

BOSS'S  
FAKE

*Fiancé*

EMMA BLAKE

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# BOSS'S FAKE FIANCÉ

An Enemies to Lovers Romance

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EMMA BLAKE

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# Chapter 1

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## Melanie

“Jenson?”

There’s a mostly naked man in front of me, but instead of taking in every cut of those perfect abs or curve of his pecs, I’m staring at the little tattoo on his hip.

*What the hell?*

The towel drying his hair—not the one around his waist, unfortunately—comes down and I’m standing face-to-face with my former high school boyfriend.

His gray-blue eyes are emotionless as they take me in. Shouldn’t he be at least slightly curious about what I’m doing in the men’s locker room of Dupont Analytics?

What company devotes an entire floor to an employee gym? How was I supposed to know I’d get lost in it while trying to find my new office?

“Melanie.”

Jenson Sharpe says my name easily, as if it hasn’t been over a decade since we’ve seen one another. He’s definitely changed from the eighteen-year-old I used to get wrapped up in. His once too sharp jaw is now just right, square and proportionate. There’s that same bow to his lip and he’s still just over six feet tall. When we were younger, he was gangly.

*Not anymore.*

He’s definitely grown into...everything.

“If you’re done staring,” he says flatly, tossing the towel in his hand away. The other is still wrapped precariously around his hips, just under that elegant tattoo he got on his eighteenth birthday. A week before I dumped him.

My eyes linger on the shell, beautifully shaded and realistic, but broken into the Fibonacci sequence. The tattoo of a true math nerd.



I rip my gaze away. “Sorry.”

“What are you doing here, Melanie?” Jenson’s tone is still cool and calm. Despite my heart thundering and my brain telling me to run, I look at him and feel...safe.

The same way I felt all those years ago.

Before I can explain, two men breeze by. They look very awake for 6:30 a.m. and wear amused and curious expressions.

“Mr. Sharpe.”

“Dean. You’ll have those financial reports on my desk by eight?”

A submissive nod. I look at Jenson with narrowed eyes as the pair exit the gym. *Financial reports.*

There’s only one reason I’d run into Jenson Sharpe in a place like Dupont Analytics; one reason why he’d be getting financial reports from men who clearly defer to him.

“What do you do here?”

His eyes run down my body and it sends heat through me, as if he’s caressed me with his hands. Memories of nights spent in his beat-up Honda flash through my mind. His fingers playing my body sinfully, teasing and taunting.

“I’m the CEO. I should be asking what *you’re* doing here.”

The towel around his waist loosens just slightly. Mortified—and tempted—my eyes snap back to his face. “It’s my first day of work.”

“And you just happened to wander into the men’s locker room. Before business hours.”

My face heats. It looks bad, but is that a glimmer I see in his eye? A hint of humor? Does he still remember the fussy girl I used to be, uptight about not only arriving somewhere on time, but needing to be early?

“I...wanted to get settled in before everyone else got here.”

“Stay right here.”

I blink in surprise. It comes out as a command, one he obviously expects me to obey. This definitely isn't the Jenson I knew, and neither do I recall the cold, unaffected attitude he wears like a mask.

“Excuse me?”

Arms crossed, I can't help popping out a hip. Jenson Sharpe may be half-naked, damp, and delicious, but that doesn't give him the right to be rude. Even if he is the CEO of the company I just started working for.

His eyes cut into me.

“I said, stay here. I'm going to change.”

The thought of that towel coming off momentarily takes my breath away. I watch him walk into the other room where the changing area is, the muscles of his back trailing down to two dimples just above his ass.

“I must be in some kind of alternate reality,” I whisper to myself, feeling crazy. “I'm still at home, dreaming.”

But no. A few minutes later, Jenson walks back into the room.

He's wearing a suit that fits him perfectly, one that compliments his eyes and accentuates his broad shoulders.

“Come.”

The word sends a thrum of...*something* through me. I try to ignore it, following him blindly. I don't even know if this is the same way I came in, but we end up in a hallway. People are starting to arrive, hurrying down the hall here and there.

A few look at Jenson fleetingly before dropping their gazes to the ground. Frowning after them, I try to keep up with his long strides.

“What department did you get hired to, Melanie?”

Melanie. He's using my full name. All of a sudden I'd give anything to hear him say *Mel* the way he used to.

But it's been twelve years, and we're practically strangers now.

"Marketing."

His eyes flicker with curiosity as he glances over his shoulder. Back in high school, I was adamant that I'd go to an art school and become a great photographer or painter. He must be wondering what I'm doing in a massive corporation that is slowly taking over the healthcare sector. *I'm a sellout.*

I shake the thought off. It's the money that matters, and Dupont Analytics is paying me a lot to head up their marketing division.

Jenson doesn't speak, not even when we end up alone in an elevator. He hits a number—the fifth floor. There's a directory inside the doors that tells me we're heading for both marketing and strategy.

In the small space, it's agonizingly quiet.

The doors open and Jenson steps out. Even more annoyed now, I follow him...because I don't know what else to do. He *is* bringing me to my office, which is where I was trying to end up in the first place.

A small part of me hopes to get him alone for more than an elevator ride and ask...what? How he's been? What the heck he's doing here? In the deepest part of my soul I know I owe him an apology for disappearing all those years ago, but my stomach twists at the thought of bringing it up.

Jenson turns a corner and someone lets out a startled sound. I peer around his broad back and see a woman with dark pixie cut hair. She's quite short and stares up at Jenson in near horror.

"Mr. Sharpe, I'm so sorry—"

She sees me and all color drains from her face.

“I—Melanie, what are you doing—?”

The woman looks mortified and upset. I look at her company badge: Liza Honenfield. My boss’s assistant, who I was supposed to be meeting. Right now.

“Hi, Liza. I’m sorry. I got...caught up.”

*Staring at your nearly nude CEO. Who is also my ex. No big deal, though.*

Suddenly, I can’t get away from Jenson fast enough. Liza looks disapproving but starts heading back the way she came. Before I can escape, Jenson’s hand wraps around my wrist almost gently, and I feel a jolt of electricity run up my arm.

When I look from his fingers to his face, there’s no expression there. He’s a blank canvas.

“When you’re settled, come find me. I have a proposition for you.”

I pull my hand away and ignore the tingling sensation, something I haven’t felt with a man...well, since him.

“Okay. Yes. I’ll...I’ll come find you.”

Flashes of memories come back to me as I march toward an open area of cubicles and offices. A teenage Jenson, laughing so hard I can see all of his perfect teeth, the feeling of his mouth curving into a smile against my skin.

The last one sends a shiver up my spine that I hope Liza doesn’t notice.

“What were you doing with *Jenson Sharpe*?” she hisses, blocking me into a corner near the water cooler.

“He was just helping me out after I got lost. I took a wrong turn—”

“You’ll be lucky if he doesn’t go straight to HR and tell them to let you go.”

I scoff. “He can’t do that.”

Liza’s eyes are wide with warning.

“Yes, he can. Jenson Sharpe is practically God here. Whatever he says, goes.”

My heart drops into my stomach like a stone as Liza dives into a tour of my new work space and team.

A part of me wants to run far, far away from Jenson.

But I need this job. I took it for a reason.

I'll just have to ignore the guilt gnawing at me and do whatever I can to remain employed. Hopefully, Jenson has moved past me disappearing from his life and realized that we were just kids with crushes. Fooling around in the back of cars, going to the movies as an excuse to touch in the dark.

*Was that all it was?* The omniscient voice in my head asks saucily. I ignore it and decide to focus on one problem at a time.

And right now, that's getting to know every detail about my job as the head of marketing.

Even if it means having to face my past. Every. Single. Day.

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## Chapter 2

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## Jenson

When 5:30 p.m. rolls around, it hits me that I've barely gotten anything done today. Not that there was a lot on my calendar, but I was irritated enough to ask my assistant to cancel two calls that probably should have happened.

Instead, I paced. Walked the long length of my office. Wondering what the hell Mel Atkinson was doing at my company.

*Not yours yet, the voice in my head reminds me. Zach could always steal it right out from under you.*

Infuriating, but it's important to stay humble and not get ahead of myself. Roy Dupont, owner and creator of Dupont Analytics, is a humble man, and he respects the same in others. And right now, I need him to see the best in me.

Everything had been lining up nicely until lunch yesterday, when Roy suggested we head down to Vernon's Diner. It's not a place I like to be seen, but it's one of Roy's favorites, so I agreed.

Full of blue-collar workers and retirees, Vernon's reeks of nicotine, grease, and mediocre coffee. Roy always orders the same thing: a Banker's Hour plate and a hot chocolate with whipped cream. In his late sixties now, Roy doesn't worry so much about his health as he does about his happiness. Which is why he's planning on retiring at the end of this year.

"It's not your competence I'm worried about, Jenson," he said, happily picking at the piled high plate of breakfast food. "It's the fact that you don't seem settled. I'm worried that if I pass the company over to you, you'll just sell it in the next five years. And Dupont Analytics, well...I built it from the ground up. I can't let that happen."

Initially, I'd been offended. But after spending the entire night replaying our conversation over and over in my head, I

understood what had given him the impression that I didn't "seem settled."

During the last few years, I've dated only casually and very publicly. No one sticks around for more than a couple of months. And I trade living arrangements almost as often, finding a new townhouse or penthouse apartment as soon as I get bored.

If I'm being honest with myself, I haven't felt settled since...Mel.

Ironic, since her showing up at Dupont Analytics has me shaken enough to want a strong drink.

*Melanie.* I need to think of her as Melanie. Set a boundary right away.

What is she doing here?

Standing, I begin pacing once more, shoes echoing in the mostly-empty office.

I like it this way: minimalist. The flooring is dark, the windows reach to the ceilings, and the walls and furniture are a steel gray that complement the city of Boston outside.

She steals into my head again. The shock of seeing her, especially given the circumstances. How many times have I daydreamed about coming face-to-face with Mel—Melanie—Atkinson again? In none of those daydreams was I practically naked, but it was an added bonus seeing the heat in her eyes.

As much as it pains me to see her after the way she broke my heart all those years ago, Melanie is going to be the key to me securing Dupont Analytics.

A slow smile curves across my face for the first time today.

Roy wants to see responsible and settled? So be it.

Roy hired me as an intern ten years ago, and I feverishly worked my way up to CEO.

This company is as important to me as it is to him.



But he'll never believe it. I've done too good a job of disguising my weaknesses. There's nothing vulnerable, carefree, or "settled" about my life.

*Look how far you've come, though.*

Memories play like an aged film in shards and images: the day my dad passed away, when I was a kid; the first time I saw Mel in elementary school on the playground; moving from the house on Mulberry Road to the much smaller bungalow on Chestnut so mom could manage better; getting elected Most Likely to Succeed; asking Mel to prom and her saying yes; kissing her for the first time, the pounding in my heart.

Mel. *Mel, Mel, Mel.* Her name flows through my head like a prayer and I close my eyes, standing stock-still.

"Jenson?"

Every muscle in my back goes stiff. Slowly, I turn and face her—the only woman I've ever loved, and the only one I lost.

"Melanie."

She skirts the edge of the office, eyeing me suspiciously. I must've surprised her just as much as she surprised me. Good. Catching Mel off guard might help me out with what I'm about to suggest.

She owes me.

And I'm calling in my favor.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Take a seat."

I can't help looking her over as I perch on the edge of the desk.

Her blouse, the way it gapes open at her throat, gives me sinful ideas.

What would eighteen-year-old me have done with a woman like this in his hands? Probably stammered and come too soon before even taking his pants off.

Now, all sorts of ideas crowd my mind. Filthy, wanton ways I could pleasure her.

I push them away. Would it be satisfying to finally have my way with Mel Atkinson, to make her beg?

Yes.

But I have other needs. Ones that I'm sure will be more fulfilling in the long run, since Mel has proven she isn't the type to hang around for very long.

The reminder sours my attitude. I pick up a flyer and hold it out.

“Have you seen this?”

Hesitantly, she takes it from me. The delicateness of her wrist almost sends me reeling, breaking the carefully disinterested attitude I've cultivated.

Her brows furrow.

“The company retreat...yeah. My assistant said it happens every year.”

“Yes. Usually just our executive team and close clients, the higher paying ones, are invited.”

I can see the annoyance in her eyes. Mel has never had a soft spot for the wealthy. She's a bleeding heart. When we were kids, she took care of baby birds and adopted stray cats.

“Okay.” Her eyes scan the flyer again. “Do you need me to make up some itineraries or...?”

“I want you to come.”

The words hang in the air between us. My mind, of course, runs away with me again, echoing a memory from years ago. Bracing myself over Mel, my hand between her legs, stroking her wet folds. *I want you to come.*

There's a blush on her cheeks. Is she remembering that night, too?

“I—you want me to come on the retreat?”

“I want you to come as my fiancé.”

Another beat of silence, and then Mel laughs. It's loud enough that Brett, my assistant, glances our way from outside the office.

“What the hell are you talking about, Jenson?”

Slipping the flyer out of her grasp, I step closer, so that we're only inches apart. The silk of her blouse brushes the buttons on my shirt. I reach out and finger the sleek fabric, wondering if she's just as soft beneath it.

“You're going on the company retreat, and you're going to pretend to be my fiancé.” The words come out low, deep. Confident.

Her eyes search mine, the humor dropping from them quickly now that she realizes I'm serious. She tries to step back, but I catch her, a hand on her lower back. Holding her close. My dick twitches in response.

I know Brett is still glancing curiously our way, and if my idea is going to work, I need some rumors to start. Why not now?

She seems uncomfortable but doesn't fight to get away. Instead, she puts a hand just below my chest, holding us a safe distance apart. Beneath my fingertips, I can feel her warm skin, the dimples of her lower back.

“I want Dupont Analytics.” The explanation comes out smoothly. I've been working on it all day, after all. “Roy is retiring soon, and I want the company. I've been here since day one. I deserve it.”

“So you're using me...for a business deal.”

“Yes.” No point in lying.

Mel looks away and pushes me back. Not hard, but enough to catch me off guard.

“You're crazy.”

“*You* walked into *my* company, Melanie. I make the rules here.”

She scoffs. “I’m pretty sure pretending to be your fake fiancé wasn’t in my contract. But thanks for the offer.” Her eyes flash with disdain, lip curling. “If that’s all.”

She turns and marches right out the door, Brett looking at her in disbelief.

A hundred words, questions, and accusations well up in my chest.

*You owe me, Mel.*

*How could you just walk away back then?*

*What right do you have to come back and disrupt everything?*

*Do you know how hard I’ve worked?*

*Do you hate what I’ve become?*

But it’s that first one that sticks—*You owe me.*

I *will* have Mel Atkinson at my side, as my fiancé, no matter what it takes.

A slow smile spreads across my face. Because I know exactly what it will take. Or at least, a ballpark idea. Everyone has a number.

Even Melanie Atkinson.

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## Chapter 3

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## Melanie

Two glasses of wine and I still can't wrap my head around the interaction with Jenson earlier today. It's dark outside, clouds hanging in the navy sky and streetlights creating puddles of light down the quiet street. My apartment is just on the outskirts of Boston, the cheapest I could find that didn't look like it had roaches or mice.

With a sigh, I sink deeper into the tub. It should be a bonus that a one-bedroom, cramped apartment has a tub, but there's no shower. I promised myself that I'd save every penny I could, so I'll live with a less-than-desirable apartment for now.

But tonight I need to relax.

The memory of Jenson's eyes, the way they'd flashed dangerously, sends a shiver through my already tight muscles. He's clearly a man used to getting what he wants.

With that ludicrous offer he threw at me—*offer* is a nice way of saying it—I can't believe I'm focusing on his dominant display that had my knees weak and my sex growing damp. That almost had me...agreeing.

*No. It's ridiculous; you can't pretend to be his fiancé.*

The voice of reason in my head breaks through the last sip of wine and I sink lower in the water. At least it's Friday, and I don't have to be back in the office, or worry about work, until Monday.

Although that means I have the whole weekend to think *way too much* about how close we'd once been. How riled up he got me with that attitude of his, the curl of his lip as he leaned in, boxed me against him with his hand on my lower back...

A thrum of desire shoots down to my core and I pull my thighs together, clenching them. "Ugh. No."

I *cannot* be attracted to Jenson Sharpe. Not now, not when he's my boss.

*Not ever. Not after how you left things.*

True.

A small part of me knows there's a good chance he'll treat me like shit because of the past. And I can't blame him, but... that was more than a decade ago. I'd always assumed he'd gotten over me quickly and moved on.

He was so handsome back then, girls probably flocked to him as soon as I was out of the picture.

But now...now, he's so much more.

My mind replays the image of drops of water sliding slowly down his torso, clinging to each dip and curve of muscle. The way I imagined myself licking that water from his body.

The glow of my phone lights up the dim room and I sit up sharply, as if I've been caught doing something wrong.

*Jodie.*

That's my first thought. I moved to the city a week ago and she's been checking in every day. She'll definitely want to know how my first day went.

But it isn't her name on the screen. It's a number I don't recognize.

There's a link, but I don't click it. Instead, my eyes drop to the number just below it. A six-figure sum.

Oh no.

I know exactly what this is. The other half of Jenson's offer.

This must be why he seemed so self-assured when I refused him at the office. I hadn't let him finish, but he was intending to offer me half a million to play the part.

Taking a deep breath, I click on the link. It brings me to the company's website, a page for the company retreat at some place called Jade Lodge, located in Colorado.

Numbly, I scroll through the photos. The lodge is stunning, of course. The perks of working for a company like Dupont. Several pools, water features, sunken bars, a sauna, a spa, even hikes through fairytale woods and well-manicured meadows.

I can picture myself waist-deep in the pool, soaking in the emerald trees and getting a tan.

**Isn't this something your girlfriend can handle?** I type quickly, not wanting to second-guess my frustration and wuss out.

Jenson's reply comes quickly: **I don't have one. I don't date.**

**Don't you have some intern simpering around, waiting for an opportunity like this? To sleep with the CEO?**

**You volunteering?** The response sends blood rushing to my face as my body heats. Before I can close my mouth from the shock, he elaborates: **To get the company, I need a fiancé. Not an office fling.**

I have so many questions but stop myself from texting back. I've had two glasses of wine, after all, and don't want to get too sassy with him.

Scrolling up, I look at the number again. That much money would pay off a year's worth of Jodie's medical bills. More, it would chip away at some of the debt.

Holding my breath, I make the decision.

The one that Jenson assumed I'd go with as soon as I stepped foot in his office earlier today. My heart twists in my chest. I don't want him to see me as a greedy person, but...

**Okay, I type. Tomorrow. We need to talk logistics.**

Before I can change my mind, I toss my phone onto the bathroom rug.



“What am I doing?” I groan, sinking farther into the water. I need something to take my mind off this mess.

As the water slowly relaxes my muscles, I find my hand drifting lower, grazing my stomach, sliding between my legs.

Somehow, I’m already turned on. Probably thanks to a day full of adrenaline and a half-naked Jenson.

I play with myself teasingly, just brushing my clit as my legs tense. A buzz of desire runs through my body and I arch my back with a low moan, thankful the walls here aren’t thin.

Within moments, I’m well on my way to an orgasm. One that will relieve the day’s stress. I let my legs fall apart as I tease myself more, dipping fingers between my slick folds, loving the feel of the cool air on my nipples.

Just as I’m nearing the edge, Jenson’s face crosses my mind. Those steely eyes, his parted lips. I reach back to a memory—his face buried between my legs, one hand gripping my thigh as he thrust his tongue inside my core while he played with my clit.

With a gasp, I pull my hand away.

I can’t get off to Jenson Sharpe. Not only is he my boss, but I just agreed to go on a two week retreat with him as his fake fiancé.

The last thing I need to do is dream up fantasies about that wicked body of his and all the ways he can pleasure me.

No, I can do this. I need the money badly and while Jenson may be the boss, I know him—the real him. He wants to use me to secure the company.

Fine. I’ll use him just as readily.

Jenson Sharpe will never, ever, have me on my knees.

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## Chapter 4

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## Jenson

It's almost noon as I pull up outside of a small two-story brick building.

It's...quaint. Definitely doesn't reflect the splendor of Boston, but then, there's a lot more grass and trees out here. My chest aches at the realization Mel has found somewhere that probably feels a little more like *home* to her.

When was the last time I felt like I was home?

Shaking off any deep thoughts, I step out of my silver Aston Martin Vantage and squint up at the windows of the second floor. A curtain flickers and I suppress a grin.

Moments later, the front door is wrenched open. Mel stands there wide-eyed, looking both outraged and a little panicked.

"What are you doing here?"

"You said tomorrow. It's tomorrow."

Luckily, the words come out smoothly, far removed from the tremor that runs through my body at the sight of her. Her hair is mussed and she's hurriedly tying a wrap dress at the waist. It drapes over her body beautifully, naturally drawing my eye to the deep V at her neck, and the curve of her hips.

"You know, you're not supposed to look up private employee information so you can show up at my house."

It's obvious she's upset but still holding back. Must be the money.

The reminder that this is just a business transaction steadies me, and I walk toward her. Mel stands firmly in the doorway. I get close. *Really* close.

Close enough to see the flush of her skin start at the top of her breasts and work its way slowly up her throat. She swallows.

“You’re still on board?”

She nods.

“Well then, get in the car. We need to go shopping.”

Her brows knit. “Shopping? For what?”

“A wardrobe,” I toss over my shoulder, already walking back toward the Vantage. Mel’s mouth opens, but she shuts the door behind her and trails out after me.

“I—I have clothes, Jenson!”

She jogs to catch up and stops in surprise as I hold open the passenger side door. Confusion races through her eyes, as if she’s trying to reconcile who I am now with who I once was. It must be strange for her, just as it’s strange for me—seeing one another as adults.

Gracefully, Mel folds herself into the car and I stalk around to the driver’s side.

“I know you have a wardrobe. And your dress, it’s...*nice*.”

She scoffs, not understanding that the bland word came out awkwardly because I’m tongue-tied. Because what I really want to say is, *I want to be that dress. I want to wrap around your body like a glove. I want to cling to every curve and caress every dip.*

Instead, my jaw clenches.

“I lead a life with a certain level of luxury—”

“I can see that.” She’s gazing around the interior of the car. All custom, dark leather and dark wood. But instead of looking impressed, Mel just looks sad.

“If you’re going to be my fiancé, those who know me will expect you to have similar tastes. So we’ll buy a few outfits, a few bathing suits, shoes.”

She’s quiet for a moment and then asks: “On your dime, right?”

“Yes.”

I can't help the slow spread of a grin as we rocket back toward the city, into the maze of streets that lead to designer labels and stores where champagne is served as you shop.

"If you didn't notice, Melanie, this isn't a Honda. I've leveled up quite a bit since then."

"I liked the Honda," she murmurs.

Her words hit me like a hammer to the heart and a frown twists my features. She can't really mean that, can she? The women I've dated have eaten this up—the luxury, the lavish accessories, and the gifts. But in the passenger seat, Mel only seems resigned, arms crossed.

The first store we pull up in front of is called Lamb. Everything inside is white. I can see immediately that it's not to her liking, but tug her inside anyway, situating myself behind her with a calm smile.

"Mr. Sharpe," an assistant greets, familiar with me, though I don't know her name. "How may we help you today?"

"My fiancé is interested in doing some shopping. Some dresses, perhaps. Something comfortable but suitable for a vacation."

"Of course, sir." The woman's eyes cut to Mel, analyzing, judging. They narrow. She glances back at me, as if questioning whether *this woman* could really be my fiancé. "Right this way, miss."

Mel walks off stiffly, glancing once over her shoulder.

I find a comfortable couch and wait, lounging and watching. Another woman has joined them after a small argument breaks out. Mel has two hands up, palms forward, as if pushing the garments the first woman holds as far away as possible. They corral her toward the fitting rooms anyway, and I can't help a smirk.

After only an hour, Mel finds me—out of breath and looking slightly ruffled. She grumbles that everything is at the register, and I stand, towering over her. I don't ask what's

in the white bags. Just lead the way out to the car and pop the door so the staff can put everything in the back.

In the car again, Mel is even quieter.

“Is it that bad?” I ask, planning on another shop only two short blocks away. We could walk, but I want the air conditioning. And the privacy.

It feels good to be close to her again. If I can get away with it, I will. Her scent—like salted caramel—fills the Vantage, intoxicating me. I grip the wheel tighter, afraid of what I’ll say or do. In my mind, I imagine reaching out and wrapping my hand around her thigh. Squeezing. Brushing my fingers back, toward her warm center...

“It’s embarrassing.” Her tone makes me do a double take. She’s serious.

I park the car, get out, and go around to open the door for her, not sure how to navigate this moment. I wasn’t expecting Mel to be so...forthcoming. Not after twelve years of not seeing one another.

Yes, at one point, we told each other secrets. Holed up in the basement at my parents’ house, whispering and laughing, hearts aching, fingers exploring.

But this is different.

*This is a business transaction.* It’s my new mantra.

Still, there’s a haunted look in her eyes as she takes my hand and steps out onto the sidewalk. I lead her inside. The store is almost comically small, narrow, and deep, with only bathing suits inside.

She gravitates immediately toward the more colorful options, but grimaces in distaste at the cuts. I raise a brow, curious about what she’d look like in a few of them.

An older woman smoothly comes between us and shepherds Mel away. She gives off a motherly air, and soon enough, my fake fiancé is speaking to her quietly, as if

confiding in her. They both frown, heads bowed together, ticking through the hangers, and pulling this or that down.

With a few options on her arm, Mel gives the woman a smile and heads back to the private fitting rooms.

The door chimes and another customer enters. The woman is distracted, and I walk casually back toward the rooms.

“Damn.”

I suppress a smile at the sound of her muffled curses. A thud, and I can see one of her shoes beneath the crack of the door.

After another moment or two, there’s silence.

“Are you okay in there?”

The door opens quickly, just enough for Mel to peer out at me, eyes wide.

“What are you doing, Jenson? This is—this is a women’s dressing room.”

“And you’re my fiancé.” I say it in an even tone; we need to get this correct, right from the start. It needs to roll off the tongue and feel natural.

*Shouldn’t it seem harder?* The persistent voice in my head notes.

“I’d like to see what I’m buying, Mel. If you don’t mind.”

She scoffs, but then the door opens fully. Mel steps out just enough for me to get a look. And I almost swallow my tongue.

It’s a one-piece, which wasn’t what I was aiming for initially. After all, Mel has a great figure and should show it off. My fiancé would show it off.

But this bathing suit...it cuts across her hips daringly, in a dark red color, like wine or blood, making her skin look more tan somehow and her eyes darker. The cutouts on the side are slight, but enough to lead to a natural high cut just under her

breasts. I can see the swell of the underside of them, the soft skin and shadow.

My mouth waters.

It's strapless, showing off her beautiful neck and shoulders as well. I feel my cock stir with interest and fight to keep my face blank.

"This one seems appropriate."

Inappropriate, actually, but I'm already thinking of the sight of her rising from a pool or hot tub—water streaming down her body.

"Is there another you like? The retreat has endless options for swimming or lounging, if that's something you're interested in."

She looks at me shyly and suspiciously, arms crossed under her breasts. They rise deliciously.

"Maybe. Let me..."

Mel disappears back into the room, this time with more enthusiastic shuffling. With a sigh, I drop back in the chair and cross my legs, hoping that whatever she comes out in next doesn't give me a heart attack before this whole plan even gets started.



ON THE DRIVE OUT of the Boston, Mel's stomach growls.

"Hungry?" I ask with a smile curling my lips. "We can go out for dinner."

She shakes her head. "No. Not yet, I mean. I—I know we need to be seen and everything, but I'd like to keep this quiet until it sinks in."

I nod, accepting her request. As much as this is a two-way street, it must be jarring for her. Only a day into starting a new job, in a new place, and now she needs to fake a relationship



well enough to convince my boss that we're madly in love and going to settle down.

The thought makes my stomach ache. *Settling down.*

The last time I thought of settling down was with Mel, ironically. Back when I was a kid, daydreaming after a long phone call, wondering if it was crazy to be thinking of it at such a young age. Of asking her to marry me when we graduated from high school. Of following her anywhere she wanted to go.

Except, she didn't give me the opportunity.

At the apartment, I take her hand to help her out of the car and ask, "Can I come inside? There are some rules we need to set down, and some things that need to be signed."

Mel eyes me warily but agrees. I follow her into a small, stuffy foyer and up a narrow flight of stairs. She unlocks the door and steps aside so I can enter the apartment.

It's tiny. Tinier than I expected, even. Almost a studio, except that I can see a bedroom behind two interior French doors, and a little bathroom off to the side. There's good light, at least.

But most importantly, I can see bits of her everywhere.

Books piled on the side table, a divot in the loveseat where she sits, a few sketchbooks lying open on a drafting table. It's almost the biggest piece of the furniture in the room.

She blushes and goes to stand in front of her drawings, some of which are tacked to the wall. A part of me longs to inspect them, but I don't want to make her uncomfortable.

And that's not why I'm here.

Wordlessly, I hand her a folder.

"An NDA."

"An NDA?"

“Yes. This is business, after all. And while the relationship will terminate a few months after I secure the company, I need to be sure this won’t ever come to light—what we’re doing.”

She looks up at me with a frown, her eyes calculating. “You’re very serious about this.”

“I am.”

“Why?”

With a sigh, I perch on the edge of the loveseat. I don’t want to tell her everything, but I do need her to understand.

“I’ve been at Dupont Analytics since the start. No one is a better fit for running it than I am, and if I don’t prove to Roy that I can handle long-term commitment to something, then he’ll give it to his stepson.”

Zach. Just the thought of him made my blood boil, but I suppressed it, not wanting Mel to see.

“It’s your baby,” Mel murmurs as she drops into the chair across from me.

My jaw tightens. *It’s all I have.* But I won’t say that to her, either. I need to keep a wall up. I can’t let her get close, not again.

“It’s a lucrative company that I’ve spent the last decade building from the ground up. I’d like to see it go further.” Calmly, I pull a checkbook out from my blazer’s inner pocket. “I’m assuming that’s enough to ensure your involvement and your discretion?”

There’s a moment of hesitation, but then Mel nods. Her eyes are glued to the check—half of the total amount—and there’s a sadness in them again. One that’s veiled, but I can see it. I know her well enough to know that she’s hiding something.

For a moment, I have the urge to ask if everything’s okay.

Then that night comes flooding back—the hurried voicemail. *It’s not going to work out. Sorry, Jenson.*

Just like that, she was gone. No explanation. My heart aches all over again, but it hardens me.

“And you think you and I...are plausible? As a couple?”

Another shrug. Obviously, Mel doesn't think much of me, or authority in general. She's made that clear. But then why did she take the job at one of the largest corporate offices in the county?

“We have a history. It'll be easier to fake.” Another thing I don't say: *We were believable once; we were in love once. We can fake it all over again.*

She looks away, a blush coloring her cheeks as her eyes scan the NDA.

“So there are certain stipulations in here about intimacy, I'm guessing? PDA?”

“Yes. And of course, we need to have our story straight. Everyone will be wondering why Dupont Analytics suddenly hired my fiancé.”

“About that...” she asks curiously.

“I emailed the head of HR this morning. We'll be signing a disclosure Monday, before we leave for the retreat.”

“How long would we have to fake this? The retreat is just shy of two weeks, and I doubt Mr. Dupont will be convinced by a few days spent together.”

Smart girl. Now my smirk unfurls.

“A month. Two, at the most. He'll be retired by then and I'm sure this is the last push he needs to hand it over to me. Like I said, I've been here since day one; no one knows the company better than I do.”

The questions in her eyes soften. What I've said has appeased her, and she sighs, pushing the shopping bags around aimlessly.

“Okay. Two months at the most. Let me read this over tonight, and I can have it to you Monday, signed, if I agree

with everything.”

*You will*, I want to say.

But now I’m the one who has questions. A part of me is still surprised she’s agreed to this—obviously because of the extremely large sum of money I’ve offered, but that’s even more confusing. I knew Mel for years when we were younger. Money was never a motivation for her.

So what’s changed?

I glance at the walls again—the drawings, a watercolor painting of her childhood house that makes my heart ache. Her aunt’s: I remember it well. We used to sit out on the front porch in the sun, soaking up the summer days before we fell in love. When we were still just friends.

Shaking off the past, I stand abruptly and hold out the check. Mel takes it, blinking.

“I need to get going. But look over the NDA, and text me if you have any questions. Read up on our backstory. I’ll see you Monday, otherwise.”

“Okay. Yes.” A frown, and then she says softly, “Thank you for today, Jenson. I know it’s all so I’ll look the part, but I still appreciate you footing the bill and everything.”

I smile. She’d practically had an aneurysm at the total in a few stores.

At the door, I pause, an impulse overtaking me.

“You don’t need any of it, you know. You’re beautiful, Mel. This is just pretend. To convince everyone else.” And even though I know I shouldn’t, I can’t resist reaching out to her and tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

The words and my touch surprise her, and I don’t wait for a response, closing the door behind me and practically running back down those narrow stairs.

A whole day of soaking her in. Her scent, the adorable scrunch of her nose, the tempting curves of her body, basking

in pulsing desire each time she stepped out of a fitting room and met my eyes.

We need to fake being in love.

But I don't think I'll have any problem faking how badly I want her.

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## Chapter 5

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## Melanie

As soon as I hear Jenson's car hum away down the street, as if he can't get away from me any faster, I stand and taking an aching breath.

All day I've been holding...*something* in. I don't know what. Panic? Self-consciousness?

No, not that. I couldn't be self-conscious with the way Jenson was looking at me. Even if he's treating me like a means to an end, it's clear that I at least meet the physical standards of what he wants in a fiancé.

That look he gave me when I tried on the red bathing suit...it comes flooding back, and a shiver goes through my body, lighting me up with desire.

It'd be silly to say Jenson hasn't aged well. He carries himself with a confidence that's not cocky, but self-assured. It's insanely attractive on a man. Plus, he still has a few inches on me, and the way his eyes bore into mine when he looks down at me...

Another shiver. A pulse of *want*.

I fight it back. The last thing I need is to complicate this whole situation, which was already too complicated the moment I stepped foot in Dupont Analytics. Why didn't I do my research before applying for the job?

*Because you needed the money.*

Why didn't I turn around and walk right out the moment I saw Jenson Sharpe dripping wet?

*The money—*

Why did I agree to be his fiancé for the next few months? Surely we'll have to be in close quarters, and I can barely control myself already. Just the way he looks at me is setting my skin on fire.

Karma comes back to remind me as my cell rings shrilly, making me jump. I scramble to grab it before it tips off the coffee table, sitting next to the absurdly large check Jenson left in my possession.

Jodie's name is on the screen.

*The money.*

"Hi, Jodie." I sound chipper, at least, despite how exhausted—mentally and physically—I feel.

"Hey, sweetheart. I was just calling to check in."

I can't help smiling. "Thank you, but you know you don't need to call every day. I promise I'm okay."

"I know, I know, it's just...I miss you already."

My heart aches at her words. This is the longest we've been apart, and it's eating me alive—the worry. And the missing her, too.

All of a sudden, I wish I could tell her everything. Spill it all.

Seeing Jenson again after all these years. The undeniable pull I feel toward him. The same pull I need to fight, because I agreed to this ridiculous plan.

A plan that will pay her medical bills.

"I miss you, too. I went out on the town today." Breezily, I go on to tell her about shopping—well, more like checking out a bunch of stores I could never afford anything in.

I can't tell her what really went on. That Jenson carelessly handed over a heavy black card to pay for all of it. Every bursting bag at my feet, full of my new wardrobe, everything I'll need to be his fake fiancé.

Lord, what am I going to do with it all when this is over?

As Jodie fills me in on some neighborhood gossip, I dip a hand into one of the bags and pull out a cream-colored evening



gown. A gown, for a company retreat? But Jenson insisted on it.

I can't quite imagine throwing it into the donation bag at a church or thrift store. But I know I won't be able to look at them again, either.

The good thing is, Jenson is paying me enough that I won't have to stay at Dupont too long. Maybe I can jump ship to another company after six months, or a year. My chest is tight at the thought of doing this—getting wound up in a relationship with him, even if it isn't real—and then having to see him day after day when it's done.

I don't think I can let him go again. Even if he's not really mine.

Once was hard enough.

“—out there yet, honey?”

“Sorry? I missed that, Jodie, you cut out for a second.” Guilt floods through me.

“I said, have you met anyone nice out there yet? When I was your age, the city was full of hot young men.”

I crack up at the sassy tone in her voice, imagining a much younger—and healthier—Jodie. Jodie before she took me on after my parents disappeared. First mom, then dad; dad insisting he had to start over “fresh” when he met his second wife.

Jodie was my mom's sister—my aunt—and only twenty-two when she adopted me. She bought a tiny house in a small town and that was the year I met Jenson Sharpe, the kid down the street. Both of us were five years old.

It hurt to see where we all stood years later.

Jenson, close to heartless and writing checks to secure the only thing that mattered to him—his company.

Me, signing over my freedom and creativity to pay the bills, and play his fiancé.

And Jodie was still back home. Our fifth home, after following her heart surgeon all around the country.

“Um, no. I haven’t quite had time for that yet. It took me a few days to get settled into the apartment, and I just had my first day of work.”

But we’re both laughing at the idea of a whirlwind romance in the city.

Unfortunately, Jodie never found anyone to settle down with. She dedicated most of her youth to raising me, and then when the blood clot happened there was no time for anything but anxiety, appointments, and fear.

“So tell me about the new job.”

I do—I fill her in on the office, the glass walls that I don’t like, my team, my second-in-command Adrian, and the basics of marketing graphic design (which I find incredibly boring, but...it pays). She can hear the excitement in my voice dim as I rattle it all off.

Graphic design was a credit I checked off the list when I went to art school. It was never the work I wanted to do, and churning out company pamphlets, organizing PR photos, and learning brand guidelines wasn’t the job of my dreams, either.

*We all make sacrifices*, I tell myself.

I can’t help but wonder what Jenson sacrificed, and if it was worth it.

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## Chapter 6

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## Jenson

“Your 9 a.m., Mr. Sharpe.”

Brett smiles and backs out of the doorway, revealing Mel.

She’s wearing a pair of heels I picked out, clearly uncomfortable in them. I can see why—they’re an easy three inches, a dark plum that compliments her skin beautifully and makes her lipstick stand out as well.

My eyes are glued to her mouth. I almost forget to stand as she enters.

The door closes and we’re alone.

All of a sudden, the words stick in my throat—for the first time in years. I stare at her, panic slowly closing my throat as I flounder.

Then my cell dings with a calendar reminder.

*Breathe. Relax.*

“Would you like some coffee?” Relief washes over me, and for some reason, Mel looks relieved as well. Her eyes scan the large office and I suddenly realize she’s uncomfortable in here.

“Yes. That sounds great.”

A folder is tucked against her middle. The NDA, I’m guessing, though she never texted me for any questions or clarifications. Hopefully, her signature is scrawled on the last line.

Hopefully, my scramble to find a good enough reason for Roy to give me the company ends here, today.

Holding the door open, I actually hold my breath as Mel walks through. Brett watches us with a slightly surprised look. I rarely leave my office when someone comes to me,

preferring to keep them in my domain instead. But if this is going to look real, Mel will need to be the exception.

We take the elevator down to the main floor and start the long walk to the lobby. It's separate from the main employee elevators, more private, and I'm happy for the solitude, as I need to get my bearings. I'm learning that being close to Mel makes me...dizzy, almost. But in an oddly addictive way.

It's quiet in the halls as everyone is settling into the workday by now. Very few people look at us, thanks to my reputation.

Then a man turns the corner.

I recognize him immediately and pull Mel to the side, into an alcove.

She gasps and stumbles against me. I spin us both, pressing her up against the wall, in the shadows.

Her scent surrounds me, her hair tickling my collar as I grip her waist.

"Hold still," I whisper, before swooping down to capture her lips.

A smaller gasp, one that I eagerly inhale as I deepen the kiss. I feel her body weaken slightly as she grips my shoulders for support. Those heels, those damn heels...they have us almost perfectly matched in height.

My mind runs away with images of that lipstick, too, the marks it'll leave on us both. I get so lost in running my tongue over her lower lip that I completely forget what this is for.

"Jenson—?"

Roy is rightfully shocked.

I pull back and look to the right, where the old man stands frozen in the hallway. Behind his wire-rimmed glasses, his eyes narrow, and dive to Mel next. My grip around her waist loosens as I step back.

"Roy. My apologies."

I take Mel's hand, ignoring the surprised glance she gives me, a desperate plea to know what's going on.

"It's not what it looks like."

He still looks slightly outraged. I happen to know this is something he never, ever expected to see. Not from me, of all people.

"This is my fiancé, Mel Atkinson."

Mel blinks and it's as if a curtain falls perfectly over her features. She schools her expression into a demure, shy politeness as she reaches to shake Roy's hand.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dupont. We haven't met yet. This is probably a surprise."

"It is," Roy manages to choke out, then laughs. "A fiancé. You've been keeping this to yourself, Jenson?"

He's all smiles, but the quick look he gives me turns my stomach to stone. He's not all in, not yet.

"It was recent, and we wanted to keep it quiet. For a few reasons, actually." I put my hands in my pockets, rocking on my heels lazily. "Actually, we were just going to grab a coffee. Would you like to join us and I'll explain?"

Mel gives him a stunning smile and he agrees, looking slightly dazed. The three of us head to the lobby, to the café where I pay a small fortune for two coffees and a tea. Mel wraps her hands around the cup and keeps her eyes on the steam.

"No ring yet, Sharpe?"

I cut a glance to Roy, who is searching my face. Looking for a lie, a crack.

"Oh." Mel looks between us quickly. "It's because—well, we didn't want anyone to know yet."

A frown, so I jump in.

“Mel was just hired as our head of marketing. When she was considering applying for the position, we weighed all our options. I’ve spoken to HR already,” I assure him. I’d just done so this morning, as soon as Valeria, the head of HR, walked in. “Everything is signed off and appropriate.”

I give Mel a small, smokey smile that makes her blush. She’s either very good at acting or still caught off guard by that kiss. My eyes drop to her lips.

“At least, everything but what you caught us doing. I can’t seem to help myself around her.”

Roy shakes his head, grinning at the two of us. “If it’s aboveboard with HR, then I’m sure you’ve conducted yourself appropriately, Jenson. I’m just surprised after all of our talks...”

I know where he’s going with this.

*Why didn’t you tell me about the engagement? Why keep it a secret when I explicitly told you I was interested in your future, your plans?*

“I try to keep my private and work life separate.”

That’s a lie; I barely have a private life. But Roy doesn’t know that, not really. He only suspects it.

“So you’ve been hiding her, then.” He gives Mel a kind smile, one she warms to immediately. At least she doesn’t need to act like she likes him. Roy is one of the most genuine, kind people I’ve ever met.

Which is why a part of me feels rotten for doing this.

“Yes. You know a little about my dating history, Roy. Something like this—like what we have—I wanted to be sure. And I wanted to make sure she’d say yes.”

I reach for Mel’s hand, rubbing my thumb over her knuckles. She doesn’t know it yet, but there’s a ring in my office. One I’d intended to give her after this talk, maybe, though I wasn’t expecting Roy to show up.

*Will she like it?*

*It doesn't matter.*

“Actually,” Mel cuts in, “I should probably get back up to my floor. I need to meet with the copywriting team and make sure the content for the new website pages is ready to go.”

“Of course, of course.” Roy stands, looking pleased, but still slightly suspicious. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Mel. I wish I’d known about you sooner, but Jenson has always kept things close to his heart.”

He gives me a sly look, and Mel throws in a curious glance.

“Jenson, feel free to walk her up if you’d like. I’m sure you’ll keep any interactions from here on out appropriate. And don’t forget, we have that presentation with Chiron Healthcare later today.”

With a grateful smile, I rise and follow Mel, keeping enough space between us to not look too attached—but to make it obvious to anyone who is paying attention that there’s a tether between us.

As soon as we’re back in the darkened hallway, Mel whirls.

“What was that?”

“The implementation of step one: make our relationship public.”

Her cheeks burn as we pass the alcove where, less than ten minutes ago, I pressed her lush body against the wall. For a moment, I’m tempted to tug her into the shadowed area again.

*Public, I remind myself. If it's not for the public, who is it for?*

And then the devil on my shoulder chimes in: *Why not have a little fun while you're hard at work?*

I don’t even bother listing the reasons. It’s obvious. And cliché. The moment I set eyes on Mel last week, I knew I had



to keep her at arm's length.

I just need to balance that and...keeping her close enough for people to think we're in love.

"Do you think he bought it?" There's worry in her voice as we step into the elevator. Mel presses the button for her floor, and I tap the little icon that goes to mine. Another reminder that I've risen in the ranks quickly here. Literally.

"I think so. Mostly, anyway." I sigh. "The problem is, I know Roy. It'll take more than one little make out session to convince him we're committed to each other. Which is why we need to really sell it at the company retreat."

"Won't everyone have questions, though? Won't they be wondering why you didn't go public sooner?"

"It's none of their business, frankly."

Our eyes meet. For a moment, the walls come down. "What I do, and who I fall in love with, isn't their concern."

The blush on her cheeks, which had been subsiding, darkens slowly. In the small space, I hear her breath catch.

Unable to stop myself, I step toward her. Into her orbit.

Her hand comes up and brushes my hip bone, steadying herself. I rest mine on her lower back, offering support even as I feel the universe reeling at the pull between us.

Our lips touch again, this time just a graze. Not the hot devouring claim I had on her earlier for show.

Mel's breath feathers against my mouth as I drag my lips across hers, a ghost of a kiss, a taste. I bring my free hand up to cup the back of her head and steal one last kiss.

*Just one more*, I promise myself.

She doesn't fight it, but she doesn't dive in the way I'm so ready to. Her shoulders fall back and she tips her face toward mine, but she doesn't kiss back—only lets me take what I want, carefully, slowly.

Mel totters on her heels and I pull back with a grin.

“Still worried about faking it?”

She rolls her eyes and steps away as the elevator doors open.

“It’s not like we haven’t had any practice.”

Her words are an echo when the doors close and I’m alone. The past rushes in, humid and suffocating, reminding me of the harsh truth.

Mel Atkinson left town, and left me, without an explanation twelve years ago.

And when this is over, she’ll undoubtedly leave again.

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## Chapter 7

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## Melanie

Jade Lodge is mind-blowing. So borderline fantastical that, as our car pulls up, I actually laugh out loud. After a four-and-a-half hour flight to Colorado, I'm a little buzzed on in-flight cocktails and anxiety.

Jenson gives me a cursory glance before turning his attention back to some last-minute sign offs. Despite his position as CEO, Jenson still oversees most of the tech department, specifically the area that's concerned with algorithms and innovation. It's what attracts some of the biggest healthcare companies in the country to Dupont Analytics.

The driver opens the door—something I'll have to get used to, all these men with manners—and I step out, staring up at Jade Lodge.

It's truly a lodge. A luxurious one. No rustic look to this place. It's all pristine and polished, wood and dark rock, water features everywhere, and lush greenery. And it's about a thousand metaphorical miles from the city.

The air is tantalizingly cool in the shade, an oddity since it's actually in the eighties today. Jenson joins me as our bags are unloaded and takes my hand, the tips of my fingers in his palm.

“Ready?”

*No.*

“Yes.”

We walk into the open lobby side by side, right up to the front desk and the polished staff. They handle check in effortlessly, confirming that we're booked for the Mist Suite.

“Suite?” I ask quietly as we're led down a long hallway.

A few people back in the lobby, Dupont employees I'm guessing, are whispering in our wake. But I don't recognize any of their faces yet and make a note to ask Jenson who they are later, once we're alone.

"You'll have some time to settle, Mr. and Mrs. Sharpe—" neither of us corrects the man, though my lips part "—and then there will be a cocktail hour on the patio. We suggest arriving at or around 4 p.m."

A curt nod from Jenson. I'm guessing we'll be attending that, then. A frisson of nerves runs through my body from head to toe.

*We'll make our grand entrance today*, he'd said earlier, on the flight. Effortlessly. As though he pretended to be engaged and in an intimate relationship regularly, and it was easy.

We stop before towering doors carved with waterfalls and cranes. Before I have a moment to admire them, the man swings them open.

The suite takes my breath away.

Jenson strides in and I follow, much slower, and stunned. Everything is robin's egg blue and dove gray, a calming color palette that actually does give the impression of mist. The space is massive and we're only standing in the receiving area. Off to the right is a sitting area with couches and a TV recessed into the wall. To the left, there's an expansive dining area with a luxury kitchenette, though I can't imagine Jenson cooking. Not in his designer trousers and twill shirt, the least vacation-y clothing I've ever seen.

"Thank you, Reuben."

Some money exchanges hands, the man bowing himself out of the room and closing the massive doors behind him.

And now we're alone.

Jenson turns, his eyes locked on me.

*Please don't kiss me again*, my brain pleads irrationally, even as my body thrills at the memory of the stolen kiss in the

elevator.

“Are you ready?” he asks, the words coming out primal somehow. Another thrill that my mind tries to attribute to the alcohol still in my veins, but I didn’t drink nearly enough for it to affect me like this. No, this is all Jenson Sharpe, his eyes boring into me as he takes two strides forward.

“R-ready for what?” I stutter, moving one step back.

A smirk slowly, tantalizingly, tugs up one corner of his mouth. The breath goes out of me. Right then, I want him to press me up against the ornately carved pillar just a few feet away and drown out the voice of doubt telling me *this is a horrible idea*.

“Ready to play the game. Tonight, we make our grand entrance.”

I swallow. The buzz slowly slips away as Jenson turns, eyes scanning the accommodations. “We’ll have to go to the cocktail hour, of course.

“Who were those people in the lobby?”

Annoyance flickers across his features. “Not anyone important. Some of the IT support team. You wouldn’t recognize them.”

“Do they know...about us?” Why does it feel like a scandal to even say it? I feel my face heat and turn away, looking for something to occupy myself with. There’s a minifridge a little farther away and I open it, eyes widening at the contents.

“I don’t know. Probably. Gossip spreads quickly, and I’m sure Giselle in HR let it slip by now.”

My mouth drops open. “Giselle? The one who helped with my sign-on to the company?”

“Mmm.”

“That’s totally unprofessional!”

He shrugs. “I made sure she overheard me talking to the head of the department about it.”

So he...wanted it to get out ahead of today? Somehow, that relieves a bit of the pressure. A prickle goes up the back of my neck and I turn to find Jenson’s eyes on me again. His gaze drags slowly from the toes of my kitten heels to the V-neck top I’m wearing, stopping for a moment at my lips.

“You should shower. If you want to. And pick something out for tonight.” The smirk is back, his eyes bright with a look I recognize—trouble. Only, I have an idea what kind of trouble Jenson Sharpe gets into now as a full-grown man. I can only imagine—and I do.

“Okay. Yeah. I’ll meet you...?”

“On the balcony.”

“Of course, there’s a balcony.”

His laugh follows me to the bathroom, which, like everything else, is massive, tasteful, and a kind of luxury I’ve never even dreamed of.



AT 4:45, sophisticatedly late, Jenson and I step onto the flagstone patio that appears to run the length of the back of the lodge. Behind us, floor-to-cathedral-ceiling windows reflect the afternoon light. It’s a beautiful, drowsy golden hour, which perfectly complements the shimmering dress draped over my body.

I feel a little exposed in it and adjust the neckline, but Jenson squeezes my fingers.

“You look gorgeous. Stop that.”

In reality, I look like someone out of a lingerie catalog—a high-end one, at least. The dress is white gold and held up by minuscule straps. Triangles of fabric barely cover my breasts,

and there are slits up either side almost to my hip. It barely grazes my knees.

Roy Dupont is eyeing us across the patio. I give him a small smile and polite nod. He's wearing shorts, a short-sleeve tee, suspenders, and Birkenstocks. It's kind of adorable.

"Want a drink, babe?" Jenson's hand slaps my ass lightly and I jump, feeling the dress graze a little too high.

My mouth opens, but no words come out. For starters, I'm stunned at the naughty gesture. He's smirking back at me, clearly amused by catching me off guard. And then there's the casual *babe* he tacked on the end.

It's what he used to call me back in the day, when we were dating. It runs so smoothly off his tongue that I search his eyes for a second before answering.

"Yeah. Sure. Um, a light beer, please."

While he's gone I'm vulnerable to every single glance from our coworkers and investors. I stand still and tall, perfectly postured, reflecting a calm demeanor. Casual. *This is nothing—oh, Jenson and I? It's been going on for a while. We wanted to keep it quiet...*

But no one asks. They're probably too professional, even though everyone has a glass of alcohol in hand and we're officially off work as of this morning. Jenson returns with a whiskey and a pint glass. I take the beer thankfully and sip at it, letting the cool amber liquid calm me.

His hand grazes my lower back, then drops down again to rest at the very top of my ass.

"Stop that," I hiss, trying to discreetly swat it away.

He raises a brow. "Careful, Mel. We wouldn't want anyone to think we're fighting."

"We're not fighting now, but we might be later if you can't keep your hands to yourself."



He casually removes the hand on my ass, but leans in, breath warm on my ear as he whispers: “I’m not going to force you, but I bet you like it.”

Before I can respond, some coworkers from my department come over, and we start chatting. Dave, the head of strategy and my boss, is obviously curious about this development but doesn’t ask. He’s eventually swept away by an investor and Jenson leans in again.

“Why don’t we go get an appetizer?”

“What? Why? They said dinner is in ten—”

Then I see his point; Liza, Dave’s assistant, is standing near the long table of appetizers they’ve set out. My heart thuds in my chest. This is harder than I thought, “outing” us.

I walk over alone and pick up a plate, filling it quickly with two lox hors d’oeuvres. “Liza, how are you? I didn’t know you’d be here.”

Her glance is quick, narrow, a look of betrayal. “Dave wanted me here. Just in case.”

“Mmm. Um, is he actually planning on working, or...? Please tell me you get to enjoy some relaxation, at least.”

“Lord knows that’s what *we*’ve got planned.”

The words startle me, but this time I don’t jump as Jenson’s arm settles around my waist. It’s comforting, actually, and I lean back into him. Liza’s eyes are wide, looking back and forth between us.

“I—I didn’t realize you two were—”

Her face turns bright red, then white, at the realization of what she’s just said. I give her a small encouraging smile.

“Oh, yeah. We didn’t want to say anything until I was settled in. But, you know, it’s all sorted out with HR. Aboveboard.”

Liza still looks suspicious as she sneaks a crab cake off the table. “I didn’t know it was aboveboard to date your boss.”

Jenson stiffens just slightly behind me and I put a placating hand on his thigh, trying to ignore the shift of muscles beneath my palm.

Before either of us can respond, a staff member thankfully announces that dinner is served. In a trickle at first, and then a chatty group, we all head inside.



“WHAT THE HELL.”

“What the hell, what?”

Jenson catches me as I spin. Back in our room—our suite—he’s just as worked up as I am. I can feel the tension in the air between us, the annoyance at how this first night went.

“Are you trying to come across as a possessive, sex-obsessed fiancé?” I scoff.

His eyes darken. “Excuse me?”

“You were practically groping me all through dinner!”

“And it wouldn’t have seemed so scandalous if you hadn’t been practically flinching every time I touched you.”

Another scoff, but I can’t really deny that. I underestimated how hard it would be to act natural, as if we were intimate all the time outside of work. Or maybe the real problem is that it *is* too easy to act natural...too easy to let him touch me that way.

“We have to be believable. They have to think we’re in love.”

“Right—in love. Not fucking our way through a company retreat!”

His jaw works, the tendon shifting tantalizingly. My chest heaves and a triangle slides to the side a bit, exposing the curve of my breast. Jenson’s eyes lock there.

“So what do you want?” he growls, stepping closer. “You want me to not touch you? You want everyone to think we’re in a sex-starved relationship?” His gaze finally meets mine, full of dark fire. I can feel it mirrored inside me—a heat that can’t escape.

“Why would they think otherwise?” I taunt. “From what you’ve said about your dating history, women aren’t exactly falling all over themselves to get to you, are they? You have to order them to be into you instead of satisfying them yourself, huh, big shot?”

And just like that, Jenson snatches my wrist. It’s not painful, not crushing. Just firm.

A beat.

He tugs me toward him. I can feel the heat radiating off his body and I stumble into him.

“I have absolutely no problem satisfying women, Mel. Sounds to me like you’ve spent an awful lot of time thinking about my sex life.”

“N-no,” I stutter, gripping the front of his jacket to steady myself. “Been there, done that.” It comes out as a light scoff, but it doesn’t matter.

The reminder that we’ve done this before—been intimate—is like a switch flipping.

All of a sudden, I’m falling right back into the addictive habit of Jenson Sharpe.

He drops my wrist and wraps an arm around me, pulling me tightly against him. I gasp and his eyes darken further somehow, his lips dipping to drag across my pulse. A whimper escapes, but it’s enough.

He definitely *has not* forgotten how to do this. I, on the other hand, barely manage to clutch at his shoulders as he lifts me and strides toward the California king bed, tossing me expertly onto it. The dress rides up my thighs, exposing my underwear.

“Really? A thong, Mel? In this dress?”

I blush even as his hand delves between my legs, tugging the panties aside and grazing my pussy.

“I forgot how lascivious your taste in dresses is.” It comes out as a breathy complaint, one that makes him chuckle. Jenson buries his face between my breasts and at the feel of his tongue dragging between them, I let out another whimper. Spread my legs.

“I don’t hear any complaints about intimacy now,” he taunts.

With a groan, my head drops back. He tugs the thong down my legs and tosses it somewhere behind him in the room, which is lit only from the foyer lighting. It outlines him in a golden hue that makes him look divine as he kneels between my legs.

“Tell me if you want me to stop.” His belt buckle clinks. I hear the *snick* as he pulls the leather through the loops, and he tosses that aside, too. “Do you want me to stop?”

“God, no.”

As if he’s been unleashed, Jenson surges forward, heaving me up and settling me on his lap. His back is against the headboard now and my legs are spread on either side of his hips. His hand delves between my legs again, thumb rubbing my clit in tight circles that make me moan.

“You’ve been killing me in this dress all night,” he mutters, face buried in my tits again.

“What? Why? You chose this.”

“I know. I chose it because I knew you’d look incredible in it.”

His free hand pushes the slit up my thigh, exposing me even more. Without warning, Jenson gently bites at my nipples at the same time he pumps two fingers into me.

Lightning buzzes up my spine and I automatically try to ride his hand, making a sound of disappointment when he steadies me.

A deep, dark chuckle erupts that only gets me more wet. “Behave. Or I won’t finish this.”

My mind spins. He wouldn’t, would he? I’m about to lecture him about cruel threats when his fingers start to move again, curling and pumping, immediately finding that sweet spot inside that makes me melt.

“Oh, fuck.”

“Mmm. Did you think I forgot, Mel?”

Of course he didn’t. This is something we practiced many, many times before. In the back of his car, in my bed on nights he snuck in, once even in the stairwell at school after hours.

“Just like that,” I gasp, grinding against him as his other hand grips an ass cheek. “Take these off.” I tug at his boxers, very obviously tented with an erection, and feel him shake his head against my breasts as he licks and nips teasingly across my chest.

“W-why not?”

“This isn’t about me.” It’s a low, insistent growl, and as he says it he picks up the pressure, steadies the pace. His thumb presses against my clit insistently, pulling away as soon as I feel myself starting to come undone. With a sound of protest, I grasp his shoulder lightly, bringing out that dark laugh again.

“Want it, Mel?”

“Mmm, yes.”

“Tell me.”

“Tell you—what?”

My whole body is overheating now, heat running from my toes up my thighs, settling in my core, buzzing as his fingers graze that part of me that I can never seem to reach on my own.

“Tell me who’s going to make you come tonight.”

“I—”

He slaps my ass, just like he did out on the patio. The sound is loud in the room and I feel myself get even wetter, somehow, at the shock of it.

“Who’s going to make you come?” he taunts, gripping my ass tight as I grind down on his hand.

“Y-you.”

“That’s right. I want you to remember this next time you decide to start an argument.”

There are no words.

My vision is already going white at the edges and I close my eyes, gripping his shoulders as his thumb punishes my clit, his teeth grazing a nipple. The dress has fallen off my shoulders at some point and I’m practically naked on top of him as my orgasm crests, sweeping me into bliss, into nothingness, my head tipping back, and a long, low moan escaping.

When it’s over, Jenson carefully removes his fingers. His eyes are dark as he looks at the juices coating them, and he licks his lips. I hold my breath, waiting for what comes next—for him to push me back, climb on top of me, ask me if I want more.

*Yes, yes, yes.*

Instead, he carefully helps me, my thighs weak from his attentions, off his lap to settle on the bed beside him.

“What are you doing?”

“Running you a bath. You look like you need it.”

That damn smirk.

He leaves me there and flicks on the bathroom light. His erection is still there, throbbing beneath designer boxers as he runs the bath and adjusts a few other things.

*Damn it.*

Pretending to be attracted to Jenson isn't going to be hard at all. And that's a problem.

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## Chapter 8

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## Jenson

“Mel! Jenson!”

Mel jumps. I feel it where my hand rests on her lower back. Day two, and our conversation last night—or maybe the other things we got up to—finally has her accepting my touch. She steps closer to me as Roy appears on the patio, and I can’t help wondering if she realizes it.

“Morning, Roy.” My response comes out smoothly. Everything depends on him believing this whole charade, so I squeeze Mel’s side. The dress she’s wearing covers her from neck to ankles, but the fabric is flimsy. In a good way. A brush of my fingers and I can feel her curves beneath—a distraction.

“Hello,” Mel says shyly, giving him that beautiful smile I’ve always loved. It’s genuine; that’s the trick. Mel’s never been anything but genuine. It hits me suddenly that this trait of hers could be a cog in the wheel at some point...but so far, she’s doing great.

“Join us for breakfast?”

Roy looks relieved. “I was worried some of the investors would be up early, wanting to talk business. Company retreat but they can’t separate business and pleasure.”

Mel shivers. We head to a small four-person table near the railing and settle in. Beneath us, somewhere down a forested hill, I can hear a stream running. The trees here are all a deep emerald and shrouded in shadow. It helps me relax back into the chair and smile at my boss and fiancé. Fake fiancé.

The server comes and puts down a tray of baked goods, the whiff of which alerts me to danger. I put a hand up quickly to stop the young man from walking away.

“Excuse me—we’ll skip this. My fiancé is allergic to bananas.”

Mel looks up, surprised, then sees the banana bread on the plate. It's touching a few of the other baked goods on there. The server apologizes and takes the plate back. Mel looks at me quizzically and I shrug. She's surprised I remember that about her, but it doesn't seem so strange to me. I don't really need her going into anaphylactic shock during a weekend where I'm supposed to be showing her off.

"So," Roy begins, "we haven't had much time to meet outside of here, Melanie. Tell me about yourself. About how you and Jenson met."

The sly side-eye he aims at me lets me know he still doesn't believe our ruse, not fully. I can't blame him. It'll seem odd that I've never spoken about our relationship when Roy and I have spent so much time together.

"Well..." Mel shoots me a glance. We haven't fully hatched out this story yet, just glossed over it. I'd been intending to do so over breakfast, but here we are. "Jenson and I grew up together."

My heart clenches and I have to fight not to press a hand to my chest. She's *telling the truth?*

Roy's brows raise, and Mel continues, "Same town, same schools—elementary, middle, high school." That genuine smile is back as her gaze settles on me. "We started dating during high school."

A surprised scoff from Roy. "But surely you haven't been dating since then...?"

She shakes her head. "No. I moved away, I had some... things to take care of." That piques my curiosity, but now isn't the time or the place. "We ran into each other again after years of being apart, and it was like picking up right where we left off."

Only I notice the way her face goes carefully blank, a mask with a smile as she hides the lie.

"Hmm. So you had a reunion, of sorts. It's safe to say then that you aren't just after Jenson's money." Roy grins and we

all chuckle. But in my industry, my position in general, that's always been a real concern. Part of why I've never taken dating seriously.

"Mel's never been interested in money," I chime in. "She was an art major in college."

She glances at me sharply, but Roy's attention is on me now, luckily. "Really? Not business? You're our head of marketing, correct?"

"Yes, I am. I...I don't really know what to say. I've always been more art-minded than money-minded," she confesses effortlessly. Then a shrug. "Money can't buy happiness, but it's an unfortunate part of life. And I like the challenge in marketing, reaching out and connecting to people, drawing their interest."

She certainly has Roy's interest. He's leaning across the table as the server delivers mimosas and a berry tart, followed shortly by an omelet for myself, a massive plate of hash for Roy, and a bagel with cream cheese for Mel. We all settle in to eat for a few moments, Roy frowning down at his plate as he chews.

I can see in the way his eyes flit from Mel back to me that he's still unsure. Probably because we haven't touched since the moment we sat down.

To correct that, I reach out and ghost my hand over Mel's thigh. She looks up at me, a small smile on her face—but I see what's beneath it. The rise of her chest. The memory of last night, her body tight over mine, her head thrown back in pleasure.

*Not the time or the place*, the logical voice in my mind reminds me. *That was a bad idea.*

A bad idea, and an absolutely delicious one. After her taunting, a part of me had been afraid I really didn't have what it takes to make a woman like Mel lose herself. Safe to say, I proved her wrong.

“What was Jenson like as a boy?” Roy asks with another sly grin. He’s enjoying the conversation, at least.

Mel chews slowly, thinking. Then she says, “Curious. About everything. And very quiet.”

Roy laughs, a booming sound that has me smiling. “Quiet? Surely, you don’t mean shy.”

“Mmm, I do! Well, maybe not shy, but he kept to himself. He was the captain of the math club.”

Roy nods. “Unsurprising. He has a mind for numbers.”

“But he also spent a lot of time outside. I remember, we used to go to the viaducts a lot, at a river in town. There was a quiet spot there that Jenson liked. We’d sit for hours and watch fish snatch insects out of the air and herons walk the rocks. Some of my favorite memories are from that place.”

A spiral of emotions is overtaking me as Roy looks at me closely. “You must be happy here, then,” he says, gesturing around us—at the forest that surrounds us. “Can’t get much more remote than this.”

I smile and nod, pasting on the polite reaction as I’m overtaken by memories. The viaducts. I haven’t thought of that spot in forever. Of Mel stripping off her shirt and shorts, down to her underwear, wading in the bottle-brown water; of the cicadas in summer, the little riffles and waterfalls.

She’s right. Places like that always brought me peace. But after college, I moved to Boston almost immediately, and the closest I get to nature now is the public garden.

“That surprises me,” Roy continues as he digs into his hash. “Jenson is such a workaholic now. But you still managed to see the boy beneath the man, hmm?”

Mel tilts her head, considers it. “Yes. I mean, it’s hard, he’s definitely a city boy now. But the guy I knew is still there. Focused, ambitious, determined. All the core things. He’s fair and takes care of people. Always has.”

“Yes. I can see that. He plays the big, bad CEO at work, but I know from some of our conversations that he cares about the company—and the employees.”

Roy is no longer grinning or shooting me sly glares. Now, he’s looking at me curiously, bushy brows knit. As if seeing more to me than he has before. I feel my face heat in embarrassment and tuck the cloth napkin in at my lap, clearing my throat.

“What’s on the agenda today, then?” I ask to turn this suddenly intimate conversation elsewhere. “Team building games? A spa day?”

Roy starts talking about some scavenger hunt the lodge has set up, and I zone out. I can feel Mel’s eyes on me but fight the urge to look at her. I can’t handle seeing the past reflected back at me right now. And the feeling that I don’t deserve this—her helping me.



“YOU’RE BETTER at lying than I thought,” I say as I walk into the suite, the door shutting behind me with a click.

Mel gasps, a hand to her chest. “Jenson! Knock next time.”

She’s clutching a towel to her chest, bare legs visible beneath the hem. Not naked...there’s a thin red strap around her neck. That bathing suit.

“It’d be odd to knock at my own door, don’t you think?”

She glares at me, but it isn’t serious, and addresses my earlier statement. “I’m not lying. Just...avoiding the truth.”

“Omission is still lying, Mel. Besides, I know what you think of me.”

She scoffs, padding around the living area to slip into sandals, pausing to tie her hair up. The towel, wrapped around her chest, pulls up just enough for me to see the tops of her

tanned thighs. My mind goes to last night again, the slits on that depraved dress revealing everything to me.

“You have no idea what I think of you.”

Throwing her an eye roll, I head for the en suite bar. I could use a watered-down whiskey, even if it’s just barely after noon.

“Mmm. So you think I’m ambitious? You think I care about people?”

Her lips are pursed when I turn to face her. “That first one isn’t really debatable, is it? You’re doing all this to get the company. And I’m assuming you aren’t planning on selling it off or firing everyone.”

My jaw clenches. She’s right.

Here’s the thing—if Zach gets Dupont Analytics, that’s exactly the path he’ll take. He’ll sell the company to some bigger analytics conglomerate, which will pick apart everything we’ve done here. He’ll let at least half the staff go, not caring about seniority or dedication.

I can’t let it happen.

But how can Mel know that? I haven’t even told her about Zach.

“Either way,” I say in a flat voice, “don’t overdo it. Roy is a smart man, no matter how innocent he looks. He can sniff out a farce anywhere.”

As Mel walks to the door, I can’t help but notice the sad look that flits across her face. “I’m not sure what you want me to say. Everything I told him is true, Jenson. Even if you don’t believe it yourself.”

With that, she disappears into the hallway, presumably to go enjoy the variety of pools scattered throughout the lodge.

I take a sip of whiskey, letting it heat my mouth and warm my throat. Loosening the tightness that’s been there since hearing her speak so fondly of me, and our past.

The only thing I need to focus on now is the future. And I'm pretty sure that once this lie is over, Mel won't stick around, no matter how much of a decent person she thinks I am.

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## Chapter 9

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## Melanie

It's the third day and I'm already deeply regretting agreeing to this whole thing. Not just pretending to be Jenson's fiancé but coming to the retreat. I wasn't made for team building activities.

The scavenger hunt the day before was fine, and actually a relief after Roy's mini-interrogation. I can see why he and Jenson get along so well together, even though it's pretty funny to see the pair side by side. Jenson, all cool professionalism, and Roy grinning at everyone with his potbelly and Birkenstocks.

A splash of water, a squeal, and I'm choking on chlorinated pool water.

"You okay, Melanie?"

Brian, one of the investors on this trip, calls out as he swims by with broad strokes. We've been put on the same team today and his enthusiasm is a little...much.

"Fine," I call back, fighting down my irritation.

The lodge has us scheduled for pool-based team building games today. Friendly competition, the supervising staff member said earlier, but this doesn't feel friendly.

I backstroke to the far end of the pool and take in the scene. Two teams, six people on each. Brian leads the one I'm on, with Liza, who is still shooting me distrustful looks, a marketing team member named Jared who won a lottery to come, and two HR employees who look like unhappy cats in a bathtub.

The opposing team has Roy on it and he's laughing uproariously as each team tries to figure out how to get the other's rings. They're pool rings that sink to the bottom, blue for our side, red for the other. Brian has decided on an offense

instead of a defense and shouts words of encouragement as he lunges toward the other side of the pool.

Seeing an opportunity, I dart to the side and go under, cursing my decision to do this for Jenson. But then, he is paying me a large chunk of money. So I keep my complaints to myself and snag a red ring, pushing off the wall of the pool and back to our end.

A cheer goes up as I hold up the ring. It's all good-natured, but there's one person who doesn't seem to be enjoying himself.

Jenson sits on a pool chair, glowering. We were separated earlier today onto different teams. As soon as this game is over, he and his team will go up against another while I sit it out and hopefully sip a margarita.

Something is off, though. I pull myself up out of the pool, slicking my hair back, and watch Jenson closely. He's not looking at me, but at a young man who appeared a few hours ago, seemingly out of nowhere. And gave Roy Dupont an encompassing hug.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Yes. Fine."

He still doesn't look at me. I stand up and wring my hair out, walking over and sitting in his lap. Jenson startles. *Now* I have his attention.

His hands settle on my hips and his eyes drag down my body. The water streaming from my suit—a black number that crisscrosses over my chest and stomach, barely covering my ass—is soaking into his lap. I feel a very familiar twitch from between his legs and bite back a smirk.

There he is.

It's nice to finally have the upper hand.

"Mel," Roy says happily, coming over to get a beer from the poolside bar, "are you aware of just how competitive your fiancé is? You're in for a treat."

I give him a smile, leaning back against Jenson's bare chest. He's hot from the sun. "You know, I've never seen him do something like this, so it should be interesting."

"Jenson." We both look up to find the man from earlier sauntering over. He has dark hair and eyes, a permanent smirk on his face. "And who's this? I don't think I've seen you before." He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles. It's a ridiculous display, and I want to pull my hand back, but don't want to appear rude.

Jenson's arm tightens around my waist.

"Melanie," he says shortly. "My fiancé. Mel, this is Zach."

Zach's eyes don't leave mine. It's as if Jenson isn't there, and I fight the urge to squirm, uncomfortable with the attention.

"A pity. Jenson seems to get everything he wants."

The vibe in this moment is definitely awkward. Roy clears his throat as Jenson's arm tightens even further. Zach drops my hand and gives us all a smirk.

"Zach is my stepson," Roy explains. "He's been wanting to be more involved with the business. I wasn't aware until this morning that he'd be joining us here at the retreat." There's a hint of sourness in his words, and although Zach claps an arm over the old man's shoulders, I'm not so sure Roy is thrilled at his appearance.

The staff member overseeing this activity calls everyone to order and asks that the next two teams come to the pool.

"Hey," I whisper, turning my head so only Jenson can hear me, "whatever's up with you, calm down, okay?"

He doesn't answer, just glowers at me and snaps the back of my bottoms, the spandex stinging.

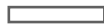
"Jenson!"

To cover the rude gesture, he covers my mouth with a searing kiss, one I can't help but sink into. Then someone is

calling his name and he gets up, leaving me alone on the chair.

It's his team versus Zach's. A nightmare situation given his obvious problem with the guy.

As I watch the competition start, I try to put it together. I haven't met Zach until today, but he and Jenson obviously know each other well enough to take shots at each other. There's some history there that he hasn't been completely honest about.



AN HOUR LATER, a small group has remained near the pool, mostly those who want to grab a drink or two before dinner. Jenson is talking to Brian amicably, his hair slicked back and muscles still damp. I'm having a hard time looking away from him and move to the far side of the pool area, under an umbrella.

*Pull it together, Mel, I tell myself. It was just a kiss.*

But if I'm being honest, I've felt off-center since our first night here. I can't remember the last time I orgasmed under the touch of a competent man, but it goes beyond that, too. Jenson and I have a history. His hands on my body were too close to home, *felt* too much like home.

I need some space to get my head right.

As if he can read my mind, Jenson's eyes lock on mine across the pool area. I look away and sip my margarita, the lime pursing my lips. A shadow falls across the table and I glance up to find Zach staring down at me.

His swim trunks are barely hanging on, and although he has a cut body, he's quite lean. Not my type. Plus, I don't like the way he's looking everywhere but at my face.

"It was a pleasant surprise to meet you today, Melanie," he says smoothly. "If you get tired of Jenson's company, maybe we can have dinner together one of these nights."

Placing a hand on the tabletop, he leans in. I can smell the salty sweat on his skin and fight not to wrinkle my nose. “I’m in the Falls Suite.”

It’s a quiet invitation, but not discreet enough. Both of us see Jenson coming and Zach slithers away like a snake, sending me a smirk as he disappears into the lodge.

“What was that?” Jenson demands.

“What was what?”

He sits down across from me, eyes locked on mine. “What did he want?”

“H-he wanted to have dinner together sometime. If we’re free.”

“We, or you?”

He’s sneering, but there’s another emotion just under the surface—jealousy. Slowly, a smile spreads across my cheeks.

“Worried, Jenson, that he’ll ruin your plans? That I might run off with him?”

He sits back, the jealousy disappearing for a moment. Considering me.

“Not particularly. But we have spent the whole day apart, and Zach hasn’t seen just how *affectionate* we are.”

As he says the word *affectionate*, his eyes trail down to my bathing suit. I’ve thrown on a wrap around my waist, but my torso and breasts are still trussed up like an offering. He’s looking at me like he wants to devour me, and I repeat my mantra: *Pull it together, Mel.*

Taking a sip of cool tequila, the lime lingering on my tongue, I give my body a chance to calm down. It’s practically humming under his gaze.

“What’s going on between you two? Should I be jealous?” I’m teasing, but Jenson glowers. That only confirms my suspicions. He isn’t telling me something.

“The only thing you need to worry about, Mel, is if he believes this just as much as anyone else.” Jenson leans in close, his hand sliding up my thigh, under the wrap. His thumb grazes the inside of my leg. Reminding me of the first night here...

“You want that money? You’re going to have to work for it.”

A shiver runs down my spine, but to fight the desire, I get angry instead.

“Fine.”

Pushing the chair back, I stand and grab his hand, pulling him up behind me. A look of surprise flits across his face before he composes himself. Making sure to sway my hips with every step, I walk toward the bar, head raised and feet bare.

About a dozen people are still hanging around as the staff set up a dinner service inside. Conversations slow or quiet as we approach, and I lean on the bar, tugging Jenson up tight behind me. He almost stumbles but catches himself, bracing a hand next to me.

“Two shots of whiskey, please. Doubles.”

I feel him go stiff. So he wants me to work for it? He wants a show? In front of all these people, he can’t say anything or pull away. And he knows that.

The bartender gives us a strange look but pours the shots into tumblers. I take both and turn. The space between Jenson and I is nonexistent. My breasts drag across his chest as I stare up into his gray-blue eyes.

“Let’s get a little buzzed, babe,” I stage whisper, loud enough for the couple seated nearby to overhear. “I want to tie you to the headboard tonight and *put you to work.*”

There’s a dangerous flicker in his eyes, a challenge. But he takes the tumbler and throws the whiskey back. I do the same, feeling it take the edge off my nerves.

The couple next to us looks scandalized and moves away. I drag Jenson over toward an alcove. Not exactly discreet—it's clearly visible to those still out on the patio, but gives the illusion of privacy if you're not paying attention.

With no warning, I press him back against a pillar and let my fingers trail up his thigh, feeling *him* shiver this time. Stopping just shy of his crotch, I wrap my arms around his neck and press up on the balls of my feet. He's still got a few inches on me so I weave my fingers through his hair and give a slight tug.

He makes a sound of surprise as our lips meet.

For once, I've broken Jenson Sharpe's cool exterior.

*He wasn't always like this*, my mind reminds me. So hard to catch off guard, so stoic. I like surprising him.

Jenson grunts into my mouth, his hands finally coming up to support me as I rock against him. I drag my right leg up to his hip and hook it there, bringing our centers together. It's already obvious that he's wrapped around my finger. His hot, hard erection presses against my core, and I have to fight to stay clearheaded. *I* need to be the one in control now.

"Is this enough of a show?" I ask, glancing over his shoulder to see the people still on the patio looking scandalized.

His hand comes up and squeezes my ass as he leans in to kiss me again. But I continue to tease him, turning in his arms, pressing my ass against his erection just enough to give him an idea of what he could have.

Before Jenson can get a hold of himself, I walk away and leave him in the alcove. One look back—that's all I allow myself.

He looks appalled, shocked, disheveled, and delicious. A grin graces my lips as I head inside to change for dinner.



FOR THE NEXT TWENTY MINUTES, my heart pounds in my chest. I rinse off quickly in the shower and wait to hear the door open, but Jenson never comes. It takes a while to come down off the high and face reality—I want him. Badly.

*But he wants you just as much.*

It's reassuring, and a little daunting. Back in the day, we were totally consumed with each other. We knew each other's bodies, what would send us over the edge, what drove the other crazy. As I towel off, I ignore the way my pussy throbs from wanting him.

“I need to get my head on straight,” I mutter to myself, standing in the center of the living area.

And then it hits me. I need to call Jodie.

A reminder of *why* I'm going along with this crazy plan is just what the doctor ordered.



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## Chapter 10

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## Jenson

I give it some time before I head back to the suite.

Mostly because if I follow Mel in, I know I'll rip off that tight little bathing suit and have my way with her. There's no way she isn't as soaking wet as I am hard, and giving in to our desires seems like the best idea I've ever had in the moment.

Instead, I wait behind the pillar, slowing my breath and counting backward from a hundred until my dick gets a hold of itself. I can't walk out of here hard and ready. That's a little too far, even for me.

Besides, I need to convince Roy that I'm settling down—not that I'm obsessed with fucking my childhood sweetheart.

*But that's the way this is going. You want her. You want to bury yourself inside her and—*

I cut the thought off quickly, deciding on a walk along the outskirts of the lodge. Some alone time. Some time to think.

Zach showing up was...unexpected. He's always flaked on company events in the past, and that's something I was banking on with Roy ready to step down. Surely he wouldn't give his stepson control of the company if he couldn't even show up for this retreat?

But here he is.

Trying to schmooze Roy, trying to get under my skin by flirting with Mel.

At least she didn't flirt back.

Or...I don't think she did.

That unfamiliar feeling of jealousy rises again, catching me off guard. I can't even remember the last time I was jealous over a woman, but here I am, ready to jump Zach and pummel him into the dirt if he even looks her way one more

time. And that wouldn't look too good for me, beating up the boss's stepson.

Circling back toward the lodge's entrance, I walk in and stride toward our suite. Somehow, most of the company was quartered on the other side of the building, which gives us some privacy. It's almost as if fate is working in our favor.

The suite door is unlocked and I step inside quietly, closing it behind me. The stillness in here acts as a warning. I stand for a moment, listening, and hear a voice—Mel's.

My heart thuds, possibilities running through my mind. Did she bring Zach back here? Is she finally sick of this, and calling for a plane ticket home?

But then she laughs, and the sound is so familiar that my anxiety drains away.

“No, I'm fine, really. I know—it's crazy they already have me on a retreat. But everything's going great, Jodie. The team is competent. I don't even think they needed to hire me.”

Jodie.

Her face flashes through my mind: long honey-colored hair, a kind face, always laughing. The same dimples that Mel has.

Jodie took Mel in not long after her parents abandoned her. Mel spilled the whole story to me one summer night when we were sixteen. My heart ached for her back then, and it aches now at the thought of Jodie, who was always welcoming me into her home, as if she'd always planned on having two teens rambling around.

“I'll check in after a few days. And I promise I'll call before I fly back. Alright. Love you, too.”

In the last minute or so, I've crept toward the balcony, not even realizing it. The memory of Jodie and the ease I felt back then sinks into my bones. I just want that comfort again. When was the last time I felt calm and grounded?

Mel is leaning against the railing, looking out at the forest. A pair of young squirrels chitters and chases each other through the branches.

“How’s she doing?”

Mel turns quickly, not looking too happy that I snuck up on her.

“Were you just listening to my phone call?”

I shrug. “Not really. Just came back to the room and you left the balcony door open, so I was going to hear it whether I wanted to or not.”

Her eyes narrow. She’s changed into a pair of light linen trousers and a tank top, both fitting the slight curves of her body perfectly.

“So? How is Jodie?”

Mel’s mouth presses into a flat line. “She’s fine.”

“Is she...back wherever you moved from?”

I have no idea where Mel was last. I haven’t asked, because it hasn’t felt like my business, but now...there’s a longing in me to know more. Where she’s been. Who she’s been. Where she wants to be in the future.

What I said to Roy was true—Mel had always wanted to go into fine art. Like him, I wasn’t sure what she was doing as the head of marketing at Dupont Analytics. Aside from graphic design, which she was obviously great at, management didn’t seem like her thing.

“She is,” Mel says shortly, arms crossed.

There’s a beat of silence. She obviously doesn’t want to talk about her personal life, and I turn away, letting her have some space.

“She’s in New York.”

It’s blurted out like a confession. I half turn around, surprise on my face.

“New York? Jodie never struck me as a city girl.”

Mel laughs, a sad sound, and walks over to sit on a chaise. “She’s not. She hates it there. Lives just outside the city. Has a nice little house.” A shrug. “I lived with her for a few years before getting my own place. Worked at a few galleries in the city.”

“Why didn’t you stay?”

Mel gives me a sidelong glance, so I decide to keep the distance between us, settling on a couch on the other side of the living area.

“I’m not much of a city girl, either,” she admits. “And galleries are great, but they don’t pay well. I needed...more.”

The little voice in my head whispers that I should pay attention to this. There’s a reason she agreed to be my fake fiancé, after all, and it was money. Is she in some kind of trouble?

“So what’s Jodie getting up to these days, then? She still go to karaoke nights at dive bars?”

Mel shakes her head, smiling at the memory. Jodie belting out Celine Dion in a halter top and cut-off jeans. Too young to be a mom, still full of excitement—raising Mel anyway.

“No. She stopped that a long time ago. She works from home now as a billing specialist. Doesn’t hate it.”

“I’m surprised she gave up karaoke. And that she works from home. She was always out and about. What happened?”

The question comes out naturally, casually, but I see Mel flinch and my guard goes up. *What happened?*

“She had a tough few years,” she answers evasively, arms wrapping around her middle again. “She’s fine now. It was just...rough.”

My mind whirls, trying to decide which question to land on next: Did you go right to New York after leaving our

hometown? Did you bounce around? What exactly was rough, and if Jodie was fine now, what had she been before?

But Melanie beats me to it and turns her clear eyes on me, asking, “What about you? How did you turn into...?”

She gestures vaguely at me—my perfect hair, a loose button-down shirt and men’s Louboutin’s on my feet. I learned a long time ago that it pays to look the part; people listen to you when you look the part. Even if the shoes are uncomfortable as hell.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I say breezily, leaning back, arms outstretched.

Mel snorts. It’s not a feminine sound and we both grin.

“You know. Like this. All rich and snotty.”

“I’m not snotty,” I argue back. “I just have my boundaries.”

“You know some employees call you Ice Man, right? It’s not exactly a compliment.”

I did know about the nickname, and things like that stopped bothering me a long time ago. If eighteen-year-old, brokenhearted Jenson could see what we’d turned into, he’d be pretty satisfied.

“I did what everyone else did. Went to college. Worked hard.”

“Got caught up in analytics?”

I shrug. “What else was I going to get into?”

“I don’t know...you just always struck me as having such big ideas.”

I lean forward, a little offended. “Dupont Analytics *is* a big idea, Mel. It’s changed the way healthcare works. The marketing is what brings hospitals in, but do you know what we’re doing in terms of community partnerships? Data tracking that can prove where resources are needed? Yeah, our ticketing system is great and we have a streamlined medical

record system, but it's the analytics that matter. That'll make things change for the better."

Her eyes are wide by the time I finish, and I purse my lips, fighting back embarrassment. I haven't ranted like this since I tried—and succeeded—to convince Roy that we could do a lot more with the system he'd designed in the late '90s.

"Is that why you're doing this?" she asks quietly. "Why you're really doing this, I mean?"

I stare at her, caught off guard. I wasn't planning on having a heart-to-heart with Mel Atkinson today. Especially not after that stunt she pulled earlier, getting me riled up in front of everyone, then strutting away.

"I don't know. Maybe. Yeah." Running a hand through my hair, I stand and start to pace. "Zach..."

"That's right, how's he involved in all of this?"

"Zach is Roy's stepson. All of a sudden, he's decided he wants the company."

"Out of nowhere? That seems a little improbable, Jenson."

My jaw ticks. She's right. "He's tried a few times to get into it, to take over. But Zach is bad news. Wherever he goes, he destroys things. If he gets Dupont Analytics..."

I don't even want to think about it.

"If he's such a mess, do you really think Roy would hand the company over to him?"

I shrug. "I hope not, but..."

"But what?"

"But Roy doesn't have much reason to believe I'd do any better. That I wouldn't sell it off immediately. You see this tough exterior, Mel. How did you phrase it? 'Rich and snotty.' I guess I've never given Roy a reason to think I'm not just after the money. He needs to believe that more than profit matters to me."

“But it does!”

“Yeah, but he hasn’t *seen* that.”

She crosses her legs, lowers her chin, and pins me with her gaze. “Surely, you must have had someone in your life long enough for him to notice.”

I shake my head. Mel’s eyes widen, her face softening.

And that’s what kills this conversation.

I turn away before we can dig any deeper into my personal life. She has a kill switch; I have one too, and this is it.

I just can’t tell her the truth—that no one has ever stuck since her. That I’m worried Mel leaving messed me up so bad, I can’t give myself over to anyone else.

*No.*

In this situation, Mel Atkinson definitely can’t know that she’s my weakness. As far as she’s concerned, I’m the Ice Man.



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## Chapter 11

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## Melanie

A week goes by in a flash, partly thanks to the ridiculous team building exercises. But it's not all bad; they're half day events at most, and Jade Lodge has an amazing spa. Both Jenson and I have taken advantage of it during our stay.

Nights are hard. It's nearly impossible to sleep next to him. Neither of us could work up the courage to tell the other to get lost. We have a shared history, and it feels wrong to kick someone out of bed, so instead, I lie awake late at night and try not to think about his hands on my body.

I have no idea if he does the same. Probably not. His entire focus is on getting Dupont Analytics, and for good reason.

Zach has barely slowed down in his pseudo-pursuit of me. When Jenson steps away, Zach is there, ready to smirk and seduce. It doesn't work; something about him makes my skin crawl. But I notice other coworkers watching, and it makes me self-conscious, so after a few days, I asked Jenson to stay close.

As we walk to the lodge ballroom, his hand is on my lower back again. Only this time it's skin to skin.

The casual dress I have on is backless, tying at my neck in a halter style and draping to my knees in furls. A ridiculous thing I'd never normally wear, but a few people compliment me on it, including Roy. He's warmed up to the idea of Jenson and me in the past week, joining us for meals a few times and laughing with Jenson during events.

"This is a bad idea," Jenson mutters through clenched teeth. About twenty other people are joining us, which isn't much. That makes us very visible.

"Why not? Everyone's sure to notice us in a setting like this."

"That's the problem."

He's stiff, I can feel it in his bicep when I reach up and squeeze his arm in reassurance. Today was surprisingly hot and Jenson has on a sleeveless T-shirt that looks somehow wrong and very, *very* right on him. A few women from the office notice and can't help little double takes as we reach the large room and line up with everyone else.

Salsa lessons.

The teacher is a small, lithe man with a booming voice surprisingly loud for his stature. He greets us all enthusiastically and herds everyone around into pairs if they aren't already. Jenson and I practically clutch each other, spreading out with everyone else.

"Alright, everyone! The first thing we're going to do is just listen to the music. Feel it. Let it flood your body, take over your hips, your chests. I want this music to be your heartbeat."

Jenson and I exchanged amused, pained looks, and I have to stifle a laugh. But the teacher is right. After a few seconds I can't help tapping a foot to the beat of the music, moving my shoulders a bit.

Jenson, on the other hand, is like a board. Stiff and upright. His eyes are locked on mine. He's scared—it hits me suddenly and I smile up at him, taking his hands.

"We're going to start out easy. There are only three steps for every four beats." The teacher demonstrates and we all watch, some with confusion on their faces, others with curiosity. I find myself mimicking the steps in miniature, Jenson's hands sweating in mind.

"Men, you're leading!"

And just like that, he sweeps us into a salsa lesson.

At first, everyone is a complete mess, stepping on toes, laughing, wincing. Jenson barely moves. I have to step in closer than I probably should and encourage him quietly, pressing my hand to his upper arm, giving him a smile.

"You need to loosen up," I whisper.

He sucks in a breath through his nose, shooting daggers at me. I can't help laughing.

“Alright, you two. I can see you have a connection. If you didn't, she would have left you by now for another partner.” The teacher laughs at his own joke, Jenson's face flushing, before he guides us through the steps more slowly. Thankfully, Jenson catches on and starts to relax, enough that it feels like it's starting to flow.

“There! You have it. Remember, sir, salsa is a sensual dance. And you two aren't lacking in attraction.”

The tiny man gives us a wink before flitting off to help others.

“This is terrible,” Jenson deadpans, making me laugh again.

“It's not—really. Now that you've loosened up, I think we've got it.”

After another half hour, we've conquered the basics and are laughing our way through more complicated steps.

I swing my body around his, arm dragging across his waist, and he spins me into a hold. Our feet match up almost perfectly, Jenson cursing with a chuckle when he missteps. With each cycle of the dance, I notice him more and more. The taunt pull of his muscles as we turn, the way his eyes stay locked on mine, the heat of his body.

*Pull yourself together, Mel.*

But it's hard. So hard with his scent surrounding me. As he pulls me in close, pushes me away, steadies me with a touch when I overcorrect, we're suddenly the only ones in the room.

Roy, a spectator today, is clapping along with the music. When it ends, he walks over to us, slightly bow-legged, and gives Jenson a sly grin. “If I'm not careful, I'm going to lose you two to professional dancing. That was wonderful. But try to keep it PG-13 next time.”

With a wink, he turns away. But even with the music gone, my heart is still pounding in my chest.



WE GET BACK to the suite late, close to eight o'clock, and I can't look at Jenson once the door closes.

"Bet you're happy you didn't wear your Louboutin's," I joke, but shoes are the last thing on my mind.

Jenson looks at me and his eyes are dark, like a storm coming in. My breath catches; I know that look, what it means, and I need to get far, far away from it.

Making a flimsy excuse, I slip into the bathroom and close the door. Take a deep breath. Try to calm my heart.

It's not working.

It's been hours since the dance class, but still adrenaline rushes through my veins. I quickly strip off the dress, tossing it to the side, and run the shower on cool.

Light spills in through the windows. The lodge has several plants in here, vining ones that climb from high shelves across sections of the ceiling. It provides a calming atmosphere.

My underwear go next, a lace set, strapless bra, my breasts spilling out. With a shiver—not from the temperature—I step into the water and close my eyes.

"You have to shake this off," I beg myself quietly. "You can't handle another month and a half of this."

With a groan, I lean against the wall and let my head drop back, the water spilling across my body sideways. It feels good, rivulets cooling my skin, streaming over my curves and into the dips. With my eyes still closed, I'm back in Harwinton, the little town we grew up in just hours from Boston.

Jenson's room, smelling of boy. Painted dark blue, posters on the wall of bands I teased him for liking. But we're not kids anymore. He's on the bed, knees spread wide, gaze intent. Shoulders slumped in youth, hair tousled.

*Are you coming to bed?*

What I wouldn't give to hear him say that again. Those summer nights we couldn't get enough of each other. With his mom working the late shift at the hospital, it was easy to be alone. Easy to shuck our clothes off, practically gasping, groping at each other, kissing and tasting.

A whimper slips out of me. My hand has slipped down to my thigh without me realizing it, and I fight the urge to touch myself. Pulling it back, I push the hair out of my face. My eyes are still closed.

And then his fingers skate across my belly.

With a gasp, I grab his wrist. My eyes snap open and we're almost face-to-face. Not quite; he still towers over me, the water streaming down his chest, beading in his chest hair.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asks, all business. Fingers flexing. My pussy throbs and I shake my head, letting his wrist go.

"No."

Fully naked, Jenson bends toward me, shoulders hunched. He braces himself on the wall and with his free hand, slowly delves between my legs. His fingers part my slick folds and swirl. I've been wet for hours now after touching his body, dancing so close, and teasing myself with memories.

"Please."

It comes out half begging, and he lets out a huff in response. Readjusting himself, he tugs me closer and two fingers slip inside easily. A crest of pleasure sweeps over me. This is all I've wanted. Him, touching me, his body arched over mine, his eyes watching as he pumps his fingers in and out, driving me higher.

I grip his shoulders tightly and try not to wriggle, but I want more. His cock is already hard. Bobbing between us, grazing my hip. I lick my lips and push him away.

Water soaks his hair as he frowns at me, but without a word, I drop to my knees. I grip his thighs for balance, my lips parting.

First, I ghost my hand across his balls. Just enough for them to tighten momentarily. Then I drag my tongue along the underside of his cock, tasting the saltiness of him, rubbing the pre-cum that leaks from the tip across my lips.

Jenson grunts and cups the back of my head. It's surprisingly gentle. I take the head in my mouth and bob down, sucking slightly on the way up. Just enough to let the tip *pop*, something I remember he loves.

"Fuck," he groans in appreciation, and the vein in his cock bulges. I run a hand up his inner thigh and cup his balls, staring up at him, the water spraying off his shoulders. "Come here."

It comes out as a growl and I stumble to stand quickly, happy to have him there to support my weak knees. I press closer to him, wanting him between my legs. But instead, Jenson turns me around and pulls my backside up against him.

He runs the soap over my body quickly. His hands course over everything, lingering at my breasts, lifting them, toying with my nipples. They're stiff from the cool water and his attention, and I arch my back into his touch.

"Go wait on the bed."

"What?"

He nudges me toward the door.

"I said, go wait on the bed." He levels me with his gaze. "I'm going to clean up, and when I come out there, you better be ready for me."

Wet heat pools between my legs. I step out of the shower, towel off quickly, and practically run to the bedroom.

When was the last time I was this turned on? I'm a mess, trying to get comfortable at first, and then trying to be sexy. The sound of the shower and my breathing is loud. Finally, I lie back with my hands beside me.

He wants me to be ready? I'm more than ready for him.

The water turns off and my heart practically beats out of my chest. Jenson walks out of the bathroom still dripping wet, reminiscent of the first day I saw him, *my* first day on the job.

Only now, there's no towel around his waist.

His cock bobs with each step. I can't help letting my eyes run down his chest, to his abs, and that little Fibonacci tattoo at his hip. My mouth waters.

When he reaches the end of the bed, Jenson grabs my ankle and tugs. Enough that I gasp, ass sliding forward, breasts jiggling. He puts one knee on the mattress. Then the other. Tugs me closer again with a hand on each calf. Spreads my legs farther apart.

He stares directly at my pussy, like he's looking at a meal from a top Michelin star restaurant. Slowly, his tongue drags across his lips. He fists his cock and pumps once, twice, and I can actually see it thicken in his palm as it somehow hardens even more.

"You're going to be a good girl for me?" he asks, voice low.

I nod. I can feel myself literally dripping and it's mortifying, but Jenson doesn't seem to mind. He leans over me, and using one hand, guides himself to my entrance. I'm so wet that he slips in easily. Just the head—just enough for me to feel the stretch and whimper. Then he pulls back, swirls the tip through my soaked folds, and rubs at my clit.

A pulsing throb of electricity warms between my thighs and belly as he toys with me.

"Jenson, please," I beg, letting my knees fall to the sides. Not knowing what else to do with myself, I start to play with



my breasts, squeezing them, tugging at my nipples. His eyes widen as he watches, lips parting.

It's enough.

Without waiting another second, Jenson grabs my hips and buries his cock in me. Despite how turned on I am, he stretches me tightly and I whimper. With his hands, Jenson takes my legs and pushes my knees up, so the friction is even tighter now.

"Fuck," I whisper, eyes rolling back. As he slowly starts to push into me, one stroke at a time, I'm barely holding it together. Unthinking, I keep playing with my tits until his hand replaces mine, rolling and tweaking my nipples.

"I can't," he breathes, bent over me and pumping rhythmically, unforgiving. I know what he's getting at and I don't care, lifting my hips to take more of him, moaning and whimpering as he fucks me into the mattress.

Jenson curses, hips stuttering just once, eyes tight. He leans back and places a hand on my lower stomach, pressing down and holding me in place. The pressure makes me gasp and with his other hand he plays with my clit, circling it but not touching it directly.

My pussy clenches and tightens around him, trying to get more of him even as he plunges into me over and over. Our eyes meet and he presses his thumb on my clit hard. Just like that, I come, screaming his name.

It's even better than our first night here. The orgasm hits me like a wave, making my legs seize up around his hips and my back arch. I reach out and dig my fingers into his shoulders as he fucks me harder, gripping my ass with one hand and bracing himself with the other.

My eyes are squeezed tight but I hear him grunt, feel his hips stutter again, longer this time, a broken rhythm before he buries himself deep. I can actually feel his cock pulsing as he comes deep inside me.

A few more shallow thrusts and the only sound in the room is us panting.

“Fuck,” I breathe, partly out of pleasure, and partly because I know that *now* I’m screwed.

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## Chapter 12

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## Jenson

The next day, everything hurts, but in the most delicious way.

Who knew dancing could be such a workout? But that's not the real reason why I'm sore, not truly.

I haven't had a workout like that in...years. Half awake, I drowse in memories of last night. Mel's legs wrapped around my hips, her tits bouncing as I pumped into her.

With an exhale, I flip over and blindly find her tucked next to me. I hook an arm around her waist and pull her in tight. She's wearing some kind of T-shirt, something I didn't okay for the trip, but I don't even care. She can wear whatever she wants as long as she keeps rubbing her ass up against me like this.

*What if.*

What if she'd never left. What if we'd had more time. Would we have lasted?

Slipping back into a half sleep, my mind runs away into the possibilities. A happy, quiet few years in Harwinton, both of us picking out colleges. An hour away at most, maybe. Spending weekends together. Sleeping over in dorms when we shouldn't, grossing our roommates out, unable to keep our hands off each other.

Would we have moved back to town? Would Jodie have been happy for us? And when would I have asked her to stay, permanently, to be mine, to make it real.

*Real.*

This wasn't real.

Rousing myself, I lift my head and blink as the world returns.

Jade Lodge. Our massive suite. The balcony doors still open, and dawn light spilling in, birds calling somewhere out

in the trees.

Mel groans and turns over in my arms. Her eyes open and for a moment she looks confused, hair mussed, a frown creasing her brows.

“What—?”

Before she can finish the question, there’s a knock at the door. I stand and throw on sweats, what I normally sleep in, but apparently didn’t bother with last night. We’re both clean. We showered after...

I shut that part of my memory down. Literally shake it off as I head for the door and open it.

A young woman in a staff uniform stands outside, blushing and dropping her eyes at my shirtless appearance.

“Breakfast,” she squeaks, pushing a little cart through the space.

“Breakfast? Everyone else can’t be up—”

She glances up at me, blushes deeper, shakes her head. “You ordered it last night, for delivery this morning. It’s only six thirty, sir.”

I thank her and watch blindly as she scurries down the hallway and disappears. The scent of whatever is under the platters catches my attention.

Mel comes out of the bedroom, a hotel robe wrapped tightly around her middle. It reaches to the floor, her toes peeking out.

“I ordered breakfast for us last night.” It’s a vague memory, one trampled by post-sex euphoria. Mel nods.

“You did. I was half-asleep, but I remember you calling down.”

She lifts the lid on a platter and a small smile quirks her lips at a mound of French toast. I raise my brows, gesture to the dining area, and we both take the plates over there.

French toast, a pile of fruit, a veggie omelet for me. Coffee and juice. We both eat voraciously, Mel downing two cups of coffee as I steal a piece of her French toast.

“Hey!” She laughs, leaning in to cut a chunk of omelet, dodging my fork. I cut her a bigger piece and heft it over to her plate. Our eyes meet and she blushes.

*We shouldn't talk about it.* That's what I tell myself. Not just because it shouldn't have happened, but because I don't want to embarrass her. I don't want to know if she regrets it.

Without a word, I stand and pile my dishes, then head toward the bathroom.

I still need to pull this whole thing off. I can't let one night of passion distract me, not now.



IT'S A LONG WAIT through morning as the rest of the lodge wakes up. Mel and I sit in the living area, the TV on with the sound off, a newspaper spread on the couch beside me. Mel is curled up on the chaise lounge.

We both keep catching each other's eyes.

It's ridiculous. This feels like high school all over again, but I can't stop looking at her. It's like she's glowing. Or maybe that's just the attraction still lingering, a Cupid's arrow right to the heart, knocking me on my ass.

Another knock on the door and we both startle.

“I'll get it,” Mel says quickly, standing.

I turn my attention back to the newspaper and listen as a voice I recognize informs Mel that a small group is heading out to a local museum. They're taking the lodge's bus—would we like to come?

“Definitely!” Mel exclaims, and I bite back a groan. “Just let us get a few things together. We'll meet everyone out

front.”

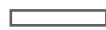
Once the door is closed again, I sigh and stand up. “I could use today to get some work done.” But it’s an obvious tactic, and Mel gives me a sour look.

“Come on, Jenson. You’re the one who wanted us to look all couple-y. What better way than to be seen out and about?”

I clench my teeth, seriously considering putting my foot down. But she looks so excited. There’s that light in her eye, which I haven’t seen since literally running into her in Boston.

“Okay. Fine. But I’m serious, later today I’ll need some time to get a few things done.”

Her radiant smile warms my chilled heart, and I try to ignore it. That arrow twangs a little triumphantly.



THE MUSEUM IS, thankfully, less than an hour away from the lodge, so I don’t need to listen to Zach schmooze everyone on the bus for too long. Mel holds my hand the whole time, her fingers wrapped in mine, and it’s oddly calming.

*A bad idea, the voice in my head warns, after last night.*

But I don’t care. I can’t be bothered with it right now, not when I’m mentally and physically exhausted.

“Ready?” Mel asks, practically jumping out of the seat when we get there. I follow her down the stairs, trailing the small group into the museum. It’s about what I expected—several stories high, a lot of white stone, and confusing signage.

“Let’s start in the Roman era.” She drags me in that direction, somehow able to make sense of the little pamphlet they’ve given us.

It’s a throwback to the one trip we took to Boston when we were kids. Or teens, I guess, before I got the nerve to ask her

out. She'd laughed when I did, but nothing beat the thrill of her saying yes.

As we walk slowly through the exhibits, Mel chatters on about the history of certain pieces. I can barely absorb any of it, brows raised as she points and lectures, tugging me along, and jogging in her little heels.

Coming around a corner in the Hall of Modern Art, I catch Roy's eye. He's talking to two of the HR employees and shares a conspiratorial smile with me. He's seen Mel's enthusiasm and unsurprisingly, is completely charmed by it.

"Look at this!" she exclaims, glued to the floor.

I glance around in confusion. Then she points.

There's an upside-down stack of eight chairs above us, hanging from the ceiling. I stare up at it in confusion.

"What the hell?"

Mel nudges me, a sassy pout on her lips. "It's art."

"Okay, but what's it mean?"

A guilty look crosses her face and I smirk. She doesn't know, either.

"We're not meant to understand everything," she says airily, nose turned up and marching toward the next section.

We end up in a small private place that feels more comfortable. It's all local photography from a man Mel apparently recognizes.

"He grew up on a farm," she explains quietly, "and started taking long exposures at night. Only where light was found. So, streetlamps, people's houses when they left a light on, tunnels."

"It's a little creepy."

But I find myself looking at a large photo of a classic car under a streetlamp, half covered by a tarp. I'm not sure what's



so captivating about it, but the shadows stir me. The possibility, maybe.

When I find Mel, she's stock-still in front of another large photo. I know immediately what drew her to it.

The little house, hazy blue light spilling from one window, looks like Jodie's old house in Harwinton. The same concrete front steps. It's missing the laurel-tree and Mel's rollerblades, but otherwise, I can see that it hurts her as much as it pulls her in.

She wraps her arms around herself.

"I don't know about this guy," I say, trying to break the chill that's settled in suddenly. "Seems like a sellout, making money on strangers' private lives."

The intensity of Mel's angry glare surprises me so much that I almost take a step back.

"Seriously? You don't think you're the sellout, Jenson? You work for an ever-growing healthcare analytics company. You're a city boy."

The words are scathing and I can't help biting back at her.

"If I am, you are, too, Mel. Don't forget why you're doing this." I hold up two fingers and rub them together in the universal sign for money. "You don't have art up on these walls, do you?"

It's a cruel remark, and I regret it immediately.

Mel stalks away, back toward the entrance of the museum where the bus is leaving in twenty minutes. I turn to follow her, but glance back at the photograph.

Maybe we're both just caught up in memories of better times.

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## Chapter 13

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## Melanie

*Two more days. Two more days and I can spend the weekend in my apartment, decompressing, just being myself—and not as Jenson Sharpe’s fiancé.*

The thought makes my head and heart hurt as I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Mel? Does that sound good?”

Dave is looking at me worriedly. I smile and nod, only vaguely aware that I’ve agreed to join a group hike in an hour. Jenson smiles tightly and squeezes my hand, a supposed show of affection, but it just feels like pressure.

“I’m going to try and fit in a half hour in the sauna.” It comes out in a fake happy voice, but I keep up the facade anyway, excusing myself and heading down the beautifully stained wooden boardwalk toward the spa.

As the cedar buildings come into view, steam rising from the roofs, I take a quick turn off the path and step into a wooded area.

A gasp escapes from my mouth, surprising me. Then the tears follow. I can’t help it, and I angrily dash them away, feeling suddenly overwhelmed.

No...not suddenly. This whole two weeks has been stressful, a push-and-pull nightmare of acting like Jenson and I are in love while maybe...just a little bit...

“No,” I gasp, pressing the heels of my hands to my eyes. “No, no, no.”

“Mel? Are you okay?”

I turn to find Jenson stalking toward me off the boardwalk, concern and annoyance on his face. Immediately, my body goes stiff. We keep at least two feet of space between us. The pressure has gotten to both of us, apparently.

“I’m fine.”

“Well, you don’t look fine.”

I swipe angrily under my eyes. “You don’t know what ‘fine’ looks like on me, Jenson.”

It’s not true, of course he does. He knows me better than anyone, except Aunt Jodie.

There’s an awkward, heavy silence. Jenson steps toward me. It’s not threatening, but I have this indescribable urge to pull away and I can’t meet his eyes.

“If this is getting to be too much for you,” he says in a low voice, “you need to tell me. So we can figure something out. Some story...something about how you have to be away for a bit until the wedding.”

“The wedding?” A surge of surprise and fear goes through me. “I never agreed to—”

“I know.” The words come out harsh. He’s out of patience, his normally light gray-blue eyes a storm. “There won’t be a wedding, Mel, but we need to make people believe there will be. But like I said, if this is too much for you—”

“Jenson? Mel?”

We both turn, Jenson shielding me with his body. I have to crane my neck to look over his shoulder. Roy is standing on the boardwalk, a robe draped over one arm. He looks concerned.

“Are you two okay?”

“Yes.” Jenson starts back toward the path, then stops, holding a hand out to me. After a beat, I take it and follow him. “Sorry. We just needed a moment of privacy.”

Roy Dupont looks back and forth between the two of us, suspicious, curious, and worried. “I know it’s been a long trip, and some of the team building activities were a little more competitive than I would have liked...”

Jenson waves his words off. “No, no, they’ve been fine. I think we’re just in need of some alone time.” He plasters on a smile and pulls me in tight against him. I drape an arm around his waist, but my smile is weak. Roy notices.

“Well. If you two would like to leave early, I’d understand. No harm in getting back to the office early and seeing how everything’s running.”

His smile is kind, and I feel my eyes start to water again. Jenson rubs my back, thanking Roy for understanding before leading me back toward the lodge.

His body is stiff and tight against mine.

“Sorry,” I mutter. It hits me suddenly that I—we—could lose everything. That check. The company. Both of us with nothing, and for what? “I should hold it together better.”

Jenson only shakes his head, his lips tight.

“If you need a break, that’s fine, Mel. But tell me. We aren’t strangers.”

His eyes bore into mine for a moment before he heads back toward the porch and the group of people waiting on him.

*That’s the problem,* I think as I watch him go. *We’re not strangers. And this would be so much easier if we were.*



THE HIKE LEAVES me physically exhausted on top of the emotional and mental exhaustion. I find an excuse to step away on my own before dinner and head to a private area of the lodge, away from the guest rooms and dining areas. It’s quiet back here, a series of stone terraces with little tables tucked away in dark corners and tiki torches lighting the coming evening.

Slipping my cell out of my pocket, I take a deep breath and put on a fake smile.

Jodie answers on the second ring.

“Hi, love! How’s it going? Did you get up to anything fun today?”

I give her a quick rundown of the hike, and an ice carving that was wheeled out for breakfast—a replica of the falls we ended up hiking to. She pokes and prods for details, catches me up on an appointment she had with Dr. Salazar, and then we’re both lulled into a comfortable silence.

I want to be back in her little house, although it’s really too small for the both of us. Tucked up on the couch next to her. Head on her shoulder, telling her about all my worries and fears.

But I haven’t done that since before we left Harwinton. And I won’t now. Jodie has more than enough to worry about.

“Tell me, hon, have you met anyone there? Anyone catching your eye?”

I roll my eyes and chuckle, leaning against a railing that overlooks a series of trails across a meadow. Deer are starting to creep out of the shadows now that the sun is setting.

“No, no one is catching my eye, Jodie. A relationship isn’t exactly my top priority right now.”

She sighs, trying to make it sound lighthearted, but I know it bothers her that I’m always alone.

“You need to make time for yourself, Mel. Fall in love. Fall out of love. But you should experience it either way.”

I don’t tell her what I already know deep in my heart; that I was in love once. With Jenson. That I’m scared a part of me might still be.

Instead, I turn the conversation to when the next bills are due, and when a good time to visit would be. I assure her that I already have PTO to take a Friday off and stay the long weekend. When we hang up, I don’t feel any lighter, but I am calmer.

Until I hear pebbles scatter across the rocks.

Turning, I gasp at the sight of Roy standing nearby with his hands clasped behind his back.

“I’m sorry—I was out for a stroll before dinner. I couldn’t help but overhear...”

He hesitates and my heart gallops in my chest.

Because I know exactly what he heard.

“It was my aunt,” I explain, quickly getting control of my emotions in a way I haven’t been able to for days. “I was checking in on her. She worries about me.”

Roy nods, but his face is creased with concern. “Does she know Jenson? You two grew up together.”

It’s a question that’s just a bit beyond polite. A challenge. I meet his eyes and decide to tell the truth...kind of.

Enough of the truth to save us all.

“She does. But she doesn’t know that we’re together.”

He looks surprised at how easily the confession came out. “She doesn’t know you’re engaged.”

“No, not at the moment. The thing is, Jodie—my aunt—she knows Jenson a little *too* well.”

Roy hums and sits in a nearby chair, inviting me to join him. I do, and feel the weight of the day lift just slightly. I can see why Jenson, and everyone else, likes him so much. And in that moment, I’m on Jenson’s side—I don’t want Zach to take what Roy has built and destroy it. I want to see it all thrive.

“What do you mean, knows him too well?”

A smile curves my lips. “I told you we grew up together. So, she knows Jenson well enough to know his flaws as well. And I don’t think she’d approve of us. Of my choice.” I shrug. “He can be too focused on work, and not enough on enjoying life. And he can be selfish. He’ll go to extremes to do what he thinks is right without questioning if it *is* actually right.”

It all spills out so easily that the guilt comes quick and fast. Roy returns my gaze pensively, chin in hand, glasses reflecting the sunset.

“You’re not wrong. I noticed the same things when I hired him. He was so willing to move to Boston without another thought of his family.”

I don’t mention that Jenson’s mom remarried and became consumed with her two stepdaughters and new husband. I know because Jodie told me at one point soon after we moved. It hurt to hear, but we haven’t talked about it these past weeks. I wouldn’t even know how to bring it up to him.

“And I know for a fact that he slept at the office some nights. Back when we were operating out of a duplex. Dentist on one side, us on the other.” Roy smiled at the memory. “But he was ambitious. I think that’s what stuck with me. And you’re right, he fights for what he thinks is right. But the thing is, I don’t think he’s ever been wrong.”

Roy sits back with a grin. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

“Of course not.” I chuckle. “Anyway...I think he can find his way back to what matters.”

Roy nods solemnly. “I believe it. And it might be you that helps him do that, Mel. Your aunt might not approve of him if you tell her the truth, but she’ll find out sooner or later, right? Why not give her a chance to come around to the idea? I’m sure if she saw you two together now, she’d understand.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugs. “I’ve never seen him care about much else other than work. It’s part of what concerned me when he let me know he was interested in taking over the company when I retire. I don’t need a Steve Jobs or a Bill Gates stepping in and making a mess of things. Just someone who cares.” He looks at me over the top of his glasses. “And Jenson cares about you, Mel. I can see it. We all can.”

With that, he stands up, gives me a soft smile, and starts strolling back toward the main area of the lodge.



I sit in silence. Fireflies start to come out of the bushes, flickering at the edge of my vision. Roy's words linger in the silence, making me second-guess my decision not to tell Jodie about Jenson.

It amazes me that everything I just said was the truth—that the truth can come out of any of this.

Except for one thing.

I'm not sure Jenson can find his way back to what matters. And maybe *that's* what really scares me. Because I'm not afraid of falling in love, but what if I fall for someone incapable of loving me back?

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## Chapter 14

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## Jenson

The next day dawns beautifully. The moment I wake up, my eyes open and I think back on the past few days; the burning jealousy I barely tamped down, the argument with Mel. Mysteriously, later last night, I caught sight of Zach dropping into a dark car at the lodge's entrance.

Thinking of Mel, I glance over to where she's curled up next to me on the king-sized bed. It's so massive that we don't need to worry about touching. Since the night we spent having the hottest sex of my life, we've managed to keep our hands to ourselves. But still, in the nights here, I've woken to find myself reaching for her, and almost had to sleep on the sofa a few times to avoid an awkward explanation in the morning.

My eyes rove over her face as she sleeps. There are bags under hers, slightly puffy and pink, as if she's been crying. When I came back to the room last night, she was already in bed and I'd assumed she was sound asleep. But I must've missed something. I should have come back sooner.

Quietly, I creep out of the bed and pull on a pair of sweatpants. I took the liberty of ordering breakfast in this morning, too tired from the last two weeks of joining the whole group to eat out on the patio or in the dining area. I settle in on the couch, pull out my laptop, and catch up on some emails so I won't be swamped once we're back in the city.

A soft sound draws my attention. Mel stands in the doorway of the living area, chin tucked down, eyes a little red. She's chewing on her lip; a nervous habit.

"Are you okay?" I ask before I can stop myself. It isn't my business.

"Yes. Just...tired."

I nod. “It’s almost over. Here, at least. Just one more day.” I try to make the words reassuring. Mel takes a deep breath and returns the nod. Her face softens and for a moment, I regret pulling her into this mess. She deserves better.



A FEW HOURS LATER, after a casual hike with Dave and Roy, and Mel spending time at the spa, we meet up at the room again. Lunch is in half an hour and my stomach is already rumbling. I’d barely picked at breakfast, distracted by the emails and my worry about Mel.

“Everything okay?” she asks, curling up on the chair across from me. I’m pulling off my hiking boots, stretching my feet.

“Yeah. Just trying to decompress.”

“Decompress, hmm? Isn’t that what a company retreat is for?”

I give her a slightly flat, sardonic smile. “Work never stops. Especially on a company retreat.”

As if to make my point, my cell buzzes and vibrates across the coffee table. I glance at the screen and then snatch it up, reading the text over again.

It’s from Michelle, the head of HR, who stayed behind to catch us up on hiring.

“Shit.”

Leaning forward, I grab my laptop and flip it open. “I have to take this,” I explain to Mel, eyes locked on hers to impart that this is serious—I need her to stay quiet if she’s going to be in the room. “Zoom call.” Ignoring the fact that I’m still wearing a sweaty T-shirt, I connect to Michelle’s invite and her grim face appears.

“Thanks for getting on so quickly, Jenson.”

“Of course. Fill me in.”

“The report came in yesterday, but I didn’t want to reach out until I had a little more information. And corroboration.”

“So there’s a chance it’s true, then?” Not that I doubted it for a moment, given who the instigator in this situation is. Mel is watching, chin tucked up against her knee, brows raised.

“Yes. There were two other witnesses at the time. The person who reported it was hesitant. For obvious reasons.” Michelle’s voice has a sharp edge to it. Neither of us like Zach Dupont, and now we have even less reason to.

“Did he touch her, or was it verbal?”

“It sounds like there was some light inappropriate touching going on. No groping. I’m assuming when we speak to him, he’ll try to pass it off as standing a little too close.”

I grunt, my lip curling. “Did you already contact legal?”

“Of course. Jenson, I hate to ask this, but I have to—you’re sure you want to be involved in pursuing this? You are negotiating with his stepfather right now...”

“Of course I do,” I bite out. How can she even...? “If there’s even a chance this is true, that’s more reason for me to pull Dupont Analytics out of his hands, Michelle. We can’t have a man like that in control. If he’s comfortable sexually harassing the employees now, imagine what he’ll do when he’s the owner of the company.”

“You’re right, and I’m glad to hear you’re on board. You’re back when?”

“The day after tomorrow. But I can leave today if you need me.”

“No, no. Finish out the trip. I’ll have legal start writing up the paperwork. It’ll be a long battle and I want to make sure this woman is prepared for that. The uncomfortable questions, the attitude he’ll have.”

I have to breathe through my nose slowly to fight back the rage. Michelle and I work out the details and I finally close out the call, shutting my laptop and falling back against the couch.

“What was all that about?” Mel asks, voice timid but curious.

I look up at her, a dark cloud hanging overhead. “This stays between you and me. HR got a report from an employee that Zach Dupont sexually harassed them. There are two witnesses.”

Mel’s eyes are wide. “You think he really...?”

“I do,” I confirm emotionlessly. “I know he seems nice, Mel, but Zach has a history of these kinds of issues. It’s just never been brought this far up the ladder. Maybe now, it’ll get Roy’s attention.”

She straightens up, feet on the ground and a determined look on her face. “I never thought he was nice, Jenson. Actually, he kind of skeeved me out. He was definitely overdoing it.”

“Probably trying to get his hands on you, since you’re mine.”

It just slips out. The two of us lock eyes, and I wait for her to straighten me out or laugh. She does neither, only holds my gaze.

“You don’t need to go back early for this?”

I shake my head. “No. We can stay for the last day. I’ll take care of it when we get back.”

Standing, I shuck my shirt off and stride toward the bedroom, intending to find a clean one. I can shower later, after lunch. Right now, I’ll probably just angry-sweat anyway. It’s a good thing Zach left last night, because if I saw him face-to-face, I don’t know what I’d do. Probably wrap my hands around his throat and teach him a lesson about how to treat people.

“Hey.”

I look over my shoulder. She's standing in the doorway, light trousers flowing down her hips and a thin-strapped top slipping down one shoulder. My heartbeat slows, then picks up even faster, but not from anger this time.

“Yeah?”

“You really care about them, huh? The employees, I mean. Everyone you work with.”

“Of course. There'd be no Dupont Analytics without them. And besides—I started right beside them years ago.”

She's watching me closely, a look on her face that I can't explain, arms crossed. Mel pushes off the door frame and steps near, then catches me off guard by pressing up on her tiptoes and kissing me on the cheek. The spot tingles as she pulls back.

“*That's* the guy I grew up with,” she says teasingly, walking backward out of the room. At the last second, she spins away.

And everything in me wants to follow after her, forever. Anywhere she'll lead me.

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## Chapter 15

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## Melanie

Dinner the last day of the retreat is a huge to-do. Jade Lodge has gone all out, with an actual waterfall feature in the dining room singing prettily against one wall. It's a gorgeous temperate night and the wall of French doors that lead out to the patio are all open.

Jenson lounges next to me in a shirt unbuttoned just enough to look lazy and content. His hair is slightly ruffled, his gray eyes half-closed as he observes the rest of the team. There are about two dozen people left. At a nearby table, Roy chats happily, laughing and good-natured as ever.

Liza is tucked away at our table, giving us furtive glances. Brian is here as well. I've grown to like him on the trip—he's a retired cardiologist and an investor in the company.

"So," he says, leaning in toward me with a charming smile, "now that we've reached the end of our journey, Melanie, you have to tell me—how did you snag Jenson Sharpe? Or was it the other way around?"

I return his smile easily and push my cleared plate away. "Hmm, well. I'd say *he* snagged *me*."

Jenson raises a brow slightly. "I beg to differ."

Liza is watching curiously now, as are the other two people at the table. Ben and Jill, the two HR employees who didn't look thrilled to be here the first few days.

"We grew up in the same town," Jenson explains, then goes on to tell the story. The one we haven't had to make up, because it's true. As he talks about our past—meeting as kids, Aunt Jodie and his mom chatting at the elementary school pick up area, having some of the same classes together in middle school, exploring every summer—I'm lulled into a comfortable swirl of memories. The stress of the last few years

doesn't go away, but it recedes. I feel oddly at peace...like I'm where I'm supposed to be.

“And then in high school, I finally got the courage to ask her out.”

“He didn't do it well,” I chime in, grinning. “There was a bit of stuttering, if I remember correctly.”

Jenson shoots me a playful glare, and it's as if it's just the two of us in the room, reminiscing. “It was hard not to. You were so pretty. Still are.”

A light blush heats my cheeks. “You weren't too bad yourself, Sharpe. Still aren't.”

Brian sounds a chuckle of protest. “Reel it in, you two. We're all more than aware of just how made for each other you are.”

I glance quickly at Jenson, wondering at that. Because on some level, these past two weeks haven't been as hard to fake as I thought they'd be. The PDA took some getting used to, but after the night we slept together...even that was easy to slip into. Like putting on a well-worn glove, if the glove was a chiseled man in his early thirties. A shiver goes through me at the memory of his wet body pressed against mine in the shower.

“So what happened?” Liza pipes up, the sharpness no longer in her eyes. I think she's felt a bit betrayed by me. We don't work closely, but we cross paths often and I've obviously never mentioned Jenson. Because there never *was* anything to mention until very, very recently.

“What do you mean?” There's a dangerous edge to Jenson's voice, but Liza ignores it and doesn't meet his gaze.

“You didn't stay together, right? You only met again a year or two ago?”

More like about a month ago, but I don't correct her. I almost bite the tip of my tongue, but then the truth spills out of

me, because that's the direction we've been going in, anyway. "My aunt got sick and I had to move away."

Jenson's eyes cut to me.

He's never heard this before. I never told him...just left that voicemail. *It's not going to work out.*

I wanted so badly for it to work out.

Heart in my throat, I avoid Jenson's eyes.

"Sorry," Liza says quickly, but I shake my head.

"It's fine. She's doing better now, it was just a rush at the time. We had to follow her cardiologist out of state."

Brian's brows rise and he pauses in cutting a piece of the key lime pie in front of him. "Can I ask who she was seeing? Or still is?"

"Dr. Salazar. He was out of Mass General, but transferred out of state to open his own practice."

"Mmm, Golden Oak, correct? I considered joining that team, but it was very close to my retirement."

"Yes, exactly."

"New York City. It was a good move for him, his center is considered one of the top cardiology treatment facilities on the East Coast."

I smile politely and chance a glance Jenson's way. His face is blank, and I just know he's putting it all together. Our conversation a few days ago about Jodie not being a city girl; my unexplained move from Harwinton; that voicemail.

His eyes are boring into mine, demanding answers. Luckily, the middle of dinner isn't a good place for him to confront me.

"If your aunt is still with him, she must've had a very complicated case," Brian continues conversationally. "She's doing okay now?"

“She is,” I confirm. This much I did tell Jenson. He just didn’t know the whole backstory.

Dinner winds down, the conversation slipping into how no one wants to return to “real” life. Our day jobs. But for me, it’s different, because whether I stay here or go back to Boston, I can’t escape Jenson. Especially not now that I have another month and a half of this facade to finish out.

After the plates are cleared away and a few people head off to the bar for a drink, I politely excuse myself, hoping to flee to the suite. Maybe lock myself in the bathroom.

But Jenson’s large hand settles on my lower back. “You look tired, love.” We’re still in earshot of others. A shiver goes down my spine—at his touch, or in anticipation of the conversation I know is coming?

Once we’re out of view, I stride down the hallway, dress fluttering at my knees. My heels wobble and I almost go down. *No, no, no.* Not tonight, not the last night.

It’ll be just me and him in the room.

And I’m not ready to answer to the past.

I slip inside and hear the door shut behind me firmly. Before I can make a run for the balcony or the bathroom, Jenson’s hand wraps around my wrist. It’s not forceful, but insistent. I turn, unable to look up and meet his eyes.

“Is it true?”

There’s so much in his words—sadness, bitterness, anger. I nod.

“Jodie’s okay?” he asks, and that makes me look up in surprise.

I’ve lied to him all these years, and his first reaction is to ask after Jodie?

“Yes. That was true.” *Omission is still a lie*, the sly voice in my head whispers. Guilt is eating away at me. I rub my shoulder, shivering.

“What happened?”

There’s no question I need to put it all on the table now. And maybe it’s better this way. Jenson wants to know what he really got into by forcing me into this arrangement? Fine. He asked for it—literally.

I turn and walk into the living area, dropping onto the couch.

“She got sick.”

“When?”

The memory burns up my throat, bringing back old tears. I fight them down and remind myself, *she’s safe now, she’s fine.*

She’s not, really, but that’s something to worry about another time. Not tonight, with Jenson towering over me, his steel eyes burning.

“Our senior year. The day after graduation. She had a heart attack and I found her—”

I choke on the words. Reset myself.

“I found her in the kitchen. She’d hit her head and I didn’t know what had happened. I called 911. They said if I hadn’t come home right then...”

I almost lost her.

Jenson slowly sits down across from me. His eyes are wide, haunted, his face blank. Without prompting, I continue, the past spilling out of me.

“She needed surgery. It was all so quick, a week maybe, but then she got an infection after and her doctor was going to New York.”

“A week. You told me Jodie took you to the coast.”

“I didn’t know what else to say.” Tears start welling up, threatening to spill down my cheeks. I haven’t cried about Jodie’s situation—my situation—in front of anyone. Ever. “It was such a quick decision. We couldn’t stay in Harwinton.”

“You could’ve told me, Mel.”

He stands, fists clenched.

“How?” My voice breaks. “We didn’t have a choice. It only got worse, Jenson, and I was a mess—”

“I could’ve helped you.” He sounds so frustrated, and it makes me frustrated as well.

“How, Jenson? What could you have done? We were eighteen—”

“Exactly! You shouldn’t have had to go through that alone, Mel.”

“I wasn’t alone. Dr. Salazar made space for Jodie at the new hospital immediately. After the infection, it only got more complicated, Jenson. She got much worse before she got better. I wasn’t sure she was going to make it.”

He’s pacing the room, a habit of his that has apparently transitioned to his adult self. “I could have...I could have come to New York...”

“And what? Missed out on going to college? Jenson, you don’t understand. I was spoon-feeding her for a while. We wouldn’t have been hanging out in your bedroom, laughing, fooling around. It wasn’t—”

I stop, the words caught in my throat. What was I going to say? *It wasn’t the kind of life conducive to falling in love; you would have fallen out of love with me if you’d seen how bad it was, how I fell apart; it would have broken us.*

These are all things I knew then, things I know now. I look up through my wet lashes at Jenson and see the man he’s become. If he’d followed me to New York, if he’d gotten caught up in this mess, he wouldn’t have any of this. He wouldn’t be the man I’m falling for all over again.

“So, she’s okay now?” His tone is frosty. In the dim light of the room, his shadowed face looks angry, haggard.

“Yes, mostly. She’s on dialysis. But she can manage on her own.”

He snorts. “You can’t be that worried about her, Mel, if you moved a few hundred miles away, can you?”

My brows knit and I stare up at him in defiance, sniffing the fear and memories away. “I had to. There are so many bills to pay off, you wouldn’t believe...”

“So that’s it, then? That’s why you agreed to be with me?” He sneers when he says it and my mind goes blank.

“I...I came to Boston for the job. Obviously, I didn’t know that you were the CEO of Dupont Analytics. Or that you’d hire me to be your fake fiancé.”

“But you’re in it for the money. And that’s it.”

The silence is heavy between us, the space from me to him suddenly insurmountable.

“Yes.”

It’s a lie. Just like all the lies I’ve been telling—to him, to myself—for years. That I was over it, that it was just young love, a crush, nothing more.

You were in love with him. You always have been.

How do you get over something like that, something that was buried in your bones? With everything that happened after graduation, I didn’t have time to grieve losing Jenson. So for years—more than a decade—I’ve been walking around loving him a little bit every day. But tucking it away, like a secret.

A secret I plan to keep.

Everything else is coming out, but I can’t let him know those old feelings are resurfacing.

He turns away and scoffs again, fists clenching and unclenching. When I speak, the words come out even and cool.

“Don’t act as if you’re any better than I am, Jenson. Because you’re only in this for the company.”

He glares at me over his shoulder, but I have him there.

We’re both in this for the *right* reasons, and that’s what makes it so hard. For me, it’s Jodie. For Jenson, it’s the staff at Dupont Analytics. It’s the legacy.

That very fact is what’s making me fall for him all over again and it’s why I can’t let him know.

Ever.



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## Chapter 16

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## Jenson

I spend an hour cooling off. Maybe more. I don't know.

Time slips around me like a river. All over again, I'm eighteen, heartbroken and alone in Harwinton. Wondering why I wasn't good enough for Mel, why she didn't stay.

But now, after all these years, I know. And it's breaking my heart all over again.

Mel probably thinks I'm upset. I am on some level. But I'm not angry at her. Admittedly, I'm hurt that she's only in this for the money. But mostly, I'm angry at the universe for forcing her to make an impossible choice. I'm angry that I lost her, and that I almost lost Jodie without knowing it, and that now it feels like there's an insurmountable canyon between us.

*I need to make this right.*

I can't lose her again. Not now that she's back in my life.

Out on the balcony, I take a deep breath and look up at the stars gracing the sky over Jade Lodge. I've never seen them so clearly. Even back in Harwinton, a bit of a Podunk town, they were never this bright.

It's the last night of the retreat and maybe the last time we'll get an ounce of privacy now that our very scandalous, high-profile relationship is out in the open. When we get back to the office everyone will have an ear and eye out for us.

I turn and walk back into the suite, leaving the balcony doors open behind me to let the night in. All the lights are off except for those in the bedroom. I can hear water running in the bathroom, and the sound of Mel's evening routine is calming. It's another reminder that I'm doing the right thing.

"Mel."

I stand in the bathroom doorway, arms crossed, gaze soft. She's barefoot, her hair up and a silk pajama set hanging

delicately from her shoulders and hips. There's only a hint of hesitation before she responds. "Yes?"

"I'm not mad at *you*. I want you to know that. I'm just mad in general."

She takes the information in, her bare face blinking up at me. I fight the urge to step forward and take her in my arms.

"Is there anything you need help with?" The question makes my heart hurt, and it's so much bigger than it sounds.

Mel's eyes water again for a moment before she answers, "No. You're already helping, Jenson. As much as this isn't how I imagined things working out...it benefits us both, right?"

I move farther into the bathroom and watch her shoulders tense as I come to stand behind her, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

"How bad is it?"

"Bad," she sighs. "The whole string of events at the start—the heart attack, infection, and the kidney failure these last few years. I have it under control but I want to get ahead of it if I can. I don't know if you remember—Jodie donated a kidney when she was younger. So she only has one left."

Her shoulders slump, the weight of the last twelve years settling over her. I reach out and massage my thumbs gently into her soft skin, trying to loosen the tension.

"There's debt," she breathes. "And at-home care sometimes, when it's bad. She'll need it in the future, too, if she can't find a kidney transplant. And a few times each year we need to check in with Dr. Salazar, so the bills never stop coming."

"I'm sorry." It comes out as a quiet murmur. "You know I love Jodie. She made the best peanut butter and fluff sandwiches."

A soft laugh bubbles out of Mel, sounding a little watery, but I'll take it. We share a small smile in the mirror.

“You could’ve told me, you know. When you got to Dupont, I mean. I would have helped.”

“Yeah?” The question comes out wryly. “After walking in on you mostly naked, finding out you’re my boss—you think I could’ve just asked for a loan?”

I shake my head. “Not a loan; I’d give you the money freely, Mel. I still will. If you want to quit this.”

My heart seizes for a moment.

I wasn’t planning on saying that, but...it’s been in the back of my mind. For a few days, maybe. Not just because of tonight.

Her eyes search mine. And then she turns, depositing herself in my arms effortlessly. The silk top and shorts ghosts across my forearms, drawing a shiver from my body.

“No. We’re already in too deep.”

My heart thuds at her words. There’s a truth to them that I’m not sure she’s aware of. *I’m already in too deep*. The thought slips through my mind as Mel’s fingertips trail over my abs, rest at the top of my trousers.

There’s a shy hesitation to her actions that only fire me up more. It reminds me of when we were teenagers, kids really, just beginning to explore each other...the way she touched me so hesitantly, curiously, bravely.

I take her wrist and raise her right hand to my mouth, planting a kiss on her palm. Mel sucks in a breath, her chest heaving beneath the silk, nipples dragging a wake across the light pink fabric. Slowly, I lift the hem just enough to settle my hands at the dip of her waist and rub gentle circles with my thumbs. She sways against me, lips parted, and I can’t hold back anymore. I lean down and capture her lips.

This kiss is different from the ones we’ve shared so far. It’s not heated with tension, not done with the thought of others watching.

This one is just for us.

Her lips melt against mine, warm and supple. I part my mouth and let the delicate wet skin catch, teasing her lower lip with the tip of my tongue. Mel makes a mewling sound of need and presses up, our mouths slotting together more fully, her body dragging against mine.

With one swift move, I lift her onto the countertop. It's more than big enough and my mind runs away with ideas. The marble is cold under her thighs and she squeals, pulling back with a grin. Her fingers make quick work of my shirt, tugging it up over my shoulders, tossing it away.

I lean in for another kiss.

I could do just this all night; lose myself in kissing her. Let the past and the present merge. Act as if we never lost one another to things we couldn't control.

"Jenson," she moans quietly as my lips move to her neck. I feel her body quiver and I bite at her pulse point, sucking lightly. She clumsily thumbs at my trouser button and I step back, shucking the rest of my clothes off, wanting to be skin to skin with her.

The straps of her top fall down her shoulders as I lift her. Mel wraps her legs around my hips and we move out to the bedroom, the warm night air billowing in from the balcony. I lay her back on the bed and pull her shorts off quickly, the silk like butter in my hands.

"I need you." The words spill out of her and only make me harder. She sits up and pulls her top off, reaching for me as I crawl over her body.

We get lost in kissing again, our bodies melding together, our skin heated. Mel's legs part and let me in. I settle between them, my shaft rubbing against her soaked center, the anticipation only heightening the buzz I can feel in every nerve.

"I fucking missed you," I murmur against her mouth. Years and years of the truth are welling up now. There's no point in hiding from her; she knows me too well.

Her arms wrap around my shoulders and draw me closer, until I can't tell where I end and she begins. We're both breathing hard as she lets her knees fall to each side, opening herself up to me, tilting her hips so that we fit together perfectly.

I groan as my cock slips into her wet heat. My forehead drops against hers and I just stay there for a moment, soaking her in—the scent of her, the feel of her, the way her pussy tightens in little flutters around me.

I pull my hips back and snap them forward without warning. The little gasp she lets out makes my cock throb. Wrapping an arm around her thigh and pulling it in close, I keep fucking her, slow and steady, angling myself so that the friction is just right.

Electricity shoots from my toes to the back of my neck. I lean my head back, already feeling sweat beading on my chest. It's not hot out tonight, but the effort of holding back is almost too much. Stars are already breaking at the edge of my vision.

“Jenson,” Mel whimpers, her hands running over my chest and squeezing my hips. She guides me in, wanting more, desperately lifting her hips so my pubic bone hits her clit over and over. She's lost in a delicious spell of pleasure, her body shivering under mine as I keep slamming into her over and over at a maddeningly slow pace.

I can't keep holding back and feel my body start to stiffen. Staring into her eyes, I grit out mindlessly, “Don't you *ever* think you can leave me again. You're mine.”

Mel wails, body shaking as she comes, pussy clenched around my cock. I can't hold back any longer and white bursts across my vision. My back arches as I keep pounding into her over and over, losing myself in the sensation of her body, her sounds, her scent.

When it's over, I drape her body over mine. Mel's breathing slowly evens. One arm is tucked into her side, the other thrown over my chest. Exhaustion is already seeping in

when what I said earlier comes back like a boomerang. *You're mine.*

But she doesn't pull away or disappear again. Instead, I wait, completely still and terrified—until she falls into an easy sleep, her arm still wrapped around me.

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## Chapter 17

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## Melanie

Giselle's lips are pursed as she reads through the last few lines of the final document on the desk in front of her. I'm worried she can hear the humming of my anxiety as it permeates the air, but Jenson is cool indifference in the chair next to me.

"Everything here looks good," she says, glancing from Jenson to me. "You two should be set. I'm sure you understand the boundaries of PDA and what can be construed as sexual harassment on company grounds." She snorts delicately before muttering, "As if we don't have enough of that to go around."

Relief washes over me, although I'm not sure why I was worried. Maybe because Jenson and I are still lying, and I'm still worried about being called out.

Only...are we?

I sneak a look at him, unsure. He's so effortlessly handsome in a casual suit, hair mussed, chiseled jaw. Good Lord, I can't believe I walked away from this man all those years ago.

More like, got dragged away from him...

It doesn't matter anymore, though. Somehow, we've been drawn back together. Partly by fate, maybe, but we have a hand in it, too. If it weren't for Jenson's deal, I'd probably be hiding away in the marketing department, avoiding any run-ins with my past.

"We have a meeting about that later today, correct?" Jenson asks.

Giselle nods. "Kelly put it on both our schedules, I think. Though you haven't been to your office yet." She looks intrigued, sending another glance my way, her perfectly manicured brows drawing in as if to say, *No one ever keeps Jenson Sharpe away from his office...who are you?*

It's almost 9 a.m., after all. But we both needed time to get home and recuperate from the retreat.

It was odd to be back in my apartment, all alone, after sharing a suite with Jenson for two weeks. Odd not to listen to the shower running and know he was in it; odd to fall asleep without the knowledge that he was only inches away.

Jenson and Giselle chat a bit more, catching up on open positions and the possibility of sending a recruiting officer out to MIT next month. I find myself sinking comfortably into the background, contemplating what projects might need to be tackled now that we're back and how my team did without me.

"Ready?"

I startle, looking up at Jenson, who's already standing.

"Yes. Thanks."

My hand slips easily into his as he helps me up. Giselle is still watching the two of us closely, and a frustrated bubble forms in my chest. We've just spent two weeks convincing everyone this is real; I thought the pressure was off, but no, apparently, the show must go on.

His hand hovers over my lower back as we leave Giselle's office and the HR suite. This side of the building is quiet, mostly the billing department and HR, plus a meditation room I haven't had a chance to look at yet.

There's a tug on my hand. Jenson pulls me into a little windowed alcove with pseudo-privacy on the fourth floor. It's quiet, but down below cars meander by and pedestrians hurry to wherever they need to be.

"That's sorted then," he says quietly. "We shouldn't have any technical issues with the relationship now. It's all just appearances from here on out."

"Okay...yeah. I can do that."

"Can you?" His brow lifts, a cheeky smirk on his lips. I tamp down the urge to press up on my feet and kiss him. *No one is watching right now. Reel it in, Atkinson.*

“So what’s the agreement now?” I ask, ignoring his teasing remark. “Lunch a few times a week? Should I come by your office, or would it make more sense if you came down to check on me? More people to witness it on the fifth floor.”

He hums in thought, hands in his pockets, the collar of his shirt pulling just enough to expose his throat. My mouth waters.

“Both, I think. Lunch three times a week. I’ll take you out, if you want, but we should at least do a coffee here in the morning.”

“Giselle won’t be mad that you’re not in your office at eight o’clock sharp?”

His eyes flash with amusement. “Jealous?”

Giselle is a beautiful woman, but...no. My stomach knots, something tells me that Jenson is all mine.

For now, at least.

We settle into a comfortable moment of silence. Jenson sighs and reaches up to wind a stray piece of hair back into my bun. “I wired half the money over to your account today.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” I protest, but secretly I’ll be happy to get some of the bills that are in collection out of the way. My body starts to relax at the thought, and I put a hand on his waist to support myself.

“Why not? You’ve been working hard.”

“Mmm, well. It *is* hard work, faking being in love with you.” I give him a smirk with the taunt, praying he doesn’t guess the half truth in it. *Being in love with you*. Ugh. I’m happily heading for a train wreck. What is wrong with me?

Jenson’s cell buzzes and he looks down, a frown appearing. “Okay—I really should get upstairs now. But we’ll talk later. I have a busy day, so we can touch base after work if I don’t see you. We should set up a date.”

“Or you could just ask me out, like a normal guy.”

“I could, but this is a business transaction, darling.” There’s a purr in his voice as he says it that makes my core tingle with anticipation. He turns and strides down the hallway, his broad shoulders making my stomach flutter.

With a sigh, I step out of the alcove...and right into Adrian.

One look at her somber expression tells me she heard everything. Or *enough*.

“Adrian, w-what—?” I stutter out.

“I was just coming to find you. We have a meeting in half an hour with the social media team to go over the schedule, and you need to approve their ad campaign design.”

My mouth is still open as my brain tries to catch up. Adrian takes my arm and pulls me right back into the little nook I’d just been tucked up against Jenson in.

Only Adrian is five-foot-five and thin as a toothpick. Her dreads fall to her chest and look like a version of Medusa’s hair coupled with the anger on her face.

“What the hell is going on here, Mel?”

“I...”

“While you were gone, HR reached out to the supervisors on the team, so we all know about you and Jenson. That in itself was a shock, *but what did I just hear, Mel?* Are you two actually together, or not?”

My mouth snaps shut. There’s just so much to explain. Literal years to explain. Our whole history together, the situation with my aunt, how desperately I need the money, how desperately Jenson needs me...

*Not you*, the voice in my head reminds me. *Just someone to fill in a gap. When he doesn’t need you anymore—*

I cut the thought off before it can continue and shake the fog away.

“It’s...complicated.”

“Well, try to explain it. Because I don’t want to work for a liar, and you’ve been lying to me, one way or another.” She crosses her arms.

“Okay. Yeah. First, I’m sorry, Adrian. None of this was planned.” The apology only makes her face go blank with dread, and I rush on. “Jenson and I...we have a history. A long one. And when I came to Dupont, we weren’t in a relationship—I didn’t even know he was here.”

“But you did know him? Before you got here?”

“Yes.”

“That explains why he was watching you all the time the first few days.” She mutters the words, but my eyes snap to hers, confused. He was watching me? “So?” she prompts.

“I ran into him my first day here, and I thought...or I didn’t think...ugh. I don’t know. I guess I thought everything would be fine. I really, really need this job, Adrian.”

I take her hands, practically pleading with her, and her eyes soften.

“Why? No offense, Mel, you’re good at this, but it doesn’t really seem like your kind of gig.”

I almost laugh but swallow the bitter sound down. “You’re not wrong. It’s the money. I have a family member who’s really sick, and there are a lot of bills.”

Her lips go from a frown to an unhappy pucker. “Okay, I can get that, I guess. My dad...” But she shakes her head, trailing off. “I get it. I’m still not connecting all this, though—what does this have to do with you and Jenson being together? You’re not, like, a sex worker, are you?” Adrian whispers the last part, then rushes on. “Not that I’d judge you if you were, it’s just...an odd choice to bite the hand that feeds you and—”

“I’m not,” I interrupt, a grin on my face at the absurd idea.

*Is it absurd? I did sleep with him. More than once.*

“This has to stay between you and me, Adrian, okay? You know Roy is retiring soon. Jenson—”

“Wants the company.” She doesn’t look or sound surprised as she says it. “From what I hear, it’s him or Zach.”

“Exactly.” I’m hesitant to keep going, unsure how she feels about either man. But I have to believe in Jenson—even if he’s different from the guy I grew up with, I have to believe there’s still good in him.

“Jenson is trying to convince Roy that he’s the better choice, not just as a leader, but to really take care of the company. And everyone working here.”

Our eyes meet, and I can see in hers that she understands. Whether she’ll say it aloud or not, Adrian at least knows that putting Zach in charge would be a bad idea.

“The problem is, Roy doesn’t think Jenson is settled down enough. So when we ran into each other, and he realized I was staying in Boston pretty permanently, he made me a proposition.”

The light slowly goes on in Adrian’s eyes as they widen.

“You two are faking a relationship.”

I nod. “Yeah. I’m sorry. Honestly, I assumed it would be over pretty quickly and that no one would care.”

Adrian tosses her head back and laughs, her dreads dancing. “You thought no one would care? Mel, half the female population at Dupont would die to have a chance with Jenson Sharpe. You’re officially enemy number one by being his fiancé.”

I groan, leaning back against the wall. “I honestly didn’t realize.”

“What, that he’s hot? Rich? Got that ‘bad boy’ attitude going on, like he’d be really great at punishing you?”

A flush goes through my body, but I keep a straight face. “Trust me, growing up, Jenson wasn’t exactly a bad boy. He

was in the math club.”

Adrian grins and takes my hands again, squeezing them in solidarity. “What exactly are you getting out of this, Mel?”

“A good chunk of money. Money that I need.” I shrug. She mentioned her dad, so I’m hoping Adrian really does get it, even though I don’t know the story there.

She nods, her gaze clouding and brows knitting. “I just think you really need to be careful about this. For starters, you probably shouldn’t even be doing it.” I bite my lip guiltily as she continues, “But if you’re going to insist, then you *definitely* shouldn’t be discussing the deal here at the office. Anyone could overhear you. It kind of makes sense, though.” She shrugs.

“Makes sense how?”

“You two. You just...make sense. I don’t know. You said you grew up together, so maybe that’s it. Jenson’s definitely been keeping an eye on you, and you seem very comfortable with him.”

She has no idea; I’m probably *too* comfortable.

“Anyway. Just be careful. Zach was nosing around, asking questions.”

“What? How? He was on the retreat with us...”

“He’s got a few moles in the office he keeps in contact with. He wants Dupont Analytics bad, Mel. Don’t worry, I’m Team Jenson. But if this gets out...that you two are faking the whole thing and lying to Roy...Roy will, without a doubt, hand the company over to Zach, and probably fire Jenson on the spot.”

Guilt and fear twist my gut into a knot and I wrap my arms around my waist. Adrian steps out of the alcove, tipping her head.

“Come on, we’ve got to get back to work. I emailed you the minutes from the last meeting so you’re caught up.”

I give her a tight smile and thank her, but as we head toward the elevators, I can't keep the worry at bay. The hard part was supposed to be over.

We might have everyone convinced—even Roy seems less suspicious of us now.

But if what Adrian says is true, and Roy finds out...Jenson could lose everything.



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## Chapter 18

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## Jenson

By 4:30 p.m., I'm feeling uncharacteristically frazzled. I glance up again at my empty office and grit my teeth. Out in the small reception area, Brett is sitting stiffly. He has a good sense for my moods and knows I'm not in a good one.

*What's the rush?* I ask myself. *You knew today would be a full schedule.*

Still, I was hoping I'd get another few minutes with Mel.

I shouldn't want this so badly. We just spent two weeks together and have a month and a half more to go.

*But then what?*

It's a question I've been lingering on a lot lately. Will she stay in Boston? Stay here, with Dupont? A part of me can't imagine she'll want to be around once all this is over. Especially if we very publicly, and amicably, break this off.

*She only wants your money*, that little voice of betrayal whispers. I shake my head and groan; I just can't picture it. Yes, Mel and Jodie might be in a tough spot financially right now. But for Mel, life was never about money.

I think of the countless times we skipped "normal" dates when we were kids and instead lay in a field somewhere stargazing. A few nights we even snuck out for meteor showers. With Mel, I was just as happy laughing in the back seat of my junky car as I was spending my whole paycheck on her at the local diner. We didn't need money. Just each other.

The clock on the wall ticks down another minute. Four forty-five now.

"I can't take this." I mutter to myself and stand, slinging my bag over my shoulder, tapping the screen on my desktop, and leaving the office.

Brett startles. I'm rarely out before five thirty and always give him a heads-up if I'm planning it.

"Take an early day," I say, passing him. "I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks for all your work while I was gone."

He stutters out a thanks as I jab at the elevator button, trying to fight back a slowly blossoming headache. I want to go home and have a drink—something dark and smokey—but what I really need is probably water and a good rest.

The elevator lights up and stops on the fifth floor. My heart starts pounding in my chest, and as the doors open, it's almost as if fate intervenes. Mel is standing in the foyer. Our eyes meet and she blushes, but we're not alone. Her assistant, Adrian Kenny, raises a brow.

"I'll take the stairs, Mel. Have a good rest of your night."

Adrian disappears and Mel steps into the elevator, giving me a shy smile. "Long day?"

"You have no idea."

She probably thinks I mean catching up on endless backlogs of work and meeting after meeting. But I spent most of the day thinking and worrying about her—about us. It's comfortable standing here with her at my side, and I'm just starting to work up the courage to ask what her plan is after this whole fiasco is over when we hit the ground floor.

The doors open. I gesture for Mel to step out. We're making our way toward the front entrance when a familiar figure slinks out from the café area.

"Zach."

He looks fake-surprised and blinks one too many times. Mel steps a little closer to me, her fingers finding mine.

"You're not supposed to be here."

Zach doesn't react to the flat, borderline threatening tone I use. Instead he pastes on a smile and drags his eyes over Mel,

right down to her toes. I fight the urge to shift her behind me and instead, continue to stare him down.

“Yes. Right—HR called me this morning. It seems there’s been a misunderstanding.”

Hot anger runs through my veins. Not only because Zach is blatantly checking out the woman he knows is my fiancé, but because he’s here. In the same building as the woman—women, really—that he’s been harassing. God forbid she come down to the lobby right now and see him.

“You need to leave and not come back unless this is cleared up.”

“*When* it’s cleared up, you mean.” His smile only widens, curling like the Cheshire cat’s. “I’m sure Roy will step in and reassure HR that nothing untoward ever happened.”

The odd thing is, he does seem sure. Only I know Roy Dupont well enough to know that in this scenario, he’ll step back and let Giselle and the HR team do their jobs. Because *Roy* knows *Zach* well enough to know there might be some truth behind the accusation.

I, for one, don’t doubt the woman at all.

“Melanie,” Zach says, turning his attention to her, “we never got to meet up for dinner at the lodge. Now that we’re both back in town, maybe you can make some time.” His eyes flick down to her bare legs where the hem of her skirt tickles her knees.

“I’m going to be a little busy with planning the wedding. Sorry.”

But Mel doesn’t sound sorry at all. Her voice is strong and cold, like iron. I almost look at her in surprise at the mention of the wedding—what our fake engagement would naturally lead to, except that both she and I know it’ll all end before we get there.

“Mmm.” Zach’s grin suddenly dims. “Of course. Well, I’m sure I’ll be seeing you two around. Sooner, rather than later.”

*In court, most likely*, I want to say as he saunters off. Once he's gone I gesture for a security guard and fill him in on the situation. "He's not to come back into the building until he's cleared."

The guard nods seriously and steps away to speak into his two-way radio. A few years ago, Zach was a rare sight around here. He mostly spent his mom's, and Roy's, money traveling around the world. Amsterdam, France, some part of northern Europe where Roy had to pull a few strings and get him safely back to the US. But these days, he's around enough that the guards know him by sight. That worries me. It means he's making a real effort at obtaining the company.

"That was...a lot."

Mel looks a little stressed. We walk out front and step off to the side as pedestrians go by, a curious dog sniffing at my trousers, a guy on a bike whizzing past.

"It's only going to get worse."

She bites her lip, looking up at me through her lashes. "Jenson, Adrian said today that Zach has been asking around about us. I think he might know..."

She trails off, not saying, *This isn't real*. It shouldn't be a relief, because it *isn't* real. But so much of me wants it to be.

I let out a long, slow exhale. "We'll just have to stick to our guns. Roy's retirement party is in a month, and I doubt this whole thing with Zach will be cleared up by then. I just got word earlier that the woman involved is considering taking it to court. And I'm sure she'll find quite a few supporters and corroborators among the staff."

Mel looks both relieved and worried. We're still holding hands, and she squeezes mine reassuringly.

"Hey. Breathe."

"I am breathing," I deadpan. "I don't like the way he looks at you."

When I meet Mel's gaze, she's grinning. "You're not jealous, Jenson, are you? No one likes a jealous fiancé."

She purrs the last line, standing on tiptoe to place a kiss on my jaw. I take another deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart and the stirring in my boxer briefs. The last thing I need right now is to be seen backing Mel up against Dupont Analytics' building and ravaging her right here in public. But with adrenaline coursing through my veins, it's hard to see the logic in that denial.

"Dinner," I say. "Tomorrow."

Mel raises a brow. "That's a blunt way of asking a girl out on a date. You used to be better at this, Jenson."

I'm sure she doesn't mean it as a warning, but her words cool my head anyway. "Can I take you out for dinner tomorrow night?"

"What did you have in mind? I'm guessing you'd want to make it pretty public—"

"Wherever you want." I can't stress that enough. I'd take her to a hot dog stand in the middle of the park. I'd Lady-and-the-Tramp it out back of an Italian restaurant if she wants.

She purses her lips together, considering much more than dinner, I think. And then the corner of her mouth lifts.

"Know any good diners around town?"

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## Chapter 19

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## Melanie

The end of the week finally comes, and despite the chaos of getting back into the groove at work, I'm riding a high. Literally humming as I step out of the apartment Saturday morning and decide to head into the city for some retail therapy.

I don't need anything in particular, but lately my wardrobe seems...boring. I'm not really a material girl, and I always invest in well-made clothes, but all of a sudden, I have the urge to buy a few new pieces. Maybe some heels? Maybe a new skirt, or some of those skintight pants I see fashionable women wearing on the streets...

*It's definitely not to catch Jenson's eye.*

I bat the thought away; of course it's not. What's the point of impressing someone who's already your fake fiancé? And who has seen you in embarrassing gym shorts in high school.

Still, I have to admit that earlier in the week, I'd agonized over what to wear to dinner. Jenson was true to his word and took me to a hole-in-the-wall diner with crappy coffee and stacks upon stacks of pancakes. He got his usual—a Banker's Plate, piled high with two of everything—while I dug into the sweets. Texas French toast, a tall glass of OJ, and a blueberry muffin on the side.

It was...good. More than good.

Which is why I need to be careful about falling deeper into this mess. I can't fall for Jenson, not when this is all going to end in a month. As I hit the city limits, buildings officially climbing higher than two stories, I wonder what to do *after*.

Leaving Dupont would be hard. The pay is great, and I don't hate the work as much as I thought I would. It's the team, really, that I love. And Boston...it's different from New



York City, which I found stifling and grimy. I can picture staying in Boston.

But would Jenson want me to?

Or once our engagement falls apart, would he want to play the role of “jilted lover” and be left alone? Free to be cared for by all the women waiting to fawn over him?

I try not to think about it as I find a parking garage and navigate the twisting turns. There’s a big shopping center nearby, and it’ll be good to focus on material things instead of my messy life.



TWO SKIRTS, a pair of heels, a new e-book reader, and a serving of cheesy fries later, I’m making my way back toward where I think the car is parked when someone calls out my name.

*Liza.*

It’s odd seeing her outside of work or the lodge. To my surprise, she gives me a friendly, shy smile and excuses herself from a small group of people who must be friends.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” I return, happy and relieved that she’s finally forgiven me for keeping a not-so-secret matter from her.

“Sorry, I don’t want to interrupt your day—I just wanted to thank you.”

My brows knit. “For what?”

My mind whirring away, I try to think of what I might’ve done to help Liza out. Did I get a report to her early? Did I cover her butt, somehow?

“The invitation,” she chirps, mirroring my frown. “I just got it yesterday.”

My mind goes blank.

“And the plus one was nice, too. I know it’ll probably be people mostly from the company, especially since it’s also a charity event, but still. I’ve just started seeing someone seriously, and—”

She blushes as she rambles on about being grateful to be able to bring a friend to my engagement celebration. It’s all white noise to me as I try to make sense of the situation. I definitely did not plan an engagement party.

“Of course.” I give her a smile that doesn’t quite reach my eyes. “I’m really looking forward to it, too. I’m happy you’ll be able to join us.”

*Us.*

Someone has some serious explaining to do.

Liza thanks me again, backing away with a wave, and then returns to her waiting friends. I turn back toward the area where my car is parked, blind to everyone and everything around me.

As soon as the bags are tossed in the back, I slip into the driver’s side and pull my phone out.

**Why am I hearing about an engagement party?** I text Jenson with no soft opening. If this is going where I think it’s going, he doesn’t deserve one.

**Sorry—been busy. Meant to tell you. It makes sense, though, doesn’t it?**

Maybe, I can admit. But still.

**I need details,** I type furiously. **When is this happening? Where? And what’s with the charity aspect?**

Those three little dots appear, then disappear. Appear again.

Disappear.

I’m holding my breath, heart straining.

He sends a link.

Clicking on it brings me to the spotlight section of *The Boston Globe*. Right on the front page is a photo of Jenson and I walking down the street together, probably one of the days we grabbed lunch quickly.

*Boston's bachelor CEO will be ringing wedding bells soon, an opening line reads. Jenson Sharpe, CEO of Dupont Analytics, will be hosting a combined engagement party and charity event on Friday, August 16<sup>th</sup>...*

I stare in shock at the article. It's a few paragraphs long, detailing the venue, the cause, and a snippet of our back story.

*Mr. Sharpe and Melanie Atkinson met as children. Despite going their separate ways after high school, love found the pair again...*

It isn't love I'm feeling right now. It's murder, or something close to it.

**This better be a joke.**

I jab the "send" button and wait. Somewhere in the parking garage, a car alarm goes off, upping my anxiety.

**It's not. It's part of the game, Mel. Has to be done.**

One week. One week until my engagement party, and he gave me absolutely no warning.

Then it hits me.

**Where else is this announced?**

**Everywhere**, comes his quick reply. He must be picking up on how pissed off I am right now. **We have investors up and down the East Coast, and Roy offered to include the announcement with the rest of the press.**

Everywhere. That means...

I jab at Jenson's number and bring the phone to my ear. He answers almost immediately.

"Jodie is going to see this."

Silence from his end. *He didn't even think of that.*

“Probably,” he admits.

“Jenson, I can’t...she wasn’t supposed to know about any of this...”

What I don’t say is, *It’ll break her heart. It’ll kill her to think I’ve gotten engaged, kept a secret from her, and it’ll kill her to find out I’m lying to every person from Maine to New York for money.*

“This wasn’t part of the plan.”

In the beat of quiet, I picture him clenching and unclenching his jaw. “I’m sorry, Mel. It has to be done. No one would believe us if the engagement wasn’t announced in the papers, and when Roy offered the charity event as a possibility, I couldn’t turn him down.”

Now he’s the one leaving the truth out of it. *I couldn’t say no because I need him to give me the company. It’s the only thing that matters.*

Not me. Not even Jodie, who Jenson claims to care about. Funny way of showing it.

“So it’s all business, then?” I bite out. “I have to call Jodie and do damage control myself.”

He sounds stressed as he offers, “Do you want me to? Explain to her, I mean?”

“Explain what? That we started seeing each other again and I’ve been lying to her about it?” I *know* he can hear the hurt in my voice. I *know* he knows he messed up.

But he’s not backing down. “We’re coming down to the line here, Mel. We both need to make sacrifices. If it makes things easier, I can toss in another hundred grand.”

He makes the offer so casually that all at once, I feel worthless. Like someone he can buy, not someone he cares about.

“Fine.” I don’t acknowledge the money or thank him. There’s no use—he’s made it clear that this is happening

whether he ran it by me or not.

And the articles are already out. Sooner or later, Jodie will see this. I can probably expect a call from her tonight, even.

“I’ll see you Monday,” I bite out, pulling the phone away and tapping the red “end call” button quickly.

I don’t want to hear any more logic from Jenson, as if that’s all life is to him—logical. A series of decisions to be made in order to get ahead, no matter who you hurt or disregard along the way.

As reality sets in, I start to wonder once again what happened to the good man I dated my senior year. The one who brought a handful of baby bunnies to a wildlife rehab center when their nest was exposed, the one who helped Jodie make buttermilk biscuits, and walked his elderly neighbor’s dog for free.

Wherever he is, he’s not in Boston. And he’s not the man I’m engaged to, fake or not.

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## Chapter 20

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## Jenson

I'm pacing again. This is a throwback to when Mel stepped back into my life a month ago. A pulsing mess of anxiety, frustration, and anger.

But not at her. At myself.

*You're messing it all up again.*

Strange that I carry so much guilt when Mel is the one who left Harwinton a decade ago. For good reason, I know now, but still.

“Does it fit?”

She doesn't answer, but the bedroom door opens. Add that to the list of things rattling around in my brain like little mindfucks—Mel Atkinson in my bedroom. In my adult bedroom, only feet away from my king-sized bed, with weeks of fantasies trapped away in the back of my mind...the things I want to do to her...

But the look she gives me makes it clear that Mel wouldn't let me touch her with a ten foot pole at this point. Especially not in that dress.

It's champagne-colored silk, draping over her body perfectly. Little triangles of fabric covering her chest just enough to be tastefully scandalous. A low back, the skirt flowing all the way to the floor. It pools there an inch or two deep—we'll have to find her heels to match.

By “we,” I mean the personal stylist I occasionally enlist to help out with my wardrobe. A late-night phone call to Barry a few days ago had piqued his curiosity. *A woman, hmm?*

Older and widowed now, Barry lives vicariously through his clients. But I couldn't get into it with him that night—how I've been royally fucking up one day after the next.

How signing Mel up for a public engagement party without asking her sealed her lips. She's barely spoken to me at work, even when we go down to the café together or get lunch. People are starting to notice.

"You look beautiful."

It's true. And not meant to soften her up, though from the scoff she gives me, that's obviously what she thinks I'm doing. She turns away, a glistening flash making me wonder if she's crying.

Good crying or bad crying? *Why would it be good crying, you idiot?*

With her back to me, Mel comments, "You certainly cut it close."

The engagement-slash-charity event is tomorrow night, August 16<sup>th</sup>. This date will be forever stuck in my mind and I'm already dreading it. Because despite the fact it's supposed to be a celebration, it feels more like we're preparing for a funeral.

"Imagine how bad of a real fiancé I'd be," I deadpan, trying to lighten the mood.

But it still feels like there's a gulf between us.

Mel sighs and turns. Her face is solemn, tired. "Why do you seem so nervous? You're the one who orchestrated this whole thing."

Not entirely true; the PR firm that Dupont Analytics consults with arranged it all.

"I don't know."

Another tidbit of the truth.

Unable to stop myself, I start pacing again.

"You were right. Zach has been nosing around." I glance at her, wondering if she's going to mention the fact that Zach has also been down to the fifth floor again. Prowling around her



office. From the reports I'm getting, Mel has done a good job of avoiding him, but that doesn't always stop rumors.

She remains silent. She only watches and waits.

"Roy will be making his decision soon and announcing it at his retirement party. He's been meeting with legal a lot." I roll my shoulders. "Maybe that's it."

*Or maybe it's that you've planned an entire engagement party for the woman you once dreamed of marrying without telling her. And she wants nothing more than to be far, far away from you.*

"How's Jodie?" I ask abruptly.

Anything to get away from thoughts of how I've been tripping over my own feet for the past week.

Mel crosses her arms. "Fine." Her brows knit. "I don't know. We haven't really talked, just texted." Guilt flits across her features.

"Does she know...?"

The question brings tears to Mel's eyes, and now I'm sure that's what I saw before. Annoyed with herself, she lifts a hand and dashes the tears away. "No. I was avoiding her at first, but I haven't really been able to get in touch with her. Not for a phone call, at least. She texted to let me know she made her dialysis appointment a few days ago and—"

She chokes out a little sob.

"What if she already knows, and she's mad at me?"

Unable to stop myself, I step forward and pull Mel into a hug. It's strange, how easy this is—like we're right back where we started all those years ago. At first, she's stiff. But then she relaxes into my arms and lays her head against my chest, sniffing lightly.

"I'm sure she's not," I murmur into her hair. It smells of lavender and coconut. "She probably didn't even see it, Mel. Remember how the papers used to pile up on the front steps?"

A little chuckle sneaks out.

“Mmm. But everything is digital these days.”

She has a point.

“Still; I don’t think Jodie would be going for avoidance if she was mad at you. You two are too close for that. She’d call you, hash it out. Hear you out.”

Mel calms, but I can practically feel her mind buzzing, trying to figure this puzzle out. It is strange, but I try not to linger on it, not wanting to add to her anxiety.

“About the party...”

Her shoulders slump as I explain what tomorrow night will look like. We’ll aim for fashionably late, and I’ll have to make the rounds to greet everyone who shows up. The last head count was about 300 people. Most of them have never seen me, but they’ll be there to wish us well anyway, and we’ll have to paste on smiles all night.

I talk about the decorations, the theme—pearls—chosen by PR, with a focus on ocean conservation. The pearls are all sustainably manufactured by oyster colonies that are being rebuilt and repurposed to help filter in areas with unhealthy water along the shores.

I rattle off some of the menu items, talk about champagne, muse over what kind of suspenders Roy will pick out and if Zach will be brave enough to show his face now that he’s been assigned a court date.

By the end, Mel is breathing evenly against my chest. I swirl my fingers comfortingly over her lower back, letting the creamy silk melt away my own worry and anxiety.

“Do you know what the worst part is?” she asks quietly, brokenly.

My body goes tense, expecting an arrow to the heart. For good reason. Her next words cut deep.

“If this was real, I think Jodie would love it. And I’d love to have her there.”

I sigh, dropping my chin to her head. “It’s not too late, Mel. We can...I don’t know. We can explain everything to her. Invite her; maybe she’d be game for it...”

I know Jodie too well, though. We both do. She’d be thrilled if Mel and I actually got back together, but even sick and financially burdened, I don’t think she’d want either of us lying and cheating.

Mel doesn’t even bother responding to that supposition. Instead, she says, “It’s worse because my parents...”

She can’t finish the thought, and she doesn’t have to. How many nights did we spend sitting up in the dark while it all spilled out of her? The guilt, shame, and anger at being abandoned by them. How she felt like she was a burden to Jodie, so young for a guardian. How she felt worthless.

“Hey,” I say sharply, pulling her tighter against me. “It’s their loss. And my gain.”

I mean what I say, but I wonder if Mel thinks the words are empty. Or thinks what I really mean is, *I’m gaining the company.*

What I’m starting to realize is that the only thing worth gaining...is her. Back in my life again. For good.

My heart swells in my chest and I’m just on the verge of telling her that when she pulls away and looks up at me with glistening eyes. Bravely, Mel wipes the unshed tears away and steels herself.

“Don’t worry.” She tries to muster up a grin, and almost gets it. “I’ll be on my best behavior. We’ll have them all fooled.”

And just like that, another little piece of me dies inside.

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## Chapter 21

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## Melanie

It's Friday.

The day of the engagement party. *My* engagement party.

And I'm standing over a desk staring down blankly at the layout for Dupont Analytics' semiannual employee newsletter.

"So?" Adrian bumps against me, her dreads grazing my shoulder and making me forge my way back to reality.

"So...what?"

She gives me an exasperated look, closing the copy. "Okay. This is fine, I'm going to finalize all this. The only thing I saw, which you agreed with, is that we need to choose better images for that article on data tracking in the community. You need to *go home*."

"It's only noon." I glance at my cell to confirm.

"Yeah...and you need to get ready for your party, Mel." She leans in close, whispering, "Whether you're actually engaged or not."

A chill runs down my body from head to toe.

"This is crazy." Slapping my palm against my forehead, I close the office door and pace back toward Adrian. "What the hell am I going to do?"

Her thin brows are raised. "Not to get too much into it, but...are you *worried* about this whole thing with Jenson?"

There's a certain edge to her tone. I glance at her. "Worried like...?"

"Like, he's going to retaliate or...hurt you if—"

"Oh! No." I laugh, maybe a little hysterically, and drop into my chair. "No, actually. I'm just having a hard time because of our history." Over the past week, I've filled Adrian

in here and there on what life was like before Jodie got sick. Really sick.

How Jenson and I were inseparable as kids, and how that shifted very naturally into a romantic relationship once we were older. How having to leave Harwinton broke my heart, especially when I left that voicemail on his cell.

*It sounds like you were soulmates*, she'd said.

*Were* soulmates. Not *are* soulmates.

“The thing is—” I bite my lip “—once upon a time, if you'd told me Jenson and I were engaged, I don't think I would've been surprised. At all.” A blush heats my face as Adrian grins triumphantly at me. She's now fully Team Jenson after hearing the whole story.

“Actually, it feels weird, like I'm living in a parallel universe. It's hard to wrap my head around the fact that this—tonight—is all fake.”

Adrian looks sympathetic, sitting down across from me. “And your aunt—I'm guessing you wish she was here, too?”

She's right about that. It's been tough to reach Jodie the last few days, and that's been eating away at me, too. But there has been so much to do, both at work and in my personal life—like figuring out how to pull off a fake engagement party and trying on the dress last night at Jenson's place.

That was maybe the worst of it. Being in his apartment, in the space he takes up, with everything around us reminding me of him. It just made me long for what we'd missed out on.

My cell buzzes once, then again.

And again.

It pings with a missed call.

Then a text.

I lean forward and snatch it, confused.

The name on the screen is Dr. Salazar, NYC.



“Hi. I’m here for Jodie Ann Atkinson. Is she okay?”

The words tumble out in a rush as the cardiology receptionist looks up at me, unfazed.

“Are you family?”

She’s new. I haven’t seen her before, and Jodie hasn’t been checked in as an inpatient in over a year. So she wouldn’t recognize me.

“Yes. I’m her niece. I’m also listed as her power of attorney.”

The nurse holds her hand out for my identification and quickly whips up a badge that I stick onto my chest.

“She’s in B-14, hon. Sweet woman, your aunt.”

That calms my heart, which has been racing over the four hour drive from Boston to New York. Somehow, I avoided rush hour, leaving the office just after noon.

I power walk to B-14 and peek around the corner, dread heavy in my chest. Every other time I’ve seen Jodie in a hospital bed flits through my mind. But today, she’s sitting up and tapping at the TV remote, a look of consternation on her face.

I exhale loudly and she looks up.

“Mel!”

In seconds, I’m sitting on the edge of the bed, hugging her, and starting to cry. Happy tears, scared tears, relieved and exhausted tears. The pent-up tears of a month of secrets.

“Oh, honey.” She rubs my back and I pull away, smiling at her wetly.

“I’m sorry. *You’re* the patient, not me.”

Jodie looks at me sternly and pats the bed. “What’s wrong? What’s been going on, Melanie? I know you keep saying you’re fine, but ever since you moved to Boston you’ve been...off.”

I shake my head. “You first—what happened? Are you okay?” I scan the room for any sign that might clue me in as Jodie waves a hand and explains.

“Nothing serious. I had chest pains for a few days, Mel, and you know how Dr. Salazar is.”

“They said your neighbor brought you in!”

“That’s true—she did. I got winded walking down to the mailbox and sat for a moment. You know Allison, she’s a worrywart.”

“But Dr. Salazar said your heart was strained. So you’re not totally fine, Aunt Jodie.” I give her a stern look, her hands in mine, and she sighs.

“Okay. Maybe I need to take it easier. But I promise, darling, I’m fine. Stable, and they’re watching everything closely. Now tell me—what’s going on with you?”

Reluctantly, I open my mouth and begin to talk. And over the next half hour, everything spills out. Not just an explanation of what’s happened with Jenson, but tears. A lot of tears. A lot of fears, too. I admit to Jodie what I haven’t been able to admit to myself.

“I th-think I like him.” The last word ends on a quiet, drawn out wail, and I feel like I’m seventeen all over again. Scared of losing my best friend the first time he tried to kiss me.

When I dash the tears away, Jodie is watching me with a wicked grin. Her hand in mine feels surprisingly strong, and she squeezes it, saying, “I’m not really seeing a problem here, Mel.”

Then, when she actually laughs, I frown angrily at her.



“What do you mean, you don’t see a problem!? I’m fake-engaged to my ex-boyfriend and lying to an entire company. Plus the public, and whoever is showing up for this charity event.”

“Hmm. So, for the past month you’ve been spending time with a person you love...growing to love them more. And if I remember correctly, you did quite a bit of daydreaming about marrying Jenson Sharpe.”

I give her a shocked expression, not quite sure how she knows that detail.

“I—that’s not the point, Jodie! It’s *fake*, all of it.”

“It doesn’t sound fake to me, darling.”

I groan, knowing what she’s getting at. “It doesn’t matter how *I* feel.”

“I’m not talking about how *you* feel.” When I pause in confusion, she shakes her head, continuing, “Melanie, I love you, but you really can be blind as a bat sometimes. There was no way you were going to walk back into Jenson Sharpe’s life and not win his whole heart, immediately. If you’re in love with him, I don’t doubt for a moment he’s just as—if not more—in love with you.”

My heart sinks, because as much as I want to believe it... there’s just no way. I can’t be that lucky.

I bite my lip, explanations surfacing and immediately being pushed aside. *Jenson is more worried about the company than whether or not he has me; Jenson was anything but happy that first day we laid eyes on each other; Jenson isn’t stupid enough to fall—*

I shut it all down, suddenly exhausted. Outside, the day is starting to wind down. It’s not dark yet, but close to sunset, and guilt eats away at my insides.

“I’m supposed to be with him right now. At the venue, announcing our engagement.”

Jodie's face softens into a serious expression. She can hear the worry in my voice and knows where my head is at—even if I had him, I most likely lost him tonight.

“He’ll understand,” she says comfortingly. “Even when you were kids, I always had the odd feeling that it was like you two were made for each other. Go back to him, Mel, but when you do, be ready to tell the truth. The whole truth, this time.”

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## Chapter 22

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## Jenson

Roy Dupont stands half a room away, watching me carefully over the rims of his glasses. I give him a tight smile, trying to play off the fact that Mel still isn't here.

Even though the event started an hour ago.

Even though the silent auction begins soon, and shortly after that, dinner. And after dinner, the announcement of our engagement...

Even though I'm standing alone in a room full of several hundred people, most of whom are looking at me curiously. Aware that something, *someone*, is missing.

I've made the rounds and greeted people. I've stepped into quiet, dimly lit areas to text Mel, with no answer. It's 7:30 p.m. and everyone who is going to arrive already has.

Brian, one of the investors who joined us at Jade Lodge, swings by. We shared a brief "hello" earlier. Now he holds an expensive craft beer.

"I haven't seen your bride-to-be yet. I'm guessing she'll be making a grand entrance of some sort?"

This, at least, I have a genuine reaction for. "She should, if there isn't one planned already. I'm sure she'd stun everyone here."

Brian hums a note of appreciation, sipping his beer. "A night like this, she deserves to be the center of attention. Let her take all the time she wants." He eyes my pocket, where I've been obviously fidgeting for the last twenty minutes. "You're not getting nervous, are you, Jenson?"

"No, no. Well..."

My mind goes to the little box in my pocket.

Am I nervous to pull it out and show it to Mel? Yes. I've been nervous about it since picking the ring up this morning.

And I was planning on giving it to her before things here picked up, but...she hasn't shown.

Brian is waiting, bushy eyebrows raised. "I'm surprising her with an upgrade."

I pull the box out and snap it open, the two of us leaning in close. I don't really want everyone to be in on this secret, but Brian is exuding genuine giddiness and slaps me on the shoulder.

"Beautiful, man, beautiful choice. She'll love it, no need to worry."

I nod in thanks, feeling oddly relieved. Maybe if things were different, I would've asked Jodie her opinion.

But Mel was right. I dropped the ball in that area, forgetting that none of this is real. Jodie's absence only highlights that fact.

If this was real, Jodie would be here, glowing as Mel entered in that gorgeous dress. If this was real, it would be Jodie teasing me about being nervous, nudging me.

But it's not.

And Mel still isn't here.

Brian gives me one last pat on the shoulder and wanders off toward someone waving him over. I'm left alone again, wondering what the heck is going on.

*Am I being punished?*

It's a possibility. And what a time for it to turn out this way.

Mel's been wearing a simple silver engagement ring for weeks, one that Brett picked up at my behest once everything was in place. Brett didn't ask questions, under the assumption the "real" ring was just delayed in being designed.

The truth is, I hadn't planned on buying a new ring at all. Not until I realized that I'm completely in love with Melanie Atkinson and need to keep her in my life. No matter what.

Tonight, before the announcement, I was planning on getting Mel alone and asking her to stay fake-engaged to me—so we could date.

It's a gamble; part of me knows I might've pushed things too far and been too cold. I might not be the kind of man that Mel can love. But I'll do better every single day if she gives me the chance.

“Things don't seem to be going quite as planned.”

I turn my head to find that Roy has sidled up to me. He's watching the crowd closely. Zach weaves through it, the snake in the grass.

“No. They're not,” I grunt.

“Here's the thing.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up in warning. Roy is using a tone he rarely breaks out, one only for the most dire of situations. When he has to put his foot down, when he's meeting potential investors and clients one-on-one, or when he's pissed.

“I don't know what's going on with you two. But I'm aware that everything isn't as it seems. I know it was my idea to announce the engagement tonight, so if it falls through, that's on me.” Roy's eyes meet mine, flinty, more than a foot of height between our gazes. “Whatever this is, though, Jenson, you better sort it out. Everything seems to be falling apart, lately, and I'd hate to see you lose a woman like Mel in the midst of it.”

And with that, he waltzes off, a look of calm content on his face.

That's how Roy gets you.

He's a shrewd old man, and while my anxiety has only ratcheted up, I feel oddly...reassured. He didn't approach me to call me out on a lie or to declare that he's leaning heavily toward Zach taking over the company.

No. He wanted to make sure I hold onto what matters.

So I'm the last one to know, I suppose.

I take one more long look around the room before someone reaches out and touches my arm tentatively. Adrian Kenny is wearing a well-tailored suit, the look on her face serious, phone in hand.

"Jenson." She leans in. "Mel isn't coming."

The world screeches to a stop.

I stare down at Adrian, mind completely blank except for that little voice. *This was always a possibility.*

*Did you really expect her to stick it out?*

*For you?*

"Why?" It's more of a rhetorical question, but Adrian swallows and lifts her phone slightly.

"I...she had an emergency come up. I just heard from her; she can't be here tonight. And...she's going to need Monday and Tuesday off, too. I'm fine to step in for her, I just..."

She trails off, talk of work and business out of place in this setting.

All I can do is take a deep breath and brace myself.

I should have known that even after all this time, Mel would walk away from me without an ounce of guilt.

She already did it once, after all.

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## Chapter 23

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Melanie

*“What do you want to be when you grow up?”*

*With a laugh, I roll over on my side. In the dark, I can barely see Jenson’s eyes, but I know he’s watching me—he always is. I just turned eighteen and I feel grown up, even though a part of me thinks that might not be true quite yet.*

*“I don’t know...do you?”*

*The comforter shifts as he shrugs. His hand trails lightly up my thigh, rests at my hip bone, and I shiver. Lately I’ve been thinking we should...or, maybe it’s my body, not my brain, doing the thinking. Because this close to him, in a bed, all I want is to press myself up against him.*

*I’ll never get over how good Jenson Sharpe makes me feel.*

*“I think I just want to do something that makes a difference.”*

*There’s a hint of anxiety in his voice, and I know why. We’ve talked about this before. About how absurd it is that, at eighteen, we’re supposed to decide how to spend the rest of our lives. As if there’s a straight path to walk and not twisting, turning, forked roads that sometimes go back and rejoin.*

*Sneakily, I shift closer until our arms are touching. Then I reach out and mirror his movements, dragging my fingertips up his jeans, grazing the skin of his side where his shirt rides up. He shivers underneath my touch and I’m drunk on that feeling.*

*“I think I just want to be happy,” I confess. It’s the only thing I can come up with when I think about the future. It’s the only thing I want, and right now, in bed with Jenson Sharpe, whispering with him as Harwinton sleeps around us, it’s exactly what I am.*



A TRILLING sound pulls me out of sleep.

A deep, comforting sleep. Sleep I want to sink back into. Get lost in. Use as an escape from reality.

But the trilling is relentless, and I turn over, groping blindly and finding—not my nightstand.

My eyes shoot open. The ceiling above is popcorned and stark white, a triangle of light coming in from an odd angle. I sit up in a queen-sized bed.

A hotel room.

A sigh of relief escapes and everything floods back. The long drive to the city, finding Jodie stable but tired, my own exhaustion setting in as I tried to find a last-minute hotel room that wouldn't break the bank or give me bedbugs.

And here I am.

Glancing around, I find my phone discarded in the duvet with me. Without thinking, I answer, and the first words I hear are:

“I guess I shouldn't be surprised.”

“W-what?”

It comes out as a stutter. I glance at the clock; it's just after 7 a.m. According to Dr. Salazar, they'll be moving Jodie to the dialysis center today before one more day at the specialty hospital. Then she can go home, on bed rest, until her heart is stronger.

Jenson speaks again, his voice hard, as cold as it was that first day in Boston. “You ran out on me. On the plan. So it's a little worse than last time, you know, since several hundred people were waiting on you as well. But I shouldn't be surprised.”

A lump forms in my throat. It's made of anger, guilt, and fear. I'm not sure which is more appropriate.

"Jenson, if this is about last night—"

"What else would it be about, Melanie?"

*Back to Melanie.* The harsh way he says it makes my heart ache.

"What else but the fact that you didn't show up to our engagement party? To the very public event where everyone was expecting to see us together, and where I had to explain that you weren't coming. Thankfully, your assistant gave me a heads-up—"

Adrian. I don't interrupt him as he continues to rant.

"—just figured you'd take two-thirds of the money and disappear? As if none of this ever mattered," he scoffs.

My phone buzzes and I pull it away from my ear to see a voicemail from Dr. Salazar's facility. Probably just letting me know that Jodie has been moved, but anxiety swells in my chest.

"Jenson, I can't."

"What?"

I've obviously caught him by surprise with the interjection, and even over the hundreds of miles, I can feel his anger building.

"Do what you have to do, okay? I wouldn't blame you. But I can't deal with this right now. I can't do this with you right now."

The declaration is met with silence. I'm slumped forward in the bed, tangled hair blocking my vision and exhaustion still lingering despite a night of sleep. Or an attempt to sleep.

"Melanie, you know what's at stake."

"I do. And I'm sorry. I really do think you deserve the company, Jenson, and I think you'll be good to everyone there."

But I can't be a part of this anymore. Some things...some things matter more in life than winning. And you used to understand that once."

Before I second-guess my decision or Jenson recuperates enough to speak, I pull back and tap the button to end the call. Toss the phone back onto the duvet, where it will hopefully be lost forever.

Then I lie back and wonder how the hell I got here. Madly in love with a man and yet...utterly alone.

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## Chapter 24

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## Jenson

I've become the one thing I've always despised.

A boss that everyone is terrified of.

As I tear through the halls at Dupont Analytics, employees retreat or break eye contact immediately. They slink into offices, congregate together with their backs to me, hold their breath until I pass.

I know what they're all thinking.

*She abandoned him. Can't blame her.*

*Dodged a bullet.*

*He'll probably die right here in his office, alone.*

I let out a low growl, flexing my hands as I turn the corner, my destination in sight.

Giselle sits at her desk with her ankles crossed, long hair flowing down her back and brown eyes on the computer screen. Once, when I first got the promotion to CEO, I fleetingly thought about dating her. She's gorgeous. And accomplished. The kind of woman any man would be proud to have as a partner.

*But she's not Mel.*

Anger flares through my body at the thought, and I revel in it. It's been keeping me alive these last few days. With no word from Melanie, waiting for the questions to come, adrenaline has been coursing through my veins on a loop.

This is the end for me.

Zach will get the company, and I'll be gone within the first three months. Roy will either discover the truth—that we lied—or he'll think I'm such an asshole that no woman wants me. That I lost the only one who mattered.

Closing the door behind me, I set my eyes on gorgeous Giselle. She looks up in surprise at the sound.

“Have you had any communication from Melanie Atkinson?”

The question comes out measured. As if I’m asking after any other employee with Dupont. Not my fiancé.

Giselle’s eyes narrow.

“Excuse me?”

“Has she reached out to you at all? Provided an update as to why she didn’t show up to work Monday?”

Giselle scoffs. She turns her chair in my direction. Normally, an HR representative is professional to a fault. She’d offer me a seat.

But not today.

Her glare sears my skin and I almost flinch, a sliver of guilt working its way into my heart.

“This department doesn’t exist to notify you why your fiancé may be mad at you, Jenson, or unavailable.”

My mouth drops open in defense, but no words come out.

“I imagine if she hasn’t reached out to you, there’s a reason. But on a professional level, since you’re asking—in a professional capacity—” her look here is meaningful “—Melanie is out on leave due to a family emergency. I’ve approved three weeks, and she’ll be in touch soon if she needs more than that.”

My heart drops.

Jodie.

She’s the only family Melanie has.

I drop into the chair across from Giselle, staring blankly out the window as my mind tries to catch up. Why didn’t she say anything when I called her the day after? Why didn’t she let me know something happened?

The thought that Jodie might have passed runs through my mind, and nausea rolls through me.

*Damn.* I burned that bridge. If I call her now, I doubt she'll pick up.

"We need to talk, Jenson."

Giselle turns her full attention to me, purple nails clicking on the desk as she folds her hands. I blink at her in surprise, eyebrows drawn together.

"About Melanie? I know I shouldn't have asked—"

"Not that. I've had some complaints."

Giselle isn't one to sugarcoat things.

"Complaints about...?"

Zach, I'm thinking, or the fact that only a limited number of employees got to go on the company retreat this year, or that the east wing elevators are down for maintenance for the next week.

"About you. Specifically, the way you've been treating everyone lately."

My mind goes completely blank, then clicks back into gear, whirring with anxiety and disbelief.

"What?"

"There have been complaints that your attitude is unprofessional. You've been disrespectful and short with everyone. You walked out of a meeting yesterday."

I wince; that one is true.

Maybe the rest are, too. I haven't exactly been regulating my emotions. This conversation, sitting across from Giselle and her direct expression, is an awakening.

It cools off the anger, anxiety, and betrayal that's been brewing like a storm in me these last few days.

"How bad is it?"



“It’s bad.”

She doesn’t need to say more. Giselle knows what my plans are for the company. She knows that I won’t, *can’t*, let Zach have it.

But here I am, hurting and scaring the very people I’ve been trying to protect.

“How can I make it better?” I ask, a pleading edge to the question.

When Giselle’s eyes soften and she sighs, I know I’m in deep.

A black hole opens up underneath me.

Everything is on the line now. I’ve just been so distracted by my own emotions that I didn’t realize I’m on the verge of losing everything I worked so hard for.

Mel’s words come back to me. *Some things matter more in life than winning.*

I’ve wanted her for so long that having her back in my grasp, and losing her again, has been the catalyst for my downfall.

I need damage control, and I need it now.

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## Chapter 25

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## Melanie

New York will never be home. But I can make a home wherever Jodie is, so this little brick house is tolerable.

More than that—it's a blessing as I pause to listen and hear Jodie singing to herself in the living room. Probably doing something she shouldn't be, since she's on bed rest. She's never been good at resting.

"I'm going to head out to the store and start working on that diet list they gave you, okay?" I pop my head into the room and catch her red-handed. She's standing on a little stepstool, trying to reach the top of a bookshelf.

Jodie rolls her eyes. "Fine. But can you pick up some Swiss cake rolls, please?"

Her grin is tired and teasing. Jodie doesn't actually eat all that bad, but at the medical center her sodium levels were high.

I grab a reusable bag out of the foyer, take a deep breath and tell myself *she'll be fine*, and head out to her little beat-up car.

It feels weird to be out of the city. I never pictured myself as a city girl, but as I drive the ten minutes to the grocery, I find that I'm missing it. The hubbub. The stream of passersby, the breweries at street level, the lights in the evening.

The IGA is local and tiny. I can see why Jodie ended up with a sodium-rich diet when I catch sight of the meat department, which is 50 percent processed. Lingered for a long time in the produce section, I jump when a hand lightly taps my shoulder.

"Melanie? Mel Atkinson?"

"Sheryl!"

My old friend from high school—more of an acquaintance, really—is a little heavier than she used to be but looks good. Her hair is long, blond, and full, as is her figure. She has a toddler propped on her hip.

“It’s so good to see you! I wasn’t expecting to run into you in Dawson, though. Are you visiting your aunt?”

As we catch up over a mound of cucumbers, Sheryl explains that she’s seen Jodie around town and they chat now and then. It would’ve been nice to know that Sheryl and her family moved here, but my aunt has had a lot on her mind, so I can’t blame her. The toddler makes little gurgling happy sounds as he reaches for every fruit and veggie in sight, placing a sloppy kiss on Sheryl’s cheek.

“I just saw your engagement notice in the paper, by the way. Jenson Sharpe, huh? You two really lasted. You’re the epitome of ‘high school sweethearts.’”

She means well, but the sentiment sours. I fold in on myself, arms crossed.

Of course, people I know saw the announcement. It was in quite a few major East Coast papers.

“Do you think you two will move out this way to be closer to Jodie? Or are you planning on staying in the city?”

“Um, actually, we just recently broke things off.”

Sheryl’s blue eyes go wide. She looks genuinely stunned, and I feel bad to have to break the news. She just seems so invested in...us, I guess.

“Oh, gosh. I’m sorry, Mel. I have to say, I’m surprised. You two always gave me soulmate vibes.”

A little snort slips out at the cheesy thought. “Soulmates? Really?”

Sheryl shrugs, an embarrassed smile on her face. “I don’t know. Dating at that age is so...juvenile. Remember Ryan Anderson? I dated him for, like, two months in sophomore

year and he sent pictures to all of his friends of me changing in my room. Ugh.”

The memory flashes through my mind and I wince at her misfortune. But she’s right. At that age, figuring everything out can do more harm than good in the process.

“You two were such good friends and it seemed so natural that you’d fall in love. I can’t believe I’m admitting this, but for a while, I used to compare my relationships to you guys. You know. Trying to figure out if someone was a good fit, if it was real.”

*Real.*

The word hits home, mostly because Jenson and I were anything but real.

“Well, that’s...I mean...” I gesture awkwardly at the toddler, half-asleep on his mom’s shoulder now. “It looks like everything worked out?”

Sheryl smiles at the hopeful lilt to the question.

“It did. Took me a while, but I ended up meeting Tommy at church, and I don’t know. We just clicked.” She gives a casual shrug, the effortlessness of someone utterly in love. “He’s my best friend. I can’t imagine life without him.”

A shadow must fall over my face, because Sheryl suddenly looks worried and apologetic. She reaches out but doesn’t touch my crossed arms.

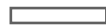
“Oh, Mel. I’m sorry. I feel like I keep saying the wrong things. Listen, if it didn’t work, it didn’t work, right? I’m sure you made the right choice for you. Not all relationships can last forever.”

I zone out as we go through the motions of promising to keep in touch and finally saying goodbye.

Her words keep echoing in my head. *Not all relationships can last forever.*

Maybe that's why this is hitting me so hard. I think a part of me always assumed that Jenson would be there, no matter what, right up to the end. Even those years without him...it felt like I was just...*waiting*.

And as rough as that first day run-in with him was, maybe a part of me was also relieved to have him back. Even if he is a changed man.



JODIE ONLY MAKES a few faces at the groceries as she helps unpack them. I keep a close eye on her, making sure she's breathing normally and not overdoing it.

"Zucchini?" she asks, making me smile as she holds up the summer squash.

"Yes. Pasta with pesto tonight? That sound okay?"

I don't wait for an answer, puttering around the little kitchen and pulling out pots and pans. It's only when I put the cutting board on the countertop that I realize Jodie is watching me closely, her tired eyes narrow, a hand on her hip.

"What?"

"What?" she repeats with a sigh, taking the knife from me. I try to protest, but she starts slicing the zucchini in little disks.

"You can't keep doing this, Mel."

My brow furrows. "Making you dinner...?"

"No. Dropping everything to come here."

I scoff. "Jodie—what? You were in the *hospital*, in case you forgot."

"Yes, I was. And I have been before. And Mel—" she turns to face me, her expression deadly serious "—I will be again. Especially if they can't find me a kidney."

My heart stutters at her words, and my throat constricts, going all thick and achy. This is a possibility I try not to dwell

on, but she's right. The end might be coming sooner rather than later, even though she's not even fifty yet.

"I...Jodie. If you need me here, it's not a problem. My job approved the time off. I can come and help out. If you'd prefer space, I can stay at the motel or—"

Jodie shakes her head, her bun loosening enough for locks to fall around her face. "It's not that, Mel. You need to live your life."

My mouth snaps shut.

"I am living my life."

"Are you?"

She pins me with her gaze, and the kid in me squirms. Jodie was always good at knowing when I was lying, or maybe just not telling the whole truth. When I started crushing hard on Jenson in high school, the same week he officially asked me out, she had it out of me in minutes.

"I know the city isn't where you want to be, Mel. I know you took that job for the money. And I know you worry about the bills. But they aren't *yours* to worry about. You need to focus on your own life, be happy, create a family."

My chest feels hollow as I think just how far I am from any of that.

But she got one thing wrong.

"I do like the city, actually."

She looks a little surprised, so I add, "Really. It's... exciting. I don't know. I've never lived anywhere like that before." Even the art college I went to was tiny and rural, with an enrollment of only five hundred students a year.

"So you've been enjoying your time there? You like it?"

She sounds so hopeful that it breaks my heart all over again. A large part of me also feels guilty because I *have* enjoyed my time in the city.

It dawns on me that I'd been enjoying my time with Jenson.

Every frustrating, stressful, ridiculous, tempting minute of it.

All of a sudden, all I want is to sink into his arms. To vent about how worried I am about Jodie, but also...just to go home to him. He makes me feel safe and excited all at the same time. He's familiar, but I want to have adventures with him.

*Home.*

Jodie isn't the only person who feels like home.

Pushing dinner aside, I look at Jodie dead-on, finally ready to tell the whole truth. No matter how old I get, I'll always ask her advice, and I'm in such a deep hole right now that I have no idea how to dig myself out of it. Hopefully she does.



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## Chapter 26

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## Jenson

The little town of Dawson is...little. Not even an exit off the highway, but a series of backroads out of a main town to the outskirts of meadows and forests. A smile slowly spreads as I realize this makes sense. This is exactly the kind of place Jodie would want to settle down in.

And we're only an hour outside of New York.

Something in my chest twists at the memory of Giselle's words. *Family emergency.*

I haven't heard from Mel since the day she broke it off.

I also haven't asked Giselle for any more information, choosing instead to focus on repairing my attitude and reputation at work. I apologized to a few people in person, and many more in a company-wide memo. It was appreciated and acknowledged but blew over quickly with Zach's HR debacle finally reaching court.

He has twelve women going up against him.

Word is, some even have blatant evidence—in the form of texts and pictures—of the harassment. Roy has been tight-lipped, but I don't think Zach will be lingering around Dupont Analytics too much longer, whether I become the new owner or not.

Jodie's gravel driveway crunches under the tires as I pull in. The house is cute and small, reminiscent of her place in Harwinton. It makes me a little homesick.

Stepping out of the car, I take a deep breath and mutter to myself, "You owe her this much."

The package I pull out of the back is unwieldy, wrapped in butcher paper and surprisingly light, but bulky and a bit awkward. I lean it against the front railing and knock on the door.

The curtains in a side window twitch. Then the door opens just slightly, and those eyes—

It's like a punch to the heart.

I actually rock back on my heels at the sight of Mel's eyes, her pursed lips. She looks tired, but calm, her brow raised.

“Jenson?”

The door is pushed open wider and Jodie, the same height as Mel, stands at her niece's side. She looks older than I remembered in a lot of ways, but her smile is still the same.

“Jenson!”

She pulls me inside, my body brushing against Mel's and sending a shiver of longing through me. *We belong together*, it seems to say.

But if I ever tried to say those words, they'd get stuck in my throat.

I'm left standing in a tiny living room, towering over the two women as they gaze up at me, one in elation and the other in confusion.

“How have you been?” Jodie asks, settling me on a couch where my knees practically meet my chin. “Can I get you anything, darling? A drink? A beer?” She winks. “You're old enough now.”

That draws a warm chuckle from me, but I decline. “No, thanks, Jodie. I'm not staying too long. I just wanted—”

I break off, looking to Mel. She's still standing near the door, her arms crossed over her torso, a broken look on her face.

*You did that to her.*

If I could take back the last few months, I would. I would do anything to spare her from the stress and embarrassment she's had to put up with because of me. I'd go back and never, ever ask her to lie for me.

“I have a date with a neighbor, anyway,” Jodie states breezily. “I’ll be back in about an hour. Jenson, if I don’t see you...” Her eyes glisten for a moment and she kisses the top of my head, making me feel like a kid all over again. In a good way. “Keep in touch, okay? You know you can call me any time.”

Just like that, she slips out the door. Mel watches her go with a slightly outraged expression.

“She’s supposed to be—”

She catches herself and glances at me, cheeks flushing. All of a sudden, I feel like I’m overstepping. Intruding.

Standing, I clear my throat, but Mel beats me to it.

“If you came to ask me to stick it out, I just can’t, Jenson. I really can’t. I’m not good at lying or pretending or—”

Is it just me, or did her voice break a little on the words?

I reach out and rub her upper arm lightly, trying to sense if my touch is welcome or not. To my surprise, she sways into it. Our eyes meet.

“I’m not here for that.”

Her brows crease.

“Then what...? Did I mess something up with HR?” The panic rises now. I’m an idiot for not just coming out and saying it, but this is hard. When I *do* finally manage to get the words out, that’ll be it. I won’t bother her again.

“No, nothing like that.”

Reaching behind me, I hand over the wrapped frame. Mel takes it with two hands, looking baffled.

“I just wanted to tell you face-to-face that I know I haven’t been the best person I can be for a long time. And I’m sorry you got wrapped up in my bullshit. I thought I was trying to do better. But now I can see I was just hurting certain people to help others.”

It spills out of me as if I haven't been rehearsing it for days now. Sounds true because it is, although my pulse thunders in my ears at speaking it out loud.

Mel stares down at the package. When she slowly starts tearing the paper off, I'm pretty sure it's a sign that she doesn't want to talk or look at me right now.

"Jenson," she breathes, holding out an arm to see the photograph better.

It's the one from the museum that we visited on the company trip to Jade Lodge. That oversized photograph of a little house, light spilling from one window. Like Jodie's old place.

Standing in Jodie's current home, I'm not sure getting Mel this gift was the right choice. Will she think I'm trying to tug her back into the past? Will she think I'm being cruel, since this photo so obviously struck her when she first saw it?

Trying to take away from my potential blunder, I wave a hand in the air, digging a slip of paper out of my pocket with the other.

"I'm not asking you to finish what we started. I just wanted to thank you and apologize. And give you this, as well."

I hold out the check.

Mel hesitates. She knows what it is—there aren't many things that are the exact size and shape of a check.

Then there's a flash of guilt across her face. She reaches out and takes it, and a swell of emotion burns in my chest. I want to tell her that she's not a bad person for taking the money, whether she finished out the deal or not. I want to tell her it's a good thing that she cares so much about Jodie.

Speaking of...

"I should get back. But tell Jodie I miss her. And I hope she's doing better."

Tipping my chin down, I send Mel a questioning look. *Is she doing better?*

She swallows and nods. That's enough.

I walk the few short steps to the door and out onto the walkway, digging my keys out of my pocket.

“Jenson, wait.”

Turning back at the sound of her raised voice, it hits me all over again that this is probably the last time I'll see Mel. I just can't imagine her coming back to Dupont, not after everything that happened. Not with how scared she is about Jodie being unwell.

“You're not a bad person,” she rushes out, her eyes locked on mine. “You care. You just went about it...” She trails off, searching the sky as if the words will appear there. “Maybe after more than a decade apart, we're just too different. I hope you get what you want, and I hope the company does well.”

I nod, and then there's nothing left to say.

Just a drive back to the city, the life I thought I wanted, my spacious, empty apartment, and the company I've been so focused on for years. Only now, I'm wondering if I should want more.

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## Chapter 27

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## Melanie

I can't seem to pry my hand from the door frame after watching Jenson's car speed off toward the center of Dawson and, inevitably, Boston.

I can't believe he drove so many hours to get here. To apologize? And bring me that photograph, the one that kills me a little every time I see it, and the rest of the money...

The money.

Guilt eats away at my stomach as I turn away and close the door. I almost have a small heart attack when Jodie appears in the space between the living and dining room.

"What are you doing here? You said you were going to the neighbor's!"

"Well, I was, and then I remembered I didn't actually have plans to visit them. So I snuck in through the back door."

"You snuck into your own house?" I deadpan, trying to breeze past her and act like Jenson Sharpe showing up here just now wasn't earth-shattering.

But Jodie puts a hand on each of my shoulders and stops me. Her gray eyes search mine, worried.

"Is everything okay, darling?"

The endearment makes my throat burn with tears. I nod and blink rapidly, willing them to stay away, not wanting to cry. Not wanting to make this some big dramatic moment when it's not.

Jodie sighs and gives me a little shake.

"You know that man is in love with you, right?"

A laugh bubbles out of me. And *then* the tears come, as much as I try to fight them back. Two little streaks down each cheek. Swiping at them, I sniff and avoid Jodie's stare.



“No, he’s not. He just feels bad.”

“Melanie. I *know* you’re not that clueless.”

I gasp, a little hurt and surprised by her words.

“Do you really think any man would drive all the way down here with gifts and an apology just because he feels bad? Men don’t apologize. They’re bad at it. And even if you’re not sure about Jenson loving you, *you* sure as hell have always loved *him*.”

Why does that make me feel guilty? A blush heats up under the tears and I let Jodie herd me into the kitchen, where she starts putting on tea. A cure-all for any issue, whether a cold or bad dreams.

*Or a broken heart.*

But a heart can only break if you’re in love, and I’m definitely *not* in love with Jenson Sharpe.

At least, that’s what I’ve been telling myself ever since I called him to end things. Before that, even.

“Alright,” Jodie says in a determined voice, sitting across from me. She pushes a cup forward. The calming scent of chamomile immediately catches my attention and I bend over the steam, breathing it in. “Tell me how, exactly, this is good for either of you—denying your feelings.”

I bite my lip.

“It’s different now, Jodie. We’re adults. We’ve built separate lives, we aren’t just kids in the little world of our bedrooms.”

She nods along as I speak, agreeing. “Exactly. And you had, what, almost two months of acting like you were in love for the sake of everyone else. Was it that hard to do?”

Her brows raise and that blush is back again.

“No...”

A grin curls her lips. My aunt just loves being right. “Exactly. You weren’t pretending, sweetie, so why do you think he was?”

I hesitate, really thinking it over.

Maybe because we jumped into sex pretty quickly. We didn’t have much of a choice with showing physical affection—it would be strange for others to see us standoffish, so the touching made sense. But I didn’t need to hop into bed with him so quickly. *And it didn’t need to be so damn good.*

Was that it, though?

No, not exactly. As much as I worried that Jenson has changed, he hasn’t, not really. Not at his core. He’s still a good person, still trying to do the right thing. Just distracted and a little corrupted by the world he’s a part of now.

But being with him, I saw glimmers of the man he really is. At one point I was even thinking I could draw it out of him.

I don’t realize I’ve spoken these words out loud until Jodie hums in agreement, sipping her tea.

“You were his whole world, Mel. Just think about how hard it was for him when you were ripped away. And then it was just him and his mom.”

She shakes her head sadly, and it strikes me that it’s wonderful my aunt can be so empathetic when she’s experienced her own trauma. Then it sinks in that she’s right. I try to imagine how lonely he must’ve felt when I disappeared. Probably just as lonely as I did a few hundred miles away, scared that I might lose Jodie in an unfamiliar place.

“Mel, whether you realize it or not, you’ve been holding out for Jenson for years. Why do you think none of your relationships ever worked out?”

“Funny you’d even consider them relationships.” I grin back at her, thinking of the short string of guys I dated here and there. Nothing serious at all. Some, I can’t even remember their names.

Jodie sits back, her eyes zeroed in on something on the table.

The check.

I hadn't realized I carried it in here and dropped it on the table. It sits there like a crumpled paper crane.

"Was that worth it?" She ducks her head at the slip of paper.

I open my mouth to say, *Yes, of course*, but hesitate.

If I could take it all back, would I?

We've already paid off a good little chunk of debt with the money Jenson sent me early on. This will clear another year's worth, at least.

But was it a fair trade for this heartbreak? For losing out on a relationship that could have been genuine?

Jodie looks at me sadly, brushing a strand of hair away from my face.

"I know you worry about me, hon. But I worry about you just as much. And take it from me—there's no time to waste. You need to hold onto the ones you love, for as long as you can."

As I stare down into my cup of tea, breathing in the comforting scent and replaying the last two months spent at Jenson's side, it really sinks in. My feelings for Jenson didn't just come back. They grew exponentially.

And they're not going anywhere.

Whether I stop seeing him or not.

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## Chapter 28

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## Jenson

The door to the top floor balcony opens and I watch Roy totter through, a thoughtful look on his face. This is unusual.

For one, Roy is afraid of heights. But he locks his eyes on me and walks over.

It's just the two of us up here. Boston spreads beneath us like a curved grid, toy-sized cars maneuvering through the streets and little people wandering about. This balcony is only accessible from my office; there's another employee balcony a floor down.

I lean on the railing, long arms folded, for once face-to-face with Roy. He gives a quick glance over the side and then steps back two feet, still within eyesight.

“Zach settled.”

The statement is no surprise. I nod in acceptance, hoping the women involved got their money's worth out of him. Not that money will ever make the experience go away.

“He's heading back to the islands. And I think staying there for good.”

I snort. *The islands*. Like a weasel crawling back into his burrow.

“I'm just happy it all came out when it did,” I say truthfully. “Hate to see the company go down because of someone else's bad choices.”

Roy is silent for a moment, staring at a clump of ornamental trees and flower pots among lounge chairs. He walks over and sits on the end of one, knobby knees spread, sleeves rolled up.

“You've made some bad choices, too, Jenson.”

My breath catches and I stare out at the city. Does he mean the few days I stormed around here like a tyrant? Was it really

bad enough that it's going to follow me for the rest of my career here? I was hoping the apologies, and change of attitude, would be enough.

“Very recently, in fact.”

I glance his way and stand, immediately going into problem-solving mode.

“What can I do to fix it?”

Roy shrugs. “Get Mel back.”

That hits me like a punch to the kidney. Unexpected, painful, and stunning.

“Mel?”

My brain has to override my emotions. Roy gives me a sad smile and pushes his glasses up his nose.

“I don't know what happened with you two to call the whole thing off, but from what I saw, I think it was a mistake. If you let that girl go, you're going to regret it, Jenson.”

At first, a cool wave of relief washes over me. I didn't screw up here at work.

Just in my life outside of this building.

Just in, quite possibly, the only way that matters.

I move to sit on the chair next to Roy, elbows on my knees, both of us looking out across the little balcony's expanse.

“I think it's more complicated than just getting her back, unfortunately. I botched this one for good.”

Roy chuckles, then tells me a story I've never heard before. “You know Clara, my first wife? Well, know *of* her. We met when I was a freshman in college and got married quick. Then, I started up the company. Back before technology got fancy. And things were good for a while. Really good. The only problem is, I started spending more and more time here and not enough at home. Clara made it known that she wasn't

happy about that, especially when she got pregnant with our daughter.”

My brows crease. As far as I knew, Roy only had one kid—Zach, by marriage. He sees the look on my face and smiles.

“Didn’t know I had a daughter? I haven’t seen her since she was two.” He lets out a heavy sigh. “Clara divorced me when I didn’t change my ways. Which, looking back on things, wouldn’t have been very hard to do. Just doing things like getting home in time for dinner. Spending weekends with them.” Roy shrugs. “She took Emma and went back to the Midwest, where her family lived. At first, I didn’t even notice their absence. I sent child support when I needed to and kept building thing here, slept in the office a few nights. But then a year went by, and another. And once I had people to run this place so I didn’t have to watch it as carefully, I realized just how alone I was.”

He closes his mouth with a frown of finality. I brace for the second half of the story—when he met his current wife, fell in love, etc. But it doesn’t come. Instead, he just shakes his head and adjusts his glasses again.

“The solution was so simple, to just *be there* for them. And I couldn’t even do that. I wish every day I could go back and change it, but...”

“But sometimes it’s too late,” I finish, the truth of the words like an arrow to my heart.

Roy glances at me. “Not always. Sometimes it might seem like it is, but if she means that much to you, Jenson, you should fight for her. Until she tells you to stop.”

I open my mouth to reply that Mel did ask me to top, but then I realize...she didn’t.

She told me she didn’t want to continue a fake relationship, continue lying to people.

*But did she ever say she didn’t want you? Didn’t want something real?*

It's a crazy thought. After everything, Mel shouldn't want me. But yet...

A seed of hope lodges itself in my chest.

Can it really be that easy?

“Whatever you do—” Roy sighs, standing and looking down at me through his round lenses “—I think we both know the best person to take over Dupont Analytics is you. Has been all along.” He reaches out and grips my shoulder tightly, more a father figure than the father I briefly knew. “Just make sure life outside of these walls is worth going home to.”

And with that, Roy ambles back into the office, leaving me to my thoughts.

And the realization it might be worth one more fight.



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## Chapter 29

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## Melanie

I've only been to Jenson's apartment once, but it's hard to miss. A tall, black, glossy monstrosity with a minimalist approach. I'm a little surprised he chose something so clinical and think back to the first time I stepped into his personal space.

Or lack thereof? The apartment was similar to the building. Sleek and clean. The only sign of the man I knew was, ironically, in the bedroom, where a few books on math were piled on the nightstand and the room smelled like him.

Out on the street, I chew my lip and stare up at the tower. How to get inside? Obviously, I don't have a key, and Jenson doesn't even know I'm here.

*What if he's not here, either? What then?*

But it's 6 p.m. on a Saturday, so he should definitely be home. Unless he's out on a date? Maybe hunting for his next fake fiancé.

I push the thought aside and stalk across the street, intent on making this mad dash plan work.

Admittedly, it's not much of a plan. Just with the objective to *win him back*.

I manage to make it halfway across the lobby before a security guard stops me. He has the beginning of a paunch hanging over a belt that carries a taser.

"Can I help you, miss?"

Settling my expression into one of uncaring confidence, I tell him, "I'm just here to meet a friend."

"Are they expecting you?"

He gestures to the left, guiding me to the reception desk and reaching over to grasp a clipboard. One that I know my name is definitely not on.

Sweat begins to break out across my forehead. Should I text Jenson? Would he even bother answering or just tell me to leave?

“He’s on the fifteenth floor, so I’ll just—”

When I make to walk away, the guard catches my wrist, making me stumble. It’s not intentional, but a flurry of fear rockets through my chest.

“Melanie?”

That voice is somehow both music to my ears and dread inspiring. Turning toward the open elevator, I watch as Jenson steps out.

He’s effortlessly handsome. As always. Wearing a set of wire-rimmed glasses, just like the ones he wore when we were kids. How does he look even *better* in glasses?

Our eyes meet and the flutter in my chest tells me that I’m doing the right thing. Even if it’s terrifying.

“Please let my fiancé go,” he says coolly once he approaches.

A smile curls my lips at his words. There’s still hope!

The guard pulls his hand back as if burned, and Jenson pulls me into the shelter of his tall body instead, heading back to the elevator.

Once we’re alone, I start sweating again. *But he didn’t kick you out.*

“What are you doing here?”

He looks genuinely surprised, eyes searching my face and his hand cupping my elbow. I stare up at him with that hopeful smile.

“You called me your fiancé.”

Jenson shrugs, but it’s obvious to me just how hard he’s working to look nonchalant. The man I know is probably nervous, too, and that makes me feel better.

“Habit.”

My smile only widens as the elevator finally reaches the top floor. More sure of myself now, I step out and wait in the foyer in front of his penthouse door. Jenson digs his keys out of his pocket, eyes on me the whole time.

“Were you going out?”

“No.”

I laugh, because of course, he was going out, and Jenson grins. He pushes the door open and we walk in. This time, I’m barely paying attention to our surroundings. I’m just happy to be alone, anywhere, with him.

Turning, I take a chance and press up onto the balls of my feet and loop my arms around his neck. Our mouths meet in a hungry kiss. Jenson’s hands go to my hips, tugging my body closer.

He devours me.

I let him, finally giving myself over entirely to how bad I want this. Not just the phenomenal sex, but *all of this*. All of him. I want Jenson Sharpe just as much, if not more, than I’ve ever wanted him, and I’m ready to tell him that.

So I pull away and catch my breath. My heart is pounding against my chest, so hard I’m sure he can feel it. He presses a hand there and stares down at me, concern in his brows.

“Wait. Before—Jenson, I want you. I don’t want to fake this anymore.”

I don’t say what “this” is, but before I can keep rambling, Jenson interrupts with a shake of his head.

“You deserve better than the way I’ve been treating you. I shouldn’t have tried to use you for my own gain and—”

I cut him off with another quick kiss, a nip on his bottom lip. He brings his fingers to the spot, surprised and silent.

“If you think I deserve better, then be better.”

It's a challenge, one I know he's up for immediately when his features transform from surprised to serious. Without a word, he scoops me up again, walking me backward until I'm sitting on the kitchen island.

I don't allow him a moment of hesitation, stripping off first my shirt and then his. Jenson can't seem to keep his hands and lips off me. He trails kisses down my jaw, my throat, sucking at the place where my shoulder and neck meet until I shiver and let out a slow moan, leaning into his broad chest.

His hands cup my breasts and squeeze deliciously, a leg parting my knees. Grinding against him, I can't get over how *right* this feels. Jenson's fingers work the button of my shorts and he slides them down my legs quickly, tossing them aside.

"Come here," he growls, tugging me toward him and helping me down. My bare feet hit the tile floor and he leads me to his bedroom.

The one I changed in only weeks ago. The one that had me wondering what it would be like to be in his bed.

I don't have to wonder anymore as Jenson steps out of his pants and locks his hot eyes on me. My heart starts pounding harder, a pulse between my legs as he stalks toward me.

In just my bra and panties, I take a stumbling step back, wanting him to catch me.

He does. Almost immediately.

Not that I'm trying very hard to get away.

Jenson parts my lips with his tongue and it delves in possessively to find mine. He turns and drops us both onto the bed, me half in his lap, a leg thrown over his hip.

It's the perfect position to grind my center against his thigh. I can't help it; I need to feel some friction, some release.

"God, I want you," he mumbles against my neck.

I can barely think straight, but the words seem deeper than just this moment. Tugging at his boxer briefs, I ignore his

indulgent chuckle and stand as he strips them off, leaving his naked body before me.

Jenson leans back, legs spread at the edge of the mattress, the deep V-cuts at his hips making my mouth water. I let my eyes drag down his body from top to bottom, lingering on his erection as it literally throbs before me.

Wet heat rushes to my core. I unhook my bra and toss it aside, then do the same to my underwear, ignoring how damp they are. Every moment of this feels so natural—climbing onto his lap, guiding his cock to my entrance, and slowly teasing myself with just the tip.

Jenson groans approvingly and leans back farther to watch. But his eyes, teasing, flick up to mine.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve already had you this way,” he purrs before wrapping an arm around my hips and flipping us.

A gasp escapes me as I find myself suddenly under him. His arms cage me in, muscles taut, his knee nudging my legs apart again. I open them shamelessly.

Missionary was never my favorite position, but I’m more than willing to do so with him. I’d try pretty much anything with this man.

He looks down the length of my body, a cocky smirk playing at his lips, his erection bouncing against my pussy. I push my hips up toward him and let out a low whimper. “Jenson, please. I need you.”

“Fuck, I love hearing you beg for my cock. Are you going to be good for me, beautiful?”

His question comes out low, demanding, and I nod. Jenson wraps an arm around my left leg and pulls me closer so that he’s lined up at my entrance. I feel the head of his cock drag against my soaked folds and try again to seat him inside, but he only slaps my ass, grinning at the little yelp I let out.

“You’re only going to come when I tell you to. Understand?”

I nod again, eyes widening. Since when is Jenson so bossy in bed? But it's a turn on, because I know that outside of these doors, he's respectful. I can trust him.

"W-what do you want me to do?" I ask, already out of breath with anticipation.

He holds his cock at the base and drags himself over my clit, sending a zing of electricity up my spine.

"I want you to spread your legs and take me. Just like this."

Mindlessly, I make a noise of approval as he slowly presses his way inside.

He's sitting back on his haunches and the angle creates a different kind of pressure that I'm not expecting. It leaves me feeling needy, my clit untouched, the friction barely there as he slides inside.

But the stretch is delicious and I drop my head back, reveling in the feel of him.

"Just like that," he murmurs, fully inside and holding my thighs wide apart. His eyes are glued to the place we're connected as he pulls back and then pushes into me again in one fluid movement. The force of it sends a jolt of pleasure up my body, but it's not quite enough, and my teeth clench.

Jenson grips my ass with one hand as he pounds into me slowly, over and over, his cock dragging along my walls. When I can't take the teasing anymore, I reach down and start to play with myself, expecting him to push my hand away.

But his eyes only darken and meet mine.

"Keep touching yourself," he commands, sitting up on his knees and pulling me closer.

This puts my hips at a different angle as he drives down into me, the wet sounds of every thrust filling the room. It gets me even more aroused and my slick fingers move faster on my clit, shoulders shivering with each little shock, the uneven rhythm that Jenson keeps up, catching me off guard.

He pulls one of my legs up over his shoulder and now the friction is exactly what I need, a grinding pleasure that makes my eyes roll back. I moan and thrust my hips toward him, wanting to take him deeper, wanting him to fuck me hard into the mattress.

My pussy starts to clench and I know I'm close, barely holding back the noises he's pulling out of me. Jenson has my knee bent back, sweat beading on his brow.

Our eyes meet. He rocks into me at a different angle. "Come. Right now."

And that's it.

White takes over my vision as I squeeze my eyes shut, tightening and pulsing around his cock as he fucks me faster. The orgasm rolls through me, making my nipples tingle with pleasure.

When I can finally focus some of my attention again and blink up at him lazily, Jenson's shoulders are tense, his lips parted. I push up, helping him by thrusting my hips up greedily, and that's all it takes.

His hips stutter as he comes, pressing us together tightly, burying his face in my neck and cursing as the orgasm takes him over. I moan happily, wrapping my legs around his back and holding him close. I want all of it. I want all of him.

Once we both come down from the high, Jenson stays pressed against me, our chests sticky with sweat. The city is hot for late in the summer.

Finally, Jenson sighs and stands, holding a hand out.

"Come take a shower with me," he asks with a soft smile. "And we should probably get some food. But then, I'm taking you right back to bed."



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## Chapter 30

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## Melanie

Running in these heels is a nightmare.

I'm not sure why exactly I wore them today—or at least, I'm pretending not to know, annoyed with how delicate my ankles feel in them.

In reality, they get Jenson all hot and bothered. I know it was killing him this morning when we left his apartment, watching me walk out to the street, skirt grazing the backs of my knees.

I wonder if he cleared any time in his schedule to mess around...I could certainly stop up at his office after lunch.

But now, I'm in a rush.

Dupont Analytics recently secured a contract with the biggest hospital in the Midwest. It's huge for us, and they'll not only be using our data analytics software, but our social media and marketing hub, as well. I have a small team ready to go today and several weeks' worth of posts mocked up, but I need to put the final touches on the billboard and poster spreads.

In the next hour.

I take a corner a little too quickly and teeter to the side. Suddenly, strong hands grip my waist.

"Almost lost you there," Jenson comments quietly, his tone neutral even as he pulls me into an empty conference room.

"Jenson, I—"

But he cuts me off with a kiss, innocent at first.

That's the trick. He always seems so innocent...until he gets me alone.

As I float in the hazy pleasure of his sensual kiss, I don't notice right away that his hands are slowly hiking my skirt up.

When I do, I laugh and push him away lightly.

“Not right now. I have to get down to the team and sign off on a few things.”

“You shouldn’t have worn those heels,” he growls into my neck. “You know what they do to me.”

“And *you* know what our contract with HR says,” I gasp out, knowing I need to cool things down, but not wanting him to stop touching me. “Giselle will kill us if anyone sees—”

“I’m the owner of Dupont Analytics, Mel. I can do whatever I want.”

He says it so casually, but I know that pride is buried in his statement. Roy officially handing Dupont over to Jenson was a big deal. Not just for the employees, but for Jenson. He finally achieved his dream—to run this place himself and take it even further, expanding to other hospitals, focusing on the needs of the employees.

Roy still consults here and there, but for the most part, Jenson is right. He’s the boss.

The thought sends a quiver of desire through me and I *almost* give in. After all, a quickie in the conference room wouldn’t be a big deal.

But my eyes catch on the clock and I pull away, sighing apologetically.

“I really need to go. I’m sorry. I’ll come up later—send Brett to lunch.”

Giving him a teasing wink, I dip out of the room and jog toward the elevators, needing to get to the lobby.

When I finally get downstairs, Adrian and the rest of the team are waiting in the lobby. I’m still adjusting to her decision to buzz her head, but Adrian looks great, and she’s stepped up as the lead for this new client’s social media campaign.

“Hey,” I greet everyone breathlessly, settling into a chair. “Ready?”

Adrian turns a tablet toward me and the five of us go over the details, contentment settling in my stomach as I realize we have this more than squared away.

The casual meeting dissolves into chatter as we all take a moment to enjoy the drinks and food we ordered. I gaze around the lobby, thinking back to just two and a half months ago. What it felt like walking in on day one.

How shocked I was to literally run into Jenson Sharpe, the love of my life.

*You haven't said it to each other yet.*

I bite my lip in thought, wondering why not. It's not like we've never said the “L” word before. Back when we were teens, it slipped out of our mouths easily, every chance we got.

But now...

Am I saving it for a special time? Is he? Everyone around us—or me, at least—rolls their eyes and isn't at all surprised that we picked up where we left off.

A small crowd has gathered in the lobby around a table and group of volunteers, all wearing gray and red shirts. I watch curiously until it hits me—this is part of Jenson's new internal improvement initiative.

A week ago, he asked the employees in an anonymous survey what they wanted. He's also had the strategy team and HR looking into things that other companies with high employee satisfaction offer.

Today, it's a blood drive. Employees can take a break whenever they'd like, come down to the lobby, and sign up as a blood donor. There's also a little section where they can sign up as an organ or bone marrow donor, as well.

My heart warms at that. I haven't asked, but I know he probably got the idea from Jodie.

That problem, unfortunately, isn't as easy to solve. My aunt is still waiting for a transplant, but Dr. Salazar seems hopeful she'll make it to that day in decent health.

As I watch the group of curious employees mill around, chat, sign up, and ask questions, I can't help touching the bare spot on my finger where a ring once sat.

I gave it back, of course. And I have no idea what Jenson did with it.

But I don't really care; I don't need it.

Everything worked out for the best. Ring or no ring.

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## Epilogue

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Jenson

*Six months later*

Jade Lodge hasn't changed much from when we were here almost a year ago, except that it's quieter in the spring. The air has a cool chill to it that I enjoy, and as Mel and I sit out on the balcony gazing into the forest, a feeling of peace settles over me.

This time around, there's no schedule of team bonding events or forced dinners.

It's just the two of us, taking our time.

This morning we slept in, made love, and convinced each other to take a hike to a swimming hole a few miles away. Later today, we'll lounge in the sauna, maybe. And then I'll talk her into getting back in bed.

I can't help but marvel at where we've ended up. Twelve years after first falling in love, and it just keeps getting better. Every day I fall for this woman a little more.

She keeps me honest, keeps me laughing, and every time I look at her—and the ring on her finger—it's a reminder to *be better*.

Later, as we head into the dining area, our waiter greets us. "Mr. and Mrs. Sharpe." He hands us both menus for this evening's courses.

Marriage looks good on Mel. It's not quite what I imagined when we were kids, but I don't think you can imagine a connection like this. Plus, I never would have been able to predict how beautiful she is now—glowing, smiling up at the waiter, her slender finger showing off the small diamond.

Once we were "officially" back together—after we made up according to everyone else and decided to stop pretending we weren't head over heels for each other—I barely held out for two months before proposing.

I lazily decide on a salmon dish and chuck the menu onto the table, staring instead at my wife.

This honeymoon is a relief.

The marriage was quick, the planning of it even quicker. And exhausting. Luckily, Jodie felt well enough to bustle around and help out, but neither Mel nor I wanted to tire her out.

And then there was making sure everything at Dupont would run smoothly without us. Not much to worry about, since my new CEO—a younger guy who reminds me a lot of myself—was raring to take on the responsibility.

And Adrian, Mel's assistant on the marketing side of things, is more than capable. Word around the office is she has a love-hate thing going on with a woman from accounting, the two of them having been caught in a fax room. Pretty cliché, but to each their own.

“Still exhausted?” I ask, reaching out to take Mel's hand.

She smiles at me, thumb rubbing my knuckles. “I think I'd be *less* tired if someone would let me sleep instead of waking me up with those sexy kisses.”

Mel whispers the last part teasingly and I give her an indulgent grin.

“I can't help it. There's something about you being my *wife*.” My eyes run over her casual top and jeans, remembering what's underneath.

Mel gives me a playful nudge and turns her attention to the glass of water on the table.

“You haven't touched your drink.” I toy with the pineapple slice on the Singapore sling I ordered for her before she came out of the room.

Mel wrinkles her nose. “Just not feeling it tonight. That fruity scent is making me pretty nauseous.”



My brows knit. “Really? I thought this was your favorite, though?”

“Oh, it is.” Mel leans back, giving me a shy grin. “But not right now. And I need to stay away from the fancy cocktails, anyway, for a while. I’m pregnant, after all.”

My mind goes blank as shock, then terror, then excitement washes through me. Mel is watching me closely, biting her bottom lip in that tempting way I can’t resist.

“What?”

I heard her, but the question slips out anyway. When she opens her mouth to answer, I lean over the table and take her face in my hands, kissing her soundly.

“Really?” Before she can answer, I kiss her again, and she laughs against my lips.

“Are you going to let me get a word in, or are you going to keep this up?”

I stand and move around to her side of the table, kneeling in front of her and continuing to steal quick, enthusiastic kisses.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

Mel pushes me back with a smile, twirling the ring on her finger. “Well, I wasn’t 100 percent sure. That’s why I took a little longer getting ready. I wanted to take another test.”

“How many have you taken?”

“Four.” She pauses, giving me a meaningful look. “So that means it’s for real, Jenson Sharpe. You think you can handle it?”

Lost for words, I stand and pull her up with me.

Handle it?

I don’t think I’ve ever wanted something so badly in my whole life.

Mel's laughing again as I lead her out of the restaurant, barely resisting, but putting up a fight for appearance's sake.

"Jenson! Our food—"

"To hell with dinner. We're going to have a baby, Mel. We need to go celebrate."

As I draw her into my arms, reveling in the warm smile that curls her lips, I wonder how I got so lucky.

And then I'm reminded that I *almost* didn't. I almost lost her.

The thought makes me want to hold onto her tighter. I swear, I'm going to cherish every moment I get with her in this life—and with our baby.

Mel loops her arm through mine and leads the way back to our suite, those sassy heels clicking on the tile floor. My eyes follow them as she asks, "Can we at least call Jodie first and tell her the news?"

I let out a low growl of approval and chase her the rest of the way to the suite, heart swelling at her laughter and the thought of everything that's to come.

THE END

Did you like *Boss's Fake Fiancé*? Then you'll LOVE [\*Nanny for the Protector: A Billionaire Boss Romance\*](#).

\* \* \*

**He's a silver fox with an adorable kid and a luxury car that costs more than my entire life savings.**

**He just saved my life - and became my boss.**

Losing my job was a disaster. But stumbling into Wesley's world might save me.

I need the money.

His daughter needs a nanny.

It's a win-win, right?

*Wrong.*

The first spark of attraction between us was as instant as it was forbidden.

I can't get how safe I felt in his arms out of my head.

I can't help but imagine what his perfect lips would feel like sliding across my mouth, down my neck, onto my...

STOP.

This can't happen.

The gap between our worlds is colossal.

**But a positive pregnancy test means our worlds are about to crash together.**

\* \* \*

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## Nanny for the Protector Sneak Peek

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Cara

*Deep breath, Cara. You got this.*

As I stepped out of my car, it really felt like the first day of the rest of my life. I was about to do a walk through of a building that might be the perfect place for my daycare center. *My daycare center.* The words made me giddy. Not even the January chill could ruin my mood.

I had been working in childcare as long as I could remember. Babysitting, aftercare, daycare, nannying. And now, at twenty-four, I was ready to step out on my own. Some might say I was a little too young, but I was ready and hungry to take this huge step. I had a business plan, courtesy of my kid sister Katie who was a top-notch business student at Fordham, a meaningful amount of savings, and grit.

Still, my heart beat fast as I walked up to the two-story building on a quiet corner in Brooklyn. *Building* was a generous way to describe it: most of the windows were boarded up and some of the bricks looked less than sturdy. I saw the potential, though; nothing some TLC couldn't fix.

Katie's voice rang out in my head, *Don't forget to take pictures!* Duly noted. I pulled out my phone and started snapping pictures of the building. I needed to get a clear shot of the whole thing, so I backed up onto the street just a bit to get the full shot.

*This is going to be perfect.*

Just then, a car turned onto the street and parked just behind mine. At first, I thought it might be my realtor, but the car was way too nice to be his. Like, really, *really* nice. A *small fortune* kind of nice.

A man wearing a well-tailored, camel-colored coat stepped out of the car. His blonde hair was well-styled — think Ryan Gosling — and his face was freshly shaved.

*Who's that? He's gorgeous.*

I didn't have long to admire his good looks before a little girl hopped out of the back seat. She was his doppelgänger, clearly his daughter, and she had a spirited smile on her face.

I couldn't help but smile at her. Kids always brought that out in me. I briefly wondered what they were doing here. Surely a man driving a car like that didn't have business on a nearly empty street in the not-so-nice part of Brooklyn. And there was certainly no reason to drag his young daughter all the way out here, too. Hmm...

I shook off the distraction and went back to framing the shot. Just before I could take it, though, my phone rang. My boss. *Goddammit.*

"Hello?"

"Cara? It's Jenny." Jenny was the mother of the twin boys I was nannying. They were definitely rambunctious but loved me to bits. Jenny, on the other hand, was a pain in my ass. "I need you to come pick up the boys *now*. They're driving me crazy."

I frowned. "I'm sorry, Jenny, but I told you I'm not available until the afternoon today."

Jenny laughed dryly. "You can't be serious."

"I told you about this five weeks ago. It's on the calendar."

"But this is an emergency!"

She always thought her mere annoyance with her children was "an emergency." You would think she hadn't chosen to have them and that they'd been a burden forced upon her. "I'm sorry, Jenny. But I can't."

Jenny let out an angry growl. "You know what, Cara? I think we're done here."

"What?"

"This isn't working out. You're never available when I need you. What's the point of a nanny who's so distracted by

other things?”

I held my tongue, but I could have listed for her all the times I had gone out of my way to do my job. The nights she and her husband came home hours later than they said they would. The weekends I stayed with the boys. The times I had run all over town to find the type of bagels she wanted. “I’ve been more than clear about my schedule, Jenny. I don’t think it’s fair that you —”

“No. We’ll find someone else. Goodbye, Cara.”

Then she hung up.

I stood there, staring at my phone, wide-eyed, and my mouth hanging open in disbelief. I’d been with that family for nearly a whole year. I had banked on staying with them at least another year to get all the capital I needed for the daycare. And that was the bare minimum. What the hell was I going to do now?

As if the day could get any worse, another car came flying around the corner, barreling toward me at an ungodly speed for a residential street. However, in my shock, I didn’t notice until it was nearly too late.

“Watch out!”

Two big hands grabbed my arms and yanked me into a wall of muscle, out of the way of the car. I gasped as we fell to the ground, but I was kept safe by my protector’s strong arms. I could smell his cologne, a musky scent of sandalwood and spice. I wanted to bury my head in his neck and breathe deeply for a minute — or thirty.

“Are you okay?”

I looked up into the face of my savior. It was the man I had watched get out of the luxury car with the little girl. His brown eyes examined my face with intensity. I couldn’t find any words to reply. He was too beautiful for words.

“Are you hurt?”

“Um...”

His eyes widened. Clearly, he thought something was really wrong with me. He pulled me closer and ran a hand over my head, checking to see if I had been wounded. I fought the urge to purr like a cat and snuggle in. “Did you hit your head? What’s your name?”

I knew I hadn’t hit my head, but I was in shock. Almost hit by a car, saved by an insanely handsome man. It felt like some weird dream. “Cara.”

“Date of birth?”

“September twenty-third.”

“Do you know what year it is?”

I finally gained my senses and sat up, drawing away from him. “I’m fine, I didn’t hit my head.”

The man got to his feet and helped me up. “Are you sure?”

His hand engulfed mine almost completely and his height made me feel petite and feminine. “Positive. I promise.” I smiled sheepishly. What an embarrassment. “Are you okay? You’re the one who landed on your back.”

He shook his head, adjusting a button on his coat. “I’m fine.”

The little girl sprinted over and threw her arms around the man. “Daddy! Are you okay?”

“Fine, I’m fine.”

“Are *you* okay?” she then asked me shyly.

My heart grew two sizes. What a sweet girl. “I’m fine. Thanks to your daddy.”

She smiled and hid behind his leg.

The man tenderly stroked his daughter’s hair. “That was a little scary for all of us, huh?”

I started dusting off the front of my coat. “You’re telling me. My whole life flashed before my eyes.”



The three of us were quiet for a moment. This was quite an awkward situation.

“Oh! Thank you. Thank you so much. Sorry, I’m an idiot. I haven’t even thanked you yet.”

The man’s lips quirked, soft-looking and oh, so kissable. It was a crime for a man to have such lush-looking lips. I couldn’t help but imagine what they would feel like sliding across my mouth, down my neck, onto my...

“It was nothing.”

I shook my head slightly to clear it from my dirty fantasies. “Are you kidding? I could have —” I remembered the little girl at his side. “It could have been a bad situation and you just —”

I was interrupted by the grating sound of my realtor’s voice.

“Jesus Christ, Cara! What were you doing loitering in the street?”

My entire body braced. *Danny Morden*. Danny was much more than my realtor, though. He was the son of friends of my parents from their church. We had known each other since we were kids, although Danny was about four years older than me. I never understood how his sweet mom and dad created such a jackass like Danny. But that’s what he was and what he had always been.

Unfortunately, he had everyone snowed. My parents never shut up about him and his successes in commercial real estate. And how *handsome* he was. “Cara, you and Danny would make *such* a cute pair.” That was a phrase to which I’d become numb.

I usually tuned them out until one day, my mother hinted at talking to Danny’s parents about maybe getting his help in my search for a building. I had laughed it off, but a day later, I received a phone call from Danny *fucking* Morden saying how happy he’d be to help me find a place for “my school.”

That was the type of guy he was. Unable to listen to anyone but his own ego. But he was willing to help me for zero commission. “Come on, Cara. We’re practically family. Let me help you out.”

Given my financial status, I really couldn’t refuse. And maybe I hadn’t given Danny a fair shake all these years.

But nearly running me over wasn’t a great way to start our working relationship.

Danny walked over to me from his car, a smirk on his lips. “God, can you imagine how awkward it would have been if I had to tell your parents I hit you when you walked out in front of my car?”

I took one look at his greased-up dark hair and his aviator sunglasses shielding his beady eyes and I just knew.

*I’m gonna have to give this asshole a piece of my mind.*

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