than the one who’d committed the original error. The Bureau’s antibodies would work to expel the offending snitch and keep the organization pure. I’d worked too hard at my career to let a little thing like the SAC’s favoritism derail me.

Liz opened the folder on her desk. “Which cover should I use?” she mumbled rhetorically. She shook her head and kept reading.

I didn’t answer.

She didn’t expect one.

After a moment she picked up her purse. “I’m going out for a smoke.”

“Those things are going to kill you,” John said wearily, for the hundredth time at least, echoing my feelings.

“Not for a long time,” she shot back over her shoulder. “And they keep the weight off.”

Arguing with her wasn't worth the effort.

CHAPTER 3



VINCENT

MY TUESDAY MORNING STARTED WITH FIREWORKS.

This one had a temper. “Fired? You can’t fire me. I quit,” Marcy yelled.

The stapler she threw missed me and hit the wall with a bang. Security grabbed her arms and escorted her out.

It took Mason Parker, my number two, all of a minute to enter my office and close the door. “What the hell did you do this time?”

“Nothing,” I insisted.

Nothing more than I ever did. I insisted on accuracy with my PAs, and that didn’t suit Marcy very well. I needed diligent office help, not a personal assistant who thought the emphasis should be on *personal*.

He plopped down in the red chair he always chose. “At this rate, in a year there won’t be anybody left in Boston willing to apply.”

“Fuck you.”

“What’s got you in such a piss-poor mood this morning?”

I pulled up the picture of the note Staci had received and handed my phone to Mason. “Staci found that on her car yesterday.”

He scanned it. “Somebody’s messing with you.”

“No shit, Sherlock. Now you tell me who.”

He handed the phone back. “Fuck anybody’s wife lately?”

“Fuck no, and you know that.”

I had played the field, but married women were never my style. And after

Marilyn went full-house psycho on me last year when I wouldn't call her back, I'd limited myself to Barbara and Staci: the only two certified commitment-phobes I knew.

As long as they were provided with lavish dinners, shopping trips, and the occasional extravagant gift, those ladies were happy and supplied me with enjoyable interludes in the bedroom. The gifts were most often jewelry, but never ever would they expect a ring.

"Just checking," Mason responded. "You ought to give it to security."

"Already did."

He pointed a finger at me. "At least you have the advantage now."

"How so?"

"They've given up the element of surprise. You know somebody's coming at you."

I let Mason badger me for a few more minutes before I changed the subject. "We need to get back on the Semaphore deal right away."

"No, we don't. Let them stew a few days. We don't have to be so reactive."

After he left, I called down to Nina in HR.

She had been expecting my call. "I'll have another candidate here tomorrow morning, Mr. Benson."

"Not soon enough. After lunch," I said.

Her response came quickly. "Yes, sir."



ASHLEY

THAT AFTERNOON, JOHN AND I WERE SETTLED BACK IN AT THE OFFICE AFTER our Brighton interviews when Liz came back early from her first day undercover. She didn't look happy from what I could see through the glass of the boss's office.

I couldn't make out any of his words, but White was gesticulating in a menacing manner.

Abruptly, he stood and opened the door. "Newton, get in here."

I hustled over.

“You fucked up the top case on my desk,” White said, pointing at Liz. “Getting blown in less than a day? What were you thinking, Parsons?”

Liz wisely didn’t answer.

“This is way too important a case for you to screw up.”

“It’s not screwed, not yet,” Liz argued. “They threw me out, but we can still get Ashley in, and I don’t think they made me.”

“What do you call getting caught in the subject’s office on the first day and being walked out?”

“I got them thinking I worked freelance for a tabloid. The guy is a gossip magnet. They think I was looking for dirt to publish—nothing to connect me to here. That tabloid identity just has to be fully backstopped, and they’ll stop looking. We’re not blown yet.”

Liz had thought ahead if she’d already worked that out. It sounded plausible enough to me.

White scratched his chin. “Tabloid could work. Get Frank to help you backstop that front.”

“In the meantime,” Liz continued, “we should send Ashley in right away. They have no way to connect the two of us.”

White closed his eyes momentarily. “Newton, you’re up, then.” His eyes bored into mine. “And you better do a better job than Parsons here.”

“Yes, sir,” I answered.

White’s reputation would suffer for a long time if he messed up a big case. Translation: I was cannon fodder, and if anything went wrong now, I’d take the blame. I’d fall on the boss’s sword for him, or suffer the consequences—in Alaska.

“Newton, a word,” he said, indicating Liz should leave, which she did.

The door closed.

I took a seat.

“Parsons has better evals than you,” he said. “We should have dinner and discuss how you could improve.” The slight hint of a lecherous grin appeared.

I schooled my face to not show the anger I felt. In terms of my evaluations under Sinella, our previous boss, I knew the statement to be a lie. Liz and I had shared once, and our evals had been identical. This could only mean Liz’s recent evals had been helped by her hide-the-salami sessions with our new SAC, and that wasn’t fair. I wouldn’t travel that road. I ignored the roiling in my stomach.

He took my silence as a no and continued. “This is DOJ’s top priority, so I really want to get this guy. If you close this case quickly and solidly, I’ll make sure you beat Parsons for the LA slot. But the loser heads to the parka store.”

He’d hinted before that one of us was heading to LA and the other to Alaska, but never this directly.

“Thank you, sir” was all I said. We both knew he could swing the promotion whichever way he wanted it to go.

He tapped the closed folder in front of him. “DOJ has information that this guy is conspiring with organized crime on something related to gambling. The objective here is to cut off the head of the snake, not just a low-level minion. We want the top guy, the guy who can give us the mob side of the equation. Wiretap warrants have been turned down, so you’re going undercover inside this guy’s business so we can get him.”

“In what capacity?” That connection took this case to the next level for me.

White opened the folder on his desk. “His secretary.”

I nodded. This certainly beat out my last assignment; an executive assistant wouldn’t require the crap cover motel with bed bugs.

“This won’t be an easy undercover,” he added. “Parsons isn’t the first secretary he’s fired this month, so you have to figure out how to last longer than the others did.”

“Not a problem, sir.”

“Good. I’m counting on you.” He slid the folder across the desk.

“Our contact at the personnel agency is listed on the first page, and she’ll be expecting your call. She’ll see that you get sent over. It’s up to you to get hired. Develop a cover and use John for whatever backup you need.”

“Got it.”

“We’ll do dinner after this is over.”

I ignored the dinner statement. “Is that all, sir?”

He went back to his screen and flicked his hand toward the door, shooing me away as if I were a fly. I didn’t rate a verbal response.

After I closed the door behind me, I gritted my teeth and realized the faint odor in his office wasn’t the new carpet. It was the stench of the swine inhabiting it.

My new boss was a much bigger pig than I’d thought possible yesterday, but I could only deal with the situation presented to me. Escape was

imperative, and for that I had to nail this assignment and get the hell out of Dodge—away from him, and not by way of Anchorage. Taking down someone connected to organized crime would be the icing on the cake.

Back at my desk, I opened the file. The problem appeared on the second page: Our target was Vincent Benson.

Turning this assignment down wasn't an option. A few months ago, Ralph Turnbull had refused an assignment White gave him and was now in the Minot office chasing moose rustlers or something. Half the agents sent to North Dakota didn't make it to their second winter.

However...

Vincent Benson had taken me to our high school prom. I'd thought we had a future at one point, and I had just been assigned to nail his hide to the wall.

I am so fucked.

And I couldn't avoid it.

ALSO BY ERIN SWANN

Why romance? Because we all need a chance to escape doing the next load of laundry.

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If you can read my books without feeling any of these then I haven't done my job right.

Devil in a Tux – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Evan and Alexa's story) They called Evan McAllister the devil in a suit. The saying is that dancing with the devil changes you. Alexa was about to find out.

Covington Billionaires Series:

The Billionaire's Trust - [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Bill and Lauren's story) He needed to save the company. He needed her. He couldn't have both. The wedding proposal in front of hundreds was like a fairy tale come true—Until she uncovered his darkest secret.

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(Steven and Emma's story) The youngest of the Covington clan, Steven, avoided the family business to become a rarity, an honest lawyer. He didn't suspect that pursuing Emma could destroy his career. She didn't know what trusting him could cost her.

Previously titled: The Youngest Billionaire

The Secret Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Patrick and Elizabeth's story) Women naturally circled the flame of wealth and power, and his is brighter than most. Does she love him? Does she not? There's no way to know. When Pat stopped to help her, Liz mistook him for a carpenter. Maybe this time he'd know. Everything was perfect. Until the day she left.

The Billionaire's Hope - [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Nick and Katie's story) They came from different worlds. Katie hadn't seen him since the day he broke her brother's nose. Her family retaliated by destroying Nick's life. She never suspected where accepting a ride from him today would take her. They said they could do casual. They lied.

Previously titled: Protecting the Billionaire

Picked by the Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Liam and Amy's story) A night she wouldn't forget. An offer she couldn't refuse. He alone could save her, and she held the key to his survival. If only they could pass the test together.

Saved by the Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Ryan and Natalie's story) The FBI and the cartel were both after her for the same thing: information she didn't have. First, the FBI took everything, and then the cartel came for her. She trusted Ryan with her safety, but could she trust him with her heart?

London Billionaires Series:

Return to London – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Ethan and Rebecca's story) Rebecca looks forward to the most important case of her career. Until, she is paired with Ethan, the man she knew years ago. Mutual attraction and old secrets combine to complicate everything. What could have been a second chance results in an impossible choice.

The Rivals – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Charlie and Danielle's story) He was her first crush. That ended when their families had a falling out. Now, they are forced to work together on a complicated acquisition. Mutual attraction is complicated by distrust as things go wrong around them. A second chance turns into an impossible choice.

Benson Billionaires Series:

Caught by the Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#), also [in AUDIOBOOK](#)

(Vincent and Ashley's story) Ashley's undercover assignment was simple enough: nail the crooked billionaire. The surprise came when she opened the folder, and the target was her one-time high school sweetheart, Vincent. What will happen when an unknown foe makes a move to checkmate?

The Driven Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Zachary and Brittney's story) Rule number one: hands off your best friend's sister. With nowhere to turn when she returns from upstate, Brittney accepts Zach's offer of a room. Mutual attraction quickly blurs the rules. When she comes under attack, pulling Brittney closer is the only way to keep her safe. But, the truth of why she left town in the first place will threaten to destroy them both.

Nailing the Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Dennis and Jennifer's story) Jennifer knew he destroyed her family. Now she is close to finding the records that will bring Dennis down. When a corporate shakeup forces her to work with him, anger and desire compete. Vengeance was supposed to be simple, swift, and sweet. It was none of those things.

Undercover Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Adam and Kelly's story) Their wealthy families have been at war forever. When Kelly receives a chilling note, the FBI assigns Adam to protect her. Family histories and desire soon collide, questioning old truths. Keeping ahead of the threat won't be their only challenge.

Trapped with the Billionaire – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Josh and Nicole's story) Nicole returns from vacation to find her company has been sold to Josh's family. Being assigned to work for the new CEO is only the first of her problems. Competing visions of how to run things and mutual passion create a volatile mix. The reappearance of a killer from years ago soon threatens everything.

Saving Debbie – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Luke and Debbie's story) On the run from her family and the cops, Debbie finds the only person she can trust is Luke, the ex-con who patched up her injuries. Old lies haunt her, and the only way to unravel them is to talk with Josh, the boy who lived through the nightmare with her years ago.

Clear Lake Series: The Clear Lake books follow the Bensons of Clear Lake as they deal with a disappearance in town which shatters the tranquility of their community and puts them in the cross-hairs of the local police chief.

Temptation at the Lake – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Casey and Jordan's story) Shot in the line of duty and on temporary disability, Jordan leaves the city for Clear Lake to recuperate. Getting back to one hundred percent was supposed to be hard, but she didn't count on the irresistible Casey becoming the devil pushing her to the breaking point. A fling with this devil becomes complicated when she gets pulled into the dangerous town feud.

Desire at the Lake – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Waylon and Anna's story) Things quickly spiral out of control for Anna when her boss disappears. Suddenly out of a job and with no place to stay, her only refuge becomes Waylon's garage. The undeniable chemistry between them explodes. Everything changes when Waylon is arrested for her ex-boss's murder.

Passion at the Lake – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Boone and Angela's story) Angela's planned escape from the hell of her life in Boston goes awry when she is stranded in Clear Lake. Things go from bad to worse when her fate depends on her personal devil, Boone. She has no intention of falling for the beast again. But, the sparks between them result in a fire that can't be controlled. With her computer talents, Angela uncovers a clue in the disappearance of Lee Pollock.

Heat at the Lake – [Available on Amazon](#)

(Blake and Priscilla's story) Blake arrived in town to help his Gramps. A chance to work for the local police force was just what he needed to further his career goals. When he hooked up with the feisty little bombshell, he had no idea she was one of the prime suspects in a local murder case. Then, he discovered she was on the other side of the duplex he'd leased. Undeniable chemistry was about to

complicate everything.



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