



ACCIDENTAL

Daddy

A J S U M M E R S

ACCIDENTAL DADDY

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS SURPRISE PREGNANCY
ROMANCE



A J SUMMERS

ATTRACTION PUBLISHING

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NEWSLETTER



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CHAPTER 1



TYLER

“*T*o us!” I shout over the noise of the bar, raising my shot glass high and clinking it with Jared’s before we down the fiery liquid.

“Damn, that never gets old!” I exclaim, the burn lighting up memories of wilder nights from our younger days.

We may be in our thirties now, but tonight, we’re here to party like it’s 1999. Jared and I decided to hit up our old stomping grounds, even if it meant dealing with a crowd that could pass as our younger cousins.

“Where’s Jessica?” I ask, referring to Jared’s fiancé.

“We had a fight.” He rolls his eyes. “Let’s please enjoy the night without bringing her up.”

“Gotcha.”

Jessica’s never been one to party anyway.

Jared smirks, scanning the crowd. “Speaking of significant others, it’s time for you to find someone to celebrate with.”

I laugh.

“Oh, here we go again with your matchmaking shenanigans.”

Before I know it, he’s pushing me toward a table where a beautiful young woman sits alone. She’s definitely my type, her wavy brown hair cascading down her shoulders, a river of chocolate tempting me to run my hands through it. The soft

glow of the flickering light casts shadows over her angelic face, her eyebrows graceful arches framing her lively eyes.

Her flushed cheeks are aglow. She's impeccably put together in a summer dress and an oversized blue cardigan.

I want to find out what hides beneath the flow of that silky fabric.

But there's more to her. A spark that sets her apart and pulls me in.

"Go get her!" Jared winks, giving me another playful shove. He knows me better than anyone, so it's not surprising he found a girl for me in this crowd.

Jared and I met as children, finding ourselves as neighbors at the end of our Medford cul-de-sac. Our families quickly became friends, and the rest was history.

I take a deep breath, my heart pounding with excitement, as I walk over to the stunning brunette.

"Hey there, gorgeous."

Her eyes lift from her phone, and instead of annoyance, I see amusement dancing in her gaze.

"Right back at you."

"What is a pretty girl like you doing by herself?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

She shifts in her seat a little, looking around as if she isn't confident I'm talking to her.

"My friends are getting more drinks," she tells me hesitantly.

Her friends must be getting drinks for themselves, I conclude. A glass of something fruity sits mostly untouched in front of her.

"Lucky for me. It gives me time to talk to you."

I shift my body a little closer to her so we can converse better over the din of the bar.

While her look doesn't scream, "I want to fuck," there's something about her whole innocence thing that's a raging turn on.

She doesn't seem to have anything to say to move the conversation along, fumbling with her sweater like a nervous virgin.

"I'm Tyler," I introduce myself with a smoldering smile, not hiding my intentions.

She arches an eyebrow. "I'm Maria. And just so you know, I don't fall for pickup lines."

Her voice is soft and warm, like a gentle breeze on a summer night.

"Who said I was trying to pick you up? Maybe I just wanted to introduce myself to the most beautiful girl in the bar."

Maria raises her glass, her face mottled red. "Well, you've succeeded in that."

"So, what do you do for a living?" I ask, trying to keep the conversation going. This could go either way. As long as she keeps talking to me, there is a chance she'll be wrapped around my dick later tonight.

A small smile breaks out across her face. "I'm a preschool teacher."

Figures. She has the vibe of a patient, loving grown-up.

Tentatively, she asks, "And what do you do?"

"I'm a lawyer, just made partner at my firm," I say, trying to impress her.

Maria's eyes widen a bit, but she doesn't seem intimidated.

"That's cool! My dad's a lawyer too."

"Must be a great guy," I say teasingly. "Speaking from experience."

I lean closer, a magnetic field pulling me toward her. I catch a whiff of her scent, causing my groin to stir in

appreciation.

“Yeah, he’s pretty great.” She sighs, seeming to let her mind drift to some far-off memory.

It’s only a matter of time before her friends come back, and I’m not getting any closer to sealing the deal. It’s time to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“Where is your boyfriend?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Why? You want to meet him?”

I laugh. “Yes, I’d like to challenge him to a duel.”

Her cheeks flush, and I can’t help but enjoy her reaction to me, imagining how red her face would be as she panted and writhed while I thrust into her.

“A duel? That’s old-fashioned,” she retorts, smiling.

“Well, I’m an old-fashioned guy,” I play along, taking a step closer. “We could have a lot of fun, you and me. Assuming there is no boyfriend, that is.”

“Oh, really? What kind of fun are we talking about? You seem a bit old for the regular playground kind of tumble.”

My heart races as I imagine the things I’d do to her if only she’d let me. I’d fuck her in my lap, fisting her hair, her tits bouncing in my face.

This woman is goddamn breathtaking.

I lean in and brush my lips against her ear, drinking in her scent. “Not the playground kind, you’re right about that,” I grind out, my breath quickening. “The kind that makes your heart pump and your cheeks flush.”

Maria’s eyes widen, and I can see her shuddering. She leans in and whispers teasingly in my ear, her breath warm and inviting. “So, your plan was to come over here and simply ask me if I’d go home with you?”

She moves her head back and looks me in the eyes, still so close to my face that I’d have to lean in only slightly to capture her lips with mine.

“Did it work?”

I hold my breath as my pants tent and my skin crawls with goosebumps, never breaking her gaze. I have nothing to lose.

There’s an off chance she’s feeling horny tonight and was also looking for an easy lay.

“Not in the slightest,” she tells me, leaning back and taking a sip of her drink.

In a last-ditch effort, I offer, “Are you sure? I could have you screaming my name within the hour.”

She only smiles, holding my gaze.

I raise an eyebrow, disappointed. For a moment there, I thought I had her. But I’m still not ready to give up.

“How about we dance instead?” I try, though I know already I’ve lost this round.

“You should have led with that, my friend. Maybe not tonight.”

“If you change your mind, I’ll be over there,” I suggest, unfazed, motioning toward Jared.

“Trust me, I’m good.” She smiles and turns away.

Leave it to a preschool teacher to let you down ever so gently.

Returning to Jared, he asks, puzzled, “What happened? You’re supposed to be taking that girl home.”

“She wasn’t into it,” I confess, a tinge of annoyance creeping in that Jared even pushed me to go over there.

Just looking at her, I should have known she was more on the prudish side. She’s young, and I might have been too forward.

“Well, don’t get down. There are plenty of women here tonight,” Jared tells me optimistically, head swiveling to find my next conquest.

“I’m good. I think you’re stuck with me tonight.”

“Well, cheers to that.” Jared lifts up his bottle, waiting for me to clink mine against his.

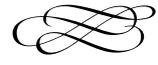
And I do.

I glance over to where Maria’s sitting. She is surrounded by her friends, who have returned with their drinks. I’m not even able to spot her anymore.

The chances of meeting Maria again are slim to nothing, and I feel disappointed.

I may not be able to have her tonight, but at least I still have my best friend with me, celebrating our wins.

CHAPTER 2



MARIA

“*I* need to get you in here more often.”

My dad swirls the last bite of chicken alfredo from his takeout container.

“If it means lunch, I’m in,” I joke, taking a bite of my own pasta.

But he’s right. I don’t see my dad nearly as much as I should for someone who didn’t move too far away from home. Things have been hectic since starting my second year of teaching, but with the first few weeks of the school year under my belt, I’ve gotten into the swing of things.

Well, as much as one can be when you’re working in a room full of four and five-year-olds.

“And how has the classroom been treating you?” he asks me as he begins to clean up our trash. He’s always been supportive of my choice of profession.

At first, he was hoping for me to take a more lucrative job. But he could tell how much I enjoyed teaching and has never made me feel bad about choosing that line of work.

“It’s been going well. I have a really good bunch this year. I’ve been trying to do more career-oriented activities with the kids, so right now, I’m looking for a volunteer to talk about their job,” I explain, almost having forgotten to tell my dad about my plan.

I like the idea of getting the kids excited when it comes to imagining what they want to do when they grow up. Having

another person besides myself talking about their career would be very useful.

“That sounds great, sweetheart. I’m sure you’ll find someone,” he tells me confidently.

We’re interrupted by a knock on the door, eliciting a small groan from my father.

“Come in,” he calls out, and the door quickly opens.

My head turns around, curious as to who is coming in. I’ve only met a few of my dad’s work colleagues, and that was years ago.

Out of all the people who could have walked in, this is the last person I’m expecting. The president could be standing there, and I would probably be less surprised.

Coming into my dad’s office is none other than the man who chatted me up the other night.

He looks even more imposing in broad daylight. Over six feet tall, his presence fills the room with a tension that rocks me to the core. He greets my dad with a firm handshake, exuding confidence and poise from every pore.

The word gorgeous feels woefully inadequate to describe him.

A slim-cut charcoal gray suit fits him as a second skin. The fact that his huge biceps haven’t popped their inseams is a testament to the masterfully crafted piece of clothing. A white shirt is unbuttoned at the collar, giving him a hint of rugged, informal charm.

He’s big, stunning, and chiseled.

And when his heavy gaze falls on me, I swallow audibly.

Would I be a different person today if I had gone home with him the other night?

When he recognizes me, his eyes turn dark and ravenous.

I quickly whip my head back to face my dad, hoping he’ll leave without incident. I really hadn’t planned on having an awkward encounter today.

“I came to get those Brennon case files.” Tyler turns his eyes back to my dad, his deep voice sliding like silk over my goosebumps.

Why did it have to be a three-day weekend for the kids? I could be coloring with five-year-olds now. Instead, I’m sitting in my dad’s office, my breath hitching, unable to tear my gaze away.

“Ah yes, I have them right here,” my dad says, standing up and heading to a row of black filing cabinets at the back of his office.

Tyler shifts his gaze to me, and my entire body hums under its weight. He gives me a knowing smile.

“Tyler, have you met my daughter, Maria?” my dad calls while sifting through thick folders.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Knowing I can’t be rude, I stand up from my seat and turn to face Tyler.

“No, I ... I don’t think I have.” He smirks, swallowing me with his eyes. His voice is cool, exuding composure and control.

My dad turns back around with a manilla folder filled with papers.

“It isn’t a lot, but here it is,” he says as he hands Tyler the folder.

My eyes widen at the sight.

That isn’t a lot?

Tyler clears his throat, giving a quick, “Thanks,” before he takes a step back. He gives me a conspiratorial look.

There is some sort of satisfaction knowing that I’m his boss’s daughter and he had no clue when he was hitting on me. But he doesn’t look too uncomfortable now. It feels as if we are in this together, so it doesn’t completely feel like a win.

Before Tyler can leave, my dad continues talking.

“Tyler, my daughter is a preschool teacher. Isn’t that amazing?” my dad says proudly, his enthusiasm pulling a tiny smile onto my face.

“It is,” Tyler tells him politely, looking as if he’d rather be anywhere else.

“Actually,” my dad continues, his face brightening, “she was just telling me about needing a volunteer for her classroom as they learn about careers. What better helper to have than a lawyer?”

My eyes widen at his words. I already know what he’s thinking before he says it.

“Dad, it’s alright. I’m sure I can...”

“Nonsense. I’m sure Tyler would love to help. Right, Tyler?” he says, giving Tyler an earnest look.

I glance over at Tyler and watch as he stands there, his mouth parted open in surprise. I can see in his eyes how much he doesn’t want to do it. But in his position, what choice does he really have?

“Sure, I’ll do it,” he splutters, trying his best to sound enthusiastic.

“Great! Look how easy that was, sweetheart,” my dad says, clapping his hands together cheerily. “I expect you to treat her with the utmost respect. She is my only daughter, after all.”

While I know he was just trying to be helpful, I really, *really*, wish he hadn’t done that. I can think of a million things I’d rather do than have Tyler at my work.

Pulling out my phone, I check the time and make a show of being disappointed.

“Well, Dad, I have to go finish up some work and all. But let’s do this again soon.” I go to give him a hug after picking up my bag.

“Yes, let’s. You can also come by the house anytime. Your mother misses you,” he tells me, giving me a soft pat on the back before pulling away.

“Tyler, come over here for a moment,” my dad says. Tyler curiously follows his direction.

They share some words under their breath. I’m too far away to hear. I’d find it rude if I had cared a little more, but I write it off as some work-related secret.

“Why don’t you walk Maria out? You can get to know each other a bit,” my dad says to Tyler once they’ve pulled away from each other.

“Yes, sir,” Tyler replies, quickly following me through my dad’s office door, looking like a cat that just caught its dinner.

Once the door shuts behind us, Tyler turns to me with narrowed eyes.

“My day is turning out to be interesting,” he says, grinning. “You didn’t tell me your dad worked here,” he adds as I continue to walk forward, uninterested in his antics.

“You never asked. Besides, *you* didn’t tell me you worked here.” I roll my eyes even though he can’t see me.

“I hadn’t planned to do any volunteering anytime soon,” he says snootily, earning him a scoff from me.

“Trust me. I’m not interested in the guy who desperately tried to hit on me showing up at my place of employment,” I tell him as I stand impatiently waiting for the elevator.

When it opens up, I step in, Tyler following right after.

He must be trying to light me on fire with his glare. He’s sexy as sin, and maybe I would have liked him if it weren’t for the douchey demeanor I felt emanating from him the other night. He keeps his chestnut brown hair tastefully styled out of his face, and his perfectly tanned skin would make anybody jealous. He must work out religiously to maintain his huge, muscular body.

But it’s all shrouded by the fact that he would probably fuck anything with legs.

“What’s your problem with me anyway?” he demands, as we wait for the elevator to reach the lobby, which feels like it’s taking forever.

“What do you mean?” I ask, only letting my eyes dart to him for a moment before they face the door again.

“I mean exactly that. What’s your problem?”

I narrow my eyes at his insistence.

“No problem. I just don’t particularly like guys who show up to bars to pick up girls they plan to kick out of their beds as soon as the sun rises,” I explain, keeping my voice even.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was a crime to want to hook up with a woman I found insanely attractive. Maybe you should try letting people in, then you wouldn’t have such a stick up your ass,” he bites back, eliciting a resounding gasp from my lips.

“I do not have a stick up my ass. And for your information, I’ve hooked up with plenty of men,” I tell him, hoping my voice comes off as more assured than I think.

He finds me insanely attractive?

“Is that so?” he growls, his voice lowering dangerously as he takes a step closer. I’m sure he’s doing this on purpose.

I quickly step back as I ask, “What are you doing?”

“What?” he asks, feigning confusion as he takes another step closer, forcing me to press my back into the wall.

He’s so close to me that our chests are almost touching. My heart is skittering, but I aim a defiant look up at him anyways. He doesn’t say anything, grinning confidently, his body casting a shadow over me. He revels in my discomfort.

You’d think after him finding out who my dad is, he’d do anything in his power to keep his distance. But for some reason, he enjoys playing with fire.

“Are you nervous, Maria?” he asks, letting his head bend lower to mine, his warm breath just barely ghosting over my face.

“No,” I tell him, but I can’t fully hide the quiver in my voice as I try to deny it.

“Someone who gets plenty of men shouldn’t be nervous, right?” he asks, the smirk on his face growing more and more irritating by the second.

“Good thing I’m not nervous,” I tell him, my voice sounding stronger as I keep a steely gaze on him.

He moves his body closer until his chest is only a hair’s width away from my own. Why is this elevator taking so long? Maybe I should ask my dad about it, you know, for productivity’s sake.

“Are you sure?” he asks, this time bringing his lips down right by my ear, causing my mouth to part open.

I look over, seeing his eyes peering into mine, our faces so close I could just lean up and kiss him if I wanted.

But I don’t. Not at all.

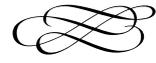
The sound of the door opening snaps me from my thoughts, and Tyler dutifully steps back from me.

“I think you can take it from here,” he says with an easy smile, gesturing out the open elevator door.

I don’t say anything as I snap my head away from him, turning my nose up as I exit the small enclosure.

And for the first time since I got in that elevator, I’m able to breathe.

CHAPTER 3



TYLER

“So, you’re sure you didn’t choose this office space to be close to me?” I ask, sitting in Jared’s new office that still has several boxes that need to be unpacked.

“Yeah, Tyler, it isn’t like this is the business district or anything.” He tosses a french fry in my direction, and it lands on his desk in front of me.

Of course, I pick it up and eat it.

Jared landing an investor for his company was huge. Not only was he able to hire three new people to his team, making a total of six people in his company, but his new office space is a step up from using the spare bedroom in his apartment. And he’s close enough that with the hour-long lunch breaks I take, we can easily eat together if we want.

“Anyway, don’t change the subject,” Jared tells me after setting down his burger. “You didn’t recognize her as your boss’s daughter when we were in the bar?”

I huff at the question. “I don’t make a point of staring at his family photos. Anyway, the girl in his photos was much younger than Maria is now,” I explain, still not quite comprehending how I’ve managed to get myself in this pickle.

“I can’t believe you were hitting on your boss’s daughter.” Jared laughs, seeming to find my inner turmoil hilarious.

“I’m glad you’re amused. To make it worse, now I have to hang out with a bunch of preschoolers once a week,” I explain, grimacing at the thought. “Monica was already a handful at

that age. Now I'm expected to hang out with, like, twenty of them."

Jared chuckles at the mention of my fifteen-year-old sister.

"Monica's still a handful."

"Well, at least Maria's cute. It'll give you something nice to look at," Jared offers, trying his best to find a silver lining in any situation.

"But to make it clear," I begin, thinking back to my conversation with Tom, "I'm not going to hit on her. In fact, I was explicitly warned not to."

"By her dad?" Jared asks, intrigued.

"Yes. He told me loud and clear, *hands off*," I explain, the conversation having been quite uncomfortable as he had pulled me aside in his office while Maria was still there. It's not the type of talk you want to be having with your boss under any circumstances.

Though, Jared isn't wrong. Maria is cute. Both in her looks and in the fact that she seems quite prickly when it comes to guys being into her.

"I find the whole innocence thing insanely hot."

"See," Jared says, pointing to the smile on my face. "You're into her."

"I am. But it doesn't matter." I roll my eyes at the thought. "Her dad would kill me. Plus, she's kind of a prude."

"So what?" Jared asks, as if confused by my comment. "You just need to loosen her up some."

Loosen her up some? It would probably be easier to make ten grand in the next hour. Maria doesn't seem interested in the slightest in being *loosened up*. But then again, it couldn't hurt to try, right?

"You know what they say," Jared continues, pausing for dramatic effect, "the quiet ones are always the freakiest in bed."

I scoff at his words. "And that's my cue to leave."

I begin to clean up my trash.

“Think about it,” he calls out at my back as I head out.

I don't say anything, shooting him a middle finger behind my back before the door closes between us.

Returning to the office, I psych myself up to power through the rest of the day. While I'm able to take longer lunch breaks, it's contingent on me being able to finish my work. I usually eat a quick meal in my office, so when I meet up with Jared, I really need to put it into overdrive unless I want to stay late.

That had been my plan, but as I sit at my desk, I realize it may be harder to concentrate than I thought.

The quiet ones are always the freakiest in bed.

While nothing about Maria screamed “freak in the sheets,” sayings like that exist for a reason. Even if she weren't, I'm sure if I had a shot with her, I'd be able to pull her out of her comfort zone.

I shake my head. I can't think about my boss's daughter like that. Even worse, I have to work with her once a week, around *children*. Letting thoughts of her in my bed cloud my mind is a no-go.

But how can I possibly make them disappear? I'm only a man, and Maria's easy rejection of me only made her more tempting.

The mere thought of her squirming as I got close to her in the elevator has my mind reeling. I know she tried her best when it came to keeping up her stoicism, but I could see the way my presence affected her.

I'm not sure yet how.

But I can't help that I want to find out. While I shouldn't be so hung up on the idea of tainting the purity that seems to radiate from her, I am.

Did her body get as hot as mine got when I was close to her? Was she trying to make it stop, not knowing what to do

about the growing wetness between her legs? Do I have that effect on her?

I'd love to find out.

I need to stop. Most likely, she doesn't like me in the slightest. But even the chance that I could somehow make her body yearn for me, despite her efforts not to let that happen, has me stiffening in my slacks.

The rest of my time at work seems to go exactly like this. My mind wanders to Maria, I chastise myself to get back to work, I am able to finish one thing, then my mind again goes back to Maria. It's a never-ending cycle that slowly drives me crazy.

And it's the reason I end up staying late at the office, my productivity completely slowed down as Maria continues to wiggle her way back into my mind.

By the time I get home, it's dark out, and I know there's absolutely no way I'll be able to fix myself dinner.

Takeout it is.

When I place my order with a local Chinese place that is in my rotation of takeout spots, I'm left to my own devices as I wait the forty-five minutes for my food to arrive. Going into my bedroom, I change into flannel pajama pants and a T-shirt, laying down in my bed to pass the time.

I try scrolling through my phone for a few minutes, but my body feels so wound up from today's events that I eventually just toss it to the side. While I somehow managed to suppress a full-blown erection from popping up at work today, the discomfort stemming from my bottom half never fully went away.

I really need to get laid.

With a huff and a quick scold for acting like a teenage boy, I reach my hand into my pajama bottoms, pulling my throbbing dick out into the cool air of my bedroom.

Maybe this is what I need. Just allow my mind to have thoughts of Maria this one time, get off, and move on. The

only person who will know is me. So, no harm, no foul.

My hand grips my rapidly hardening cock, making slow and steady movements up and down as my eyes close.

I lay Maria down on the bed, flat on her back, her body completely bared to me. I wouldn't want to do anything too crazy as to put her off, so I keep things slow and gentle, allowing her to get used to me.

It requires a lot of self-control not to pounce on her immediately. I stare at her from the end of the bed and take in her perfect form. Her chest is moving up and down slowly, trying to calm her nerves. But I'll show her that there is nothing to worry about.

I can't wait for long as my cock is throbbing against my stomach, my entire being yearning to touch her. So, I climb up onto the bed, positioning my upper body between her spread legs, looking at her dripping wet pussy.

My breath picks up as my hand moves quicker against my rock-hard shaft. With these images in mind, I won't last long.

She's perfect down there, and I wonder how many men she's let see her like this. But I don't ponder on that long, because once I'm done with her, those men will hold absolutely no place in her mind.

I allow myself to tease her some, peppering kisses on her inner thighs, breath ghosting over her most sensitive spots until she's whining for me to touch her. Then, in the middle of her protests, I let my tongue dart out, giving one long lick from her dripping center all the way up to her clit. Her resounding cries are all the encouragement I need to go to town on her.

I have to hold her hips down to keep her in place as she wriggles around from the pleasure. My cock is straining against the mattress, but I don't stop until I bring her to completion.

My fingers swirl around her entrance until I let one dip inside, soon following it up with another as she moans wantonly. And as her body stills, signaling her impending

orgasm, I let my eyes drift up to her face, watching the expression on it as she falls apart.

Then, and only then, I pull away, not giving her a moment to rest as I position my whole body over her, lining my cock up with her entrance. With my heart pounding in anticipation, I slowly but surely slide home.

“Shit,” I call out, as ribbons of cum shoot from me, completely coating my hand.

I can't remember the last time I came that hard from my own doing. But I guess it wasn't really my own doing. Somehow, that was all Maria.

As I lay in my bed, knowing that my food should be here any minute and with cum covering my hand that I need to rinse off, I know that getting Maria out of my head won't be that simple, even with her dad's words lingering in my mind.

CHAPTER 4



MARIA

“*H*ave you figured out what you’re going to do about getting a volunteer for your career lessons?” Alex asks me as she takes a bite from her yogurt cup.

Alex is a teacher here and only two years older than me. She helped me a lot when I was a new teacher and has also become a very good friend of mine. We usually eat lunch together during our overlapping free period, today being no different.

“Yeah, actually. My dad got someone he works with to volunteer,” I offer, pushing around the chips I packed with my turkey sandwich.

“You don’t seem all that excited,” Alex points out, aiming her spoon at me with furrowed brows.

“No, I’m glad, it’s just ...” I stop, not knowing how to go about this explanation.

“It’s just ...” Alex prompts, waiting for me to finish the sentence.

“It’s just, I don’t know if you saw the guy who was talking to me at the bar the other night,” I begin, Alex’s expression telling me to continue, “but it turns out he’s a lawyer at my dad’s law firm. And he’s the one my dad volunteered to help.”

Just the thought of it makes me grimace. I can’t believe I’m going to have to work with him.

“The hot guy?” Alex asks in surprise, a smile beginning to grow on her face.

“Yep. He’s the only guy who talked to me,” I explain with a small shrug.

“Charlie and I saw you guys talking. He was undeniably fuckable,” she says, referring to a childhood friend of hers, who is usually with us when we go out.

“He’s a heartthrob, for sure. But he seemed like a total jerk. I didn’t even realize he worked with my dad until I was having lunch with him the other day, and Tyler appeared in my dad’s office. You should have seen the way he cornered me in the elevator,” I rant, growing frustrated the more I talk about it.

“A hot, fuckable jerk. He’s probably raging skilled in the sack,” she says, the comment causing my face to heat up some.

It doesn’t go unnoticed by Alex as she says, “Oh, come on, Maria. Why didn’t you hook up with him? He would’ve shown you a good time.”

I don’t know what to say, and my face turns crimson. It’s not that I can’t tell when a man is conventionally attractive, but ...

I’ve never had sex with a man before.

While I’ve kissed a few guys, and even gotten to second base, I’ve never worked up the courage to go any farther than that. But I don’t want to tell Alex that at twenty-three, I’m still a virgin. She’ll probably think I’m pathetic.

Finally, I cringe. “He was in my face too much. Believe it or not, jerks aren’t my type, regardless of how steamy they are.”

“Well either way, you’re going to have to discuss what he’ll be doing in the classroom,” Alex begins, a mischievous smirk appearing on her face. “So, why don’t you text him?”

I had thought about how I would have to give him the rundown of what my plans are but was completely dreading it.

Alex can see the horror painting my features as she says, “Come on. Maybe he isn’t as much of a jerk as you think. Give him a chance. Do you have his number?”

I sigh as I tell her, “Yeah, my dad sent it to me.”

My dad is completely well-intentioned in his efforts, but it doesn’t change the fact that his help has put me in this dreadful situation.

“So, just text him. You’re going to have to do it at some point,” she tells me, a knowing look in her eyes.

I roll my eyes. “Fine.” As I pick up my phone, my mind runs a million miles a second trying to figure out how to get out of this.

But I know it’s futile.

Pulling up my text messages, I click on the number my dad sent me, opening up a blank text exchange. Reluctantly, I type a simple, *Hello. It’s Maria.*

I stare at my phone for a moment, anxious about having to send this. I just know that me texting him like this will cause a stupid little smirk to appear on his face.

“Did you do it?” Alex asks, leaning over my desk to try and take a peek at my phone.

“No, not,” I start, but I don’t finish because, at lightning speed, Alex snatches my phone straight out of my hand.

“Hey!” I call out, trying to grab it.

She hands it back, letting a maniacal laugh leave her mouth as she does. And I know exactly what it means before I even look at my screen. It’s only confirmed when I see the little blue bubble with my message on the screen, the word “delivered” in small gray letters right under it.

I release a groan of dissatisfaction.

“You can thank me later,” Alex tells me confidently, as she leans back in her swivel chair, a granola bar clutched in hand.

My eyes dart back to my phone screen, staring at the single message on it. I’m confident that I won’t be thanking Alex

anytime soon, but I don't let her know that. Letting out a loud huff, I resign myself to just seeing how this goes. In the end, Alex is right. I do need to meet up with Tyler to discuss what his role will be while volunteering in my classroom.

The rest of the day goes by without too much excitement. However, I do find my mind occasionally drifting to the text message I sent, wondering if Tyler has replied to it. A few times, I even peek at my phone, finding that I have no new messages.

By the time I'm walking out to my car, I've let my mind come up with other possibilities for the late reply. Maybe he's dodging me to get out of volunteering. Or maybe he doesn't even remember that I'm Maria.

The rational part of me understands he's probably just busy with his job, but that side doesn't seem to be in control at the moment.

So, when a little ping sounds from my phone as I'm about to back out of my parking space, I tell myself it's a notification for something else. However, the entire car ride home, I'm tempted to look on the off chance that it is Tyler.

I don't allow myself to do so until I've made my way up to my apartment. When I'm finally home, I set my bag down by the couch before slumping onto it as I finally peek at my phone.

The preview message on the screen reads: *You must be stalking me to have gotten this number.*

Despite not saving his number or remembering it off the top of my head, I know that it is, of course, Tyler.

I save his contact, sadly understanding that I will need it in the future.

Try again. My dad sent it to me. Unprompted, I may add.

I try not to wait around for replies, acting like some obsessive teenage girl waiting for her crush. Because obviously, I'm not a teenage girl, and I definitely don't have a crush.

Setting my phone on my coffee table, I stand up from my couch, hoping to keep my mind occupied. I decide to take a quick shower and change into something a little more comfortable.

When I'm back from the shower, I find two new messages lighting up my phone.

I'm sure.

His first message causes me to roll my eyes. I can just hear that annoying, self-assured voice he always seems to use.

To what do I owe the pleasure of a text from you?

This one's less irritating, but it seems like everything he does annoys me somehow. Hot Jerk still has jerk in it.

I sit down, trying to think about the best message to send. I want to get across how unenthusiastic I am about this arrangement.

I figured we'd have to talk about your volunteering at some point.

Once the message is sent, I toss my phone next to me as if it is on fire. How did I end up in this situation? I'm sure I could have done career activities with my kids all on my own. Curse me for trying to do something a little different.

Getting up again, I go into my kitchen, hoping to busy myself with making a meal. I'm halfway through building a sandwich similar to the one I had for lunch when something strikes me.

If I really, *really* think about it, the sooner I figure out a time to meet with Tyler, the sooner I can be done having this conversation with him.

With that in mind, I go back over to my couch, grabbing my phone before bringing it back to the kitchen.

Eager, are we?

His message is infuriating.

Under it bounces three small dots, and this time, I don't set my phone down. Instead, I keep my eyes fixated on the dots,

waiting for his next message to come in.

Finally, a new message appears on the screen.

What did you have in mind?

I didn't really have anything in mind, I just knew I had to do this.

I set myself down at my counter, trying to formulate my next message. I hope to sound as casual and unenthused as possible.

Nothing really. Just wanted to see when you were free.

I don't have to wait long for his next text, as one quickly pops up.

How about this Saturday at 6 pm?

Saturday at 6 p.m.? That's close to dinner time. Am I supposed to starve, or was he expecting to eat with me?

Works for me.

I huff in annoyance.

I get through half of my sandwich before I look at my phone again. The message on my screen has me letting out a noise of indignation.

Good, it's a date. Send your address, and I'll pick you up. Wear something nice.

I quickly type back, hitting send with a triumphant grin.

It is not a date.

But my grin falls away as I receive his final message.

Whatever you say.

It has a winky face emoji that a man of his age does not need to be using.

Throwing my head back, I release a groan of frustration.

I am not looking forward to Saturday.

At all.

CHAPTER 5



TYLER

Something tells me that spending time with Maria will be entertaining.

It's not a date, though.

As much as I enjoyed teasing her about it, I doubt her father would appreciate me labeling it as such. This is nothing more than a meeting. A fancy restaurant and a nice meal to discuss business matters.

I reassure myself with this justification, attempting to quell any guilt that arises from flirting with her. Fantasizing about Maria in less-than-innocent ways is already toeing the line. Taking her out on a *not-date* is treading dangerously close to a line I dare not cross.

Yet, despite my best intentions, Maria manages to make it difficult for me to stick to my resolve.

Arriving at her apartment complex, a weathered brick building that has certainly seen better days, I step out of my car and head toward the entrance.

Finding her name, I press the button next to it.

"It's Tyler," I say into the intercom, waiting for a reply.

"Just wait there. I'll come down," Maria answers, sounding only slightly irritated, which is better than I would have expected.

I give my outfit one last look over, making sure I'm put together. The light gray suit and a white button-up without a

tie are swanky and professional, but less formal.

I straighten up as the entrance to the apartment building swings open to reveal Maria, who, dare I say, looks amazing.

She's wearing an emerald green dress, the flowy material blowing slightly in the cool evening breeze. The short sleeves cover her shoulders, but the neckline plunges, though it isn't wide, making it more modest. Two thin green straps cinch the waist, displaying a shapely figure that I can't believe she's been hiding this entire time.

"You clean up nice," I tell her, loving the way she scowls at the wide smile that appears on my face.

I can tell she wants to say something snappy back but am pleasantly surprised as I watch her take a deep breath before cordially saying, "You as well."

Her words only make the grin on my face widen, if that were even possible, which doesn't go unnoticed by her.

"Don't get too used to me being nice," she grumbles, but even she can't stop a small smile from peeking out.

Leading her to my car, I do the gentlemanly act of opening up the passenger side door for her, getting a quiet thank you before rushing around to the other side.

The restaurant I'm taking her to usually requires a reservation about a week in advance, but I got lucky and was able to snag one.

When we get there, I park the car and easily maneuver us past the small line of people queued up in hopes of getting in, which will ultimately prove to be futile. After confirming our reservation, the hostess signals a waiter over, who leads us to a table for two, placed in a more secluded part of the restaurant.

The dim lighting and the candle flickering in the center of the table make the ambiance more romantic than Maria must have been expecting. Her eyes dart around as we get seated, me, of course, pulling her chair out for her.

"Have you been here before?" I ask as I pick up my menu to look over the options, Maria following suit.

“No, this is my first time,” she tells me, her voice tinged with nerves.

Once we place our orders - calamari to start, the ribeye for me, and the salmon for Maria - I get into what this *not-date* is actually about.

“So, tell me, what will I be doing while volunteering?” I ask, taking a sip from my glass of wine, having ordered a bottle of red the moment we sat down.

I watch as Maria takes a sip of her wine, making a face of pleasure, which I’m glad to see, considering the last time I saw her drinking alcohol, she didn’t seem to enjoy it.

“Well, I was thinking that for the first visit, you can just tell the kids what it is that you do. While what you have to say may not take that long, it will inevitably be followed up by a series of imaginative and inquisitive questions that you will have to answer in an age-appropriate way,” she tells me easily.

“And after that?” I inquire, finding the idea cute despite my earlier disdain for having to participate in this.

“It will vary. I have collected a variety of books about different professions that we’ll be reading, some coloring activities, opportunities for the kids to act out what they want to be when they grow up, and we are even taking a field trip,” she lists off, the smile on her face growing as she continues to talk about it.

While I can’t imagine being a teacher - kids not being my forte - I can tell that Maria loves it. There seems to be a twinkle in her eyes as she talks about her job.

“That actually sounds pretty nice. I’m sure the kids will have a great time,” I tell her earnestly, reveling in the smile that appears on her face.

“I hope so,” she says, seeming to be more excited about the activities than she’s letting on.

When our food gets here, my mouth waters at the sight of the ribeye. I thank my lucky stars that I was able to get a reservation for this place.

“Did you always want to be a teacher?” I ask, wanting to get to know her better. We’ll be working together, after all. Or least, that’s how I justify my curiosity to myself.

“Yeah, actually. I have wanted to be a teacher since I was a kid. My dad tried to steer me in a few other directions, but I was adamant about doing this,” she explains before adding, “What about you? Were you always interested in law?”

I only have to think about it for a moment before answering, “Not really. It just sort of felt practical. And I enjoy money well enough.”

“That makes sense. It was probably my dad’s line of reasoning as well,” she muses, grabbing a few pieces of calamari.

I try my best to keep the conversation professional, but the desire to see Maria blush is too tempting.

“So, tell me Maria. You can’t have me believe that you aren’t seeing anyone,” I start, deciding to jokingly add, “It’s the only real explanation I can think of for why you turned me down at the bar the other night.”

“Yeah, it had nothing to do with your strong come on,” she scoffs, but there’s a slight tinge of amusement in her voice, so I keep pushing forward.

“It could have been fun,” I continue in a sing-song voice, knowing that I’m approaching territory I really shouldn’t with my boss’s daughter.

But it’s so hard to resist. Maybe it’s the hard-to-get attitude, or maybe it’s the fact that Maria is a very attractive woman, but I can’t help but feel entranced with the chase of it all.

At my words, I finally get a blush out of her, and I’m unable to contain a smile at how utterly cute she looks with it.

To my surprise, she mumbles a simple, “Maybe.” She seems unable to make eye contact with me.

“But really, simply for future notes, as I remember you saying in the elevator, you’ve been with plenty of guys. What

made me so different from them? I can't imagine that at least some of them didn't come on as strong as me," I press further, my interest only growing more piqued as her blush grows deeper.

She seems to be holding herself back from speaking, only making me lean in a little closer, tempted to hear what she has to say.

"Maybe it isn't *plenty* of guys," she mumbles, causing me to furrow my brows.

Now, that's interesting.

"Okay, so a ballpark estimate?" I urge, unable to guess what number she could throw out at me.

Her eyes finally lock on mine, seeming to be thinking through her next words. I can't tell if she's going to retreat from this topic of conversation, which is understandable, or if she'll keep moving forward.

Is she embarrassed because of the number of men she's been with?

"There's nothing to be ashamed about if it's a lot," I add, hoping it will help put her at ease.

But it doesn't seem to; her mouth opens and shuts as she tries to get the words out.

Trying to help her out, I say, "You also don't have to"

But I'm cut off as she blurts out one single number.

"Zero," she says, her eyes moving back away from me as she pushes around what's left on her plate.

I stare at her, dumbfounded.

"Come again?" I ask, feeling like I misheard her.

"I know, I know. I'm a twenty-three-year-old virgin. I get it. You can make fun of me now," she says, her voice laced with annoyance.

My mouth dries up as I take in what she's said. I had not been expecting that.

“No, no. There’s nothing wrong with that. But you’ve done other stuff, right?”

I should stop pressing and change the topic. But I’m entranced.

She’s a *virgin*.

“I mean, I’ve kissed and stuff . . .”

She trails off, obviously embarrassed by her admission.

But I need her to know there’s nothing to be embarrassed about.

“That’s cool. I mean, you’re only twenty-three. That’s still pretty young,” I say, leaning in closer, wanting her to hear what it is I have to say. “You have absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about.”

She mumbles a quiet thanks, but it’s obvious she’s still embarrassed, and I finally force myself to change the subject.

“So,” I begin, hoping to get this meal back on track, “where did you go to school?”

That seems to loosen her up some, though I can tell she’s still reserved about our previous conversation. But she really shouldn’t be embarrassed with me.

Because in all honesty, that’s probably the hottest thing I’ve heard in my entire life.

CHAPTER 6



MARIA

“Despite you not being at the top of the list of people I’d wanted to spend an evening with,” I begin, earning a scoff from Tyler as we walk to my apartment building, “I had a good time.”

“I’m flattered,” he tells me as we near the entrance.

Outside of my building, the two of us stand there, as if unsure of what to do. I know I should just say goodbye and leave, but I’m not ready for the night to end.

Surprised with myself, I ask, “Would you like to come inside?”

Tyler doesn’t miss a beat. “Yes, I’d love to.”

My heart pounding in my throat, I feverishly try to justify to myself why it was necessary for Tyler to come to my apartment. I hadn’t planned on doing anything aside from having dinner with him. But if I’m honest with myself, I have to admit that I enjoyed spending time with him and would like it if we kept the night going a while longer.

Then I tell myself that it’s probably best that we get to know each other more since we’ll be working together.

Unlocking my apartment door, I lead Tyler inside. It isn’t much, but the one bedroom, one-bathroom apartment with an open living area has quickly become my home after finishing college. I’ve tried my best to make it cozy, filling it with knick-knacks, art, and other pieces I find at thrift stores.

“Can I get you something to drink? I know you have to drive home later, but ...” I trail off as I await an answer.

“Water’s fine,” he replies, following me into the small kitchen area.

I’ve never had a man here, other than my dad. I’m not fully sure what possessed me to invite Tyler in, but I find myself considering that maybe I have been too quick to judge him. Sure, he may be a little forward and crass at times, but he’s funny and undeniably charming.

Handing him his glass of water, he takes it with a quiet thanks, sipping it as he leans against my counter. Over the rim of his glass, his eyes are dark whirlpools. A knowing smile lingers on his face, obscured by the drink in his hand.

“What?” I finally ask as he sets his cup down, squirming under his intense gaze.

He’s silent for a moment, as if turning his words over, like he’s suppressing some type of delight. “Is it fair to assume that I’m the first man you’ve brought up here?”

I scoff at his question. “I’ll have you know my dad helped me move in.”

Pushing himself off the counter, he takes a step closer to me.

“Other than your father, is it fair to assume that I’m the first man you’ve brought up here?” he repeats.

A beat passes before I answer, “Yes.”

My skin flushes, and I feel my nipples pebble.

The smile on his face must hurt with how big it is, only making me want to disappear into a hole.

“You obviously find me being a virgin hilarious,” I point out, turning my back on him as I busy myself with looking through mail that I already looked through today.

“Hey.” The sound of him moving closer to me does nothing to prepare me for the feeling of his hand resting on my

shoulder. “I meant what I said earlier. There really isn’t anything to be embarrassed about.”

His words allow my shoulders to relax somewhat, though I hadn’t even realized how much they tensed up. Maybe inviting him inside was a bad idea. I don’t know how much more of this teasing I can take.

“Actually,” he begins, leaning his head down and trailing his hot breath over my neck, “I find it insanely hot.”

His words ignite the low simmer in my belly into a blazing fire. That was not what I had been expecting. I figured no one would like the idea of me having no experience, that it would only lead to awkwardness.

Slowly, I turn around. He’s standing so close that our chests are almost touching as he gazes down on me. His hand reaches up to grab my chin.

“Knowing that no one else has touched you in that way makes me imagine all the things that I could show you.” His voice is gruff, his eyes boring into mine. “If you let me.”

My first instinct is to push him away. But there’s this fire burning in my belly that has my breath stalling.

When his head drops down to brush his lips against mine, I meet him eagerly.

His lips softly move against mine, but there’s held back need in his movements. For the first time in my life, my body truly wants for a man.

It’s all too soon when Tyler pulls back, his chest rising up and down. I let out a moan in protest that I can’t hold back, my body moving forward as my lips seek out his.

“I’m sorry,” he chokes out, leaving me confused.

I recoil in on myself, thinking that I must have done something wrong. Maybe I’m a bad kisser, or he’s just repulsed at the idea of kissing me.

But I work up the courage to ask, “Why?”

He looks at me as if in pain. “It isn’t because I don’t want to, believe me, I really, really want to. But your dad is my boss, Maria. Plus, he told me explicitly to keep my hands off.”

“I’m an adult,” I snap back, annoyed that this fact has gotten in the way of what I want. “Is that what he told you in his office that day?”

“Yes,” he tells me dejectedly, and despite my annoyance with my dad, I don’t want to think about him right now.

I can’t have him stop now. I press my body up against his, thinking he’ll get the message.

He lets out a groan. “You’re killing me, woman.”

The warmth spreading between my legs has me yearning for something, though I don’t know yet how it’d feel and whether it would satisfy my need.

“Please, Tyler, I want this,” I beg one more time, hoping he hears the pleading in my voice.

A myriad of emotions seems to cross his face: need, doubt, concern, longing.

I let out a yelp as his hands grip my waist, lifting me up onto the counter. He stands between my legs for a moment, staring deep into my eyes, as if looking for something within them, before sinking down to his knees.

My body sits still in mild fear of what’s about to happen. Yet my skin, despite the panic, feels like it’s on fire.

His hands creep up the bottom of my dress, sliding across my legs and all the way up my thighs, until he’s reached the band of my underwear.

His eyes look up at me, searching for permission for him to do what it is we both want him to. My head gives a single nod before he’s hooking his fingers into the waist band of my panties.

I lift my hips up enough that he’s able to drag my underwear down my legs, hiking my dress up in the process, so my bare ass is resting on the counter.

I'm filled with the type of nervous excitement one feels at having not done something before, but knowing they want to. It fills me as I watch my panties fall off my feet, boils over when Tyler's hands drag me to the edge of the counter - my bare pussy only centimeters from his face - and absolutely explodes when he takes that first lick.

"Tyler ... fuck," I whine, having not expected just how pleasurable the sensation would be.

I want this, and I want it bad.

He's insatiable as he lets his tongue glide through my folds, slurping up my juices and sucking on my clit until my head is falling back against the cabinets. He slides a finger into me, moving back and forth at a rapid pace as his tongue dominates my sensitive bud.

It's inconceivable that someone can be made to feel like this. And it's even more mind-blowing to watch how much Tyler seems to be enjoying himself. I think that sight is what has me falling apart against his face, experiencing an orgasm more powerful than anything my own fingers could have made me feel.

When Tyler pulls away, he continues to stare at my pussy longingly before finally climbing back to his feet.

"How was that for you?" he asks, sliding his body between my spread legs as he reaches out to cradle my jaw in his hand.

He leans forward to press a kiss to my lips, and I can taste myself coating his mouth.

"Incredible."

"I really want to fuck you," Tyler groans as he rests his forehead against my own.

"I want that too," I whisper, yearning to experience how he would feel inside of me.

He lets out a deep sigh as he pulls away, staring into my eyes. "Now that I know what your pussy tastes like, I don't know how I'll be able to stop myself," he growls. "But I work with your father, and he made me promise."

Despite understanding where he is coming from, disappointment still fills my body at his words. Does he not want me enough to put my father's feelings aside? Where does this leave us now?

He peppers kisses across my face, seemingly in control of his actions despite the obvious bulge in his jeans. But I can't shake the feeling that he'll never try and have more from me outside of this kitchen romp, despite claiming to want me.

When he finally leaves after depositing me in my bed for the night, I try to recreate the sensations he dragged out of me with my own fingers. But it doesn't even come close to what I felt when his mouth was fucking me.

Frustrated, I'm left wondering where we stand now, with more questions and worries than I had before he made my whole body explode.

CHAPTER 7



TYLER

Maybe I shouldn't have gone down on Maria just two days before I was set to come into her classroom. Now, I'll be seeing her for the first time since then, in a room filled with twenty preschoolers.

I'd rather be at work right now. While I can afford to miss some time in the office to do this, I still have to get my work done, which means late nights in the office will be more frequent than since I made partner. Our Saturday night together has intensified my desire for Maria, but she's still my boss's daughter, and the fact that I'm blatantly lying to him makes me uncomfortable. At the very least, time away from the office reduces the probability of running into him.

Getting to the school, I wait to be buzzed into the front entrance before making my way to the office. A visitor badge is already prepared for me, and a woman at the front office directs me to Maria's classroom.

I peer into the classroom through the small glass window. The second I knock on the door, twenty small heads turn toward it. Maria gives me a smile, which I'm sure is just for the kids' benefit because I can see the anxiety creeping into her eyes.

As I walk in, Maria greets me with a brief introduction. "Everyone, this is Mr. North. He's here to help us with our career unit. Let's all say hi to Mr. North," she says in a cheery voice only preschool teachers possess.

I'm met with a chorus of, "Hello, Mr. North," which I find way more adorable than I thought I would.

"Hello, everyone," I respond, trying my best to bring out my inner preschool teacher.

"Mr. North is a lawyer, and today, he's going to tell us about what it is he does," Maria explains, stepping to the side.

While I've talked in front of larger groups than this, filled with significantly more critical people, something about speaking to these children feels like a completely different ball game. I had a general idea of what I was going to talk about, but I didn't practice it in the way one would articulate ideas to children.

"Um ... hello again. I'm Mr. North, and I'm a lawyer," I begin, realizing that they obviously already got that.

"Does anyone know what a lawyer is?" I ask, hoping to quickly get these kids engaged with the conversation.

A bunch of small hands shoot up into the air, and after letting my eyes wander around the room, I point to a freckled, redheaded girl with cute purple glasses framing her eyes.

Here, Maria interjects, "Why don't you all introduce yourselves when you answer or ask Mr. North questions."

The child dutifully nods in the direction of her teacher before saying, "I'm Esther, and a lawyer is someone who puts bad guys in jail."

It's exactly the type of answer I was expecting from a five-year-old.

"Yes, sometimes that is what lawyers do. But what if I told you there were all types of lawyers?" I ask, amused at the way some of the little faces scrunch up in confusion.

"Like what?" a small voice pipes up from the back of the room.

"There are all different types of lawyers. Criminal lawyers are like superheroes and make sure that everyone is treated fairly while in court. Family lawyers help families do all types of things, like figure out how to care for children if they get a

divorce or help families to adopt children. And corporate lawyers, like me, work with big companies to make sure they're following the rules. We help with things like contracts and agreements to make sure things are fair for everyone. These are only a few, but there are all types of lawyers that do all types of things," I explain, hoping I did it well enough for these children to understand.

A hand shoots up, a small, black child missing his two front teeth. I hope the tooth fairy made sure to get him something extra nice.

"Yes," I call, pointing over to the boy.

"Why?" he asks bluntly before quickly adding, "And I'm Darren."

"Well, that's a great question, Darren," I say slowly as I try to think about how to answer him.

"The law is complex, and there's a lot of things about it that no one person can fully know," I begin, looking at their faces to make sure they're following along. "So, having all types of lawyers means that some people are really good at some things while others are really good at other things, and no one is forced to know every single thing about the law," I finish, hoping I explained as best as I can an answer I have never thought too much about.

Another hand, this one belonging to a pale-skinned girl with wispy blonde hair that almost looks white, shoots up.

"I'm Charlotte, and can I be a lawyer?" she asks, her soft voice reminding me a lot of my own sister when she was this age.

"Of course. Every single one of you can be a lawyer. But first, you have to study in school and go to college, then law school, then pass a test called the bar, and then, after all of that, you can be a lawyer. But looking at you guys, I'm sure you all could do that in a breeze," I tell them, the comment not seeming to wipe the shock off their faces at the thought of all it takes to be a lawyer.

The rest of the forty-minute window unfolds in a similar fashion. Maria has organized the children into groups and assigned them various activities to keep them engaged. Meanwhile, I move from station to station and answer their questions. They ask simple, yet thought-provoking questions about what lawyers do, what I do specifically, and some questions that are less about being a lawyer and more about me personally, but it's a very fun and lively conversation.

By the time all the students are waving goodbye to me as they're led out by the teacher in charge of their specials, I'm actually excited about the idea of coming back.

"Well, that was fun," I offer once it's just Maria and me in the classroom.

"Yeah, I think the kids liked it," she replies, but doesn't seem to want to make eye contact with me as she tries to busy herself with some of the papers on her desk.

I narrow my eyes as I stare at her, knowing she can feel me watching her and trying her best not to react to it. But sooner or later, she's going to have to acknowledge the elephant in the room.

Moving closer, I step behind her desk until I'm standing next to her.

"Maria," I say, forcing her to stop what she's doing but still not getting her to look at me.

"Yes?" she answers, trying her best to keep her voice from wavering, despite her obvious discomfort.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"What do you mean? I'm just cleaning my desk," she says, but her voice cracks a bit at the end, telling me she knows exactly what I mean.

Not trying to beat around the bush, I ask, "Do you regret what we did the other night?"

While I may get an answer I don't want to hear, knowing seems a lot better than not knowing. At least then, I'll know if

I'm putting my job in jeopardy for a woman who has zero interest in me.

She seems to be contemplating her answer before letting out a deep sigh that causes her shoulders to sag as she finally looks up at me.

"No, I don't. It's just ... I don't know. Weird? How am I supposed to act?" she says, becoming progressively more flustered as she talks.

Reaching out my hand, I let it rest against her flustered cheek. At first, she seems to still, but I'm pleasantly surprised when I feel her lean into my touch.

"I mean, act however you feel is right. But I'm telling you now, I don't regret what we did, even if it wasn't the best move for my career," I explain, watching as she winces.

"Yeah, I imagine this isn't what my dad had in mind when he signed you up for this," she jokes, and a smile of my own overtakes my face as I watch one grow on hers.

Taking another step closer, I raise my other hand and rest it on her other cheek. My head moves slowly toward her, giving her the chance to withdraw. But she doesn't, and I'm able to press a soft kiss to her lips, something I've been craving since I left her apartment the other night.

Pulling back, I whisper, "Let's take things slow." I need her to know I'll go at whatever pace she's comfortable with. Because I don't plan on pulling back, her father's wishes be damned.

Her, "Okay," does more for me than one would imagine a simple word like that could.

I can't help the large grin on my face, knowing that she's comfortable taking these steps with me.

"Let me take you out this weekend," I request, watching as Maria tries and fails at stopping another red-faced smile from forming.

I lean down and pepper a few kisses across her cheeks, never seeming to get tired of how easily flustered she gets.

“Okay. You can take me out this weekend,” she says confidently, unable to hold in her giggles at the feeling of my lips against her skin.

As I look into her eyes, I see no doubt or fear about what it is we’re doing. She seems to want to explore what could happen just as much as I do, and I can’t wait to be the one to walk her through it.

As much as I love how shy and innocent she can be, I’m absolutely enamored at the prospect of helping her break from her shell.

CHAPTER 8



MARIA

“*W*hen you said you were taking me out, I thought you meant to have another dinner,” I shout over the loud music as we enter the club.

Blitz must be the last place I’d want to spend a Friday night. Music that’s too loud, people packed wall-to-wall, and sticky floors have never been my scene.

Frankly, I thought we were going to walk past this place. But as we approached the brightly lit neon sign, I soon understood what Tyler meant by taking me out this weekend.

Though, I can’t be too disappointed. We are on a real date. The thought makes me giddy despite my disdain for party scenes.

“Don’t worry,” Tyler says in his silky-smooth voice that could make me do anything, his body pressed firm against my side and his mouth close to my ear as he leads me in. “You’ll be alright.”

Despite my nerves, I believe him. Besides, I said I wanted to get out of my shell, right? And what better place to do that than at one of the last places on earth I’d ever go to.

I figured we’d stay in the main area of the club, where everyone else is drenched in neon purple lighting. Many club-goers appear as if they just arrived from a rave moments ago. But instead, Tyler leads me upstairs, and we head toward a separate, roped-off room that curiously lacks a door.

He casually waves a fifty-dollar bill in front of the imposing man guarding the rope, whispering a few words in his ear. The bouncer obliges, opening up the rope and granting us entry.

The music, while still pretty loud, is significantly softer here. There's a lot more seating space, and there is another bar and a separate dance floor. While there are still a lot of people here, it's way less packed than downstairs. We're able to see over the banister into the rest of the club, and I note that if there's any part of this club I'd want to be in, it's definitely here.

Tyler leads me over to a high-top table, pulling out my chair as he helps me clamor onto it.

He doesn't move to take a seat, instead opting to continue standing in front of me, wiggling himself in between my legs.

The black dress I'm wearing - an outfit that is a little more scandalous than I'm used to - has a short skirt that I'm worried someone will see up with Tyler's position. However, I tell myself to take a deep breath and just worry about him, no one else.

"Is this alright?" Tyler asks, not having to move any closer, since the music isn't as loud up here.

While I had been worried before, he makes me feel significantly less anxious, so I tell him as confidently as I can, "Yes, I'm alright."

Tyler looks at me hungrily, a hint of a smile gracing his features as he takes me in. It tells me that I have no reason to worry while I'm here with him.

"I'm going to get us some drinks. Have to loosen you up some," Tyler jokes, but his face turns serious as he asks, "Are you okay if I leave you here for a few minutes?"

I playfully shove him in the chest and reply, "Yeah, go ahead."

As Tyler heads to the bar, I try to keep myself occupied with my phone. But before I know it, a new presence appears

beside me, and I turn my head to find a younger man with shaggy blonde hair standing there.

“I couldn’t help but notice you from across the room,” he says, flashing a wide smile with perfectly straight teeth.

I search for something polite to say, but I can only manage a curt, “Is that so?”

“That is so.” He leans in closer, and the smell of alcohol on his breath is unmistakable.

“When I see a beautiful woman sitting all by herself, I just have to check on her,” he continues with a confident tone, introducing himself as Andy.

I give him a tight-lipped smile and reply, “Maria.”

Ignoring my disinterest, Andy persists. “Can I offer you a drink, Maria?”

“No, I already have one on the way,” I respond, hoping he gets the hint that I’m not interested.

Unfazed, Andy keeps standing there, probing, “So, you’re here with someone?”

“Yes, I am,” I assert firmly, my discomfort growing.

“Well, if I came with a woman as beautiful as you, I wouldn’t have left her alone,” he boldly declares, reaching for my bare knee.

Annoyed, I shift my knee away, trying to create some distance. “Well, you didn’t, so ...” I trail off.

But Andy isn’t deterred, moving even closer. “You don’t need to be like that,” he growls, attempting to touch my face.

When the gesture is done by Tyler, it makes me feel warm inside, safe even. But when it’s done by a complete stranger, I’m utterly repulsed. At least when Tyler tried picking me up in the bar the first time, he didn’t touch me, and he graciously took his leave when it became obvious he wasn’t getting anywhere.

My head jerks away, not liking the touch, which only seems to annoy the man in his drunken state.

“Come on. I can make you feel good tonight,” he asserts, leaning his body closer to mine in an effort to kiss me.

But I lean back as far as I can in my seat as I tell him loudly, “It’s a hard no, man. You should leave.”

But I guess for him, no doesn’t mean no, as he continues to fume in front of me.

“You listen to me, you bitch“ he starts but is quickly cut off by an even more menacing voice.

“What did you just say?” Tyler growls from behind the man, his hand gripping Andy on the shoulder as he jerks him away from me.

“None of your business,” Andy slurs, not looking fazed in the slightest.

“Well, why don’t you run along before I decide to throw you over this banister,” Tyler threatens, looking deadly serious as he says it.

Andy sizes up Tyler, calculating whether it’s worth it in his state to start a fight. He must think better of it, letting out an annoyed scoff.

“Whatever. You can have her,” the man says before leaving, most likely to find someone else to bother.

By the way Tyler has his fist clenched, I can tell he wishes to have done a lot more to that man.

Reaching out, I grab his balled-up fist in my hand. The gesture stops him from shooting daggers in the direction Andy went, his gaze immediately turning to me as his whole face softens.

Moving back in front of me, he grabs my cheeks with both of his hands.

“Are you okay?” he asks softly, tilting my head from side-to-side as he checks to see that I’m alright.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I tell him earnestly, hoping for him not to worry.

While the man had been brazen, and frankly, irritating, Tyler being here makes me feel a lot better. I can see the concern filling his eyes, and it feels a whole lot different than the Tyler I'd first met.

"Are you sure?" he asks, stilling my head between his hands as he stares intensely into my eyes.

The sound of the club music blasting from the speakers downstairs may as well not exist with the way Tyler is staring at me. Right now, it's just the two of us.

I can't mask a smile at his concern, "I'm sure."

"We can leave if you want," he continues, letting the thumb of his right hand delicately stroke my cheek.

The movement is soft, like the flapping of a butterfly's wings against my skin, but even such a simple touch makes me feel electric.

"I'm alright. I want to stay," I assert, before quickly adding, "I want to stay here with you."

My words seem to light him up as his expression of concern shifts to one of delight, a smirk appearing on his face at my words.

"You want to stay here with me?" he echoes, his face moving impossibly closer to mine.

"Yes," I laugh, reveling in the way his face darts forward with a promise of warm kisses.

On my cheeks, my forehead, my nose, and lastly, my lips, the kisses are short and sweet, and only have me yearning for more.

My body heats up at the idea, not dissimilar from the way I felt as I sat on my kitchen counter with Tyler kneeling between my legs. It starts at my lips, radiating outwards through my body. While the warmth may be attributed to the heat of the club, I'm confident it has more to do with Tyler's presence than anything else.

And while I'm scared about having new feelings, Tyler somehow tempers some of that worry with his confident

attitude and charming disposition.

So, yes, I'm sure. I want to stay here with him.

CHAPTER 9



TYLER

“*T*hat sounds like exactly something Tom would do,” I point out, sitting across the table from Maria.

“It is. While he didn’t realize the small ceremony wasn’t for the parents to attend, he still made sure to cheer loudly. It was embarrassing at the time, but sweet in hindsight,” Maria explains, a wistful expression on her face.

While talking about her dad is a huge turnoff, seeing Maria’s bright smile makes the topic of conversation worth it. Her joy helps me not feel too bad about having both tender and filthy thoughts about his daughter.

Although I promised it to Tom, I haven’t been that good at the whole hands-off thing.

After I ran off the guy that had been bothering Maria, she seemed a little worried about staying any longer. While I was completely prepared to leave and a not-so-small part of me thought there were more exciting things to do back at my place, she had been insistent that we stay.

So, we stayed.

She has loosened up a bit, but I still want her to get more out of her own head and truly enjoying what going out to a place like this has to offer.

Quickly knocking back the rest of my drink, I stand up from the table.

“Let’s dance, gorgeous.” I hold out my hand for her to grab it.

“I’m not sure,” she mutters, looking around at all the other people on the dance floor.

“Trust me. It’ll be fun,” I push but tell myself that I’ll stop pestering if she gives me a hard no.

The possibility of seeing her enjoy herself motivates me to try and get her out of that chair.

She mulls it over some, then agrees, finishing the rest of her drink and climbing off the stool.

“It’s okay,” I lean down and whisper once we’ve made our way into the throng of people, getting close to the middle.

We start out with Maria facing me, letting her body sway awkwardly side to side against my own.

“You are allowed to loosen up,” I joke, wrapping my arms around her waist, my hands landing precariously close to the dip of her ass, and pulling her even closer to mine.

It seems to help, as her body does in fact loosen up, swaying with mine in rhythm to the music. The bass makes the floor thrum.

I can’t take my eyes off her as she moves against me, the smile on her face only growing bigger and bigger the more she dances.

“And you were hesitant about dancing,” I call out over the music, watching as she tilts her head back in unfettered glee.

“Well, it helps that I have such a good dance partner,” she yells back, finally comfortable in this space.

The music changes to a slow song. My hands travel lower, resting on her ass. Feeling her tight curves pressed against me stirs my groin, the slow swell in my pants growing larger. She notices but doesn’t say anything, keeping her body moving against mine.

I’m stiffening even more as we continue to grind against each other. Maria turns around in my arms, letting her ass press against me while my chest is glued to her back.

“You’re so bad,” I groan into her ear as she continues to tease me.

She’s moving as if she’s always had this inside of her, this yearning to dance as if no one is watching. Somehow, I just became lucky enough to witness it.

She remains silent. I can hear our deep pants from the heat of the other bodies around us and our own growing arousal at being so close to each other.

My hand travels up and down her sides, not wanting to remove them from her for even a second.

I love seeing her like this. She doesn’t have a care in the world outside of what we’re doing now. And I can’t help but feel pleased that I had something to do with it.

Maria turns back around, staring up at me imploringly. I lean my head down to her mouth, so she can say whatever it is she needs to.

“I need to feel you so badly,” she says to me, her face filled with want and excitement.

“What exactly do you have in mind?”

“Will you take me to the bathroom?”

“I will not take your virginity in a nightclub bathroom,” I grind out, barely able to control myself.

“I promise I won’t tempt you. Please, let’s go to the bathroom.”

I look at her questioningly and grab her hand, leading her to the private bathroom on this floor. It’s cleaner and nicer than the one with stalls downstairs.

Once inside, I lock the door and turn toward her. She stares at me as if transfixed, biting on her lower lip, as if she is thinking about something filthy. Then she throws herself into my arms, letting her lips mash against mine like she’s been waiting to do this all night. I don’t hesitate to kiss her back, the smooth skin of her lips gliding against mine fiercely.

There's so much I could do to her in this bathroom. Given the chance, I'd have her right back up on a counter, face shoved between her legs, ready to make her see stars.

She pulls back, her chest heaving, looking like a lion ready to pounce. Her eyes hungrily trail up and down my body, pausing on the bulge that is quickly growing in my pants. She steps closer and cups my cock in her hand, causing me to gasp for breath. Without a word, she sinks down to her knees.

"What are you" I'm cut off by a moan as she lets her hand glide over my rock-hard dick.

"I want to feel you in my mouth," she says, reaching forward and unbuckling my belt.

"Have you ever ..." I begin, waiting for her to answer the question left hanging in the air as I watch her pulling me from the confines of my jeans.

She looks up seductively and shakes her head.

"How complicated can it be?" She smirks. As my cock springs free, still fixing me with her gaze, she gives it a long, slow lick. There is a yearning in her eyes that has me groaning.

This can't be real. This has to be one of the hottest things to ever happen to me in my life.

"Maria," I choke out, praying to any being who will listen that this isn't some type of extremely vivid dream.

She grabs my cock at the base as she gives it a few tugs. A hiss immediately leaves my mouth, the pleasure almost too much.

Because it's *Maria*.

She licks my tip and tastes the precum that's already oozing out, then engulfs the first two inches into her mouth, slowly moving her head back and forth as her hand continues to work it.

She pulls away, and I let out a groan in protest.

“Like that?” she asks, her eyes looking up at me seductively.

“Just like that, gorgeous,” I tell her, letting my hand rest on the back of her head as I slowly guide her mouth back onto me.

Her movements are a little uneven at first, but it still feels amazing. It only gets better as her confidence grows. She bobs her head back and forth at an even pace, her lips meeting her hand as she works me over.

It takes all of my willpower not to thrust into her mouth. I don't want to scare her off, and besides, she can do absolutely no wrong in this situation.

It's almost shameful how fast my orgasm approaches, wanting this to go on forever. But the sight of her on her knees in front of me and the feeling of her lips wrapped around me has me stilling on my feet.

No fantasy I could ever have would amount to the real thing. The sight of drool leaking from her mouth, looking absolutely enthralled with her actions, is just too much.

“Maria, I ...” I stutter, not able to get another word out as I pull out of her mouth, shooting string after string of cum into my hand.

She doesn't let her eyes move from the sight, transfixed by it.

“How was that?” she asks, the question teasing.

Could she not just see what she did to me?”

I can't help myself as I reach my clean hand down, grabbing her arm and pulling her up to her feet. I lean my body back against the counter, staring down at her, not even worrying about getting my pants back up.

“Did you not see this?” I whisper, holding my dirtied hand up to her face. “This is what you do to me.”

With that, I press my lips against hers, swallowing the soft moan that leaves her mouth at the force of it. My lips trail

down from her mouth, pressing kisses down her jaw and to her collarbone, loving how she throws her head back in pleasure.

I can't get enough of her. After tonight, I know there's no going back. My body craves Maria; every part of my being calls out for her.

Pulling away, I return my lips to hers, letting them lightly brush together without kissing her.

"I *really* like you, Maria," I tell her, needing her to know that these aren't going to be only sporadic hookups.

And once she lets me, I'll make her fall apart while wrapped around me, screaming my name. But I want more than just that. More dates, more nights out, just more time with her.

And if my heart wasn't racing before, it is when she tells me, "I really like you too."

CHAPTER 10



MARIA

“*Y*ou did what in a bathroom?” Alex exclaims, quickly covering her mouth as I shush her.

“You did what?” she asks again, this time quieter.

“I’m not saying it again,” I explain to her, my cheeks red enough without having to explain what Tyler and I did a second time.

“I can’t believe it. I didn’t think you had it in you,” she says with a smirk, popping half of a strawberry into her mouth.

While saying what Tyler and I did out loud felt weird, I couldn’t wait to confide in her. She didn’t know I was a virgin, but I knew she’d still find it shocking given my general demeanor.

“I would have done the same with someone as good looking as Tyler.”

She wiggles her eyebrows up and down before asking, “So, are you guys, like, seeing each other now?”

“We haven’t really talked about it ...” I trail off, not knowing what else to say.

Do I want to be with Tyler? He’s nice, funny and can make me feel extremely good, but I hadn’t thought about if he’d want something like that with me. I haven’t ever been in a serious relationship before, and never imagined it would be with someone who works with my dad.

“Well, by the look on your face when you were telling me, I think it could be in your future,” Alex points out.

“I don’t know. My dad’s always been sort of protective of me. While I’m sure he likes Tyler well enough, I’m not sure he’d be too thrilled seeing me with a man ten years older than me that he works with.” I cringe, thinking about how awkward telling my dad about me and Tyler would be.

We aren’t serious yet. I’m positive he doesn’t need to know about us right this very moment.

“Well, I think you should go for it. Something as hot as what happened with you guys can’t just be a one-off thing,” Alex tells me, and I know she’s right.

Tyler makes my body sing for him, something that has never happened to me with a man before. And I hope he has the chance to do it again, and again, and again, for as long as I let him.

“Maybe. I have had fun doing things I wouldn’t normally do. It’s freeing,” I admit. Not long ago, I couldn’t have imagined sucking a man’s cock in a nightclub bathroom. Even more so, I couldn’t have imagined being turned on by it the way I was.

“You deserve it. You’re young. Live a little,” Alex tells me, sounding genuinely pleased by my change of pace.

A knock on my door has me looking up in confusion. The kids should be in music class for another fifteen minutes.

Peering out the window on the door, I see Tyler. A smile breaks out as I wave him in.

“Oooh, your boyfriend,” Alex jokes before he’s fully through the door, and I shoot her a wide-eyed look, not wanting her to embarrass me.

Though, she seems to be looking out for me well enough as she’s already packing up her lunch.

“I’m going to finish this in my own classroom,” she announces loudly, gathering her two containers and water bottle into her hands. “You both take care.”

She doesn't leave without giving me a wink behind Tyler's back, and I roll my eyes at her antics.

Finally turning my full attention to Tyler, I notice he has a bouquet of white lilies in his hand.

"Are those for me?" I ask as I stand up from my desk.

"They are," he tells me with a smile, leaning down to press a kiss on my cheek.

The gesture is adorable. If he keeps up with this, my heart will beat so fast it will fly out of my chest.

Going over to a vase of flowers I keep by one of the windows, I take out the wilted ones, replacing them with Tyler's bouquet. The lilies smell divine.

"That was sweet of you," I tell him as I do it, my back turned to him.

While the first few times Tyler had done it, I had been surprised at his nearness, this time as he creeps up on me from behind, I'm completely expecting it.

His arms wrap around me, and he presses soft kisses into the crook of my neck. It's all so romantic, and I can't help but feel like my insides are melting. If anyone had asked me a week ago if I could imagine myself with Tyler like this, I would have blanched and thought they were crazy. Now, I can't seem to get enough of him.

"What brought you in so early?" I ask as Tyler sways the two of us side to side.

"Besides bringing you the flowers," he starts, pausing for dramatic effect before continuing, "I wanted to see if you'd want to come over to my place this Friday and let me cook you dinner."

"Really?" I ask, turning around in his arms as my back presses against the counter.

"Mmhmm," he murmurs, smiling at my disbelief.

"Okay," I tell him, my voice sounding cheery, but my stomach churning with worry.

“What’s wrong?” He reaches his hand up to rub at the furrow of my brow to get it to loosen up.

“Nothing’s wrong. Just ... What are we doing?” I’m genuinely curious at what to call it.

We haven’t talked about it, but is this dating? Are we friends with benefits? Is this a situationship? Does he expect me to fuck him on Friday? Am I ready? There are so many possible names for what we’re doing, and I can’t tell which one applies to us.

He doesn’t say anything at first, which absolutely does nothing to alleviate my nerves. Can he not see the anxiety growing all over my face? Maybe I shouldn’t have even asked the question. He’s already asking to cook me dinner, that should be good enough. Right?

“What do you want?” he asks, and I huff at the way he’s turning the question back on me.

“I’m not sure. As you can imagine, I’ve never really done anything like this,” I tell him, letting my eyes flicker away again as my virginal status has been brought up once more.

But my eyes don’t stay parted from his for too long, as his hand reaches out to lift up my chin, placing my eyes back on him. He has a soft smile on his face at my embarrassment, which may have made me annoyed before, but now, only makes my heart flutter.

“We’ll still take things slow,” he says, letting his head drift closer to mine as he adds, “I like you. And I want to see where this goes, if you want to.”

I’m only able to let my head shake up and down in a small nod before speeding up in a way that must make me look like a bobblehead.

“I do want to,” I finally choke out, watching as his smile widens even more, brightening up his whole face.

His smile sends electric impulses through my body. Knowing that he is willing to let me take my time makes me realize that a relationship with an older man isn’t such a bad idea.

“But,” he starts, causing my eyes to widen some as I worry about what it is he could possibly add.

He doesn’t want to take his words back, does he?

“Can we just keep things from your dad, for now? I only recently got this promotion, and work has already ramped up enough. While I don’t think your father has a problem with me, I don’t think any dad would be too thrilled at the idea of their only daughter dating one of his colleagues. Especially when he is the reason we found each other,” Tyler explains sheepishly, and I let out the breath that I had been holding in fear.

“Yes, we can. I thought the same. Because you’re right, he would not be too thrilled at the idea of me seeing you. Let’s keep things simple for now,” I tell him, though I know that if we continue seeing each other, we’ll have to come clean to my dad at some point.

But not yet. At the moment, I want to focus only on me and Tyler.

“Good,” he whispers before leaning down to press his lips against mine.

It’s both passionate and filled with a tenderness that makes me feel safe. I’m not sure why, because as Alex has pointed out a handful of times, Tyler is *hot*. Just feeling his chest under my hands gives me proof enough.

I’d love to get him out of this shirt.

At the thought, I pull away.

“What’s wrong now?” he asks, staring into my eyes with obvious concern.

I blush as I tell him the truth, “I don’t know if I’ll be able to make it through the rest of the day if you keep kissing me like that.”

And there’s that smirk again, the one that sets my panties on fire.

“Good to know.” He takes a step back, looking at me playfully. “Why don’t you show me what we’ll be doing today

instead?”

I jump up in excitement as I grab his hand to lead him over to my desk.

Picking up the little human-shaped cutouts, I fan them out for Tyler to look at.

“All the kids are going to get one and color it with what they want to be when they grow up. We’ll hang it up on the bulletin board outside the classroom. Then we’re going to go around, and each student is going to explain what they drew and why,” I explain excitedly, finding the concept adorable.

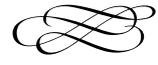
“What will you have me doing?” Tyler asks, coming up to stand behind me as he looks over my shoulder.

“The kids will still have questions from last week, and they’ll probably ask about your job. But you only need to engage them in conversation about what they’re coloring. At this age, it’s easy to inspire them to pursue their dreams. Having an extra hand to do that is super helpful,” I accidentally ramble, feeling very passionate about this work.

Tyler gazes at me in silence and nods, his expression a stoic mask that reveals nothing of his thoughts. It’s then that his dinner invitation rushes back into my mind, and I’m suddenly overwhelmed by the possible expectations he could have.

Am I ready to have sex with him?

CHAPTER 11



TYLER

“*H*ow about pasta? Is that too simple?” I ask Jared, scrolling through a list of online recipes.

Maybe spaghetti is too simple, but a shrimp alfredo could be good. That one’s hard to mess up.

“It all sounds good, Tyler. Why are you worrying so much?” Jared questions on the other end of the phone, being so kind as to pick up my call in the middle of the workday. “I don’t think she’s coming for the food.” He snorts at his own joke.

“I’m not worrying. I want it to be nice,” I explain, trying to convey how important this is for me.

I’ve never been this worked up about a date before. This is the first time I’m cooking for a woman. A nice restaurant has always worked its magic before, but this time, it doesn’t seem like the right move.

“And it will be. She likes you, and that’s all that matters,” Jared says, his wise words reminding me just how much older we’ve gotten.

“Your mom would be so glad to hear you give me such a sensible answer,” I point out, practically able to hear the way he rolls his eyes on the other end.

“I always give sensible answers,” he retorts.

“Yeah, yeah. Now, back to my drama. How does smothered pork chops sound?” I ask, seeing the recipe.

“It all sounds amazing. What you need to do is take a breath,” Jared says, sounding amused. “And buy condoms,” he adds, grunting at his own jest.

“I’ll take a breath once I’ve decided what to make,” I reply, not stopping my insistent scrolling.

“She must be good in bed,” Jared tries, and I narrow my eyes at the implication.

“It’s not about that. She’s kind, and caring, and she’s really adorable when she blushes, I can’t help but make her do it all”

“What has happened to you?” Jared cuts me off, seeming truly horrified at my words.

But I can’t help myself. It’s all true, and there are so many other things about her that I can’t even begin to name. The effect she has on me is completely different from anything I have felt before, and despite how scary it is, I can’t help but want to dive headfirst into it.

“Nothing has happened. I really like her. You can understand that, right? With Jessica?” I point out.

He doesn’t say anything at first, but then offers out a quick, “Yeah, I remember.”

I want to inquire more about his answer, but he quickly changes the subject, and I note that I’ll have to ask him about it at some later date. Right now, I need to finalize my dinner choice.

“Maybe you can ask her dad what she likes,” Jared offers, and I let out a hiss at the idea.

“I can’t possibly do that. He has no clue about any of this,” I explain, tensing at the thought of her dad knowing.

That is not a conversation I want to have any time soon.

“Oh, really?”

Endless amusement shines through his voice.

“Of course not. I can’t imagine he’d have the most positive reaction. I mean, she’s his only child and ten years younger than me,” I point out.

“Cradle robber,” Jared bites back, and if I wasn’t so worked up about dinner, I might have been able to come up with a worthwhile retort, but I let it slide instead.

Just this once.

“I need tonight to be perfect.”

I lean back in my chair, giving my hand a break from scrolling.

Maria doesn’t think I’m the same guy as when I first met her, but I still want to be able to convey to her just how much I care about her. It feels comical that, at age thirty-three, I’m experiencing feelings that are more typical of a teenager.

“It will be perfect. Even if you burn the food or poison it or it turns out completely terrible, I’m sure she’ll be able to see past it,” Jared tells me, and I can almost see the smug look on his face.

“Thanks for the kind words,” I tell him sarcastically, taking a glance at the corner of my desktop to check the time. “I have to get back to work, so I can leave at a decent time to pick up some groceries. But you should meet her. Let’s meet up for drinks, and you should bring Jessica.”

“Sounds like a plan. And good, I need to get off this call so I can reclaim my manhood,” he tells me, sounding completely serious.

With a quick goodbye, we hang up.

I’ll do a shrimp alfredo. It may be simple, but it’s probably a dish I will mess up the least.

It’s time to get back to work. I can’t afford to be stuck in the office late tonight with what I have planned.

Despite my cooking worries, I am excited to have Maria over. I haven’t seen her since I was in the classroom on Monday, which is way too long. And I would be lying if I said it didn’t cross my mind that she might be ready to spend the night.

It’s a definite possibility.

A knock at my door prevents me from exploring that wet daydream further.

“Come in,” I grind out, annoyed.

I’m taken aback as Tom strides in, a noticeable spring in his step. He’s virtually the only lawyer I’ve encountered who consistently exudes positivity.

“Hey, Tyler, how’s everything?” he inquires, settling into a chair facing my desk.

“Things are progressing well. I’m working on the Trenton account,” I explain, opening my files to lend an air of authenticity to my words.

For obvious reasons, I can’t exactly tell him that I was looking for potential recipes for dinner with his daughter.

“That’s good to hear. That one’s been quite the challenge,” he says, easing into his seat. His usual calm demeanor tends to put me at ease, but today, my nerves are tense. Keeping things secret is not for the faint of heart.

“How’s the volunteering going? Are Maria and the kids treating you right?” he asks with enthusiasm in his voice, though, I suspect his main interest is in hearing news about his daughter.

“Yeah, um ... It’s enjoyable, the kids are fantastic, and Maria has some exciting plans lined up,” I reply, aiming for nonchalance and hoping it’s enough.

Yet, he maintains a searching gaze, indicating he’s awaiting a more elaborate response.

But how can I oblige? Even just mentioning Maria seems to send a jolt through my stomach. Not exactly butterflies, but not indifference either.

Amidst contemplating what to prepare for Maria’s dinner tonight—an issue I probably should have sorted out days ago—my thoughts also venture to the possibilities that might unfold after dinner if she’ll let me.

“Last week, I told the kids what lawyers do, and the kids had plenty of questions. This week, Maria had them draw their

future aspirations, which they then shared. She's planning to showcase their artwork; it's all very cute," I explain, feeling a hint of relaxation as I recall the children's animated expressions while they colored.

The drawings depicted a range of professions: a ballerina, a firefighter, a doctor, a construction worker, and even a lawyer. I made an effort to interact with as many kids as possible, providing encouragement for their ambitions.

"That's nice to hear. She's always had a talent for connecting with kids." Her father beams, swiftly adding, "And I'm pleased to hear you're doing well too."

"Thank you, Tom. I appreciate it," I reply as I observe him rise from his seat.

"And just to reiterate," he begins, his expression turning serious, "you've heeded my advice?"

It's clear he's alluding to his demand to keep my hands off his daughter, a directive I've disregarded. But admitting that is out of the question.

"Hands off," I affirm briskly, hoping that brevity might make it harder for him to discern my falsehood.

"Well, that's reassuring. I'll let you get back to work then. You know where to find me," Tom says as he heads toward the door.

"Take care," I call out just before the door closes.

Once he's gone, I allow my head to slump onto my desk. Why does he have to be so affable? While I've encountered some difficult colleagues in my legal career, Tom isn't one of them.

My wet dreams involving his only daughter feel like a betrayal.

But I'm not stopping now.

CHAPTER 12



MARIA

Tyler's gray Lexus turns into his building's private parking lot right before I do. Amused that he's obviously running behind, I follow him and park in the space next to his.

He looks sheepish as he climbs out of his car, opening one of the rear doors to produce a few bags of groceries.

By the time he's shutting the door, I'm already coming around to where he stands. The florescent glow of the parking garage lights is highlighting his frazzled state of being.

His tie hangs around his neck with a few of his buttons undone. His brown locks are mussed up, which I imagine were styled better this morning.

"I'm sorry, I'm running a bit behind," he says as he spots me. He shifts the grocery bags into one hand while he grabs mine with the other.

The gesture is effortless, as if it's the obvious thing to do, and I try to hide my giddy face in my shoulder.

The elevator ride to Tyler's apartment is silent. I'm leaning into his side while he's pressing endless kisses to the crown of my head. He definitely turned out to not be a douche bag.

His apartment looks exactly like a place a lawyer's salary can afford. It's all navy blues, sleek blacks, grays, and whites. Large windows make up the sitting area that has a flat screen TV that's larger than my desk at school. The floors are dark wood except in the kitchen, where they turn into a pretty black

and white tile. The brand-new, stainless-steel appliances, spotless granite counter tops, and beautiful navy-blue cabinets give it a homey, yet modern feel.

“This is nice,” I tell him, giving a slight spin in the room as he sets the groceries down on the counter.

He lets out an exasperated huff as he unpacks the food. “I’m glad you like it.”

“I am going to go upstairs and change out of this suit. I will be right back, but help yourself to anything,” he says, halfway out the kitchen door by the time he’s finished talking.

Cooking this meal for me might be overwhelming. I know how taxing the job of a lawyer is, and I don’t want to cause added stress on him.

He comes back in a pair of crisp blue jeans that hug his strong thighs and show a deliciously toned ass. An old law school T-shirt reveals powerful biceps I have been wondering about since the day I saw him in my father’s office for the first time.

He comes over to where I’m perched on one of his black kitchen stools at his island counter, grabbing my face with his hands and brushing his lips over mine.

His breath is warm and sweet like vanilla.

I let out a surprised grunt before surrendering to his touch. The pressing of our lips together is rough and coarse, but the feeling of his tongue moving against mine is soft.

He pulls back and rests his forehead against mine, “I’ve been scattered. Today’s menu was a last-minute decision, I’m afraid,” he smiles apologetically. “And it won’t be ready at the time I planned it to be ready.”

I couldn’t care less about the food though. The tingling feeling between my legs caused by his proximity is growing more intense by the second.

“Don’t worry. I have all night,” I tell him, hoping that my answer communicates how little I’m interested in the food right now.

I'm glad to be here.

He starts by filling up a pot of water and setting it on the stove. I watch as he sets a box of fettuccini next to it, cluing me in that he's making some sort of pasta.

As I watch him cook, I remember one of the things he said to me as he was rambling on.

"So, you talked to my dad today?" I ask before thinking about how silly the question sounded and continuing, "Well, I imagine that isn't uncommon, but you said he came into your office."

He puts a deep pan on the stove, throwing some butter and what looks to be minced garlic into it.

"He wanted to know how volunteering is going. And I told him the truth. It's going amazing," he explains, throwing an easy smile over his shoulder.

It's sweet that my dad is interested in the work. He always asks about the classroom whenever we talk, so it's no surprise that he'd go to a new informant when it comes to the goings-on of my career.

"You didn't mention tonight, did you?" I ask, even though we already covered keeping this a secret from my dad for now.

But I also know my dad's nature can make it hard for one to keep secrets from him.

"No, I made sure to omit that," he explains, working on peeling shrimp as he tosses them into the pan to sear. "In fact, he did ask if I'm keeping my hands off. And I, of course, told him I was."

That's good to hear. Despite the uneasiness I feel at keeping a secret from my dad, I know I would feel worse if I had to fess up to what's really going on.

"Are you sure you don't need my help?" I ask, though my seat provides the perfect view of Tyler's very strong, very well-built back.

"No, you stay there and be beautiful. It helps me cook," he tells me as he walks over to his fridge to pull out heavy

whipping cream.

Watching him work from a distance is its own type of torture. A man who takes care of a woman in this way is sexy. Seeing him focused on perfecting a meal for me and looking this good while doing it makes me squeeze my thighs together.

Being teased by the little sliver of his stomach I can see does nothing to help.

“Okay, the sauce is simmering, and I just put the noodles in and have set a timer for twelve minutes,” he tells me, turning around with an accomplished smile.

Maybe it’s the way I’m biting my lip, maybe he sees something in my eyes, or maybe he spots how I am squirming in my seat. Whatever it is, it makes his eyes darken.

“What do you think we can accomplish in twelve minutes?” his husky voice rings out, as he stalks toward me.

“I don’t know,” I stutter, though, I know exactly what I want to do.

His hand silently reaches out to grab mine, and I don’t question it as he pulls me from my stool, leading me over to his living room. He sits down on his couch.

I stand there, staring at his sitting form, my eyes entranced at the growing bulge in his jeans.

“Turn around,” he orders, and I follow his directions as if in a trance.

When my back is facing him, his hands reach up to grab my waist, pulling me back until I unceremoniously fall into his lap.

“I really like this dress you have on,” Tyler comments on the cotton light blue dress, pulling down one of the thin straps to press a kiss to my shoulder.

“It’s perfect for what I’m going to do next,” he explains, tongue darting out to trace the shell of my ear.

My ass is nuzzled between Tyler’s legs as his hands reach around me to spread my legs across his thighs. He presses

kisses against my jaw as I throw my head back into the crook of his neck, waiting for his hands to touch me where I really need him to.

And he seems to get the hint as his left hand dips under the neckline of my dress, pulling out one of my breasts as he palms it in his hand. He moans, and I feel my panties becoming even wetter.

“You’re not wearing a bra. Do you want to kill me, woman?”

While his one hand works on my breast, his other hand slowly creeps down my body until he reaches the end of my dress, sliding up under the fabric. His movements are slow and torturous.

My hips buck, hoping to come into contact with his hand.

“So eager,” he grumbles in a husky voice.

“Twelve minutes,” I murmur, hoping that rutting my ass against his rock-hard cock will get him to speed up his movements.

I seem to have been correct as he finally lets his palm come into contact with my panty-clad pussy, touching my flesh over the piece of fabric.

“This what you need, gorgeous?” he asks, lips moving against my neck as his head turns, so he can watch my face.

“More,” I whimper, wanting to feel his skin on mine, but finding that my panties sit in the way.

“Anything,” he whispers as his fingers push my panties aside to find my sopping wet slit.

I can hear Tyler choke on his breath, gliding back and forth between my folds.

“Tell me what you need,” Tyler’s gruff voice commands as his fingers slide through me, ghosting over the spots I need him most.

“I ...” I begin, finding his words put a blush on my face but knowing my need for him outweighs my embarrassment.

“I need your fingers in me and ... and I want you to touch my clit.”

“Good girl,” he praises, his fingers immediately following my directions, the palm of his hand pressing against my clit as he lets his fingers move inside of me. “I want to fuck you so bad, baby,” he groans as he continues playing with my pussy.

It’s exactly what my body craves. “I want that too, Tyler,” I manage to say. I’m curious and scared at the same time.

I’m so close to reaching my finish, basically on the precipice, so when that insistent ringing of Tyler’s phone goes off to signal that he needs to check on the food, I’m hoping he’ll forget about it and finish me off.

But I don’t seem to be that lucky.

“Hold that thought, gorgeous,” he says, smirking. His hand stills as he pulls it from my underwear. Carefully, he lifts me off his lap, sliding me next to him, so he’s able to get up.

“Can’t let the food burn. You’ll need the calories for later.” He winks as he goes to enter the kitchen, leaving me with a sticky mess between my legs and no orgasm to show for it.

CHAPTER 13



TYLER

“*H*ow is it?” I ask as I twirl my own bite of the shrimp alfredo.

It didn't turn out too bad. I'm sure if we went out to eat, we could have gotten a better version of the dish, but it's good enough that I'm not embarrassed to be feeding it to Maria.

“Very good. Thank you,” she tells me, her smile kind. But I could see her watching me, shifting occasionally in her seat.

I know exactly why. While I had no plans to leave her unsatisfied, I wanted her to yearn for more. And I loved giving her a taste of what's to come. Giving her satisfaction later will be even sweeter.

Maybe we'll try something else tonight. I would die a happy man if she sat on my face, or maybe we could get each other off at the same time, my tongue destroying her as she sucks me off.

Or maybe, she'll let me be her first. Here's to hoping. The thought almost has my eyes rolling back into my head at the dinner table. What a gift that would be. Showing her what it feels like to make love would be incredible. She'd be impossibly tight, but I'd make sure she was ready.

She said she wanted to fuck, but she might change her mind. I would have no problem if she needed more time. She's the one setting the pace. But how I would love for her to be ready tonight. To allow me to be her first.

Looking at her now, I know she's going to need to get off soon. She is distracted, the red flush never leaving her chest, eyes unfocused as she continues to squirm in her seat.

"Are you okay, gorgeous?" I ask but can't hide my smirk as I already know what the issue is.

She rolls her eyes at my question. "You already know I'm not alright."

"Patience," I tell her like some sort of sage.

The tightening in my own pants has me yearning for this dinner to move along, a sentiment I know the both of us share as we shovel down the pasta.

By the time we're cleaning up, the temperature in the room has gone up several degrees. My cock is throbbing as I scrub our plates, and I know Maria's underwear must still be soaked from earlier.

We don't talk much as we straighten up. We are probably thinking about the same thing. How much we crave each other, how much we want to peel our clothes off and just burrow into each other.

Just thinking about how I transformed the innocent Maria into an impossibly horny woman is almost enough to make me come in my jeans.

When we put away the last dish, we stand there for a brief moment. The air is thick, our bodies hot, and the knowledge that the other person is so close hangs in the air.

Then I give in and grab her by her waist, pulling her in. She gasps, more in relief than surprise. The kiss is absolutely filthy, all tongue and teeth and loud grunts as our bodies writhe together, trying to get the type of contact we need.

I lift her dress, gripping her ass as I hoist her into the air, not breaking our kiss as her legs wrap around my waist. I let out a groan, feeling her silken clad pussy press against my abdomen.

I want to do terrible things to it.

It takes a bit of focus and coordination to maneuver to my bedroom. I have to let my eyes open every so often to make sure I'm going in the right direction, but I finally manage to find my way. It's only as I toss Maria onto the bed that our lips break apart.

I can't help but stand at the end of the bed staring at her, our chests heaving up and down, our want for each other evident in our eyes.

I'm completely elated at the next words that leave Maria's lips.

"I want you to be my first," she says, sounding so confident, it's a complete contrast to the Maria I first met.

But I absolutely love it.

"I can arrange for that," I growl before climbing onto the bed with her, my body flush against hers as I let our lower halves grind together, both of us excited for where this is about to lead.

We both struggle to get ourselves out of our clothes. Neither of us wants to pull apart long enough to get our shirts off, so it's a slow inching up of the fabric in between kisses.

It would require less time if I were to shuck my jeans down part way and lift the bottom of her dress up, but I want to take my time and do this right. I need to see all of her exposed to me, and I want her to feel my bare skin glide against her as I fuck into her virgin pussy.

"You're perfect," I groan once her whole body is made bare to me, letting my head rest between her two breasts, nuzzling against the mounds, and laving my tongue across the skin.

Her heavy breaths are like music to my ears, and I think about how lucky I am that I'm going to be the one to give her a pleasure she's never felt in her life.

I let my tongue trail down her body, knowing I need to make sure she's good and ready before I slide into her. While her first time probably won't be the best sex she'll ever have, I'm determined to make it as good as possible.

“We are going to ease into it. Take all the time we need,” I say reassuringly from where I’ve settled between her spread legs, her half-lidded eyes peering down at me from where her head rests against my pillows.

“Okay,” she answers, and despite her yearning for pleasure, I can still hear worry laced in her voice.

Kissing the inside of her thighs, I tell her, “You’ll be okay,” before putting my tongue to work.

I suck at her clit as I let my fingers reach up to tease her hole, one going in easily, allowing for a second to follow. I pump in and out, making sure to scissor her tight opening to get her good and ready for me.

I slip another finger inside of her when I deem her ready to take it, wanting to make sure she’ll be able to accommodate my thick girth. It twitches at the mere thought of finally getting to be inside of Maria, having yearned for it for weeks now.

She’s dripping around my fingers, and by the way she’s bucking her hips up for more, I know that I shouldn’t keep her waiting. She’s a woman who knows what she wants, and I’m more than ready to give her exactly what she needs.

Pulling my fingers from her, I give one last kiss to her pulsing clit before sliding my way up her body. I’m positioned over her, and I carefully fit myself between her spread legs, hissing at the feeling.

Reaching over to my bedside table, I pull out a condom.

“Get so many girls you have to stay prepared,” Maria comments jokingly, but I can see in her eyes that she’s anything but amused.

Ripping the foil, I sit up on my knees and pull out the latex contraceptive, then roll it down my length.

“Got them just for you,” I say, getting myself back into position once it’s on. “Didn’t want to be presumptuous but wanted to be prepared.”

She can't hold back a satisfied grin at my words, though her face quickly morphs to worry as my tip teases against her slick entrance.

"Hey," I tell her, leaning down to press a soft kiss to her forehead as I watch apprehension cloud her features. "It's okay. It may hurt a little at the beginning, and it may not be the best time, but I promise you that we will take our time and go slow at it. And we will try again and again until we get this right."

She takes a deep breath, readying herself as she drops her legs a little further open to accommodate me.

"Okay," she says, psyching herself up, "I'm ready."

With one more kiss, I press forward, letting my tip slide into her awaiting cavern. Maria lets out a small hiss but seems to be handling things well as I slowly push in about half an inch more.

It takes my entire focus not to slam into her. It feels so good, I'm sure I could finish in a few quick strokes. But Maria's comfort is worth more than my pleasure, and I'm determined to make this the best time I can for her.

"You can do more," she croaks out after I've been stationary for a few moments, waiting for the go ahead.

I let myself slide in further, inch by inch, pausing until I get confirmation from Maria to keep going. I continue this pattern until our pelvises are pressed together, me having settled in to the hilt.

"You good?" I choke out, her tight core squeezing my cock so deliciously, I can't imagine how I've gone my whole life not getting to have this.

This woman has absolutely ruined me, and I don't think I'll be able to have another woman lie under me again after this.

"I'm good. You can move," Maria tells me, her voice not straining in pain but not dripping with pleasure either.

I don't pull out much before pushing myself back in, wanting to go slowly so as not to hurt her. But after a few thrusts, she seems to get used to it.

"More," she whimpers, her hips rising from the bed to meet mine.

She does not have to ask twice.

My hips pick up a steadier motion. I keep my ears and eyes focused on her to make sure everything's okay. Does she like it when I do this? Am I being too rough? I want to understand what it is she likes.

But I know I can't last for long. I've been waiting for this for far too long and dreaming about it way too much for that to happen. Despite wanting to get her off like this, I know that it won't be the case today.

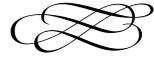
"I'm not going to last, baby, but I'm going to get you off. Don't you worry," I say, my hips quickening their pace as I chase my orgasm.

And when I spill into her, it's absolutely heavenly. The knowledge that Maria's pussy milks it out of me makes it all the better. But I don't dwell on the sensation too long, knowing that Maria herself hasn't finished.

So, quickly, I pull out of her and climb back down her body, not wasting anytime as I let my fingers and lips attack her newly deflowered pussy; it somehow tastes sweeter with the knowledge of what I just did to it.

When she comes all over my face, I'm left wishing that she was able to come over other parts of me. But I know that we'll have plenty of time to practice that in the near future.

CHAPTER 14



MARIA

“*Y*ou’ll like them. I promise,” Tyler assures as he holds the door for me to this casual sports bar and grill.

It’s just after 6 p.m., and the place isn’t packed yet. It looks like people are enjoying a bite and a quick drink as they watch a hockey game on the screens.

“Hopefully, they’ll like me,” I mutter. Tyler either doesn’t hear me or doesn’t respond as he leads me over to a booth. A man and a woman are already sitting on one side of it.

They don’t seem to be talking much. Each of them is focused on something on their respective phones.

“Jessica, great to see you. Jared ... Jared,” Tyler greets the man who stands up to give him one of those man hugs that include heavy pats on the back.

Just looking at the two together tells me that they must have gotten into a lot of trouble back in their younger days. They both have that devilishly handsome look that screams trouble, tall and sturdy with mischievous glints in their eyes. They scream double trouble.

“And you must be Maria.” Jared turns to me, giving me a small side hug before sitting back down.

“I am. It’s nice to meet you both.” I smile as I slide into the other side of the booth with Tyler.

He sits very close to me, pressing his body against mine. Earlier, I worried that Tyler may act differently with me in front of his friend.

Jessica gives me a tense smile, but it doesn't fully reach her eyes. She's a bit reserved, though I completely understand that's just how some people are.

"So, Maria, I imagine something has to be wrong for you to be with Tyler. Have you lost all your senses? Are you in dire need of citizenship? This is a secret arranged marriage that Tyler has never mentioned before?" Jared lists, followed by a thud and a small jerk from him, telling me that Tyler must have kicked him under the table.

"No, none of that." I laugh, finding the banter between the two entertaining. "Though, Tyler, are you in need of citizenship?"

"Ha ha," he laughs sarcastically before pressing a kiss to my temple. "I'll have you know, a previous marriage of mine already settled that problem."

I look at him wide eyed, the comment catching me off guard.

Is he serious?

Tyler bursts out laughing at the expression on my face.

"I'm kidding. I'm kidding. You looked genuinely concerned," he tells me, my body relaxing after realizing it was only a jest.

Though, with our ten-year age difference, I wouldn't put it past him that he's lived a whole life before meeting me.

"So, how did you two meet?" Jessica asks. It seems to be more so as to not appear rude rather than being truly interested.

Tyler and I glance at each other, silently deciding it's okay, considering neither of the two are my father.

"Well, one night, Tyler tried and failed to pick me up at a bar," I begin, earning a scoff from Tyler.

"She was playing hard to get. My charms were immaculate. Anyway," he begins, preparing to continue on with the story, "it turns out Maria is the daughter of my boss at the firm."

This appears to be of some interest to Jessica as her eyes widen.

“I’m a teacher, and my dad volunteered Tyler to come help me in the classroom,” I explain, Jared appearing deeply amused by the story. Though, I’m sure he already knows it.

“And the rest is history,” Tyler concludes, obnoxiously throwing his arm over my shoulders as he squeezes me into his side.

“As cute as the story sounds,” Jared says clapping his hands together, “I’m a bit naughty, and it’s still happy hour. Fries and half of a margarita pitcher?”

He’s already heading to the bar as we nod in agreement. I’m loosened up, not feeling as awkward. I like Jared and Jessica well enough.

As Jared’s coming back, it looks like someone is tailing him on the way to the table. I can’t tell if he notices the woman or not, but the way her eyes dart between me and Tyler is obvious.

“She insisted on coming to say hi,” Jared grumbles less than enthusiastically.

“Not to you,” she bites back, though she keeps a smile on her face as she does it, directing it to Tyler.

“Hey, Tyler, it’s been a minute,” she says, letting one hand lean on the end of our table as she angles her body to face us.

Which is pretty unsettling on my end because it puts her irritatingly close to me.

“It has, Harper. What brings you out tonight?” Tyler asks in an obvious effort to be polite, though I can feel his body turning rigid.

She has dark brunette hair, cut in stylish layers and with bangs that perfectly frame her heart-shaped face. In a pair of ripped jeans and a cut-off band T-shirt, I feel like she’s the epitome of “cool.”

She doesn’t look that much older than me, either.

“Just out with some friends,” she says, gesturing behind her shoulder to a group of three other women at a high-top filled with empty drink glasses.

Tyler looks at them, his eyes widening for about half a millisecond before diverting his gaze. It looks like he knows them too.

“And who is this?” she asks, turning her attention to me, a perfect smile on her face.

I’m a preschool teacher. I know the difference between a smile that’s real and one that’s fake. You need to be able to fake both when working with kids all day, no matter how tiresome it can be. It’s a necessity to smile even when your day isn’t going well.

“This is Maria,” he says coolly.

I am Maria. Just Maria.

“I think I’m going to go to the ladies’ room,” I offer, getting up and sliding from the booth past Harper.

I don’t think I want to be around for that vaguely awkward encounter anymore. It’s obvious that the two have some sort of history I’m not privy to. But I guess that’s Tyler’s business. If he wants to tell me what the deal is, he’ll do it when he’s ready.

Even as I try to convince myself of that fact, the idea that he may have all of these secrets makes me uneasy. I mean, I let him take my V-card, like, a minute ago. Was that stupid of me? Did I jump into it too quickly?

At the thought, my entire body feels icky.

I wash my hands and steel myself to walk back out there. But the door to the bathroom swings open, revealing Harper.

“Oh, hey,” she says, as if she wasn’t expecting to see me here.

I assumed she’d go into one of the stalls, but instead, she leans against the counter beside me.

“Hey,” I offer quietly, hoping this conversation goes by quickly and painlessly.

“So, Tyler and you are kind of a thing?” she asks, going straight to the point of why she followed me.

“Yeah, sort of,” I tell her, at a loss as to how to answer.

Yes, we’re seeing each other. But I’d like to think it’s a bit more than that, even if we haven’t put labels on it. Are labels important? Should I have asked about that before letting him take my virginity? The thoughts make my stomach stir.

“I figured. Tyler always was one for these kinds of things,” she says cryptically, and I don’t like at all that she felt the need to come into the bathroom to tell me that.

“He’s an adult. I’m sure he’s had relationships in the past,” I say as evenly as I can, reaching around her to grab a paper towel to dry my hands.

“We had one of those things once. Actually, he’s had one of those things with three out of the four women I’m here with tonight,” she announces casually, as if this isn’t a malicious scheme to make me feel inadequate.

And it’s working beautifully. It takes all that’s in me not to let my anxiety take over completely.

I let Tyler fuck me. Was this his game all along? Is he going to make me feel special by taking me to meet his best friend, string me along for a few quick rounds, then drop me?

Maybe I had been right in the first place about the type of guy Tyler is. And somehow, I let the idea of a guy liking me overpower my reason.

Regardless of what his plan was, I enjoyed it. I wanted to lose my virginity, though I had hoped it would be to a guy who was more of relationship material.

“I need to go,” I mumble and rush out of the bathroom.

Being out on the town doesn’t seem all that fun anymore.

“I forgot I have to finish writing some of my lesson plans,” I say as I approach the end of the table and grab my sweater

and purse.

“Maria?” Tyler asks, looking up at me with concern.

“It was nice meeting you both. I’ll talk to you later, Tyler,” I tell everyone with the best smile I can manage at the moment before turning on my heels and making my way to the exit.

As I’m walking away, I hear a frustrated Tyler bark out, “What did you say to her?” But I’m not interested in hearing a response.

I need to get away. Maybe I’m too sensitive, and maybe I shouldn’t be reacting this way. But then again, I’ve never let a man have the parts of me I’ve given to Tyler.

And now, on the ride home, a tornado of doubts and regrets churns in me.

Did I make the right choice?

CHAPTER 15



TYLER

“*I* should have run after her,” I groan out as my call goes to voicemail for the fourth time.

“What is it he’s going on about?” I hear my mom ask Jared. She’s staring at my pacing figure in front of her back porch.

“Lover’s quarrel,” Jared answers, the amusement filling his voice raising my irritation tenfold.

“Your parents live right next door. Why don’t you go bother them?” I bark at him, but he’s not deterred by my harsh demeanor, only continuing to make fun of me.

I decided to give Maria the benefit of the doubt. Maybe she did have lesson plans that she had to work on. Especially since Harper denied saying anything upsetting to her. But when the next day rolled around, and she wasn’t picking up my calls, I was positive it was because Harper upset her.

Most times I get upset, I go to my parents’ house, not far outside the city in Medford. Dealing with my issues here is easier. And never too far behind me, there is Jared, under the guise of stopping by to visit his own parents.

He must find my frustration amusing, and getting to join in on a Saturday lunch is always a good time.

“I didn’t know Tyler had a lover. He’s been holding out on me,” my mom says in surprise, standing with her hands on her hips as she peers out at me.

“Her name’s Maria. She’s a preschool teacher. Very nice girl,” Jared explains to her.

“The one he’s volunteering for?” my mom asks him, increasingly more intrigued with the situation.

“That would be the one,” Jared says smugly, and I can’t stand how they are chatting away like gossiping schoolgirls while I’m only a few feet away.

“Don’t you guys have anything better to do?” I groan, trying Maria’s number again with the same result.

“No, I’m rather enjoying the drama,” my mom tells me as she takes a seat on the porch next to Jared.

I don’t think she’ll ever tire of how close we are, my family and Jared’s. We’ve known each other since we were kids.

“It’s obvious she’s not picking up her phone,” my mom offers, and I roll my eyes at her observation.

I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m deeply frustrated by the situation. While Harper didn’t tell me what it is she specifically said, she commented that she “just wanted to tell Maria a little more about you,” before joining her girlfriends back at the table.

While I’m sure Maria understands that I’ve been with other women, and her first interaction with me suggested I was a bit of a womanizer, it’s not like I told her how much I used to get around in the past.

I’ve cooled it for the most part recently, but I still have that history. She needs to know it’s nothing compared to the feelings I have for her.

“Why don’t you try something else? Go talk to her in person.”

My mom’s suggestion has me stopping in my tracks.

Why didn’t I think of that earlier? I bypass the porch and walk around the house to get to my car.

Once there, Jared calls out, “How am I supposed to get home?”

“The bus stop isn’t too far from here. Tell your parents I said hi,” I call back, getting into my car to drive back into the city, hoping traffic isn’t too bad.

If it were anyone else, I wouldn’t do that. But it’s Jared, so he’ll probably stick around to chat my mom’s ear off and bug my sister before dropping by his own parents’ house.

It’s like tunnel vision as I head for Maria’s place. I refuse to let a snarky comment from a past fling get in the way of our growing relationship.

I’m cursing as I circle the block to find parking, but finally, take the space of a car that’s pulling out. I basically sprint to her building, letting my finger smash against the button for her apartment.

“Hello?” her angelic voice answers over the intercom.

“Maria, it’s me,” I grind out through my heavy huffs.

There’s a long pause. I’m convinced that she’s going to ignore me, and I hit the button two more times.

Finally, her voice answers, “I’m coming down.”

I must look like a lunatic as I pace outside the entrance to her building. But I can’t help all of this nervous energy I feel. I’m not sure what I would do if I were to lose Maria before I’m even fully able to have her.

The door to the building swings open. She is wearing a pair of hot pink athletic shorts and an oversized gray T-shirt, looking perfect.

“Hey,” I greet her as I step inside the building, following her quick steps up the stairs as we head to her third-floor apartment.

“Hello,” she mumbles, but it doesn’t seem too enthusiastic, and despite her back facing me, I know she must have a frown plastered on her face.

When we get into her apartment, she loiters by the doorway instead of going to sit on the couch.

Trying to come up with a plan on how to avoid me.

“Maria,” I begin, hoping that she will at least turn around to face me.

It takes a few beats, but eventually she’s spinning on her heels in a pair of fluffy pink slippers to look up at me from under her impossibly long eyelashes.

“You have to tell me what’s wrong,” I urge, my hand reaching out to grab hers, though she doesn’t seem committed to the gesture as her hand rests limply in mine.

She gnaws on the corner of her bottom lip, seeming as if she’d rather discuss anything else other than her time in the bathroom.

“Please, Maria, I ... I just want to make things right,” I urge, bringing her hand up to press a kiss on it, so she knows how serious I am about this.

Her mouth opens for a second before closing. Then she does it again. Finally, the next time she opens her mouth, she begins speaking.

“That Harper woman came into the bathroom, and she was telling me about you. She was saying how you’re always *kind of seeing* someone, and how you had slept with her and three other women she was out with. I know that was before, but it just made me feel like I was next in line ...” Maria trails off, her voice sounding choked up just thinking about it.

Shit. Shit. *Shit.*

“Baby,” I start, reaching my hand out to cradle her cheek, “I can’t lie and say she wasn’t right. I have been with many women. But I haven’t been doing that for some time now. Then I met you, and despite our rocky start, you’ve completely ruined me for other women. It’s just you, gorgeous. I don’t want anyone else.”

There are no words I could possibly think of that could properly convey how I feel for Maria. I need her to know how

special she is. Even my most serious relationships never gave me the feelings she does.

My words don't seem to perk Maria up as I had hoped. She's ruminating on them, though she doesn't pull away from my touch.

That's a good thing.

"I just ... so you aren't seeing anyone else?" Maria asks, finally focusing her eyes on me rather than letting them dart around the room.

"Only you. That's all I want," I tell her sincerely, hoping she's able to pick up through my voice just how true my words are.

This isn't some trick out of some players' handbook. This is just me, trying the best I can to express my very real feelings for a woman I'm falling for fast and hard.

Maria closes her eyes for a second, her chest and shoulders rising and falling with her breath.

"Okay," she says simply, not elaborating on the thought.

"We're good?" I offer up, needing to know that things are going to be okay between us.

It *has* to be okay.

"We're good," she tells me, and she can barely get the last syllable out of her mouth before I'm sweeping her into my arms, burying her face into my chest as I rest my head on top of hers.

And for the first time in about twenty-four hours, my heart rate has gone back to a normal speed.

"I'm so sorry you felt that way, baby," I mumble against her head, hating the idea that she had been anxious for no reason.

Pulling back, she looks at me sternly as she says, "You have no reason to be sorry. I should have talked to you instead of running away. It was childish and insecure."

“You can always talk to me,” I assert, hoping we don’t have another misunderstanding like this again.

“I know, and I will,” she tells me, finally letting a smile take over her lips.

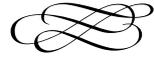
Grabbing my hand, she leads me to the couch.

“Will you stay for a bit?” she asks as she pulls me to sit down with her.

“I’ll stay for as long as you want,” I assure her, and I hope she knows I’m being one hundred percent honest.

I’d probably stay forever if she were to ask.

CHAPTER 16



MARIA

I'm confident that Tyler has spent more time watching me than the romantic comedy we have playing on the screen.

Every thirty seconds, his eyes dart over to me, presumably gauging how I am after our first lover's spat.

I was letting my own fears drive me rather than doing the adult thing and telling Tyler about what was on my mind. But I'm okay now and I trust that Tyler genuinely cares about me and wants this to be an exclusive and monogamous relationship.

However, it's obvious that he's still worried about my feelings. His uneasy demeanor and concerned gaze are telltale signs.

"Tyler," I begin, looking up at him from where my head had been nestled into his chest, "everything alright?"

"Everything's perfect," he tells me, his voice excessively cheery.

He lowers his head down to press a soft kiss to my lips, and I happily lean into it. I missed his lips and worried if I'd ever get to feel them again. So soft and tender, made to pamper me. He's easily the best kisser I've ever encountered.

He turns his attention back to the film, but that lasts only about five minutes before his eyes are wandering back over to me.

I don't worry about it too much, hoping that soon, he'll see that everything is okay. But after fifteen more minutes go by and he's still repeating the same pattern, I decide to probe more.

"Tyler, I can feel you staring at me."

He lets out a deep sigh as his arm tightens around me. "Are you sure that everything is fine? It's perfectly normal to feel insecure sometimes, and I understand my past may be a little off-putting, but I need you to know that you are the only woman I'm interested in."

His words are sweet and earnest. I pull away from his arms and crawl into his lap, straddling my legs over his hips.

"I can't hold your past against you," I explain, punctuating my point with a kiss.

He leans into the weight of my lips.

I try thinking back to the man I first met, and I don't know how I could have thought Tyler was anything but amazing. He makes me feel like I'm not some stick-in-the-mud, but a person with my own quirks and feelings.

He makes my body buzz with excitement and desire, a feeling that is very present now as I sit straddled on his lap.

I let my hips roll back and forth once on his lap, finding his groan of pleasure satisfying.

"Don't tease me," he warns darkly, his hips jutting up from the couch seat, searching for pressure to ease his arousal.

"Who said anything about teasing?"

I lean forward and trail my lips down his neck.

Tyler makes me feel sexy. Knowing this beautiful man yearns for me is a heady feeling, dizzying even. It's moments like this that I know I never need to worry about a past fling.

I can make him forget all about them.

My hips grind against Tyler's lap, reveling in the noises I elicit from his mouth as his hands grip onto my waist, helping me move against him. In seconds, my body is on fire.

“You’re killing me, woman,” he moans, head falling against the back of the couch as our lower halves move together.

“Well,” I begin, standing up from the couch to shimmy out of my shorts and slipping out of my shirt to reveal my naked body, “we can’t have that.”

He quickly shucks off his jeans and briefs. His eagerness makes me wetter.

When the two of us are left completely bare for each other, Tyler settles himself back on the couch, patting at his strong thighs for me to reclaim my seat. Instead of straddling his whole lap again, I settle for straddling only one of his thighs, letting my wet pussy glide against the strong muscles of his leg.

“Fuck,” he groans, hands helping to guide my movements as I ride his thigh, my clit being worked in the most delicious way. “You’re so fucking hot.”

Our movements quickly speed up, with me gyrating my hips and Tyler’s thigh moving up every time he drags my hips downward, creating the perfect pressure on my clit. It’s enough to make me fall apart all over his leg.

“That was so beautiful.” He grins, looking at the wet spot I’ve left on his thigh as I’m left twitching from my orgasm. “But I’m not done with you yet.”

He pulls me closer, forcing me to again straddle his hips as he positions me over his rock-solid member. I easily slide onto it, the both of us letting out matching moans as I sink onto him. I thank my lucky stars that I thought to start birth control after our first time. I can’t imagine not getting to feel every last part of him in this way.

He’s like a beast unleashed as his hips immediately start bucking into me, with me working just as hard as I bounce on top of him, chasing the same feeling that overtook my body only moments ago. I’m sensitive, but never too sensitive for Tyler.

“I need to see that again, gorgeous,” he chokes out through his movements, eyes peering up at me in a daze.

Leaning forward, he grabs one of my nipples into his mouth, holding onto it for dear life through our erratic movements. The sensation shoots straight to my clit, and I know I won't last long coming off the heels of my last orgasm.

My hands grip his hair, and I tug on it until his mouth is pulled away from my nipple with a resounding pop, forcing his head to tilt back so I'm able to properly look down on him. I need to be able to see every ounce of pleasure that crosses over his face, the sight too good to miss.

He seems to like my more dominant attitude, mouth hanging open in pleasure as he keeps his eyes locked on mine.

The sight is too much to handle. My oversensitivity and Tyler's expert movements, combined with how fucking hot he looks, has me falling apart all over him.

“Look at you *again*,” he grunts, taking over the lead as he slams me onto his cock until he's ready to explode.

Quickly, he pulls me off him, and he comes in between us. The proof of the pleasure I can bring him is coating both of our stomachs.

Despite the mess, I collapse into his arms, telling myself we can deal with it later.

“You sure you're okay?” Tyler asks tentatively against the side of my head, his hand cradling the back of it as his other hand rubs slow circles on my lower back.

“More than okay,” I tell him with a finality that I hope he hears.

Tyler shows me again and again that I'm his and only his. Whatever he did in the past is of no concern to me. I know how he feels about me now, and that's all that matters.

We sit like that in silence for a bit, not saying anything as Tyler soothingly rubs my back. It's peaceful, despite the sound of the TV playing in the background.

Right now, it's just us two.

Eventually, when we begin feeling sticky, Tyler stands up with me still in his arms and carries me over to the bathroom. He doesn't even bother setting me down as he turns the shower on, waiting for the water to heat up.

When he finally climbs in, with me still in his arms, I let out a whimper of protest when he tells me, "I'm going to have to set you down now."

"Can't we just shower like this?" I whine like a petulant child, clinging onto him tighter.

Tyler laughs, slowly lowering me down to the bathtub floor. "Maybe another time. I have to get you cleaned up."

Despite not wanting to be put down, I'm satisfied that Tyler makes sure not to move too far away from me, keeping some part of him touching me at all times.

Grabbing my washcloth, he covers it with soap before beginning to move it all over me, cleaning up the mess on me that had started to feel uncomfortable.

"Turn around, gorgeous," he whispers, and the second my back is to him, I'm grinning like a lunatic at how much I like this man and how much he seems to like and care about me.

The sensation of the cloth running over my skin is a welcomed feeling, relaxing me after the stressful morning I had ... and the active evening that followed. Having Tyler be the one to do it makes it all the better.

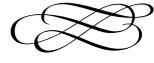
When he's done cleaning me up, I get to work washing his body, reveling in the opportunity to let my hands glide over every inch of his skin. He truly is a masterpiece, and it still blows my mind that he's all mine.

"You good back there?" Tyler asks with his back to me, feeling that my movements paused for an uncharacteristically long time.

I had been so fixated on his back muscles that I didn't realize I had stopped. Blushing, I continue scrubbing him.

Though, it takes me a considerably longer time to clean Tyler than it did for him to clean me.

CHAPTER 17



TYLER

I'm not sure how this woman manages to smell this good in the morning, especially considering the arguably strenuous activities from the night before. Maria seems to do it effortlessly.

Her back is flush against me in bed. Her hair is spread across the pillows, my face buried in the cascading waves of her strands.

“Did you just sniff me?” her words ring out across the room, sleep still evident in her voice.

“Hair smells good,” I mumble into her tresses, giving another big sniff to her amusement.

With that, she rolls over in my arms, but I make sure she doesn't get too far from me, keeping my hand placed on her waist as she does.

I lean down to give her a morning kiss, and Maria reciprocates the motion, though she cringes away when we pull apart.

“I have morning breath,” she tells me with a grimace on her face.

“Good,” I answer, leaning in for another kiss, this one more passionate than the first.

It's a bit after seven. Soon, we'll both have to get up for work. I brought a change of clothes, figuring I'd leave for work from her place. We've been inseparable lately, not wanting to go to bed without the other.

“I needed to ask you something,” she starts, eyes looking up at me inquisitively.

Little does she know, I’d probably say yes to just about anything she wanted.

“Shoot,” I answer, letting my hand glide up to swipe some of her hair out of her face, not allowing my view of her pretty eyes to be obscured.

“I’m taking the kids to the Museum of Science,” she begins, and I nod.

“Yes, they seemed pretty excited about it the last time I was there,” I agree, thinking about all of the wide smiles of “Maria’s little scientists,” as she had been calling them that week.

“I’m still down a chaperone. I was wondering ...” she trails off, eyes looking up at me, pleading. “If you’d volunteer for the role?”

I pretend to ponder the question, though I’m already prepared to say yes.

“Yeah, I’ll do it. I need to clear it by your dad, but I’m sure if it has anything to do with helping you, he’ll be fine with it,” I tell her as glee fills her eyes, and she lets out a squeal of excitement.

“Thank you,” she tells me earnestly, snuggling closer against me to show her appreciation.

“Though I have one condition,” I continue, her head pulling back from me as her eyebrows lift in interest.

“Let’s hear it,” she tells me with an exasperated sigh, though I can tell she’s already amused.

“Come with me to meet my parents next weekend,” I rush out, holding my breath for an answer.

I’ve been serious about Maria for some time now. But meeting parents is a big step for a lot of relationships. I don’t want her to think I’m moving things along too fast, but I’m sure I want her to meet the people in my life I care so much

about, considering *she's* someone in my life that I care so much about.

“Of course,” she agrees with a soft smile.

Though that smile doesn't remain on her face for long. Her expression morphs into one of worry.

“You don't need to be concerned about meeting them. They will love you.”

She looks at me for a second before letting out a deep sigh. “It's not that. It made me remember that at some point you'll need to meet my father. Not as his colleague, or my volunteer.”

I knew this would have to come up again. Maria and I have been dodging the fact that we're keeping a secret from her father. But sometimes, when conversations about my work or her dad come up, there's a silent understanding that, at some point, our little bubble is going to have to burst in order to let her father in.

“I know, baby. And we will. Soon. Let's just worry about the field trip and meeting my parents for now. Then we can talk about how we'll break the news to your dad,” I try to calm her, hoping my answer is good enough.

She doesn't immediately reply, contemplating my words. Finally, she gives me a tentative nod.

“Okay. Just know ... whatever he says, I'm still going to be with you,” she tells me sincerely, and the resolute look in her eyes has me easily believing her.

“Now,” she says, sitting up in bed despite my protests, “we need to get some breakfast into us.”

“You don't want to stay in bed a little longer?” I ask with a naughty expression on my face, rolling closer to her and wrapping my arms around her waist.

I start peppering kisses across the bare skin of her stomach, hoping that maybe, she'll be convinced to stay. There's something that I would really enjoy having for breakfast, and I can't find that in the kitchen.

“As much as I would like to,” she chuckles, pressing her hands against my head to push me away, “I’m hungry.”

I let out a deep sigh as I watch her climb out of bed, her bare ass catching my attention as she throws my T-shirt on. As much as I want her to climb back into bed, I can’t leave her hungry, so, with a sigh, I climb out of bed and slip into my briefs.

“Pancakes?” Maria asks as I trail behind her into the kitchen.

“Sound good,” I mumble, disappointed. It’s all I can get out as my attention is focused on her juicy ass peeking out from under my T-shirt.

It’s as if she can feel me staring. She whips around with a smirk on her face, a box of instant pancake mix clutched in her hands.

“I’m going to need you to focus in the kitchen,” she tells me, and I answer her with a small slap on the ass as I grab a mixing bowl from her cabinet.

“Oh, I’m focusing,” I tell her with a chuckle, but I actually try to make myself useful as we whip up our breakfast together.

We move like a well-oiled machine. I grab the ingredients. She puts them in the bowl. She pan-fries the pancakes, and I dutifully wait beside her holding the plate.

As simple as the task is, it fills me with pure bliss. Cooking a meal with someone I care about—a meal we’ll share together—makes me feel all warm and fuzzy, and I catch myself shooting smiles over at Maria as we work.

Until now, the mere thought of domesticity had filled me with dread. But experiencing it with Maria has to be one of the best feelings in the world.

“And that is the last one,” she says as she uses her spatula to set the last pancake onto the plate.

Bringing the plate over to her counter, I gather two plates and forks as she grabs maple syrup from the fridge, the two of

us meeting at the counter to begin fixing our plates.

We dig into our meals, talking about our upcoming day, stealing bites off the other's plate, and generally basking in the presence of each other.

It's perfect. The idea that soon, we'll have to head to work and separate for the day sends a pang to my chest. Because that's what Maria does to me. She makes my body crave spending every moment with her.

"That was delicious. I give it a ten out of ten," I tell her as I grab our syrup-covered plates and bring them to the sink.

"Why, thank you. I had a fantastic sous chef," she answers, not moving far from me as I fill the dishwasher.

I drag the task out, knowing that as soon as I finish, I will have to get ready for work to avoid being late. But I cherish these last few moments of our peaceful morning despite knowing that, more likely than not, I will be seeing her later this evening.

When the countertop is sparkling, we both know there is no dragging out the inevitable.

"Come on," I'm the first one to say as I let out a deep sigh. "We don't want to be late."

She pouts her lip but nods in agreement as she follows me back into her room.

Getting ready feels dreadful, knowing it signals the end of a perfect morning.

If Jared saw me now, he'd have a field day at me being all gloomy at the thought of leaving a woman for only a few hours.

And maybe I am whipped and acting like a lovesick teenage boy. But for Maria, the feeling makes sense.

"You always look so handsome in a suit," Maria comments as she watches me straighten my tie from outside the bathroom door.

“And you always look so beautiful in everything,” I reply, finding the floral dress and thick brown belt around her waist divine.

Coming out of the bathroom, I give her one long kiss, which will probably be my last one of the morning.

“Come on,” Maria says as she pulls away, letting one of her hands graze across my cheek. “You need to get out of here.”

“I know, I know,” I tell her, walking over to the couch where I’d set down my briefcase. “But I’m thinking about how I can get out of work. Maybe I can say I’m in the hospital.”

“What would it be for?” Maria asks, seeming to entertain my antics as she walks me to the door.

“Lovesickness,” I answer without pausing, loving the small snort she lets out at the corny joke.

“I’m not sure that will work. But you can workshop your excuse for next time,” she tells me, staring at me as I hang by her door.

“One more kiss,” I mutter, my eyes boring down at her as my hand hangs on the doorknob, not ready to turn it yet.

“One more,” she obliges, standing up on her tiptoes as she presses one last kiss to my lips, the soft pressure being all I need to get me through the day.

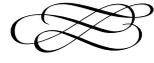
Pulling away, I finally open up the door as she tells me, “Have a good day at work.”

“You too,” I begin, stepping outside the comfort of her home. “See you tonight?”

“Of course,” she answers.

The idea of not spending the night together is nothing but implausible at this point.

CHAPTER 18



MARIA

“*T*hat’s everyone,” I tell Tyler as I mark the last chaperoned group off my clipboard.

The kids have been looking forward to today and are filled with anticipation. But that’s nothing compared to my own excitement. I’ve been planning to take the kids to the Museum of Science for a while, and I finally get to do it. Encouraging the kids into science-related fields means a lot to me, and I hope that this trip will help pique their curiosity.

Looking over at Tyler, I watch as he lifts two of my students, Aaron and Dante, into the air as they grip his forearms. They’re giggling immensely, and my heart pounds at the sight of him with the kids.

I wonder if, in a different life, he could have been a teacher.

“Is everyone ready to go inside?” I call out over the exuberant chatter of five-year olds, getting a resounding “Yes” in response. The chaperones herd their small groups together.

Leading the charge, I make my way to the small line that’s already formed at the entrance and take a deep breath at the formidable task ahead. Getting twenty preschoolers through the turnstiles will be like a whimsical experiment of controlled chaos.

“Everything will go all right,” I hear a deep voice behind me, and I startle before my mind registers it’s Tyler’s voice.

Turning around, I find him standing there with a smirk at the fright he just caused me, a gaggle of five-year olds hanging around his legs.

“I know. I’m actually very excited,” I tell him, turning my nose into the air.

“Good. You should be. The kids are excited as well,” he tells me, and he has this gleam in his eyes as he looks at me that makes me feel all types of ways.

When I get to the front, I lead my group ahead of the line, handing the guard the tickets while the kids make their way through the turnstiles. Once everyone is inside, I make an announcement.

“Okay, everyone, let’s meet back here at noon for lunch!” I call out, watching as the kids can barely contain their excitement at the vast expanse of the museum.

The second I turn my back on them, my group in tow, tiny feet scatter, and there are yells of glee as the kids go off with their chaperones to explore the museum.

Tyler leads his group along with mine. Luckily, our groups enjoy hanging around each other, so we get to be together a while longer.

And I’m not complaining.

We go into the Arctic Adventure section, and I make sure to keep my eyes on my kids as they disperse to look at different parts of the exhibit. They already know not to go far, so I’m not too worried that someone will wander off.

“What are you looking at here?” I ask a few of my students as I watch them place their hands on the wall.

“It’s cold,” Aaron calls out, and I furrow my brows as I press my hand to the wall as well.

And they’re right; it is cold. The sound of cracking ice and blowing winds also invades my senses, and I find it amazing how they’re able to simulate the Arctic experience.

When we move onto the dinosaur exhibit, the children do their best impressions of a T-Rex as they stand in front of the

large model of one. I can't help but watch and laugh at them, finding it more entertaining than the exhibit itself.

"Would you believe me if I told you I've never been here?" Tyler asks, his body suspiciously close to mine as we stand by the wall.

"Really? Not even on a school trip?" I ask, figuring everyone even remotely close to the area goes here on school field trips.

He shrugs at me. "Guess they weren't doing it when I was in school."

"Oh, I forgot," I begin, lowering my voice for the next part, "you're a little *older*."

I can tell he's about to retort, but a pack of my students coming up to me, hands trying to cover their giggling faces, has me turning my attention to them.

"Is everything alright?" I ask, bending down some, so I'm at more of an eye level with the kids.

Dante is pushed forward by his peers, trying and failing to hold in his laughter.

He seems as if he's struggling to find his words before he finally blurts out, "Do you two like each other?"

My face involuntarily turns crimson at the question. Is it that obvious? If my students can see it, can everyone else? I splutter, trying to find a way to answer this question before Tyler finally beats me to it.

"I like everybody here," Tyler answers easily, but I'm sure on the inside he's laughing maniacally.

I just know he loves seeing me flustered.

"But do you *like-like* each other?" Charlotte pipes up from behind Dante, and my face gets even more red if that's possible.

"Why would you ask that?" he responds, and again, I think about how he would have made a great teacher.

The kids stand still for a moment, pondering the question. But then, they all give matching shrugs, their attention quickly turned away by some fossils.

However, the sound of their giggles as they walk away tells me this is not the end of it.

“They have great intuition,” Tyler muses.

Of course, that was his takeaway.

“It was embarrassing,” I grumble as I watch my kids meander into the AI exhibit.

“I don’t know, I kind of like the fact that even five-year olds know you’re mine,” Tyler proclaims, sneaking a quick kiss onto my cheek before picking up his pace to go and join the kids.

We’ve explored the first level and some of the second level before it’s time for all of us to have lunch.

When everyone meets back by the entrance, Alex points out that there is a pavilion in the back that we can use for our break. It’s the best way to accommodate everyone, so we lead all of the kids there. They scatter with their lunch boxes to begin eating their meal.

The adults stick with their groups, trying to engage the kids in what they saw while inside the museum. I try doing the same as I begin eating my lunch, but a feeling in my stomach stops me.

While I woke up feeling a little nauseous, I didn’t get sick, so I didn’t think much of it. As I was packing my chicken salad sandwich, I again felt nauseous but disregarded it, not wanting this to ruin my day.

But now, as I unpack my food and try to eat it, the smell brings that feeling back in full force. I don’t think it’s just nausea this time.

“I need to run to the bathroom,” I rush out, sharing a quick look with Alex, so she knows to watch over my kids before I’m doing a light jog inside to find the nearest bathroom.

And I'm right, as the second I close the stall door behind myself, my breakfast and the little food I managed to eat for lunch all come back up.

The sound of the bathroom door opening again has me cringing, not wanting anyone to see me like this.

"Maria?" Tyler's voice calls out, and I cringe even more because I especially don't want him to see me like this.

"I'm fine," I lie, my hoarse voice indicating that I am definitely not.

It's only made worse as my body retches again; my whole being heaving as there isn't anything more to come out but bile.

"Okay, so obviously something's off," he says, his shoes appearing under the crack in the stall.

While I didn't enjoy vomiting, it does settle my stomach somewhat to the point where I think I can get up. I don't think there is anything else left to come out, and I need to get back to my students before they start to get worried.

"What's wrong, baby?" Tyler asks, his hands gripping my arms as he stares at me in concern once I've finally exited the stall.

"Nothing, I just haven't been well since I woke up this morning. But I feel a lot better now. Must have been something I ate," I explain as reassuringly as I can, but the look on Tyler's face tells me he's not convinced.

I pull away from him as I walk over to the sink, hoping to rinse my mouth out as best I can. I remember I have gum in my bag, which I left at the picnic tables. At least I won't have to walk around with a bad taste in my mouth for the rest of the day.

"Maybe you should go home. We can get you a"

I immediately cut his suggestion off.

"No. I am not going home. I'm fine. I promise you, I'm fine," I say, hoping my voice sounds convincing.

He remains there staring at me, taking in my form as I try not to squirm. I don't like this unwavering attention directed at me. I especially don't like it after he listened to me throw up.

"I'm worried about you," he says, stepping closer. His head tilts down and his bottom lip juts out in a small pout I doubt he notices he's doing.

It's adorable.

"Well, don't be. I'm fine. I promise," I say, letting my hand reach out to grab his.

I press a small kiss onto his knuckles, hoping it relaxes him. I can't have him worried. We both need to be focused on the kids.

"Now," I begin when my lips pull away, "let's get back out there."

His feet stay planted as he looks on at me, still trying to assess my well-being. I stare at him imploringly, waiting for him to move on.

Finally, with an obviously exaggerated sigh, he nods again.

"Fine. But you tell me if this happens again. Okay?" he demands, sounding deadly serious.

"Okay," I answer, but I don't plan on getting sick again.

It must be something I ate. I'm fine otherwise.

With one more squeeze of my hand, Tyler drops it as we head out of the bathroom. And I don't have to worry that my kids will be concerned. I'm sure they will be too busy teasing Tyler and me for our disappearance, the two of us not doing much to beat the allegations that we "like each other."

CHAPTER 19



TYLER

“*T*hey’re going to love you,” I reassure Maria as we step into my parents’ house, the lively sounds of my family filtering in through the screen door.

“Let’s hope so,” Maria responds with a nervous smile.

I’m confident that they will adore her. Who wouldn’t? She embodies kindness. I’m almost tempted to consult a dictionary to see if her picture accompanies the word’s definition.

“Feeling alright?” I ask, making sure to check in before we join everyone.

Ever since she fell ill at the Museum of Science, I’ve been concerned about her well-being, despite her attempts to reassure me. She claims there haven’t been any issues since, but I still can’t help but worry about her health.

“Yes, you don’t need to worry,” Maria tells me firmly, though I know she secretly appreciates my concern.

As I slide open the screen door leading to the back porch, it’s almost comical how quickly everyone’s heads turn toward us.

“You guys are here!” my mom exclaims, leaping up from her chair and circling the table to envelop Maria in a hug. “It’s wonderful to meet you.”

“You too,” Maria replies with a smile, and I’m certain my mother’s warm greeting has helped ease her anxiety some.

“I’m Beth, and this is Tyler’s dad, Philip, and his sister, Monica,” Mom introduces, guiding us to the two available seats at the table.

“Sadly,” my fifteen-year-old sister grumbles, earning a chuckle from Maria and a playful smirk from Monica herself.

“Traitor,” I playfully whisper into Maria’s ear.

“So, Maria, what’s the issue? I mean, you’re with Tyler, and I can’t imagine him being anyone’s first choice,” Monica remarks, drawing a glare from me across the table.

“You know, Jared said something similar. Maybe you two are more alike than you think,” I suggest, causing Monica to visibly recoil at the notion.

“Never say that again,” she warns me with an intense tone before shifting her gaze to Maria, her demeanor instantly brightening. “So, Maria, what’s your line of work?”

“Yes, I’m curious too,” my father interjects.

“I’m a preschool teacher. That’s sort of how Tyler and I met. He was gracious enough to agree to volunteer at my school.”

“You allow Tyler to be around little kids?” Monica calls out, smirking. “How is that working out?”

“He’s great around kids,” Maria replies easily. “He recently helped chaperone a Museum of Science visit.”

“I went to the Museum of Science back when I was in elementary school,” Monica chimes in.

“Why did everyone go except me?” I ask, racking my brain to recall my past school outings.

“Guess you’re too old,” Monica teases, eliciting laughter from Maria.

“That’s exactly what I said,” Maria adds quickly, and the two girls share a giggle at my expense.

“Well,” my mom declares, rising from her seat and giving me a pointed look, “I should order the pizza now. Tyler, could you grab the drinks from the kitchen?”

As I look over to Maria, I see her engrossed in a conversation with Monica about a particular incident from one of our combined family trips with Jared's family, so I decide not to interrupt.

Inside the house, my mom searches for the local pizzeria's contact number while I head to the kitchen to retrieve the pitcher of lemonade.

"I really like her, Tyler," my mom gushes, prompting a grin from me as I grab the lemonade.

"I'm glad to hear that. I really like her too," I reply, my face growing warmer as my mom lets out a huff of approval.

"So, this is the girl who had you pacing around my yard in worry?" my mom continues, dialing the restaurant's number.

"Yes, she's the one. Clearly, things have turned out just fine," I assure her, listening as she places an order for a cheese and a pepperoni pizza.

"Maria and Monica seem to be hitting it off," my mom remarks as she concludes her phone call.

"I'm not entirely convinced that's a good thing," I respond, already anticipating Monica's strategic plotting to recruit Maria in her endeavors to gang up on me.

My mom appears to ponder this for a moment before commenting, "You have Jared, so don't worry too much. I think this connection will be quite nice for Monica."

She's right. Though she doesn't express it outright, I'm aware that my little sister has at times harbored resentment over not being included in the activities Jared and I shared, even though she understood that our substantial age gap played a role.

Despite that age difference, Jared and I used to find amusement in teasing Monica, and now that she's navigating her angsty teenage years, she's determined to demonstrate she can hold her own.

My mom grabs some wine and leads us back to the porch.

Once there, I pour a glass of lemonade for Maria and me.

“Want to pour me a glass?” Monica asks, giving me the first real smile the entire time I’ve been here.

I make a show of thinking about my answer before ultimately telling her, “No, I think I’m good.”

And the smile is completely gone.

“I was just telling Maria about that time you passed out in front of the hotel room on the family trip,” Monica says smugly, my face immediately going red at her words.

So, that’s what they had been talking about. I shouldn’t have left the table.

“One day, when you’re old enough to drink, you’ll understand,” I bite back, but it does nothing to reclaim my dignity.

“Oh, I promise I’ll make sure I never go there,” Monica replies confidently.

If only Jared was here. She’d be too distracted fighting with him to waste anytime dredging up embarrassing stories from my past.

“We didn’t even realize he was missing until we were getting ready to venture out in the morning and found him curled up on the doorstep,” my mom joins in, and I shoot her a glare.

“Mother,” I warn, though the threat echoes empty.

“What? It’s funny. Even Maria finds it funny,” my mom points out, her face holding the same smug expression as Monica’s.

And sure enough, Maria is trying and failing to hold in uproarious laughter during what has become a “Let’s embarrass Tyler” session.

I should have been worried about this before we came here. In the end, I’m not even surprised that this is happening. Of course Monica would take the opportunity to tease me. And mom? Well, since I always had Jared, she’s tried her best to back Monica up when it comes to giving me a taste of my own medicine.

The sound of a car rolling up the driveway trickles around to the back of the house.

“That must be the pizza,” my mom says, beginning to stand up.

“I’ll get it, honey,” my dad says good naturedly, placing a kiss on my mother’s head as he gets up to collect the food.

I’ve always wanted to have a relationship like the one my parents have. It’s always seemed so impossible.

Until I met Maria.

Out of every girl I’ve ever been with, none of them have ever made me feel the way she does. Like no matter where life takes me, coming home to Maria would make it all worth it.

Or, which may be more applicable to our situation, having her dad berate me and make my time in the office that much harder would be worth it.

The idea makes my stomach toss, but not as much as it has before. Because in the end, I know I’d have Maria.

“Lunch is served,” my dad calls out as he walks back onto the porch, balancing the boxes as well as a stack of paper plates in his hands.

“That smells amazing,” Maria says, and looking at her, it’s as if she has hearts in her eyes. “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted pizza so much in my life.”

“You don’t even look at me like that,” I joke as I watch her reach over to grab a plate and a slice of pepperoni.

“I’d be concerned for her well-being if she did,” Monica teases me in a cheery voice and a kind smile, completely opposite from the usual quick jab.

“At least I’m with someone,” I tell her, always ready to spar with Monica verbally.

“I’d sure hope so. You’re thirty-three,” she retorts, and that earns a round of laughter from everyone at the table.

“I’ll remember this,” I tell her before filling my mouth with a bite of pizza.

But it's all in jest. No matter how much Monica and I get into it, she's still family, and I've always loved my family. Though, I still can't figure out how she's the same baby I held in my arms when I was eighteen.

"So, you two, tell me more about what you and Tyler have been working on in the classroom," my dad asks, and I already know that Maria is ready to go into an in-depth explanation.

While I thought Maria would get along with my family, a part of me still worried because I really wanted them to like each other. But seeing her engaging with my parents now, sharing laughs, and giggling with Monica, I know she'll fit in perfectly.

Now, I just need to figure out how I'll fit in with hers.

CHAPTER 20



MARIA

“*Y*ou don’t have to continue with the volunteering if it’s becoming too much to handle with your job,” I call out, observing Tyler as he paces around the room. He repeats the same phrases he’s been practicing for an hour, fine-tuning his opening remarks for an upcoming trial.

While he rarely has to appear in court, he’s currently handling a copyright dispute for one of his major clients. This, in addition to his help in my classroom, makes me feel guilty that he’s working too much to compensate for the time he loses at the office.

“No, I’m okay,” he responds swiftly, returning to his speech rehearsal.

“They haven’t violated any copyright laws because ... because,” he trails off, jotting down a note on his pad.

With a sigh, I resume scrolling through my phone. I must ease my excessive worrying. I’ve been grappling with enough due to my stomach issues. I can’t allow additional frustrations to aggravate me.

Even though I assured Tyler that I’ve been feeling well, I suspect something might still be amiss. Some mornings I wake up feeling queasy. Typically, it fades, leading me to stop stressing until the sensation resurfaces.

I don’t want to burden Tyler any more than he already is with his work. The field trip took him away from work for most of the day last week, and he’s been playing catch up ever since.

A small part of me wondered if I was pregnant. I almost went out to buy a test. But I got my period soon after, and I never burdened Tyler with the fleeting thought.

I also feel responsible because I'm the reason he's overwhelmed with work. If it wasn't for my father, he would not have been compelled to volunteer.

My father is another issue we haven't tackled yet.

"I've been thinking that since I've met your family now, we need to talk again about mine," I start. Tyler doesn't stop his pacing.

It's as if he didn't hear a single word that came out of my mouth, continuing to mumble the same words to himself.

"Tyler, really. I know you're busy, but" I'm not able to finish the sentence as Tyler quickly cuts me off.

"Yes, I'm busy. And since you noticed, could you please treat me as such?" he says, the smile on his face not matching the harsh bite of his words.

Tyler's never been rude to me before, and I'm very put off.

"I'm sorry. You just seemed a little stressed, and I figured maybe it could take your mind off things if you weren't focused on work," I mumble, unable to meet his eyes.

I'm taken aback at the scoff that leaves his mouth.

"Oh, so instead of being stressed about work, you want me to stress about telling your dad we're seeing each other? Newsflash, I work with him. So, regardless, I'd be stressed about work," he snaps, and it's enough to put tears in my eyes.

But I refuse to let Tyler see me like this, so with a huff, I stand up from the couch and rush into his bedroom. I'm not in the mood to be dealing with such a moody Tyler.

I have half a mind to leave but figure it wouldn't help the situation in the slightest if I did. So, instead, I flop down onto his king-sized bed, hoping that sooner or later, he will stop being so mean.

Later ends up being about twenty minutes. The door to his room cracks open slowly, and a contrite looking Tyler appears in the doorway.

“Maria,” he calls out. At the moment, I don’t feel like being forgiving, so I don’t say anything as I turn my body away from the door.

“Maria,” Tyler calls out again in a sing song voice, and I can feel as he climbs onto the bed.

I don’t bother acknowledging him and keep my back to him, despite the fact that I can feel him coming up behind me.

He doesn’t say anything as he lets his arm drape over me, laying down behind me as if he wasn’t being a dick less than half an hour ago.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he offers, pressing a kiss to the back of my neck.

I still don’t say anything. It’s obvious that he’s trying to extend an olive branch, and I should be mature enough to talk things out and forgive him, but I don’t plan on making it too easy just yet.

“I’m just stressed, sweetheart. I’m sorry for being such an ass,” he tells me, and him calling himself that brings me some satisfaction.

So, I mumble out, “And a douchebag.”

“And a douchebag,” he repeats. I can hear a smile in his voice.

Finally, I turn around to face him, finding him propping his head up on his hand as he looks at me.

“I know you’re stressed. Sorry for pestering you,” I offer, giving him a sheepish smile.

In his state, he probably isn’t interested in talking about my father. But as each day passes, that discussion becomes even more pressing.

“You could never pester me,” he says, leaning down to give me a soft kiss on the lips. “In fact, you probably keep my

head from exploding.”

I smile at the words. “Is there anything productive I can do to help you feel less stressed?”

He ponders the words for a moment before settling on, “No, nothing I can think of.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, my voice lowering an octave as I sit up, moving closer to him until he’s forced to drop onto his back, and I quickly move to straddle the lower half of his legs.

“Well, I thought I was sure, but now,” his words falter as my hand reaches out to palm him through his sweatpants, the low-hanging gray material having enticed me all evening, “I’m not so sure.”

My hand reaches into the waistband of his pants, and I pull out his increasingly stiff member. The hot flesh feels so good in my hand, and I almost believe that this will do more to de-stress me than it will for him.

“You don’t have to” He’s again cut off when I waste no time engulfing him in my mouth, loving the feeling of him getting harder while encased between my lips.

The loud moan he lets out is music to my ears.

“Fuck, that feels good,” he groans, and I let my eyes wander up to take in the expression on his face.

I love the look of pleasure that he makes whenever we’re fucking. The furrow of his brow, the slight part of his lips, and the look of concentration mixed with desire all come together to get my own body wound up.

My tongue traces up the thick vein of his cock, giving a harsh suck to his tip before bobbing back down as far as I can take him. Not having the most experience doing this, a part of me always worries that I’m not doing enough for him.

But seeing his face tells me I have nothing to worry about.

Tyler’s fingers thread through my hair as he helps me to move up and down on him. I love the domineering nature of it, which is why I pull off of him for a moment to mumble, “Grip my hair harder,” before going back to sucking him.

He groans, his hand gripping my hair harder, moving my head up and down on him even quicker.

It's so hot, and I know that Tyler thinks so, too, by the way his cock twitches in my mouth. He breathes in sharply, letting me know that he's about to finish, and I let my mouth give one more hard pull as I wait in anticipation for him to fall apart.

"Fuck, Maria," he groans as he shoots into my mouth, his hand going limp on the back of my head and falling away as he clutches the sheets.

Pulling my mouth off him, I wipe my lips and grin in satisfaction as I watch him pant, body covered in a sheen of sweat as I make my way up his body.

"You're going to kill me one day," he tells me, moving his hand to grab the back of my head again. He pulls my mouth forward into a searing kiss, the taste of him still on my tongue.

"We can't have that," I mutter against his lips as I pull away, sharing a teasing grin with him before I ask, "Did it help you relax?"

"It sure did," he tells me, arm wrapping around me as I lay on his chest.

As much as I don't want to ruin the newly calmed atmosphere and despite knowing that Tyler still has work he needs to finish tonight, I have to bring up my previous question.

"Tyler," I say tentatively, crossing my fingers that the question won't cause another spat like before.

"Yes?" he answers softly, hand absentmindedly stroking my hair.

"We have to come clean to my dad," I say, my voice filled with finality.

Tyler takes a deep breath, and I brace myself to listen to him try to talk me out of the suggestion.

Why don't we just wait a little longer? After the case. No, after this one. Why not wait until the end of the year, like a Christmas gift, right?

But I'm pleasantly surprised when he says, "Why don't we set up a lunch?"

My face is immediately overtaken by a smile. As nervous as I am, I can't continue to keep this secret from my father. I want to be with Tyler, and that means telling my dad the truth.

"Lunch sounds nice," I answer, pressing a kiss to his bare chest as we lay there in comfortable silence, me soaking in every moment before Tyler has to get back up and resume work.

CHAPTER 21



TYLER

Waking up with the feeling of Maria's body pressed against mine is exquisite, so when that sensation is missing, I'm thrown off.

Disappointed, I sit up to find the other side of my bed empty.

I start searching for her. It takes only a moment as I quickly notice the faint light seeping out under the crack of my bathroom door.

I discover Maria hunched over the toilet, her expression reflecting absolute misery.

"Maria?" I inquire, puzzled, as I kneel down on the tiled floor beside her.

The last time I witnessed her in this state was at the Museum of Science. Although she had assured me of her well-being afterward, that doesn't appear to have been accurate.

"I'm okay," she mumbles, though her statement is promptly disproven as her features contort just before she vomits into the toilet.

Even though the sight of vomit makes me queasy, I recognize that Maria must be feeling much worse. So, I gather her hair and rub her back, letting her know that I'm there for her.

"Let it all out," I encourage, my heart aching at the sound of her strained gasps.

Could she be pregnant? She said she was on the pill.

When her body eventually stills, she leans away from the toilet.

“I think that’s all,” she murmurs, struggling to regain her footing.

I assist her in standing, guiding her to the sink so she can brush her teeth and eliminate the bitter taste of bile.

“Why don’t we find you something to eat?” I propose after she finishes, stepping out of the bathroom.

Maria wrinkles her nose in disgust. “I’m not really hungry.”

Having expelled the contents of her stomach, she undoubtedly needs sustenance.

“I believe it’s time to take you to the doctor,” I suggest, recognizing that enduring this for two and a half weeks isn’t normal.

Maria starts to shake her head, but stops quickly with a wince. “I don’t think seeing a doctor will be necessary.” She crawls back into bed, turning away from the soft morning that’s beginning to filter into my room on this Sunday morning.

“Clearly, something is amiss,” I insist, perching on the bed’s edge, so I can observe her wrapped in my comforter.

“I know what’s wrong,” she whispers.

“What was that?” I ask again, gently brushing a strand of hair from her face, a futile endeavor considering how many have escaped from her messy braid.

“I know what’s wrong, I said,” she repeats louder, and her words leave me perplexed.

“You’re pregnant?” I ask, wanting to confirm my suspicion.

She doesn’t immediately say anything but has a look of concentration etched onto her face. I can just barely see her with how high up she has the thick comforter on her.

Finally, she lets her eyes slowly move to me, looking at me straight on. It's a jarring sight, with how much worry fills her eyes. It's as if she's just seen a ghost.

"Tyler, I ... I think so ..." she says, and it comes out as a whisper, but this time, I'm sure I heard her.

It's like my mind turns into nothing but TV static. Just black, white, and gray dots, and the insistent sound of buzzing that I can't turn off.

I worry that my heart may pound out of my chest.

We had been careful, and it's not like we've been trying to let this happen. I guess I know there's always the chance, but me? A father? I figured I at least had a little more time before that was to happen.

If her father was going to kill me before, now he will only leave me alive to torture me. He'll find death to be too merciful for someone like me.

Despite the pace that my mind is running, I can see that Maria's more scared than I ever could be. And the sight quiets my mind. She's who I need to worry about first.

"Did you miss your period?" I ask before thinking back to our trip to the Museum of Science. "Is this what happened at the museum? You told me everything was fine."

"I thought I was fine. I'd thought that maybe I was pregnant ... but only for a moment because I got my period soon after," she explains, her eyes filling with tears.

"Then how could you be pregnant?" I ask in confusion.

"Well, right before I threw up just now, I looked up if you could have your period while pregnant," she says, voice sounding closer and closer to sobbing. "And it said there could be spotting that can be mistaken for a period. How could I not know that? How could I be so ridiculous?"

At that, she does start crying. Reaching my hand out, I try to wipe them away from her face as I ask my next question

"Have you taken a test?" I ask softly, hoping that I can somehow make this experience less scary for her.

I took her virginity, and now she's pregnant. It's so easy for me to feel like this is all my fault. Not only am I older, but I'm more experienced and should have been more careful.

"No." She lets her eyes drift away from mine in what feels akin to shame.

"Let's go to the store and get a few tests, so we are sure," I offer, knowing that if they come out positive, we'll be forced to face a whole other set of issues neither of us are ready to deal with.

Maria contemplates my words for a moment before finally letting out a soft sigh as she sits up in bed.

"Alright," she says, getting up to throw something on so we can run to the pharmacy.

The short walk there from my apartment is filled with silence, both of us thinking about what a positive test result would mean for us.

Would she want to keep the child? Luckily, I'm in a financial position to support it. But can I actually do this? Do I have what it takes to be a dad?

Going into the pharmacy, we don't waste any time and grab three of the most recognizable brands we see.

The walk back to the apartment is just as silent. Despite our fear of the results, we both want to know the truth.

When we get back into my apartment, Maria grabs the tests.

"I'll go do these now." She offers me a tense smile before going into the bathroom.

And I wait. Easily the longest ten minutes of my life. My mind races with what these results will mean for us, and my feelings are completely conflicted when it comes to what I want.

"Pregnant," she says as she comes out of the bathroom, holding up the tests.

We stand there in silence, looking at the sticks, as if staring at them longer will change the results.

“So ... what do you want to do?” I finally ask, knowing I plan on following Maria’s lead.

Her eyebrows raise at my question.

“Well,” Her lips quirk up, despite her shaky voice, “I’ve always wanted kids.”

Of course, she does. She’d make an amazing mother. I’ve already seen how she is in the classroom, and I can only imagine that when it comes to her own child, she’d be even better. If that is even possible.

“Well, I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be there through it all,” I tell her, needing her to know how much I mean it. “Let’s set up a doctor’s appointment.”

“Okay,” she breathes out, her eyes still unfocused like she can’t believe what’s going on.

I step forward, pulling Maria into my arms. She doesn’t wrap hers around me, but I can feel her body pressing into mine, finding comfort in my presence.

I’m scared, terrified even, at the prospect of having a child. Telling everyone, preparing for its arrival, raising it for the rest of my life.

But despite my worries, I know that my number one job right now is to be here for Maria. This won’t be easy for her, and I plan to do everything in my power to help her through this.

And while I had no plans on raising a child at the moment, if I were to do it with anyone, it would be Maria.

CHAPTER 22



MARIA

“*A*nd that’s the heartbeat,” Dr. Owens breaks the silence. The rhythmic *thump, thump, thump* resonates in the cozy office.

It’s been a week since I took the home pregnancy test. We’ve both been treading cautiously, navigating our days with the weight of what we know. Tyler wears a look of wide-eyed curiosity, his face a canvas I can’t decipher. Is he joyful? Anxious? Elated? Apprehensive? The ambiguity of his thoughts only adds to my worries. But then again, I’m not even sure of my own feelings.

The notion of becoming a parent fills me with enthusiasm; it’s a dream I’ve always held. Yet, beneath the excitement, there’s an undercurrent of fear that overshadows my joy. I hadn’t envisioned having a child at such a young age. I had assumed I’d have a few more years before taking on the responsibility for another life.

Yet, here I am, expecting a baby with a man ten years my senior, who also happens to work for my father. The situation feels bizarre.

“You’re about seven weeks along,” Dr. Owens informs us, prompting me to guess when the conception might have happened.

A few instances come to mind, though, considering my luck, it wouldn’t be surprising if it were the night I lost my virginity. Despite using protection, I wasn’t on birth control at

the time. The timeline aligns, making me feel like a living example from a high school health class.

See, everyone? You can still get pregnant, even your first time.

But then again, birth control isn't foolproof, and it would just be typical for it to fail for me.

When Dr. Owens finally pulls out the ultrasound sensor, I'm more than ready to get dressed and flee the office. He hands me pamphlets detailing the first trimester of pregnancy as well as the available options, finally releasing us from the room.

Stepping out into the hallway, Tyler releases a heavy sigh.

"Hearing it confirmed from a doctor is surreal," he shares as we stop outside the door.

I intend to respond, agreeing with him, but all that escapes my lips is a choked sob.

"Oh, sweetheart," Tyler murmurs, enfolding me in his arms. His embrace offers comfort amid the overwhelming tide of emotions.

"You're going to be an incredible mother," he assures me, drawing back to cradle my tear-streaked face in his hands. "And I'll be right here beside you every step of the way."

His words only make my cries worse, not because I'm more scared, but because I truly believe him. If there's anyone I'd want to go through a surprise pregnancy with, it's Tyler.

There's so much to think about now that we have a baby on the way. Where will we live? What's work going to be like? Name ideas, parenting styles, and what I'm going to tell my dad are all questions that fill my mind.

Nine months doesn't seem like nearly enough time to prepare for a baby. I have an even shorter amount of time to figure out what to say to my father. I'm going to start showing in a few months, and I must tell him before then.

The clock is ticking.

It's a conversation I'm not looking forward to.

Getting back to Tyler's apartment, I make a beeline for the couch, collapsing onto it. I don't feel like moving for the rest of the day. My mind races as I imagine what it's going to mean to bring a child into this world.

"Whatever you're thinking, you can go ahead and share it with me," Tyler says as he collapses onto the couch with me, dragging me into his arms, so I'm settled between his legs with my back to his chest.

"I'm thinking about this baby," I begin, working up the courage to ask my next question. "Where are we going to live?"

"Right here is an option. But if you don't want to do that, we can start looking for a new place," he informs me easily. The idea of living with Tyler makes me feel slightly more excited than scared.

"Here is more than fine," I tell him, unable to hide my smile.

"What about work? I'm more than capable of supporting you if you'd like to stop for a bit," Tyler offers, and the question gives me pause.

I never imagined I'd be a stay-at-home mom. I enjoy teaching too much. But with a child on the way, maybe taking an extended break would be for the best. I could always go back to teaching in the future.

"I'll finish out the school year. Maybe I could take the next year off. But can we decide closer to the end of the school year?" I ask, knowing I want to think about the question some.

"Of course," Tyler answers from behind me, his hands having found a spot resting on my stomach.

"Also," I start, knowing how dreaded this topic of conversation is, "we won't just have to tell my dad about us dating now."

Tyler lets out a deep sigh.

“It probably would have been better to tell him we were seeing each other ages ago. At least you being pregnant wouldn’t seem so out of the blue.”

I agree. It’s ironic how worried we were about telling him about our relationship and kept putting it off. And now, we have to tell him that I’m pregnant.

We’ve somehow just kept digging ourselves deeper and deeper into this hole. It’s only working to increase my stress, which I know isn’t good for the baby.

“Yeah,” I tell him dryly, already feeling as though tears are rising back into my eyes at the thought of the disappointment my dad will feel for me. “I’m ... I’m really scared, Tyler.”

With that, a small sob escapes my lips, and I chastise myself, having hoped I would be done with the tears by now.

“Let it out, gorgeous,” Tyler tells me, pulling me tighter against his chest as he rests his lips against my temple, pressing soft kisses to the area.

Squirming around, I turn in his arms, so my side is pressed against his chest, just needing to be cradled right now. Tyler is more than ready for the job, holding my curled-up form as he continues to press more kisses to the rest of my face.

“I’m here, baby. I’m here,” he whispers.

I’m confused as Tyler shifts in his seat, leaning forward to lay me down on the couch as his body follows mine, positioning himself over me.

“Let me help you take your mind off things,” Tyler suggests, and all I can do is give a small nod.

His kisses are soft and slow, letting his tongue occasionally run across my lips or taste the inside of my mouth, but ultimately, they’re just small pecks that I revel in.

Pulling me out of my clothes is a slow and loving act, his eyes not pulling away from me even for a second as he begins to reveal my skin.

“Knowing that you’re carrying my child makes me even hotter for you,” Tyler mutters once I’m completely bare,

letting his gaze lock onto my belly that I know will soon begin to grow.

The removal of Tyler's clothes is much faster as he quickly rips himself from the material until he's naked, his hot skin against mine acting as an immediate balm to my increased nerves.

He lets his tip glide through my folds a few times, but I know my body is ready to welcome him; it always seems to be up for the task.

Finally, he sinks into me slowly, the two of us releasing matching sighs of relief at being joined together.

His movements are slow, more of a grind as he works to keep his body pressed against mine. His face rests right above my own, and I'm able to watch every expression of pleasure he makes.

Neither of us are in a hurry to reach completion, seeming more than content to be connected and moving softly together.

"You're going to make such a good mom," Tyler whispers, so close to me that his breath grazes my face.

"And you'll make an amazing dad."

We're going to be parents, raising a human together for the rest of our lives. No matter what happens to us, we'll always be connected in that way. But I don't feel much worry, because I know even outside of a child, I want to be connected to Tyler. I want him to be a part of my life *forever*.

When we find our release, it's soft and quiet, our contorted faces being the only indication of it. He had been right; it was what I needed to find a little peace after such an overwhelming day.

I'm sure that our orgasms had more to do with the simple fact that we are experiencing it together rather than the biological workings of what typically pushes someone over the edge.

Because when it comes to Tyler, his presence is enough to fill my body with immense pleasure, and I'd like to believe

that he feels the same about me.

Looking at the contented smile on his face as he slumps next to me on the couch, letting his body and the back of the couch cradle me in between them, I'm confident I'm correct.

CHAPTER 23



TYLER

“*B*etter make this worth it. Jessica and I were all set for dinner, and now you’re throwing me off track,” Jared huffs as he rushes into my apartment.

“It’s ... pretty decent,” I reply, observing him as he flops onto my living room couch.

I consider joining him, but an excess of nervous energy keeps me on my feet. Jared will be the first person to know about her pregnancy.

It’s like I’ve got a frog in my throat, an unusual sensation when dealing with Jared. I’m used to sharing everything with him without a care. But this? Once the words leave my mouth, it becomes real.

“Quit dragging it out, dude. You’re making me all jittery,” Jared grumbles, his head comfortably settled on the couch’s armrest.

Summoning a deep breath, I lock my gaze onto Jared. He appears almost disinterested, but I know that won’t last.

“Okay,” I start, concluding that directness is best. “Maria’s pregnant.”

Jared’s interest is immediately piqued. Springing upright, his eyes widen. It’s the reaction I foresaw, yet his sudden focus on me has me swaying on my feet.

“She’s what?” Jared questions, seemingly wanting to confirm he heard me right.

“Maria is pregnant,” I repeat slower, and I’m sure this is probably the first-time in my entire life that I’ve thrown Jared off like this.

“Holy shit, man,” he begins, chin resting on his hand, thinking through my words.

There’s nothing but silence for a few moments, me staring at Jared, and Jared staring at the floor.

Finally, he breaks the silence. “Does her dad know?”

I give him an incredulous look. “Of course her dad doesn’t know. That conversation is going to be a nightmare.”

Just the thought increases my worry tenfold. Tom has always been good to me, and I’ve truly enjoyed working with him. But that relationship was based exclusively on work. How am I supposed to tell him that I knocked up his only daughter?

“How far along is she?” Jared asks, obviously enraptured by this recent turn of events.

“Almost eight weeks now,” I explain, and this time, my lips quirk up in a small smile as I consider my future child. “Maria and I read that the baby is about the size of a kidney bean.”

Jared releases a small scoff at my words. “Look at you. You’re enjoying this.”

And he’s right. Of course, I’m terrified, and I wasn’t begging for a child, but it’s with Maria, and that fact alone makes me giddy.

“But really,” Jared continues, getting serious again, “you’re going to have to tell Tom soon. Definitely before she begins to show.”

“I know. I know. We plan to do it soon,” I tell him calmly. “We just need to think about the best way to go about it.”

Standing up from the couch, Jared comes over to me, patting my shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’ll take charge of your funeral arrangements.”

“Such a giver,” I tell him dryly, the sound of the door opening snapping our attention to it.

In walks Maria, a plastic bag of takeout clutched in her hand.

“I didn’t know you’d be home yet,” Maria calls out as she goes into the kitchen, setting down the bag of food.

“Yeah, I didn’t have to go back into the office once court let out for the day,” I explain, accepting the side hug she gives me on her way out of the kitchen.

“Oh, hey, Maria,” Jared says a little too cheerfully, giving away that he’s trying to hide a bit of awkwardness.

Maria narrows her eyes at Jared, sizing him up. “So, you know?”

Jared’s shoulders sag. I hadn’t even noticed before that they had tensed.

“Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.”

“I figured you’d be the first to find out.” Maria shrugs, and I watch as she absentmindedly rests her hand on her stomach.

The gesture now seems so natural for her. I can’t help but smile while I stare at her.

“Well,” Jared drags out the syllables, “I’m going to take my leave. Jessica’s annoyance at my lateness will be worth it, though.”

With one last goodbye, Jared shows himself out.

“Hungry?” Maria asks, turning to me once the door closes behind Jared.

“Depends what you’re offering.” I smirk, bending down to nibble on her neck, receiving a small smack to the shoulder.

“I ordered from that Italian restaurant you like,” she tells me, and my mouth waters at the thought.

I should have known from the smell.

“Chicken parm?” I ask, stars probably appearing in my eyes at the prospect of that meal.

She nods with a satisfied smile, grabbing my hand to lead me to the kitchen.

We don't bother grabbing plates as we bring the food over to the dining table, opting to eat straight out of the metal tins.

"Was Jared surprised?" Maria asks as she takes a bite.

"Yeah, he was pretty taken aback. I knew he would be. I don't think he was expecting this anytime soon. We figured he'd be the first one to have a kid since he's been with Jessica for a while already," I explain, the fact that I'm beating Jared to parenthood still being hard to wrap my head around.

"He doesn't think it's ... weird?" Maria asks, and I smirk at her question.

Her dad has been a major concern, and I can tell she attempts to gauge his response based on how others react. Our relationship is a tad unconventional, given our age-gap and the upcoming arrival of our child at this relatively early stage.

"Weird? No. I think for the most part, he's excited for me. Though, he did think we should tell your dad soon," I tell her, wanting to broach the conversation.

We keep putting it off. We're both dreading it. But we have a child on the way, and it's time we start acting like grown-ups. People are going to know sooner rather than later, and sooner is our best bet.

"Yeah, I have been thinking about that ... all day, really." Maria sighs, looking very interested in the pasta left in her container.

"Any ideas on how you'd like to do it? I'll go with anything," I offer. It's her dad, and she will know the best way to handle him.

"We should go to dinner at their place," Maria suggests.

It sounds reasonable enough. "Won't they think it's weird that I'm joining you for dinner? Or would you tell them we're dating over the phone?" I question.

She thinks over my words for a moment.

“I guess I could just say I’d be inviting you over as a thank you for volunteering and maybe add that I thought it’d be nice since you already work for my dad,” she starts slowly, thinking about what to do as she speaks. “Then we can spill the beans and come out with the truth.”

The truth.

The words make my stomach drop. It will be sad sitting there as such a nice dinner goes completely to shit.

I can tell that Maria notices the worry on my face, so I try my best to reassure her with a smile.

“You know, we’ve never even considered that your parents could take things well,” I offer, noting how we’ve only been pessimistic about the situation.

Maria gives a small nod of agreement. “That’s true. I don’t think my mom will be upset. Surprised, for sure. She’ll be miffed that we kept the secret for so long, but not about our relationship. But my dad ... That’s a whole other story.”

The words “hands off” ring through my mind.

“There’s a reason I’m pessimistic,” she continues, and I wince at her words.

Reaching across the table, I rest my hand over hers. I know she’s just as scared as I am, if not even more so. She and her dad are close, and I know she doesn’t have any desire to jeopardize that relationship. Yet, here we are.

“Things will be alright,” I finally utter, not knowing what else there is for me to say.

“You don’t know that,” Maria tells me glumly.

And she’s right, I don’t know that, not for sure. But sitting here enjoying my dinner with her gives me some hope.

“I know. But I have you and ... we have the baby,” I assure her, and this seems to somewhat perk up her mood as the side of her mouth quirks up.

“And we have the baby,” she repeats, the words only making her smile even wider.

I'm not sure how dinner will go, but I know that at the end of the night, I'll go home with Maria, and that's good enough for me.

CHAPTER 24



MARIA

“Come in, come in,” my dad greets as he ushers Tyler and me into the house.

My parents and I moved into the spacious townhouse when I was fourteen. Although I didn’t live here long before I left for college, the house quickly grew on me. Following the move, my parents always tried to make this place feel ever so comfortable, carrying a touch of remorse for displacing me from our previous home.

It certainly helped that my love for my family runs deep; wherever they were, it felt like home to me. This sentiment is something I’ll treasure regardless of what unfolds tonight.

Since I’m only nine weeks pregnant and not showing yet, we considered pushing off sharing the news until I was a little further along. But my parents were eager for the dinner, and there seemed to be little point in delaying.

We need to tell them now. It’s been a secret long enough.

“You both have a lovely home,” Tyler offers to my parents as we’re led into the living room, the muted tones of the space livened up with greenery.

“Well, thank you. My lovely wife has a nice touch. Wouldn’t look nearly this nice if I picked things out,” my dad jokes, throwing my mom a loving smile that I don’t think she catches. “Did you two come here together?”

The question feels charged, and I try to come up with an answer.

“Yes, I asked Tyler to bring me along. You know how I feel about driving in the city,” I explain, having had conversations with my dad about this more than once.

“That is very true. Thank you, Tyler.” My dad smiles at him.

He is in a cheerful mood tonight. Hopefully, that will work in our favor.

“It was no trouble,” Tyler offers easily, and I cherish this moment of harmony before the fallout that will surely occur later.

The extent of which, I’m just not sure yet.

“Would you two like some wine?” my mom asks, clapping her hands together as Tyler and I sit down on the couch.

We make sure to put distance between us so as not to look too friendly yet. I want to make it at least partway through dinner before shit hits the fan.

“I’m fine. Water is good for me,” I tell my mother with a smile I hope she doesn’t see through.

“The same for me.” Tyler gives her an easy smile. That seems to be good enough for her as she goes into the kitchen to get us water.

By the smell coming out of the kitchen, I know it’s Mom’s pot roast. The scent has my mouth watering, and I’m glad I still have an appetite for it.

“Have things at the school been going okay for you both?” My dad is sitting on the couch adjacent to ours. “I know I’ve been running Tyler ragged with this copyright case,” he adds, shooting Tyler a wink and reaching over to give him a lighthearted pat on the shoulder.

“Yeah, things are going great. The kids loved the Museum of Science. I had them draw their favorite part of the trip,” I tell my dad. The trip was the highlight of my lesson plans.

“I knew they would. You loved it so much when you were a kid. Thought you may grow up to be a scientist.”

“Good thing she didn’t. Those students would be missing out,” Tyler offers, and I bristle, worrying that my dad will take the comment as too friendly.

However, he seems pleased with the answer. “That is very true.”

“Come on, you all, dinner is ready,” my mom calls out, and we see her carry the pot roast out of the kitchen in the direction of the dining room.

“Let me help you,” my dad calls out, rushing over to the kitchen to bring out the rest of the food.

The pot roast, fingerling potatoes, and arugula salad remind me of what it was like to live at home. Getting a meal like this every night was unmatched. If this is my final supper, it’s a good one.

I don’t hold back as I serve myself. My parents don’t seem deterred by how ravenous I must appear, but Tyler releases a small laugh from under his breath.

“Tyler, are you close with your family?” my mother asks politely as she cuts a piece of her beef.

“Yes, I am. My best friend’s family are my parents’ neighbors, so all of us are really close,” he explains, going on to share about some of the joint family adventures they’d been on.

It’s sad how well things seem to be going as we laugh over dinner. Mom shares stories about her time volunteering at the local library, Tyler talks about Monica, and what it’s like being so far apart in age, and my dad goes on a small rant about the judge in the current case he’s working on.

If we weren’t about to throw a curveball into this dinner, I could truly enjoy the comradery. But the thought of what’s coming has me trying to fill my mouth with food to prolong not having to share.

“I will say I was surprised when you suggested this dinner, Maria,” my dad begins, pausing to take a bite of his meal, which he has repeatedly complimented. “But in actuality, we should have done it sooner since Tyler now knows both Maria

and me. It's nice that things are working out in the classroom and that you two are working well together."

At the comment, Tyler squeezes my knee under the table. This is the perfect time to bring up the real reason we came over.

As perfect a time for sharing major, life-altering news as could be.

"About that ..." I start, my parents' focus turning to me expectantly.

Those words are as far as I can manage. I must have forgotten how to put a noun and a verb together and form a coherent sentence. This is my family. I should be the one getting up the nerve to tell them the news. But for some reason, with their kind smiles on me, I just feel a whole lot worse.

Luckily, Tyler picks up from where I left off.

"What Maria is trying to say is that we asked to have this dinner to tell you both that we have been seeing each other," Tyler says evenly, and I thank my lucky stars that he's a lawyer and probably used to keeping his composure through tough situations.

He doesn't beat around the bush, and it happens so quickly that I don't even think my parents fully register his words. Maybe it was his quick and succinct spiel that inspired me, or maybe it was just word vomit from all the anxiety that was building up in me.

Whatever it was, it told me not to lose the momentum of truth-telling.

"And I'm pregnant," I blurt out, freezing once the words leave my mouth.

It isn't just me, however. Everyone at the table seems to be frozen at my words. It's almost worse than immediate yelling. It leaves me in a state of not knowing, and I've never been one to handle that well.

"What?" my dad splutters, but I know he heard.

He probably just believes that if he asks the questions, I will somehow magically have a different response.

“I’m pregnant,” I say again, but this time it comes out in a mumble, already knowing that these two aren’t going to be jumping for joy.

“Oh, Maria,” my mom says softly, a look of concerned shock painted across her face. “You’re still so young, sweetheart.”

My dad blinks a few times. Then his gaze moves to Tyler before slowly moving back over to me, then ultimately settling on Tyler again.

“You,” he starts, his voice deeply menacing.

It’s unlike anything I’ve heard from my father. He’s always been more of a happy-go-lucky guy. He rarely talks badly of others, and on the infrequent occasions he does, he always manages to wrap the criticism in a positive statement, throwing in a joke or two.

But I don’t think I’ve ever seen him like this before. His eyes are filled with rage.

“Tom, I can see you are upset,” Tyler starts, but by the look on my dad’s face, it was clear he wasn’t going to get the rest of the sentence out.

“You think?” he seethes, his voice growing louder and louder with each word. “I trusted you to help my daughter with work. And you knocked her up!”

“I understand how you might feel. This baby comes as a surprise, but now that it happened, I am looking forward to becoming a parent. I love Maria, and I plan to be with her to raise our child together,” Tyler explains calmly, and I can’t comprehend how he’s keeping his composure when I feel like I’m on the brink of crying.

Tyler’s words go straight over my dad’s head. His face remains furious and his mouth opens and closes a few times as he thinks through the situation.

“Well, you better! Do you want a medal from us for taking responsibility? She’s only twenty-three! It’s unfair to steal this time away from her and have her take on motherhood this early in her twenties. She graduated college, like, yesterday!” my dad rages, his anger causing him to stand up as he yells at Tyler.

“Dad,” I squeak out, hating that Tyler is taking the brunt of his anger.

“Don’t you dare,” my dad says menacingly, breaking his attention from Tyler and turning to me. “What happened to you taking a few trips with your girlfriends? Backpacking through Europe next summer? Remember that plan? Now, you can forget about it for the next twenty years!”

He sits back down, turning to Tyler and barking out, “I bet you went backpacking through Europe back in *your* twenties, didn’t you?”

Furiously, he slams a fist on the table.

He has never talked to me in this way. He hasn’t even come close to it before.

“Tom,” my mom says, resting her hand on his arm, trying to calm him down. “Everyone has their own path. Maria will be fine.”

She, at least, seems sympathetic as she gives me a reassuring smile. It does little to stop the tears from silently pouring out of my eyes.

However, it doesn’t calm my dad down, as he rips his arm away from my mom, which causes her to gasp.

“No. No. All I’ve done for her, and here she is, letting older men get her pregnant like *that*,” he punctuates the word by snapping his fingers. “It’s stupid.”

Tyler’s hand comes to rest on my shoulder, and I turn to look at him with tears rushing down my face.

“We’re leaving,” he says abruptly, standing up from his seat and offering me his hand to pull me up.

“Good. Get out of my house!” my father shouts as Tyler whisks us to the door, not pausing to turn back as we leave my parents’ home.

He helps me into the car, rushing around to the driver’s side, so we can get away as soon as possible. Tears roll down my face in streams.

It isn’t until we’re halfway to Tyler’s place that my silent tears turn into full-on sobs.

CHAPTER 25



TYLER

*A*fter returning from Maria's parents' place on Friday night, things have been tough. She spent hours crying until she finally tired herself out and fell asleep.

Saturday and Sunday were a little better. There were moments of intermittent crying, but for the most part, she kept herself occupied with thoughts about the baby. The more we talked about it, the more excited I became about welcoming our child into the world.

However, all weekend, I had been dreading what work would be like on Monday. While I didn't want our personal issues to interfere with our professional environment, I doubted there was any way to completely avoid the awkwardness.

I saw Tom when I arrived at work today. I gave him a small nod, trying to show that I hoped for a professional atmosphere, but he didn't reciprocate. Instead, he chose to shoot daggers at me with his eyes.

Although the situation is uncomfortable, there isn't much I can do about it. So, I focused on my job and looked forward to returning home to Maria. We're in the process of figuring out how to move her from her apartment to mine. With three months left on her lease, we have some time, even though she practically lives at my place already.

Despite this period being one that should make us happy, it's been overshadowed by the conflict with her dad. But her mom seems content enough with our situation. She called

Maria the next day to say that she wasn't upset and that she believed her dad would eventually come around. While it provided some relief, it didn't completely ease the pain she feels.

I think that's what hurts me the most. While Tom can be mad at me all he wants, he shouldn't be taking out his anger on Maria.

My plan for the day is to get through it with as little interaction with Tom as possible. But we're still working on the copyright case, and there are documents that I need that are with him.

I put off getting the documents as long as I can, but I finally run out of things to do.

So, after hours of putting it off, I get up the courage to walk over to his office.

Knocking on the door, I hear his gruff voice call out, "Come in." It doesn't sound nearly as cheery as it usually does.

I don't beat around the bush as I walk in.

"Do you have the transcripts and?" I'm quickly cut off as he sets a thick manilla folder down on his desk, the thud signaling how full it is.

"Take it," he barks, not bothering to look at me.

He's unlike the Tom I've known, always seeming positive despite the tiresome work that being a lawyer entails. I guess this is what happens when family gets involved.

I grab the folder from his desk. For most, it would be pretty obvious to leave. But I think about how hurt Maria was after our dinner and feel as though it's up to me to remedy the situation.

"Tom, I," I'm again cut off. It's painfully obvious that he's not interested in a word I have to say.

"Get out!" he all but roars, and this time, I do what I should have done before.

Leave.

Once I'm out of his office and back in my own, I let out a huge sigh. How am I supposed to fix this if he won't even talk to me?

Maria would be best equipped to cool her father down. But it's obvious he's not in a forgiving mood, and I don't think she'd be able to handle him yelling at her again.

I know she'll want this all smoothed over before the baby arrives. She loves her family, and I know she'll want our child to experience that kind of love too.

For the rest of the workday, I stay in my office, immersed in the case. Maybe it's not today, but I'll have to talk to Tom again sooner rather than later.

On my way home, I make a trip to a flower shop to pick up a bouquet. I ask the florist—a middle-aged woman who appears to have embraced her inevitable grays—what type of flowers to give someone to cheer them up.

She makes me a beautiful arrangement of yellow roses and yellow and white daisies, places them in a clear vase, and finishes off the gift with a dainty white bow.

Thanking the florist, I'm buzzing with excitement. I can't wait to present the bouquet to Maria.

Getting home is like an instant balm to soothe the unpleasantness of the day. I set the flowers on the side table by the entrance before making my way into the living room. Maria is curled up on the couch, her book of lesson plans clutched in her hand. I feel better instantly.

"I got you something," I tell Maria with a smile as I collapse onto the couch next to her to give her a kiss, excited for her to receive the flowers.

"Did you now?" she asks with a raised brow. It's so nice to see her not completely down in the dumps.

"I did." I jump back up from the couch so I can grab the vase.

Walking back into the living room, I keep my eyes focused on her, enamored as I watch the expression on her face change from inquisitive to elated.

She inspects them, as if they're the most precious flowers in the world. But then her reaction shifts. While I wanted to see a beaming smile on her face, instead I watch as tears pour down her cheeks, a strangled sob leaving her mouth.

"Baby, what's wrong?" I ask as I take the vase from her shaky hands, setting it on the coffee table before sitting down next to her and pulling her into my arms.

"They're just so ... beautiful," she chokes out, leaning into my side.

"Making you cry is the last thing I was hoping to do to you," I tell her softly, holding her head against my chest as I stroke her hair.

"I know. I don't know why I'm crying. It's probably just the hormones," she answers, working through her tears to try and get the words out.

But I know with the time we've been having, it isn't all about the hormones. This is probably a mix of happy tears, hormonal tears, and sad tears about her currently fractured family relationships.

"We can talk about anything on your mind," I offer, probing her to share her feelings with me.

She doesn't say anything for a while, and I wait as her tears slowly subside into small sniffles. I don't urge her anymore to speak, giving her the time she needs to decide if she'd like to talk about what's on her mind.

Finally, her voice comes out, barely above a whisper, sharing words that almost make my heart stop.

"I just ... are we meant to be doing this? It's only causing trouble," Maria says sadly, slowly lifting her watery eyes away from my chest, so she can look at me.

The words sting. I'm not liking even the slightest implication that anything should be different from the way it is

right now.

“Is that what you really think? That the baby is trouble? I could list a thousand beautiful and exciting things that are in our future,” I point out, my words coming out tense.

“That’s ... I didn’t mean it like that,” she says, sounding like she could start crying again any minute.

I take a deep breath, not wanting to get into any sort of argument. We are already going through so much.

“I know. And I can’t promise you that there won’t ever be trouble. More likely than not, there’ll be bumps in the road. But at the end of the day, I love you, Maria, and I want to be with you and raise our child together.” I let my feelings guide my words.

“Oh, Tyler,” she begins, watery eyes deeply gazing into mine, “I love you, too.”

Cue the tears.

This time, however, her tears fall while she has a wide smile on her face. It’s as if the sun just came out, making me all warm and content.

“Things will work out with your dad. I promise you that,” I tell her, getting a small nod as she rests in my lap, eyes still gazing up at me lovingly.

And I do promise her that. I’ll do everything in my power to get Tom to understand, even if it gets me fired.

CHAPTER 26



MARIA

The flowers Tyler gave me were a small calm within the storm of my life. I've called my dad many times, but he still refuses to talk to me.

I try to distract myself. Work is a small reprieve. Seeing my students smiling faces always puts one on my face too.

But the second I get home from work, my mind starts racing, bombarded with all the problems I need to work through. Preparing for the baby, remedying problems with my dad, moving my things to Tyler's place, it all feels like too much.

I try to make myself useful around Tyler's place, keeping busy by tidying up the apartment. But even as I try to stay present and block the tormenting thoughts from my mind, they always seem to find a way to slip through the cracks.

"You don't need to be doing that," Tyler says to me as he walks into the apartment to find me meticulously dust mopping the floor. "The housekeeper comes every Tuesday."

"It helps me keep my mind off things," I tell him, watching him set his briefcase down and throw his suit jacket over the back of the couch.

"I'm sure there are more exciting things you could be doing to help keep your mind off things," Tyler points out, coming over to me and gripping the dust mop to it stop moving. "Prenatal yoga, maybe? I heard it's good for the baby. Or something else?"

With a sigh, I finally look up at him. There is a mischievous glint in his eyes. It always seems to be there, and I can only imagine the terror he used to cause his parents and even his sister, despite their age gap.

“Do you have anything else in mind?” I ask, entertaining him for a moment.

“I might. Come over to the couch and find out,” he tells me, leaning the dust mop against the wall as he grabs my hand and pulls me toward the couch.

He softly lowers me down onto it. He kneels on the floor before grabbing at the waist band of my black lounge pants to begin pulling them down my legs. His eyes are locked on mine, making sure that this is what I want. I’m not particularly in the mood, but I lift my hips up nonetheless so he can pull my pants and underwear down.

“Just relax,” his voice soothes as he positions his head between my open thighs.

When his tongue makes contact with my pussy, I can’t deny that it feels nice. But it’s the kind of nice that I may let lull me to sleep rather than lead into hot and heavy couch sex.

Don’t get me wrong, I always want Tyler, but it’s hard to focus on his actions with the anxiety that has been settled in my body for the past week.

I’m sure with some time, I could reach my finish, the feeling of his tongue hungrily attacking my folds enough to make me bite my lip, but in my current state of mind, I’m sure Tyler would be getting severe lock jaw before that happens.

Slowly, I rest my hand on top of his head, pushing it some to move it out between my legs.

“Mind still racing?” he asks, sighing heavily.

“Too much,” I tell him, frustrated. “It’s hard to get in the mood right now.”

Standing up, he joins me on the couch, throwing his arm around me.

“You wound me,” he says, but I know he’s joking. “Don’t count me out yet. I have some other tactics up my sleeve.

Getting back up, he reaches his hand out to help pull me up.

“Come on.”

He doesn’t give me time to grab my pants as he leads me to the bathroom. He tugs at the bottom of my shirt, telling me to take it off, as he begins to remove the rest of his clothes.

“Do all your activities involve nudity?” I joke once standing fully bare in front of him.

“Of course. How could I miss out on all of this?” He’s completely serious as he gestures to my body before breaking out in a large smile. He gives me a small tap on the ass.

Maybe Tyler is onto something. He always finds a way to brighten my mood.

The sound of the faucet starting up clues me into what it is he’s planning. A bath does sound divine right now. The warm water will soothe my tense muscles.

He adds bubbles and a few drops of lavender oil as the tub fills up.

“After you,” he tells me as he grabs onto my hand to help me step into the tub.

He follows me in soon after, maneuvering himself to sit behind me, encasing me between his strong legs.

“How about this?” he asks.

“This is perfect,” I tell him, snuggling against his chest as I let my eyes close, taking deep breaths to clear my mind of everything except for the smell of lavender and the feeling of Tyler’s skin pressed against mine.

“I know you’re relaxing, so we don’t have to talk, but maybe we should discuss some things,” Tyler offers, his body stilling as he waits for a response.

As much as I want to disregard everything and pretend that we don’t have a lot to think about, being in this relaxing

setting may be the best time to do it. My mind has calmed down, able to consider the trajectory of our lives.

“Okay, throw it at me,” I tell him, preparing myself to answer some serious questions.

“Have you put anymore thought into taking time off from work?” Tyler asks, his hands stroking my stomach under the water.

“I probably will. But I don’t think I want to worry about that just yet. Let’s talk about something fun.”

“Something fun?” Tyler asks, pressing kisses into my neck. “Like what?”

“Like, do you want a boy or a girl?”

He laughs at the excited expression on my lips, but he still ponders the question, an exaggerated thinking expression on his face.

“I think that I just want a happy and healthy baby,” he tells me surely, his arms tightening around me in the tub.

“Me too,” I tell him softly, imagining how it will be holding my child in my arms for the first time.

“Do you think they’ll take after you or me?”

Despite how bad the last few days have been, and how scared and anxious I am at the prospect of becoming a mother, thinking about my child helps to soothe some of my worries.

“I’m not really sure. I hope they have your cute smile and caring heart though,” he tells me, and I can’t help but get all warm and fuzzy inside at the words.

“Stop, you’re making me blush,” I tell him, before adding, “and I hope they have your confidence and fun spirit.”

“I’m sure we’ve made an amazing baby. What we do in the bedroom,” he pauses as he lets out a whistle, “it’s art.”

I laugh at his words, already feeling much lighter than I did earlier in the day.

Turning my head, I press my lips to his, just needing to taste him. My body is melting.

His wet hand comes up to cup my face, his thumb stroking my cheek as his tongue darts out to run along the seam of my lips. It slides inside, dueling with my own tongue.

When I finally pull away, I stare at him in adoration.

“No matter my dad’s feelings, I’m so glad I get to do this with you,” I tell him earnestly.

I know how I feel, and I know how Tyler feels. That and providing our child with all the love in the world is all I care about. And if my dad can’t accept that, maybe he just isn’t the man I thought he was.

“What your dad has said to you is wrong. There’s nothing stupid about being in love,” he tells me sternly.

My dad calling what we’ve done stupid was deeply hurtful. But I know the truth; what we have is beautiful.

“I know it’s wrong. And as much as an apology would mean to me, I can’t let his words affect my ability to prepare for our baby,” I reply, not wanting Tyler to worry about me any longer.

“I’m so proud of you,” he tells me, voice thick with emotion as he looks at me like I hung the moon. “And I promise you, we’ll do a Europe trip. Maybe not next summer, but the summer after. The baby will be big enough then.”

“I don’t think I’ll be up for backpacking, though. Hotel stays sound more appropriate for our situation,” I point out, smiling.

“And I’m going to make things right with your dad. Even if you’re okay now, I know that you’ll want him there for you.”

“That would be nice.”

I’ve always been a daddy’s girl, but now I have my own baby to think about. And if my dad can’t come around, that will be his loss.

Because now, there's another man that I know loves me unconditionally.

"Now," I tell him, a smirk painting my lips, "what if we gave what happened on the couch earlier another go?"

He looks like I just offered him a million dollars. "You already know my answer."

And I'm more than in the mood this time around.

CHAPTER 27



TYLER

In my head, I can't stop replaying what Maria told me in the bathtub. Despite how much she loves her father, it doesn't appear like she's going to beg him to accept our relationship or the conception of our child.

But I know how much she wishes for him to be there for her. As much as she can put on a brave face for me, I know the rift with him tears her up inside.

Like a lovesick teenager, she glances at her phone, hoping for a call that isn't coming. It pains me to see the look of disappointment flash across her face before she quickly shakes it away.

Calls from her mom have been reassuring, but without her dad also being on board, I know she dwells on the fact, no matter how much she tries to push it to the back of her mind.

I meant it when I said I'd make things right with her father. At the end, I'm at fault for disregarding his warning, and I must be the one to fix this. I just need to figure out how.

A more pressing matter is that Tom and I must decide whether we'll try to settle the copyright case outside of court before the verdict is passed. It's for the best to wait to address our personal situation only after we get through this case. The stakes are high enough without us getting into another fight.

Knocking on Tom's door, I get called in. Not wasting any time, I approach his desk and begin with what I came for.

“We haven’t decided whether or not we’d try to settle out of court or wait for a verdict.”

“That could have easily been asked through an email,” Tom grumbles, completely ignoring the question.

“It’s easier to discuss this in person.” My voice remains steady under his angry gaze.

“I would have preferred not to see you.”

Not that he hasn’t been less than professional as of late with his short quips and glares, but the comment seems like a low blow.

I don’t react. He’s mad, but sooner or later, he’ll get over it. For now, I only want to close out this case and not worry about it anymore.

“Well, now that I’m here, I think it would be best to settle outside of court if we can. Our prospects aren’t looking great and ” I’m cut off by Tom’s scoff.

“Disheartening to see you take a coward’s way out. It confirms what I already knew.”

He scowls, and my face darkens in anger at his comment.

Not trying to get a deal is irresponsible and not in the best interest of the client. His personal issues are obviously getting in the way of his ability to be a level-headed and pragmatic lawyer.

I know I shouldn’t take the bait. Leaving his office would be the best course of action, but he called me a coward, and I’m anything but.

“And what is it that you already knew?” I ask, trying to see if he’s willing to take this any further.

“That you aren’t good enough for my daughter,” he barks at me confidently, more than willing to take this as far as I will let him.

The comment stings, but it’s nothing that I didn’t expect. I won’t lash out, not wanting to stoop to his level. So, I default to the level reasoning that they teach in law school, allowing

just enough threat to seep into my voice to let him know I'm serious.

“Look, Tom, I know you wanted me to keep my hands off Maria, but it didn't turn out that way. We fell in love. And now, she's carrying our child. She's intelligent and caring and fierce, and she wouldn't do anything she didn't want to do. Yes, becoming a mother this young is not how you expected her life to turn out. But here we are. Maria's more than old enough to make her own choices. And she's choosing me and our child.”

I keep my eyes on Tom's face.

He doesn't give me any hint as to how he's feeling. It frustrates me, not knowing what he's thinking, but it doesn't stop me from telling him what he needs to hear.

“She's your only child, and maybe I'll understand better what you feel when my own kid gets older. But what I know right now is that she's miserable because of the rift with you. Be mad at me all you want but taking that out on Maria is cruel. She wants you in her life, and in the baby's life. If you really care about her being with a man worthy of her, you sure aren't setting a good example of how she should be treated.”

As I finish, my chest deflates. I'm surprised I didn't lose my breath in the middle of that speech. Tom remains sitting there, face expressionless, saying nothing. I guess it's better than him yelling at me or making some snide comment. Maybe he has a reply, but I don't bother to wait around to find out. I rush out of his office and back to mine.

I don't care what he says.

The rest of my day passes quickly, consumed with drafting the settlement agreement.

When I get home, soft music drifts out from the kitchen. Walking into it, I find Maria softly singing along as she frosts a cake.

“Cake for dinner?”

She startles at my presence. Her face goes red as she realizes that this is exactly what that looks like.

“I was craving a carrot cake,” she says with a small cringe. “We can order out.”

“You can have cake for dinner whenever you want.” I set my briefcase down by the counter as I go over to her, scooping her into my arms.

She lets out an airy giggle as her hands come to rest on my chest. I can’t deny it, cake does sound nice right about now, though I would be interested in tasting something sweeter before that.

Reaching over, I swipe my finger through a bit of icing, popping my finger into my mouth as I keep my gaze on Maria.

“If you think looking at me like that will distract me from the fact that you’re putting your fingers in my cake, you’re wrong,” she tells me, but the mirth in her voice tells me that in actuality, the former won out.

I don’t think I’ve seen Maria this jubilant since before the dinner with her parents. Content maybe, but this smiley? I had been starting to miss it.

“Why are you in such a good mood?” I ask, my body turning, so I’m leaning up against the kitchen island, Maria still cradled in my arms.

“Can’t I be happy for no reason?” she asks, but I know that something has changed.

“I mean, you can. I haven’t gotten to see your pretty smile as much lately,” I explain truthfully, my head tilting down, so I can look more directly into Maria’s eyes.

They shine brightly, and she looks like she doesn’t have anything weighing her down right now. It’s beautiful seeing her like this, both for her sake and the baby’s.

“My dad stopped by today,” she finally tells me, trying to keep her composure, but it’s obvious she’s almost bursting at the seams with happiness.

“Did he, now?” I ask skeptically, the thought of what he said to her last time they were in the same room immediately flashing through my mind.

I don't remember seeing Tom leave early, but then again, I was holed up in my office for most of the afternoon.

“He did. He came by to apologize and told me how sorry he was for the way he reacted to the news. He said you came into his office and changed his mind. He even said he's glad that I'm with someone as strong-willed as you.”

The kind words from Tom make my chest swell. Knowing that things will again be good between us takes a weight off my shoulders.

“That's really good to hear, gorgeous.” I let my hands cup the sides of her face and kiss her softly.

“Thank you, Tyler,” she begins, her voice filling with tears, “for standing up for me, for being there, and just for everything.”

“You don't have to thank me,” I assert. “Loving you is easy.”

There have been no truer words in my life. Loving Maria is as easy as breathing.

CHAPTER 28



MARIA

“Okay, moms, breathe in.”

Mia, the Lamaze instructor, brings her hands up, demonstrating the movement.

“And breathe out.”

Her hands come down as she lets out her own breath. The women in the room follow along.

Tyler’s hands are clutched over my eight-month-pregnant belly. I’m slated for a mid-September birth, which would normally be around the start of the school year. After talking it over, we decided I’d take the next school year off from teaching to fully focus on the baby. And before returning to school the following September, we are planning to spend a month in Italy and France.

Who said I had to wait twenty years to go on a Europe trip?

Although it won’t be backpacking as originally planned. First-class flights and luxury hotels will do just fine.

“Dads, make sure to support them.”

I feel Tyler move in closer to me, shifting his position to ensure that he’s following directions.

Tyler signed us up for the class, seeming genuinely excited about it. He’s been an active participant, always asking questions and making sure he’s doing things right.

With my due date approaching fast, our nervous anticipation has only grown. We finished the nursery last month and are excited to bring the baby home to it.

Tyler showed both our parents the light-yellow decorated room, giving in-depth explanations for some of our design choices.

My dad was extra enthusiastic as he visited. It finally sank in that he's becoming a grandfather. He realized that his reaction to my pregnancy announcement was bit overboard and hasn't stopped apologizing ever since.

He did it a few more times to both Tyler and me. We assured him it truly was water under the bridge. Tyler is very glad he can go to work in comfort now.

“Great first class, everyone. Relaxation is key during these final weeks. Next class, we'll talk more about the labor process and how your spouse can be there for you.”

Mia claps her hands together as everyone gets up to leave.

Tyler acts as if a single move could break me. He helps me up, keeping his hand pressed into the small of my back as his other one holds onto my belly.

“You don't have to worry so much,” I tell Tyler with a small smile as he rolls up our mat and grabs my bag off the floor.

“I'm always going to worry about you,” he tells me seriously, as if anything else is unthinkable. “Are you hungry, gorgeous?” he adds as he leads me out of the yoga studio.

“I could go for something to eat. Something like a big, juicy burger.”

We swing by a diner that advertises some of the best burgers in town, and Tyler helps me slide into one side of the booth, my protruding stomach grazing the edge of the table.

“Women should get an Olympic medal for doing tasks like this,” I pant as I finally settle into my seat.

Being this pregnant can be draining. I'm glad I have Tyler around to help me pick up some of the slack.

“It is amazing what you can do,” he affirms, pride shining in his eyes.

We both order a double cheeseburger and fries, Tyler adding bacon on top of his.

Living together still feels like a dream despite the fact we’ve been doing it for months now. I was ecstatic when my lease finally ended for my apartment, making our living arrangement truly official.

“I can’t watch this,” he groans, as I grab a pack of cream cheese from the table and spread it on my burger.

“Don’t blame me, blame your daughter,” I tell him, watching as his face practically melts as I say the word.

When my obstetrician told us that we were expecting a girl, Tyler broke out in tears. That night, we sat up talking about what we’d name her, finally settling on Lyla, my mom’s middle name. I promised Tyler that when we have another kid, he’ll have the final say on the name.

But he didn’t seem to care about that. He had been stuck on the fact that I said *when* we have another kid.

There’s no doubt in my mind that we will.

I bite into the burger, letting out a moan as the cream cheese mingles with the other flavors.

I had been right, this is amazing.

“Do you want to try?” I bat my eyelashes at him as I offer him a taste.

He grimaces. “I’m good. Wouldn’t want to steal from you and Lyla.”

“Your loss.” I take another bite, giving him another exaggerated moan as the taste hits my mouth.

“Will you stop that?” Tyler asks with a laugh, and I answer with yet another bite and another moan.

“You don’t understand,” I begin, a french fry poised at my mouth, “I’m experiencing the deliciousness for not just one person, but two.”

“Touché,” Tyler replies, not commenting on my burger for the rest of our lunch.

By the time we leave, Tyler again having to help me out of the booth for fear I’d get stuck in it, we’re both sated. We have time to walk it off as we head back to the car.

The walk leads us past a school where a playground full of kids resides, the two of us observing it through the chain link fence.

We don’t say anything as our bodies slow, pausing to take in the laughter and screaming that always seems to follow gaggles of children.

“What are you thinking about?” Tyler finally asks, his hand joining mine where it rests on my stomach.

“How Lyla might be at that age,” I tell him earnestly, trying my best to imagine a child composed of Tyler’s and my features at age seven or eight.

“She’ll be absolutely amazing.”

Tyler’s hand guides mine as we rub circles over my belly.

At that moment, we both feel a small kick in my lower stomach, signaling that Lyla is awake and moving.

“It seems that she’s agreeing with me.” Tyler laughs joyously, something he does every time Lyla kicks. It never gets old for him.

While it’s gotten old for my bladder, I always find myself experiencing a flutter of the heart whenever she does it.

“Just wanted to say hi to her mommy and daddy. Isn’t that right, Lyla?” I ask, and as if on cue, we get another kick.

The experience is like no other, and neither of us can wait to actually meet her in person.

“Now, come on,” Tyler finally says, grabbing my hand and continuing the walk to the car.

“Looking at you makes me insatiable, and I need to get you back home.”

“Me looking like a school bus turns you on?” I scoff, not thinking I’m the pinnacle of sexy right now.

“You looking radiant turns me on ... so, basically all the time.” He leans down to press a kiss onto my lips as we near his car.

“Let’s take you home, gorgeous.” He opens up the passenger side door for me, helping me slide into my seat.

Home.

The word means so much more to me now. It’s not just where I live, but where I get to spend the rest of my life with Tyler and our child.

With the children that are in our future, too.

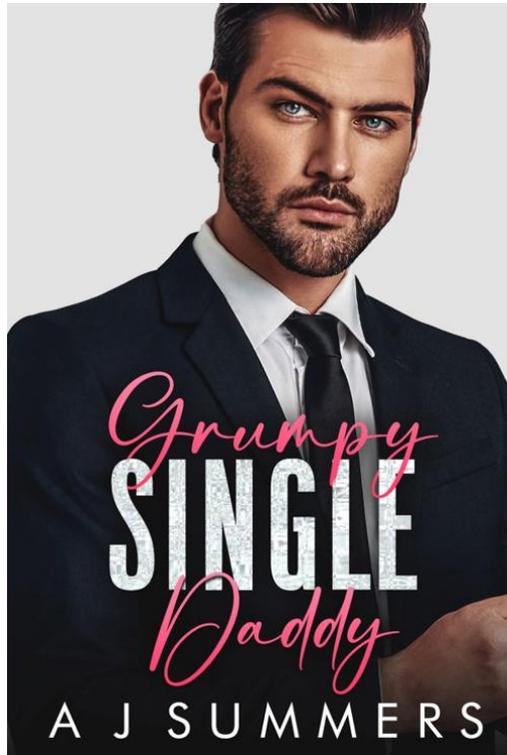
And I can’t imagine a life better than that.

The End

ALSO BY A J SUMMERS

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I thought a one-night stand with the hot silver fox would be a no strings attached distraction.

When he walks into my office the following morning, I learn he is a billionaire planning a takeover of my family's company.

Scratch the one-and-done plan.

It turns out he's cold and cruel and has an old score to settle.

There's no way I'm letting this grump have the best of me.

But the way he looks at me sends shivers down my spine. And when he touches me again, I lose all reason.

He stirs more than my temper, and I can't forget his deep growl that lights me on fire.

Then I find out he's a devoted single father. He gives me a taste of the man he could be and a glimpse into a future we could have together.

If only we could let go of our past...

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GRUMPY SINGLE DADDY

CHAPTER 1

Not to be that girl, but I'm DYING to know what it feels like to kiss him.

When the thought crosses my mind, my face grows hot. A shiver spreads across my body and turns into a tremble as it reaches my fingers, making me almost spill my wine.

“Are you okay?” the man asks, his warm, gray eyes staring at me. His lips are parted, and I get the slightest glimpse of his tongue. I wonder what it would feel like if it was running itself down my nipple and making me...

Fuck, Andrea, I think, as I slam the glass down on the bar with such force that the liquid spills over my hand.

“You don't seem... alright,” he says, the corners of his lips turning up in a self-assured, cocky, and arrogant smile I both like and dislike.

Of fucking course I'm not, I think, but hell if I'm going to say it. Yes, my libido is out of control, and I should be able to tame it.

Do you know what I can tame? My embarrassment. I've never publicly made a fool of myself, and I don't intend to start now.

“I'm alright,” I say, my voice the measure of poise and dignity, a skill I learned attending the most prestigious and expensive schools New York and Switzerland had to offer. “Are you?”

Classic projection, I know. But it works. Within my four short years in corporate finance, I've learned that directing questions back to the interviewers made them instantly want to hire you.

But apparently, it does nothing for this refined silver fox. He gives me a knowing grin. "I'm not the one spilling my drink." The words roll off his tongue, sending a tingle down my body. I turn away from him, buying time by ordering another drink. It's not the most advisable thing to do because I'm already feeling tipsy.

I spare a side glance at him as I pretend to watch the bartender do his job. It's not my fault I'm attracted to him. I haven't had sex in... I can't even remember. It's been *that* long. And this dude is sex on legs.

Yeah, he is older... about twenty years older than me, but he's aged well. The gray sideburns and the faint lines on his forehead and face give him an air of distinctiveness. He is devastatingly gorgeous—warm gray eyes, lush lips, and a face sculpted by a Greek god.

It's damn near impossible to find a good-looking available man in Manhattan. And if you were me, a twenty-five-year-old girl who has no life outside of her work and never tries to socialize, meeting a man like this at a bar after receiving the worst news of your life—two terrible bits of news heaped on top of each other—you were beyond lucky.

I could go as far as saying my fairy godmother was working overtime. If I were in my normal, sensible state, I would never admit I was this attracted to a stranger. But I'm not. I have let go of a few inhibitions tonight.

I want to fuck him.

"Care to tell me why you're drinking alone?" he asks, his gray eyes burning my skin with intensity. I ignore my feelings of lust and consider his question. Why am I drinking alone? I answer as best as I can, in my head, of course.

Well, because my manipulative asshole of a father kicked the bucket last month. We never got along—maybe because he

wanted a son to 'take over the family company' and he considered me a disappointment the first time he laid eyes on me. So, the moment I graduated high school, I moved out, applied to a hundred merit scholarships, managed to score one to Georgetown, and never needed his help again. I studied for an MBA degree while working entry-level jobs. Finally, I graduated, landed my dream job, and everything was going right in the world until his executives reached out to me, telling me I was supposed to start managing the family company.

My complaints sounded like a joke, even to my ears. *Poor little rich girl*, I could imagine the silver fox saying. *You get to run an insurance company and save yourself twenty-five years of climbing up the corporate ladder.*

When I meet his gaze, there is amusement dancing in his eyes. He's already judging me before he knows or hears anything I have to say.

And so, I open my mouth and spit out all those words running through my head, uncensored. When I'm done, I look up at him, expecting him to say exactly what I thought he would: *poor little rich girl*.

Instead, his lips stretch out in the brightest of smiles. He turns toward the bartender and orders a whiskey. When the bartender hands it to him, he sips it slowly, piercing me with his stone-gray eyes.

"What do you hate about taking over your father's job?" he asks.

I don't expect the question, and it takes me a few seconds to pull myself together. "I don't want to get a position via nepotism when other people out there are more deserving. In addition, the company is struggling, and the last thing I want to do is leave my dream job to rescue a company I hardly know anything about."

His brows furrow. "You said you work in finance. What sector is your family business in?"

I pause. I should not be talking about personal matters with a stranger. But when I look at his chiseled face again, a cord of desire tightens around my stomach. At this very moment, I'll do anything to prolong this discussion, even spilling my guts. This is the most fun I've had in years, and I want it to go on for as long as possible... before I face my newly constrained life, full of family obligations.

"Finance as well," I say after a beat. "But widely different sectors."

He smiles and says nothing. I feel a little impatient as I wait for him to start judging. When he doesn't, I say, "Here's the part where you condemn me for having it too easy."

His smile widens even further, and I feel like an idiot. The last thing I want is to seem desperate—and stupid—and that's precisely what I look like right now. I haven't been on a date for ages, but I imagine that asking people to insult you is not considered attractive. *Not that this is a date*, I correct myself quickly. I'd chosen the off-the-beaten-path bar in the Village because I did not want to be recognized by anyone. He had slid up next to me and begun a conversation, and I'd started to wonder what it would be like to...

Andrea, focus, I tell myself for what seems like the billionth time. I look up at him, almost desperate for his next words.

"No, you don't have it too easy," he says, and I feel gratified. But he adds, "No people-pleaser does."

My buzz disappears in an instant. "Excuse me?" I say, hoping—almost praying—I heard wrong. And even if I had not, this is his chance to backtrack. But he doesn't. With that shade of annoyingly supreme confidence some guys in their forties seem to possess, he says, "I wouldn't think you have it easy. You are desperate for validation from everyone. I imagine it drives you insane."

My fingers ball into fists as my anger pounds through me, chasing away the attraction I felt for him over the past twenty minutes. How dare he? He knows nothing about me. And yes, while I have a few faults, I would never have described myself

as someone desperate for anyone's validation. And I know myself better than someone who'd only been talking to me for thirty minutes and didn't even know my name.

The superior smirk on his face enrages me. I want to storm off, but I would much rather stay in the bar for the next year than let a random—albeit handsome—stranger go off thinking he got the best of me.

And so, feigning a calmness I do not feel, I fold my arms and fake a yawn. “Really?”

“Really,” he says, as calm and superior as ever.

His arrogance makes me angry, and I know he can tell I'm not as disinterested as I pretend to be. But even more annoying is that he maintains composure while insulting me, as well as a level of magnetism that turns me on.

“If the only reason you hate taking your dad's job is nepotism, you could easily turn it down.”

“It's a family business that has been around for generations,” I spit at him, unable to fake my calm any longer. “I cannot simply turn it away when there's no one else to stand in for me.”

The corners of his eyes crinkle, suggesting that he might be thinking of me as an amusing child. “Really?” he asks with such intensity that I almost forget we're talking about my life, where I'm the expert. “Or is it because you're obsessed with not letting your father down?” He shifts his weight from one leg to another, his eyes fixed on me. “I mean, you left your home and started a career path in finance because you wanted to show your dad you could do everything a son would. You think of yourself as the rebel, doing everything he wouldn't want you to do. All rebels want attention, anyway, and they think acting out is the best way to get it. But you're different. You think you're rebelling by doing the exact thing he wanted you to do. And I bet you're pleased he handed the company over to you after his death. That means he finally saw you the way you've always wanted him to see you.”

I stare at him in disbelief, too stunned to do what I want to—pour a drink in his face and storm off.

But he's not done yet.

“I mean, you're not upset by his death. Nor are you upset that he possibly passed over many executives to hand you the job. You're ecstatic about that. And you think you're qualified—to an extent, at least—or you'd be freaking out. You're concerned that everyone else will hate you because they think you're not qualified. You are, again, seeking validation. And now, you tried to make me downplay your concerns because you want me to think of you as the poor little rich girl who has everything easy for her. I bet you were waiting to whip out all the proof that you had real problems while in college when you didn't have your dad's support. That's the only aspect you want people to know about because that's the only thing that fits into the story you want to tell.”

He finishes his speech with the smirk still intact, clearly unaware that every word of his has lit a fire of fury in me, and it is taking every atom of my being to keep my body from trembling.

“You have no fucking idea,” I tell him, unable to keep my voice from shaking. “No freaking idea.”

“Don't I?” he says mildly. “From what you've told me, none of your career choices have been related to what *you* want. You...”

“I do what I want,” I grumble at him. I sound like a child, but that's the best defense my brain comes up with. I'm not nearly as good at standing up for myself as I used to think.

“Really?” he says, a twinkle in his eyes.

“Yes, *really*,” I say, only a few seconds from storming out. To think I was enjoying this, believing that I would end up allowing something I'd never let happen: getting hit on by a stranger at the bar. I've always been fascinated by how my college friends were more than okay with flirting with strangers at the bar and having one-night stands with them, the kind of fascination you hold when you envy things people do

but know you don't have it in you to do, ever. But I like this, and even though I'd rather not act on my primal sexual urges, I assume I'll leave here feeling more content at the very least.

Instead, I got psychoanalyzed, and while I'm upset, a tiny part of me wonders if he is right.

"If that's true," he says, his fingers clasped and one elbow on the bar. "Why haven't you asked me to kiss you yet?"

I jerk to my feet, disbelief filling me. Whoever this guy is, I would hate him if we met in the real world. I'm sure of it.

"You've glanced at my lips a hundred times within the last hour. You want me. But of course, a one-night stand would make you question everything about yourself. Are you even worthy of taking over your father's company if you let a stranger fuck you and forget all about you the next day, you'd wonder. I bet you'd be far more interested in having sex with me if you thought your dad would approve."

My anger gives way to amusement at his obvious ploy. He's been goading me towards having sex with him the whole time.

"What kind of fool do you think I am?" I say, reaching for my purse to pay for my drinks. "You've set the scene by labeling me a people-pleaser. So, if I decide to have sex with you to prove you're wrong, you win. If I don't, you still win 'cause you have proven that I am, in fact, a people-pleaser."

He cocks his head to the side, looking aggravatingly pleased. "I'm impressed," he says.

"And I'm amused," I reply. "Go fuck yourself."

I throw a couple of bills on the counter and walk out of the bar. Outside, light rain is falling persistently, and no cabs are in sight.

My mind inadvertently goes back to the handsome jerk I just met.

Being a woman in the world of finance, I've met hundreds of self-entitled guys like him. But none of them had managed to get under my skin as this one did, in every single way.

And he thought I would try to prove him wrong by making out with him in public...

A cab pulls up in front of me. The driver pokes his head halfway out the passenger window and yells, “Where to, miss?”

I open my mouth to give him my address in the West Village. But the rest of my night speeds through my head... going back to a quiet apartment, struggling with sleep because I’m still torn over the job, and waking up to a day that will change everything in my life, starting with a preliminary visit to my father’s company.

The thought makes me feel like someone poured cold water over me.

I step away from the cab. Yeah, the man in the bar was a complete ass. But I did want him, regardless of what he might think about it. The chances of meeting him after tonight were nil. I could go in there and have an uncharacteristically wild night of fun before returning to a life where I had to take a job I didn’t want.

I turn around and march back into the bar. I’m instantly aware of how wet my hair is and how damp my clothes feel.

The fine-looking devil is still at the bar, ordering another drink. He turns around and locks eyes with me the moment I spot him. His lips stretch in a smug smile that I interpret as *I knew you’d come back*.

But I’m far from caring.

I wend my way around the few empty tables that separate us. In a few seconds, I’m staring down at him, my heart beating furiously as he turns his face to mine.

He opens his mouth to say something, but I’m just about done with hearing him prattle on about my life.

And so, I shut him up with a kiss.

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