

THE
SIGNS SERIES
BOOK THREE:
FEATHERS

*Encounters
in Flight*

CATERINA PASSARELLI

ENCOUNTERS IN FLIGHT

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BOOK 3

CATERINA PASSARELLI

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This novel contains explicit sexual scenes, stalking, distracted driving, and the death of a partner (mention).

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EMMA

Running should be illegal. It blows my mind people do this for fun. Haven't they heard of eating cupcakes or browsing Amazon for useless items? Both better hobbies than cardio.

"Last call for zone four."

At a high rate of speed, my carry-on luggage rattles behind me as I drag it toward the gate while huffing and puffing. The flight attendant makes the "last call" announcement one more time as sweat drips from my brow. If I miss this flight my parents are going to kill me. Why does the JFK International Airport have to be ridiculously hectic?

"Wait!" I yell to the Delta employee closing the door to the plane's ramp.

"Just in time," she says in a clipped tone as I nearly slam into her at full force. "Boarding pass?"

My boarding pass—where did I put that thing?

Frantically, I toss the items around in the bottomless pit that is my black leather tote. Unfortunately, I come up empty. The sweat is now dripping off my body in places I'd rather not mention.

Checking the pockets of my blazer ... more of nothing.

Back to my purse, which holds receipts for items I can't remember buying. Where did I put that blowtorch? Or the

mouse repellent? Or the bacon flavored floss?

The flight attendant taps her foot while standing with her hip popped to the side. “Could it be on your phone?”

I’m usually old-school—hence the printed receipts—and carry a printed boarding pass, but today I used a digital one, which I forgot.

Now, where did I put my phone? Back to my purse, I shake it as if it’s going to fall out.

“It’s in your hand.” The flight attendant grits her teeth. I don’t blame her for her animosity. For dealing with me in this frazzled mental state she deserves a promotion.

Lo and behold, I have my iPhone in a death grip. Loading the boarding pass on my screen, I scan it on the machine.

“Thank you for flying with us, Miss Emma Blackstone.” She flashes a fake Hollywood smile.

I flash her one back.

The only good thing about today’s flight is my grandmother upgraded me to business class when she bought my last-minute ticket. It also guarantees I have an overhead spot for my carry-on bag. Normally, I panic thinking about playing Tetris with fellow passengers cramming too large bags in to too small overhead bins.

4B.

And a sleeping man is already in it. I bet he’s faking it. Who falls asleep *before* the plane takes off? A seat stealer, that’s who.

I don’t have time to cause a scene or ask him to move. Truthfully, I wouldn’t even if he were awake. I’m a people pleaser and a pushover. With a minute to spare, I buckle up tightly in 4C.

The flight attendants have already gone through their safety speech, but I have it memorized as a frequent flyer.

Before putting my phone on airplane mode, I reply to a text from my best friend, Eve. She knows I dread to fly and

wished me well. I remind her if anything happens to me, she needs to erase my browser history. As an investigative journalist, researching outlandish things is my job, but it would make me look like a murderous pervert if anyone found it. That's not what I want my legacy to be.

Here lies the creep with the sketchy browser history—shall not be written across my tombstone.

The plane slowly taxis down the runway and when it's in the air, I grip my armrests until my knuckles turn white and close my eyes as tight as humanly possible. My heart races as my life flashes before my eyes—from pigtails in kindergarten when I frequented time-out for talking too much, to high school prom when spiked red punch was spilled down the front of my white dress, and the day my life fell apart.

How long is the flight from New York to California? I can't count how many times I've done this flight right now; it's all a jumble.

Please don't crash. Please don't crash. Please don't crash.

"Are you going to be muttering the entire flight?" the man beside me asks. Well, I assume it's him because I have yet to open my clenched eyes. "You need to relax. This plane isn't going to crash. Stop saying that."

"How do you know?"

My eyes fly open and I instantly wish I kept them closed. All words are lost from my vocabulary. His ocean blue eyes draw me in first. But now I'm intently staring at his chiseled jawline, dark thick hair, and he hasn't smiled yet, but I bet it's dazzling. It has to be. Even his smug expression is hot.

"Are you having a nervous breakdown?"

"Uh, yes. I mean, no. Um, I don't know."

This guy may be hot, but my body can only focus on not vomiting. Nothing is as important as my fear of flying.

As the man reaches up to push the flight attendant call button, I catch a scent of fresh lemons and clean laundry

coming off his designer Ermenegildo Zegna Bespoke suit jacket. These suits run twenty grand!

And, for appearing harsh and stoic, it's odd he has such a calming, uplifting scent.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is the weird stuff journalists calculate in their minds when profiling people.

Instantly, a perky brunette is standing at our row pulling me out of my thoughts.

“How can I help you?” She bats her long eyelashes a few too many times.

I'm not the only woman this man has an effect on, clearly.

“She needs a glass of water.” He nods in my direction.

Notice he didn't say *please*? Yeah, I did too. But I don't have time to calculate his red flags because I do, in fact, need a glass of water, *pronto*.

The flight attendant scurries away and quickly returns. She brought me a water bottle, but also one for Mr. Bossy Pants.

“Thank you,” we say in unison. Looks like he does have manners, after all.

Chugging the water too quickly causes me to choke. If you could physically feel someone give you an eye roll, that's the vibe coming off my neighbor.

“Don't die.”

Once my coughing has stopped, I glance over. “Did you command me not to die?”

“Yes, that would ruin this flight.” He says without a hint of a smile, but I can't help it. I laugh. A deep belly laugh erupts from within me. If the passengers in business class weren't already staring, they sure are now. “Did you forget to take some kind of medication today or...?”

Wiping away the tears trickling down my cheeks, I calm my breathing. At least this hysteria has helped me relax as we settle into the smooth skies.

“No, I am not psychotic.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” He didn’t bother to say it under his breath. Nope. He said it loud enough for anyone eavesdropping to hear, like the flight attendant who keeps walking laps by our row. Someone should let her know the seat belt sign is on.

“I’ll be the judge of how rude you are.” I square my body to face the seat in front of me.

“You do that.”

With that he leans his head against the window and drifts back to sleep.

There’s not a chance I’ll fall asleep on a plane. I’ve traveled all over the world, but flying continues to freak me out. So I do what I do best ... work.

Pulling my laptop out of its case, I jump on the Wi-Fi and dig deep into my latest project. I’m not sure how long I’ve been engrossed in my report when Mr. Bossy Pants clears his throat. Is he trying to get my attention? How childish. But I fall for it and glance in his direction.

“What are you working on?” He nods at my computer.

“Investigative reports on several politicians who I believe are committing mail fraud, wire fraud, and racketeering.”

His baby blue eyes get a little wider. I bet he assumed I was an airhead as well as a basket case. I don’t blame him; I haven’t been at my best. Flying does that to me.

“Are you a lawyer?”

“No.”

“A cop?”

“Nope.”

“Journalist?”

“Bingo.”

“How long have you been working on this report?”

I save my document and close the screen. Now that Mr. Bossy Pants has all kinds of questions, I'm going to get distracted and that's no way to get my work done. One mistake could cost me the reputation I've spent years building.

"Four months."

Four long, tiring yet exhilarating months.

This has been the hardest case I have worked on in my history at CCW 4. There is a new scheme every day and they are all mind-blowing, you'd think they were fictional. New crimes are being uncovered left and right in New York City. It's hard to stay on top of everything, but I couldn't imagine my job being anything else.

"What do you do?"

"Real estate."

Close-ended answer. I debate shutting the conversation down, but my curiosity takes over. "What kind of real estate?"

Yes, I know that wasn't a hard hitting journalism question. However, I don't want this guy to feel like he's being interrogated. I've been accused of this once or twice on dates. I've also been accused of making men feel intimidated. Which is not my fault.

"I started in residential and then moved into commercial. Now I own a development firm that does it all."

He slipped that last part in about *owning* a firm as if it were no big deal. If I were to guess, he's in his early thirties. Normally, guys are ready to jump in and brag about their accomplishments at the drop of a hat.

Maybe it's a small firm?

The plane hits a patch of turbulence and any further thoughts of real estate fly out of my head. My fingers grip my armrests yet again. My heavy breathing kicks into overdrive and I'm seeing tunnel vision.

Over the speaker, a flight attendant announces, "Ladies and gentlemen, we've turned the seat belt sign back on. We'll

experience a small bout of turbulence for the next ten to fifteen minutes. Please remain in your seats.”

Everyone else stays calm in their seats, except for me.

Please don't crash. Please don't crash. Please don't crash.

“For the love of God, we are not going to crash.” My neighbor grabs my hand. “Slow your breathing down. You are going to hyperventilate.”

“You’re a realtor, not a doctor,” I hurl the remark but take his advice. I slow my breathing down. “Sorry for being mean.”

He smiles, which confirms my guess that it’s a dazzling smile. “Picture something that makes you happy.” He traces little circles on the top of my hand. “I don’t know, puppies or something.”

I do as he says and I close my eyes to picture something that makes me happy. Receiving accolades from my boss and peers at work.

“What are you picturing?”

“You are incredibly nosey.”

“You are smiling. It has to be something good. Let me guess ... sex.”

My eyes open as my cheeks heat. “I was not thinking about sex.” But now I am. I’m picturing sex in an airplane bathroom with him. Running my hands through his hair, pulling at the pieces that are longer on top, ripping the buttons off his designer suit jacket, licking what I’m sure are six pack abs. Because, why wouldn’t he have those too?

“Now what are you thinking about?” He smirks.

“Nothing,” I whisper. “Mind your own business.”

The turbulence has stopped. With smooth sailing skies, I’m hyper aware he’s still holding my hand. Do I slip it away? Yank it back? Instead, I do nothing, but I can’t stop thinking about my hand in his grasp. Mine is going to get clammy and awkward soon.

“Can I get you two anything?” the flight attendant asks as she stops a cart full of beverages and snacks at our row.

Her gaze goes directly to our clasped hands. After many years interviewing people, I can read body language. Hers reads shock. Shock that someone like him would want to hold my hand? Especially after she threw herself at him to fetch our waters.

“I’ll take a glass of champagne.” Again, thank you, Grandmother.

“Make that two.”

Instead of placing the drinks on the trays in front of us, the flight attendant hands them to us. Which sadly ends my hand holding session with ... *wait*.

“What’s your name?” It’s the most basic question and I forgot to ask it.

“Maverick Stern. And yours?” He extends his hand.

“Emma Blackstone.” I take his in mine to shake while I laugh at our late introductions.

We clink our plastic glasses together and take sips of bubbly. It hits the spot after this crazy day, well, crazy week. Crazy month? When was the last time my life was normal?

The seat belt sign goes off and my bladder screams for me to get out of this chair. I do something I rarely do, take off my belt and excuse myself. There are two bathrooms on this plane and the closest one is luckily in business class.

Stumbling my way into the aisle, I push the folding door open and step into the coffin they call a bathroom. If I weren’t already afraid of airplanes, this would be the icing on the shitty cake. Getting in and out as quickly as possible is my mission.

When I’m done, I take a long, hard look in the spotty mirror at my bloodshot eyes. I run my hands under the water again then splash a little in my hair to smooth down the frizz on my normally sleek TV-ready bob cut.

I always had long, flowing hair, but my News Director told me if I wanted to be taken seriously, I'd need a "professional" haircut. I went with the bob but left it longer to frame my jaw in the front.

As I'm about to open the door, there's a knock.

"Open the door, Emma," I hear from the other side.

Are you kidding me? I unlock the door as it's pushed open and immediately closed.

Now pressed firmly against my chest is Maverick.

"What are you doing in here?" I whisper. This has to break some kind of airplane rule. Rule breaking is not generally my thing. My thing is busting people who break rules.

"Wanted to see what was taking you so long." Maverick hovers over me. He's taller than I expected and we barely fit in the bathroom.

"A girl can't go to the bathroom in peace?" I ask.

"The same girl who has had multiple panic attacks, mutters to herself, and nearly fainted when she took off her seat belt. I wasn't sure she should be left alone. What if you passed out in here? Hit your head in a state of anxiety?"

I laugh at his accurate description of me. The plane jolts slightly and I nearly bounce off the back wall. I land right into Maverick's firm chest and he holds me snugly as we steady ourselves.

My heart rate increases and it has nothing to do with my fear of flying. This time, it's my fear of men. Not men per say; it's what they can do to me. My heart, to be exact.

"Someone is going to notice we are *both* missing," I say. Of course, it will be the nosey flight attendant who'd trade places with me in an instant.

"Have you ever joined the mile high club?" Maverick raises an eyebrow. His hands are still on my back.

My jaw drops. "I cannot believe you asked me that."

Maverick laughs. “I’m kidding. Relax. I don’t know you. Don’t flatter yourself.”

I shove his chest lightly. “And I don’t know *you*.”

Maverick steps closer. When he flashes me a shit-eating grin, I know he’s aware of what he’s doing as my knees slightly buckle.

“Now that we’ve both established we don’t know each other, maybe we should go back to our seats,” he says.

I nod. Maverick remains standing in front of me for a moment too long, as if challenging me to make the first move. Looking to the left and to the right of him, there’s no way I can squeeze through. I’m trapped.

“Move,” I demand.

Maverick turns to face the door, which gives me time to check out his fine rear end. A nice butt on a man is incredibly attractive. I don’t know what comes over me, but I have the urge to pinch it. I don’t, but I want to.

He spins his head around to say something but instead catches my eyes locked on his booty. “Like what you see?”

Busted.

“It’s not bad.” I shrug.

Maverick grins. “Not bad, huh? I’m going to go out first. Wait a few minutes. Unless you want to go first?”

No, I need another moment to collect myself. “Go ahead.”

He sneaks out, leaving me alone in this hellhole of a bathroom.

Am I upset I didn’t get to join the mile high club with a complete stranger? For all I know, “Maverick” might not be his real name. He could be a married man named Tony hiding his wife and child. I know that’s happened to friends on dating apps.

When I leave the bathroom, the flight attendant gives me a death stare. I return to my seat to find Maverick reading an article on his iPad. He doesn’t glance over.

Two can play at this childish game.

Without glancing in his direction, I take out a paperback from my purse. I can't quite focus on the words. Instead, I imagine what it would be like to have him jump over this seat to ravish me, but I pretend to read.

Time passes as the flight attendants serve our meals. We remain in silence throughout it all. I think I spot our favorite flirty attendant smirk in my direction. She senses our tiff and is surely not rooting for me.

"You've been reading the same page for thirty minutes." Maverick finally breaks the silence.

I slam the book shut. "Maybe you should pay more attention to your own article." I point to his screen. "Then you wouldn't notice what page I'm on."

The flight attendants take their seats before the pilot announces we are preparing for landing. The seat belt light comes back on and it's my panic attack all over again. And, like clockwork, Maverick reaches over to grab my hand.

"We aren't going to crash," he whispers before I can lose my cool.

"How do you know?" I whisper.

"Because I know everything."

I laugh. "Doubtful."

"Says the grown woman with her eyes closed." He chuckles.

"I don't need them open to insult you."

When he releases my hand, I almost beg him not to, but the plane has landed. Descending is normally when I'm at my worst, yet it wasn't half bad. Actually, I didn't know it was happening. I was focused on holding Maverick's hand like a teenage girl.

The mad rush of passengers jump from their seats before the doors are open, but I remain seated. I'm not going to stand

in the aisle like some nut job until we are allowed to walk right off.

Since we are in row 4, it's my turn to exit the plane quickly. I grab my carry-on bag and wheel it behind me. Normally, I can't wait to hightail it as far from the airport as possible.

Do I turn back and look to see if he's behind me?

Do I pretend I never met him?

What do I do?

"Are you going to run off without saying anything?" Maverick asks as we both walk onto the ramp.

"I didn't really know how this"—I wave my hand between us awkwardly—"should go."

"How do you want it to go?"

"I have no clue."

Before I can bravely suggest we exchange phone numbers, a curly-haired blonde woman rushes over to us with her giant jugs flapping like she's on an episode of *Baywatch*.

"Maverick!" She opens her arms wide. "Boo Bear!"

I side-eye glare at ... Boo Bear?

His face is emotionless.

"I'm happy you are here!" She jumps into him. Her arms wrap around his neck and her legs around his waist. When I think it can't get any more dramatic, she plants a sloppy kiss on his lips. I look away in embarrassment.

If he doesn't know her, this is alarming. And if he does know her, this is still alarming ... to me.

"Kate." Maverick places the woman on the ground.

Before anyone can say another word, I slip through the automatic doors and jump in the line for a taxi. Luckily, there's one idling at the curb and I dash inside before I can see Maverick or Kate leave the terminal.

What just happened? Maybe I got a look at his mystery wife. At least she confirmed his name is legitimately Maverick. One thing he told the truth about.



Maverick

Where did Emma dart off to?

When she first sat next to me and muttered about the plane crashing, I thought this was going to be the flight from hell. But she was rather humorous despite her anxieties. I loved our conversation about her career. Plus, she went toe-to-toe with me on the banter scale.

On top of all that, she's beautiful. I know I wasn't imagining that her nipples were hard pressed against my chest in that small bathroom. Her heavy breathing was a clear indicator I was getting under her skin. Turning her on too.

I can't believe she left without giving me her number. Since she's a public figure, I could look it up, but that would be one hundred percent stalker-like. I'm all too familiar with stalkers.

She'll willingly throw her number in my face if I see her again. I'm sure of it. I wasn't imagining her checking out my ass in that bathroom either.

What gives, Emma Blackstone? What gives?

"Boo Bear!" Kate screams at an ear-piercing volume. "Aren't you ready to go?"

Not anywhere with you, crazy lady.

EMMA

Sucking all the joy out of my life is what Grandmother is good for. If there were a PhD in creating misery, she'd teach the class.

Exhibit A: "Emma, stand up straight."

I'm sitting down, Grandma.

Exhibit B: "Emma, suck in your stomach. This dress is not flattering on you. How much weight did you gain?"

This is the only clean black dress I had on short notice. And no, I'm the same size I was last time you saw me.

Exhibit C: "Emma, when do you plan on settling down?"

Never. Now get off my back.

Exhibit D: "You aren't getting any younger."

Neither are you, you old hag.

Exhibit E: "You won't be able to reproduce much longer."

That's probably a good thing. My future kid will share your devilish DNA.

And on and on and on. To make matters worse, this was all over breakfast in the span of twenty minutes.

To distract myself, I text Eve.

Me: Girl. Get me the hell out of here.

Eve: That bad? Insane Grandma Ruby?

Eve knows all the ins and outs of my family; we've been friends since college. My grandmother is nothing in comparison to Eve's father, but she is my own form of torture.

Me: Don't you know it! The funeral is today & I'll be out of here soon

Getting back to New York as soon as possible is my top priority. I can't be away from the city I love for too long or I get homesick. Plus, I'm always working on a deadline.

Don't get me wrong, California is beautiful. My grandmother moved here when I was a little kid after my grandfather suddenly passed away. We visited each summer as I was growing up; it's my second home.

"Emma, darling, you look marvelous." Mom pulls me into a hug.

"Mom! How was your flight?" I squeeze her tightly.

"Not bad. Phoebe slept the whole flight, so I watched a movie."

"Where is Phoebe?" I look around the funeral home but don't spot her anywhere.

Phoebe is my mom's wife. My parents divorced when I was five years old and a few years later Mom married Phoebe. My dad never remarried, but he dates. I think, deep down, my mom will always be his soulmate.

"Right here!" Phoebe walks over with Dad.

Yes, all three of my parents are that cool they still hang out. It's never been awkward. Dad continued to financially support my mom years after their divorce until she finished her college degree and got a job. He went on to pay for my college as well.

“Has Grandma gotten to you yet?” Dad pulls me into a hug. It’s his mother who is ripping me apart limb from limb.

I roll my eyes. “Of course. She has radar vision on me.”

“Don’t let her get you down,” Mom says, patting my arm.

That’s easy for her to say. My grandmother is moderately nice to everyone except for me and I don’t know why. I can’t think of anything I’ve ever done to piss her off.

A clergyman, followed by a woman in an army uniform, walk into the funeral home. The memorial service for Uncle Ted starts as I take my seat beside my parents. When the formal part of the service is over, everyone is encouraged to say a few words about my uncle.

One by one, many people recount hilarious stories about the man who taught me how to ride a bike. If anyone in this room is crying it’s from laughing too hard. Uncle Ted, my dad’s brother, was a hoot! I share the story about when I broke my leg. Uncle Ted went door to door with my Girl Scout cookies to sell them because I was heartbroken about missing out on the opportunity to win a bike. Luckily for everyone else, he left the Scout uniform at home. Luckily for me, he won the bike.

When the service is over, everyone heads back to Grandma’s penthouse for light snacks and coffee. Surprisingly, Grandma is holding herself together. Uncle Ted had cancer and his death was not a shock. We were all able to say our goodbyes and he was in good spirits until the end.

Uncle Ted donated his body to a local university to study for science. His legacy is inspiring. I hope to be as cool as my uncle someday. I want people to come to my funeral and laugh. I’ve been to too many funerals with exasperated tears.

“So, Emma, how’s the TV job treating you?” Mark, my older cousin, asks before shoving a piece of apple strudel into his big mouth.

“So far, so good.”

Watching crumbs fall out of his mouth while he chews openly, I nearly gag.

Mark has tried to compete with me our entire lives. I tell him things on a need to know basis because he's always waiting to make himself look better at my expense.

"You an anchor yet, or what?"

He already knows the answer to this. I secretly think Mark sends in anonymous hate mail to the news station against me. Sometimes the notes appear a little too personal.

I take a long sip from my coffee in hopes that he'll walk away. But, to my dismay, he remains standing here.

"I'm a reporter, but I do fill-in on the anchor desk."

That's only when they need me, but it's not any of Mark's business.

"So then you aren't." He grabs another piece of cake from the table. I wish I could shove his face in it. "You still single?"

It's as if she knew the right moment to show up. Grandma joins us in the kitchen.

"Yes, she's still single," she says before handing Mark a napkin and motioning for him to clean his face. "She's being *too* picky."

Mark nods a little too excessively. "I believe it. It's all this online dating that's ruining women."

"Excuse me. What do you mean by *ruining women*? And how would you know?"

I've only online dated a few times, but I suddenly want to stand up for anyone who does! Mark has been married to his wife, Candace, for a few years. He met her through his parents. They had an over-the-top fairytale wedding, complete with horses they rode in on before releasing doves. Candace also wears the pants in the relationship. Mark kisses her ass like the weasel he is. So he clearly has no clue about how online dating is "ruining" women.

"Everyone thinks they have a million options. They swipe no on guys who are perfectly normal except maybe they are too short," Mark says. This I agree with. "Don't get me started on the over thirty crowd. Most of these women are trolls who

should be lucky they're getting any attention. Who is going to look at a thirty-year-old broad when they are on the same apps as hot twenty-year-olds? No one."

This bold statement, I do not agree with.

"You are an asshole! *You* shouldn't be paying attention to anyone, twenty or not."

"Are you doing that, Emma?" my grandmother asks. "Are you rejecting shorter guys? You are not a hot twenty-year-old."

Can we punch our grandmothers? Or is that frowned upon?

There's always a point on my visits where I hit my breaking point. Usually, it's a few days in. But today it's a few hours and I'm ready to pull my hair out.

"No, Grandma, I'm a hot thirty-year-old," I tease.

Grandmother rolls her eyes and walks away to bother someone else.

"If I were you, I'd take what you can get," Mark says before he leaves me standing by the food dumbfounded.

I am not taking dating advice from my grandmother and loser cousin. Especially when their advice is to lower my standards. Besides, dating is not something I'm remotely interested in.



How come this stuff always happens to me? It's déjà vu all over again at the airport as I frantically rush to the gate. I left my grandmother's house with ample time to make it here yet somehow I'm always late.

Oh, you've got to be kidding me. I come to a screeching halt. It's the same woman scanning the tickets as a few days ago. Doesn't this airline have any other employees? She eyes

me with distaste as I approach the counter. Practically throwing my phone at her as it slips from my hands, she scans it on the ticket machine without saying a word. That's probably for the best.

4D.

Again, thank you, Grandma. She's not cheap, I'll give her that much, but it's the least she can do outside of tearing down my self-worth.

Slipping into my rightful seat this time, I get cozy against the window. It's dark outside as I'm catching a redeye back to New York.

The seat beside me is empty. A row all to myself. This is my lucky day! No one to witness my panic attack.

With my seat belt securely tightened, my seat in an upright position, and my tray table folded ... I'm ready to go. More than I'll ever be. But we've been sitting on the runway for twenty minutes with no sign of movement. What is taking so long? I'm bound to hyperventilate if we don't get off the ground soon.

The pitch-black sky is not soothing my nerves.

A stewardess opens the door to the ramp as a passenger rushes in. Don't tell me we were waiting on someone? I nearly broke my neck running to the gate at a high rate of speed. No one should get special treatment—especially at the cost of my sanity.

It's him. Two for two today—lying married guy, Maverick. And he's alone. Why doesn't his wife, Kate, ever fly with him?

Maverick eyes the seat next to me before he slips into it. There aren't any other seats on this entire plane? After dealing with my grandmother and cousin, this is the last thing I need for the nearly six-hour flight.

“We meet again.” Maverick buckles his seat belt.

Ignoring him, I roll my eyes. Picking my purse off the floor, I dig through it to find my AirPods. Of course, they are

buried at the bottom, tangled in a mess of miscellaneous junk. I slip them in and blast some music.

This plane can take off any minute now. Especially since we waited for Mr. Bossy Pants to get his royal self here.

When my eyes are closed, the AirPods are pulled out of my ear and I nearly jump out of my seat in fright.

“What did you do that for?” I scream, startled from the unwanted touching.

A few business class passengers shoot me pissed off looks. The other AirPods are still blaring music into my ear, now causing me to scream.

“Why are you ignoring me?” Maverick asks.

“I don’t want to be *that* girl.”

He angles his body to face me more. “What girl?”

“You know”—I point my finger at him—“the girl who talks to *married* men.”

He looks around the cabin. “Who is married?”

“You.”

I try to put the AirPods in yet again, but he stops my arms.

“I’m not married.”

“Engaged?”

“Nope.”

“Who was the woman who jumped into your arms and made out with you at the airport last time?”

The flight attendant begins the safety announcements and we stop our conversation. Since he’s standing two feet away from us, it would be rude to talk while he’s talking. But I’m dying to know. It pisses me off Maverick has all this time to fabricate a good lie about his secret wife, Kate.

When we are all aware that we need to put our own oxygen masks on first, the flight attendant stops talking and it’s time to get back to interrogating Maverick.

“Kate is an *ex*-girlfriend.”

I stare at him blankly.

“And the Earth is flat. Two can play at this *lying* game,” I say.

“Not that I need to prove my point,” Maverick takes his phone out of his pocket, flicks to his photo album, and hands it to me. “But here, look. Do you see her in any photos?”

“This means nothing.”

He could delete all the photos of her when he’s hooking up with someone. Or he could have a burner phone and pull this trick on anyone. I scroll the photos and can confirm she’s nowhere to be found. Even the Hidden album was empty.

Maverick closes his photo album and opens his email, scrolling furiously through email after email until he finds one and hands his phone back again. “Now this is something I’m sure you’ll recognize.”

Scanning the email, he’s right, this is something I’ve seen a time or two in my investigative reporting years.

“A restraining order?”

This email reads Maverick Stern has a restraining order against Kate Bullock for protection against stalking, aggravated stalking, and harassment.

“Correct.” Maverick takes his phone back. “Kate and I dated briefly in college. A few years ago, I ran into her again and we went on some dates, no big deal. Then I started seeing her everywhere, lurking in corners. It was creepy, but I didn’t do anything about it. Until ... I caught her breaking into my office, showing up on my dates, stealing my trash, messaging women online who I was involved with, and, the kicker, she went to scream at my mom for what a piece of shit I am.”

Yikes.

“What did she do with your trash?”

Maverick laughs. “After all this”—he waves his phone at me—“that’s the question you have next?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “It’s a solid question. The weird questions lead to the best stories.”

He nods. “I believe you. I have no idea what she did with it. If I think too much about it, it will creep me out. Maybe she made some kind of voodoo doll? Or shrine? Sleep with my old banana peels in her bed to manifest me back?”

Before I can quiz him further, the plane taxis along the runway before takeoff.

You know the drill ... my hands are around the armrest in an instant, my breathing is sporadic, my eyes are clenched shut, and I fight the urge to vomit.

What did I eat for dinner?

Oh yeah, Phoebe’s homemade sushi rolls.

Those would taste awful in reverse.

Please don’t crash. Please don’t crash. Please don’t crash.

“You need to pull it together, woman,” Maverick says.

Trying to remember the breathing techniques Eve, who doubles as my best friend *and* a psychologist, taught me, I end up blowing out my nose too aggressively. Please don’t let there be any snot on my face. Please, please, please.

How does Eve make all this deep breathing stuff look elegant?

“I am pulled together,” I finally say when we are safely in the air.

Maverick laughs. “Oh yeah, you look it.”

I side eye him even though he’s right.

“Anything to drink?” the flight attendant asks as he approaches our row.

Before I can say “no, thank you,” Maverick asks for two coffees. I don’t want to make a scene in front of the flight attendant, but it’s 10:30 p.m. and I booked a redeye so I could try my hardest to sleep. Phoebe handed me some sleeping pills

before I rushed out the door knowing I'd never be able to nod off without drugs. I will not be drinking coffee.

Taking the steamy white foam cup and placing it on my tray, I glance over at Maverick, who is sipping his.

“Late night coffee? It's bedtime,” I say.

My fear will keep me awake but I planned to cozy up with my neck pillow, close my eyes, and listen to music. Still freaking out internally, but at least I'd maintain the facade I'm calm, cool, and collected externally.

“We aren't sleeping.” Maverick is nearly done with his coffee now.

“Then what do you want to do?” As soon as the question leaves my lips, I wish I could take it back.

I blush as he cocks an eyebrow and nods in the direction of the bathroom. When my jaw drops, he busts out laughing, which gets us a few more dirty looks from nearby passengers trying to sleep.

“I'm kidding.” Maverick laughs. “You really have a filthy mind.”

“I do not,” I whisper through gritted teeth.

To be honest, I do, but I'm not going to admit it to this guy. He's a stranger, even though there's this lingering within my stomach that makes me think I know him already. A feeling I wish would take a hike.

“Drink your coffee.” Maverick pushes the cup closer to me. Without a word, I glare at him before chugging the now barely warm beverage. “Let's play a game.”

“What kind of game?”

“Twenty questions?”

Is he serious?

“This screams junior high with my girlfriends.”

“Is the big bad journalist afraid of some questions?”

Oh, game on, buddy.

We start hurling questions at one another. They're easy at first ...

What's your favorite color?

Me: pink.

Maverick: green.

When did you get your first kiss?

Me: second grade.

Maverick: seventh grade.

Then a few about work ...

What's the most challenging thing about the real estate business? He says it's developing trust with the people you surround yourself with. I say the exact same answer for my career.

Then things take a turn. It's his fault, I swear.

"Favorite sexual position?" Maverick asks.

I turn my head around, as if to double-check no one is listening to our hushed conversation. We didn't turn on our overhead lights; it's dark and cozy between us.

"Missionary." I cringe at my lame answer and wait for him to make fun of me for choosing something vanilla, unexciting, and bland.

"I don't think I can pick only one." He scratches his chin.

"That's not fair. You made me pick."

Maverick returns his tray to its upright position and angles his body toward me. His long legs brush against mine as they rest in the space reserved in front of my seat.

"I didn't *make* you do anything. You willingly gave up that information."

I put my tray up and turn to face him. "At least give me your top three."

Maverick cocks an eyebrow. "Someone is dying to hear about my bedroom habits."

I roll my eyes. “Okay, fine. I’ll ask a new question then.”

Maverick holds up his hand. “Wait, wait. I’ll answer.” He pauses to see if he’s got my full attention. “It’s not really a positional thing, it’s more about the technique.” Another long pause. “It’s all in the *how*.” I know better than to interrupt my interviewee even though a thousand questions flood my mind. “How you touch their skin, how they kiss your lips, how you thrust your hips, how they moan your name ...”

I lean in closer as if hanging on every sensual word spilling out of his luscious lips. That’s until my elbow slips off the armrest and lands right in his crotch, hard.

“Shit!” Maverick jumps out of his seat while holding the front of his pants. His eyes squint as he’s nearly doubled over. “Fuck. That hurt.”

First, mortification sets in. Second, embarrassment washes over me. Third, I laugh. Not any laugh ... a high-pitched, deep in my belly kind of laughter. My head throw back and I howl out. I laugh so hard sound no longer leaves my lips as I clutch my chest to make sure I don’t stop breathing.

Maverick sits back down and gives me a look of annoyance. He’s probably contemplating if I am skipping the medication he thinks I need again.

“It’s not funny,” he scoffs.

Tears stream down my face. “I know. I’m extremely sorry. I can’t believe I did that. I don’t think I’ve ever hit a guy in the junk before.” More tears in between gasps of air as I catch my breath.

“How dare you refer to King Maverick as junk?”

“*King Maverick?*” I wiped away the last tear but the laughter starts all over again as tears trickle down my face.

“Oh, you don’t have a name for your ...” He nods at my crotch.

I blush. “No. That’s so weird.”

“You haven’t slept with the right men if they haven’t named it.”

“You’re probably right.”

Before he can ask me another question the flight attendant lets us know the plane is preparing to descend into New York. The time flew by as we were asking each other ridiculous questions. I wasn’t scared once during the flight. What’s happening to me?

“Tell me about one of your crazy ex-boyfriends.”

That’s not where I wanted my mind to go, but I guess since he shared his stalker situation, I can share something begrudgingly.

“I haven’t been in a relationship in quite a long time. I tend to go on dates, but they never pan out.” I fiddle with the strap of my seat belt.

“You are going to have to give me something juicier than that.” Maverick eyes me curiously. “Why don’t they pan out?”

“I don’t know,” I quickly spit the words out in haste.

“Yes, you do. Why not?”

More fiddling with the seat belt. I pull on the belt to the point it drives Maverick crazy enough that he grabs my hands to force me to stop.

“The dates don’t work out because I don’t want them to.” I’ve never said that sentence out loud before. Looking down at my hands, now fists in my lap, I hold back a tear that’s creeping its way to the surface of my eye.

Don’t do this. Don’t cry in front of him out of sadness.

Finally, I meet his eyes. They are staring back in a gentle blue hue. Not judgmental or harsh but soft and tender—the look you’d give a hurt puppy. Pity. I don’t want anyone’s pity.

“Why don’t you want them to work out?” Maverick breaks the silence.

My eyes dart back to my hands. “When I was in college, I was engaged. We were months away from our wedding... when a drunk driver hit him.” I pause as my thought trails off to that fateful night. “He died.”

We sit in silence for a moment. I keep my head down because I haven't told this story in years. I'm sure he's feeling awkward now that I ruined our lighthearted fun. I'm sure he regrets sitting next to me—the depressed widow.

After Dylan died, I shut myself off from the world. I was physically there in college; I even did multiple news internships, but mentally I was grieving the devastating loss of my best friend. The man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. The man I wanted to have children with, grow old with. My forever.

Overtime, I lost most of my friends and my family was skittish around me. No one knew what to say or how to act and truthfully, I didn't know either. I didn't know how they could help—they couldn't.

Instead of turning away, Maverick wraps his arms around me. He holds me to his chest in a warm embrace without saying a word.

It's not sexual.

He's not trying to hit on me.

He's just ... being there for me.

We hug each other until the lights turn on and the plane safely lands in New York. I quickly pull apart from him, embarrassed to draw attention to us in my time of need.

You'd think because I'm on television every day I'm okay with people staring. For the most part, it's fine. But in moments of weakness I want no one to witness. Showing emotions makes you frail and no one wants to have to take care of you.

“Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of Delta Airlines, we'd like to welcome you to New York City,” the announcement comes over the speakers.

Home sweet home.

This time I do what I never do, I quickly jump out of my seat except it's extremely awkward because Maverick is sitting in the aisle. I'm hovering over him. I sit back down when he

doesn't budge from his spot until the first couple of rows are out of the plane.

He grabs my carry-on from the overhead bin and hands it to me. I thank him and walk off the plane. I can feel his presence behind me as we both walk to the exit.

"Don't run off again." Maverick rushes over to me.

"Again?" I say while slowing down to check a text from Eve. She's picking me up at the airport despite it being the wee morning hours. "I didn't *run off* last time. I didn't want to be around when some woman was sucking your face off calling you boo bear."

Maverick laughs. "Sucking my face off? That sounds ... interesting."

I roll my eyes. "Don't make this weird."

"What's your phone number?" he asks.

Eve arrives at the right time. I can't leave her idling at the curb or she'll get in trouble with airport security.

"I don't think it's wise for us to keep talking." I regret having to make this decision but it's for the best for him not to get involved with someone as emotionally unavailable as me.

Before Maverick can fight me on it, I slip into Eve's car.



Without asking me about my trip, Eve instantly wants to know about the handsome guy I left standing at the curb with his jaw dropped.

"He's some guy I sat next to on the plane ... twice."

"Twice? Don't you think that's some kind of coincidence?" Eve quickly glances over to me before putting her eyes back on the road. "A synchronicity, perhaps?"

“Not at all. I’d call it poor planning on behalf of the airlines.” As we leave the airport terminal and head to Manhattan, I change the subject. “So ... how’s James?”

Eve gives me a knowing look. As the sun begins to rise, it casts a dreamy glow on her massive three-karat engagement ring, nearly blinding me. “James is his normal sassy self. He’s currently visiting his nephew at college to be sure he’s settling in. Now don’t distract me. What’s the plane guy’s name?”

“Maverick.”

Eve switches lanes as she merges onto the expressway. “One-word answers, I see. Something is up.”

Best friends know these kinds of things. I get it, I’m normally chatty, but with thoughts of Dylan clouding my mind, it’s hard to find the words to describe Maverick. Am I betraying his honor by thinking of him and another man at the same time?

“Did he make you mad?” she asks, stealing more glances while also keeping her eyes on the traffic packed road.

“No.”

“Horny?”

I bust out laughing. “What? Ew, no. James turned you into a pervert.”

Eve laughs. “You’re right!” She pauses while concentrating on the road. “So not mad or horny ... what then? Does he not match your list?”

“I strongly regret telling you about *my list*.”

So what, I made a list of all the things I’d like in a man. Big deal. I was desperate one night and decided to give it a go after a yoga teacher brought up the idea. My big mouth had to mention it to Eve and now she’s never going to let me hear the end of it. I don’t know why I did it. It was another game I was playing with myself to stall my dating process.

“No, he doesn’t match my list,” I lie. I don’t remember my list. “Let’s drop it. I won’t ever see him again.”

Eve takes the hint and changes the subject to the lavish wedding she is in the midst of planning. Both Eve and her fiancé, James, have lived the Upper East Side life since birth and I wouldn't expect anything but a large bash for their nuptials.

I did not have a similar upbringing, it was far different from the likes of Eve's, James', and I would bet, Maverick's. I never asked him how he convinced the plane to wait for him but I'm going to guess he knows a few higher ups.

As Eve goes on and on about the ridiculous costs of flowers and how hard it is to pick a color scheme, my thoughts drift to Maverick. Instantly grief washes over me. More than anything I wanted to give him my phone number. Yet my gut was conflicted. How can I think of dating Maverick minutes after telling the sorrowful story of Dylan's death?

I'm such a bitch.

EMMA

Walking into the news station is always a rush. This is truly one of those careers where something different happens every day and I love it. I thrive on the hustle and bustle of life in New York City, the never ending breaking news, and the rush to get to a scene or uncover a new development. Yes, this probably makes me a weirdo, but everyone surrounding me is also one, which means I blend in.

“Welcome back, Emma.” Jason, a fellow reporter, greets me first.

“Thank you!”

I smile, wave, and hightail it away because I’m not ready to answer questions about the trip. Luckily, with it being a funeral I shouldn’t get many. However, Jason has had a crush on me since we both started working here. I tried to set him up on a blind date with Eve, but that didn’t go well. She called me after to yell at me for setting her up with a guy who liked me. That’s when I spilled the beans about “my list” to get her to drop the idea of me dating Jason.

When I walk out of the central newsroom and into the office for the investigative unit, I drop everything at my desk and take a seat. I was only gone for three days yet thousands of emails await me. Most are lame press releases that have nothing to do with me, but they make it to my inbox. I comb

through them until my eyes see black spots and my head pounds.

“Lookie, lookie, who’s back,” Karl, another reporter, says as he strolls into my office.

“It’s me.” I briefly meet his eyes and then return my gaze back to my computer screen. I’d rather lose my vision than talk to Karl.

“Any new leads on the water crisis?” he asks before spinning around a few times in a rolling chair.

If I had any leads, I wouldn’t be handing them off to Kreepy Karl. I wouldn’t normally keep information from one of my own coworkers, yet Karl sets me on edge.

The water crisis was the groundbreaking story that took my career to the next level. A local river in a suburb outside of New York City was not correctly treated for lead and it leached from the water pipes into the city’s drinking water. Hundreds of thousands of people were exposed. The whole city was instructed to use bottled water for everything—drinking, cooking, cleaning, and baking.

This crisis led to several lawsuits, multiple resignations, firings, and criminal indictments. I fought long and hard to get this information exposed when official after official slammed doors in my face. Like a leach advocating for the people, I couldn’t stop. I needed to uncover every stone.

Sadly, all the facts were brought to light, but the city is still without clean drinking water. It’s absolute bullshit. Singers, actors, directors, producers, athletes, and politicians from other states pitched in to raise awareness, sent in cases of bottled water and did all they could to rectify the situation.

However, my executive producers pulled me from the story after developments slowed down. This broke my heart. I cried in my boss’ office because my story wasn’t over, yet they said I needed to move along. I was told I could keep an eye on the situation but an intern would take over where I left off.

Moving on is not something I do well, according to the therapist I saw after Dylan’s death.

Deleting a bunch of emails, I almost pass one that stops me in my scroll.

Subject: Hot Tip

Your next big break ... the Stern real estate development firm is committing investment property scams, bait and switch scams, and offshore investment scams. Look it up. You won't regret it.

Normally I'd never open an email with "hot tip" in the subject line because that screams pornography, but I accidentally clicked it trying to avoid Karl.

Why do I know that name?

Stern Development Firm

I'm dying to do a quick Google search, but Karl is peering over my shoulder. I need to wait until he leaves. Slither away, Karl, like the snake that you are.

Jennifer, our news director, pokes her head into my office. "Meeting in ten minutes!"

"See ya there!" Karl does a double finger point like a two gun salute and follows after to kiss her ass for more airtime.

With Karl out of the room, I get down to business on my search.

Stern Investments

\$330 billion assets under management

The CEO ... Maverick Stern.

The guy who held me in his arms on the plane after I shared my deepest sorrow is a billionaire being accused of scandal? And a great deal of scandal at that.

Property investment scams.

Bait and switch scams.

Offshore investment scams.

My options with this information are: investigate it or ignore it. My instinct says to forget about it. But ... I might help someone who could fall prey to these scams. My journalist's heart says you always help people.

But the heart of the girl on the plane ... she has no clue what to do.

Why the heck was a billionaire flying commercial?

Right now, I really hope this is the one time "fake news" applies. He has nothing to do with my life, however, I don't want Maverick to be a scammer.

The first time I felt comfortable opening up to someone and I clearly misjudged him.

The alarm goes off on my phone to let me know the morning meeting starts in exactly one minute. I log off my computer, grab my coffee, and head to the conference room.

Producers, reporters, an assignment desk editor, an executive producer, and several interns sit around a large table talking about the latest headlines and company gossip before we officially kick this meeting off.

Once it's underway, we go around the room pitching story ideas, getting caught up on what we know is happening today, and the morning show producers give us a brief rundown about what they covered in earlier broadcasts.

"Emma, do you have anything to share?" Jennifer asks.

All eyes go to me.

Normally, I *always* have something to share about what I'm currently investigating or what piece will be running on-air today, but right now, my mind goes blank.

"I'm sorry. I need to go through more emails," I finally say.

"Oh, Emma, I'm sorry. It's probably still a hard time for you," Jennifer says.

Realizing she's giving me an out because of my uncle's death, I nod. But for the first time in my career, I lied.

Technically I don't have to tell anyone about the Stern Developments scam email I received because right now it's simply a random email. A lead. And only one out of fifty leads result in a story. Most leads are pissed off people wanting someone to listen, but they aren't actual news.

So ... maybe I didn't lie?

Stop dancing around the subject.

Shit. I lied.

When the meeting is over, everyone heads off with their potential stories. I say *potential* because you never really know in news. One minute you're assigned a story on a court case and the next thing you know you're covering breaking news about a bear sighting. That happened to me once—a black bear was casually strolling through Central Park. Luckily, no one was hurt. Instead, the bear stole some popcorn from a vendor and was chowing down.

Back in my office, I comb through more emails to find something to cover today. And that's when I see yet another subject line that catches my eye.

Subject: Stern Developments Scam

Dear Ms. Blackstone,

My name is Judith Martini and I'm a Brooklyn resident. My grandson, Jeremy, was recently scammed for all of his savings by Stern Developments at a local seminar. He was then brutally attacked when he tried to call them out for their wrongdoings. Please help us expose this evil company.

Judith left her phone number, which I immediately dial.

"Hello," comes through the phone in a voice as sweet as honey.

"Hello. I'm looking for Judith Martini. This is Emma Blackstone with CCW 4."

"I'm delighted to hear from you."

“Thank you for your email. Could you tell me a little more about what happened to your grandson?”

Typing as quickly as I can, I jot down every word she says.

“Is there any way I could speak to your grandson?” I ask when she’s finished telling me all she knows. Admittedly, it’s not very much and she’s not a firsthand source.

“Oh yes. He’d be happy to talk to you.”

Judith gives me Jeremy’s phone number and we end our conversation. I give Jeremy a call, but it’s quickly declined and a text message is shot over.

Jeremy: Who the fuck is this?

Well, that’s not the kind of response I was expecting from someone related to sweet Judith, but I guess if this guy was recently attacked, he’s on edge? I’m not going to assume anything.

I send a message back telling him who I am and that I spoke to his grandmother. I asked if he’d be willing to meet to talk about his experience.

Jeremy: Sure. Meet me at Blinders Diner at 3

And that’s that. Working in journalism for many years I’ve come across all kinds of people. It’s odd he didn’t ask if I was okay with the place and time.

What am I about to get myself involved in?



Blinders Diner is vacant in the middle of the day. It’s an old restaurant in Hell’s Kitchen and beside a few senior citizens getting the early bird special I’m the only one here.

I finished my assignment early and sent the footage back to the station to come alone. If I brought along a photographer, intern, or field producer, this story would get attention whether it turned out to be something or not. Once I pass along the tip to the station, Stern Developments will be in our computer system forever. Next to the word “scam” and with quotes from this Jeremy dude.

The hostess sits me at a broken in booth near the back and I sip on the coffee I ordered. Three o’clock turns into a quarter past then half past. If I’m not back to the station soon, I will be getting a call.

I throw some money on the table and stand as a medium build young man slides into the booth across from me. He’s quicker than Kreepy Karl.

“Emma Blackstone?” He pulls down the black hood on his sweatshirt to reveal a baldhead with a large cut across it, near his temple. Whether or not Maverick’s company had anything to do with it, this man is hurt.

“Jeremy?”

“Yeah.”

He doesn’t apologize for being late and it irks me. I never want to make a potential news source uncomfortable, even though he’s setting my nerves on edge with his lingering eyes.

“Do you mind if I take notes?” I hold up my phone. I don’t want him to think I’m scrolling social media or texting but instead waiting to capture the story he’s about to tell.

“No video, right?” Jeremy’s eyes shift around the restaurant.

“No video.” This is like pulling teeth. “Your grandmother had a lot to say about your experience at a recent Stern Developments seminar. Could you tell me about it?”

Jeremy plops his hands down on top of the table in a tight grasp. He finally looks up to meet my eyes with his bloodshot green ones. There’s a dark circle under one eye and the other is covered in a bruise.

“I went to the seminar. They were trying to scam people, so I called them out. It’s fucking bullshit. After the seminar, I was jumped in the parking lot by two fools with a sledgehammer,” he says.

“You were hit with a sledgehammer?” I ask in my monotone reporter voice. I don’t want to give him the impression that his story isn’t quite adding up.

From what I can see he has the black eye, cut on his head, his knuckles are roughed up, and he’s missing a few teeth, but I can’t confirm or deny that has anything to do with this alleged attack. Nothing as life-threatening as taking a hit by a sledgehammer.

“No. One guy held the sledgehammer while the other guy hit me with his fists and kicked me.” Jeremy lifts his hoodie to reveal bruised ribs.

“Why did you think they were scamming people?”

A waitress comes to our table and sets down a coffee for Jeremy that he did not order. It doesn’t take a reporter to figure out he’s a regular here.

“Thanks, Twix.” Jeremy flashes her a wide smile and Twix returns one back. As he opens a few sugar packets to dump into his coffee, he says, “They were pitching the bullshit dream. The developments, the money, the lavish lifestyle.”

“And you don’t believe in it?”

Jeremy squints. “Fuck no. It was a bait and switch scam to get us to invest in their fucking property that we’d later be stuck with. When I said that in front of the whole group, the ‘expert’ talked around what I said and acted like I was crazy. During the lunch break they asked me to leave.”

Six sugar packets and six creamers later he’s done doctoring his coffee.

My cup is now empty, but I stare into the bottom of it.

“How do you know the properties weren’t quality?”

Again he gives me a look of disgust.

“They weren’t.”

“But how do you know that?”

Jeremy clenches and unclenches his hands together a few times. “Because I can spot a fake a mile away.”

A bold statement. Years doing this job and I would never say something like that. It’s the people you think will never scam you, who do.

Maverick came off as nice and caring on the plane while he was hugging me. But could he do something like this? Or at least set it up? Be the mastermind?

“How did you find out about the seminar? I couldn’t find any reference to it on their website or social media.”

Jeremy’s left eye twitches. “One of my friends was invited and brought me along. I don’t know anything about a website.”

It’s not uncommon to hold invite only events but I’ll need to keep digging.

Let’s turn this conversation around to something more solid. He doesn’t seem like a reliable scam spotter.

“Can you tell me more about what happened in the parking lot? Did you file a police report?”

I searched the police database for the precinct the alleged attack took place at and came up empty, but I don’t tell Jeremy this. I’d rather hear all the “facts” from him.

“No police report.” He takes a big sip of his coffee.

“Why not?”

“Didn’t want to cause any trouble. Not that kind of guy.”

Jeremy has a criminal record a mile long. He’s been arrested for fraud, assault, and drug charges. I’d bet a call to the cops is the last thing he wants.

“Did you go to the hospital?”

“No.”

“Why speak up now?”

The waitress shimmies over to our table. Twix plays with her long greasy ponytail and looks at Jeremy; she's completely ignoring me.

"Something to eat?" she asks.

I pass on the offer for food while Jeremy asks for a grilled ham and cheese sandwich with a side of French fries.

My phone vibrates and I spot a few text messages from my Assignment Editor, Kelly. She wants to know where I'm at and if I can swing by a potential funeral home scandal. The photographer is already in route.

Pulling up the address for the funeral home, it's a good thirty minutes away from the diner. But I don't know what kind of excuse I can come up with. I shouldn't be in the Hell's Kitchen area right now. Not without a reason.

Ignoring the messages for a moment longer, I look back at Jeremy. His shifty eyes are again canvassing the diner.

"So, Jeremy, why speak up now against Stern Developments?"

"Because I don't want anyone else to go through what I went through." He avoids my stare and glances down at the table.

"The attack?"

"Yeah, and the bullshit scam."

He's really fixated on the scam.

"Technically you didn't get scammed because you didn't sign up with them or give them any money," I say as his eyes do more shifting. "*Right?*"

He nods aggressively. "Right, right. No money."

"Jeremy." I pause until he meets my gaze. "Did you give them money?"

The waitress always shows up at the worst freaking times. She puts his sandwich and fries in front of him as they make more small talk. My phone continues to receive text messages from coworkers.

This interview is going nowhere. This guy has been lying to me since the moment he walked in.

When the waitress walks away, I say, “Thank you for your time. And for telling me all that you did, I appreciate it. If I have further questions, can I call you?”

“Sure.” Jeremy bites into the sandwich as cheese oozes down his fingers. He drops the sandwich and fans his mouth. “Damn, that shit was hot.”

I get up from the table. “If we do cover this story, would you go on record?”

“Like on camera?” he asks as he wipes his cheesy fingers with a napkin.

“Yes.”

Jeremy shakes his head. “Not sure about that.”

Now my Assignment Editor is calling me for the third time. I can’t stand here any longer.

“Okay. Think about it! Thank you again.”

Out on the street, I take a deep breath. What happened in there? That was oddly bizarre even for New York City. He called me about this story, told me lies, barely fed me any information, and doesn’t want to be on camera. Usually everyone wants screen time.

My phone blows up again. For crying out loud.

“Hello,” I answer.

“Where are you?” Kelly asks.

“Sorry,” I delay. I really have no good answer for this. “I was, uh, I was having girl problems. You know ...”

“Ugh, sorry.”

I’m grateful she doesn’t ask further questions.

“It’s okay.” Lying. I’m like Jeremy. I’m developing a bad habit.

Sticking my hand out to hail a taxi, I climb inside when one skids to a stop in front of me.

“Can you get to the funeral home?” Kelly asks.

“On my way!”

“You’re a lifesaver! Thanks for always coming through for us, Emma.”

My heart breaks a little that sweet Kelly thinks highly of me when I’m lying to her. I hang up and tell the driver the address and off we go toward something that sounds creepy.

Who scams dead bodies?

It’s now I have to remind myself this is my circus and these are my monkeys.

MAVERICK

The papers on my desk are piled sky-high. Where is my assistant?

There's a loud knock on my door before Portia struts inside my office. My executive assistant walks with the grace of a ballerina but the hip sway of an experienced seductress.

"Hey, boss." She flicks through her phone at rapid speed. Her long red nails tap dance across the screen. If she wasn't in charge of replying to most of the emails, double-checking my contracts, and reviewing our rent rolls and budgets, I'd be concerned about her excessive phone use. But she's the best of the best. "Did you see the email about the rehab facility?"

"Saw it. Screw those guys. They do shady work and I don't want them bidding on any more of our properties. Find someone else." I move the papers around on my desk. Old school companies haven't caught on that we'd all prefer to be green and paperless.

Portia nods while keeping her brown eyes glued to her phone.

"Did you see the emails from Kate?" she asks, finally looking up. This is a topic she loves to talk about—crazy women disrupting my life. Kate is not the first, but she's the maddest.

I roll my eyes. “All three hundred of them. How can we stop these from coming in? They are wasting our time.”

“The cyber security team blocks her, but she is constantly making new email addresses and redirecting our trackers. She’s eerily on top of her stalking for a hairdresser.” Portia shrugs.

“Enough of this nonsense,” I say, waving my hand around. “Let’s get this day going.”

Standing from my desk, I grab my car keys and some of the papers before heading to the parking lot.

When I can’t scratch the feeling of being followed, I turn around. The parking lot is empty. It pisses me off that I still do this. Look for a woman I barely dated lurking behind trashcans. Honestly, I don’t give a shit what she does to me, but when I found out she was going after my mom, I couldn’t turn a blind eye anymore.

“Wait,” I hear a woman shout.

Fuck this. If I turn around and Kate is running at me, I’m going to karate chop her ... and I’ve never hit a woman before.

I squint at the woman dashing toward me while waving her arms in the air.

Is that ...

“Emma?”



Emma

“Whoa, Karate Kid.” I approach Maverick standing near a car. “No need to use your arms as swords.”

He laughs. Seeing him again, my body stirs at his wickedly delicious smirk. Don't betray me, body; you have a job to do here. I've never let anything get in the way of work before, ever. I'm completely off my game and I don't like it one bit.

"Couldn't get enough of me, huh?" Maverick winks.

"Yeah, you caught me." I hold my hands up.

His phone won't stop vibrating in his hand. Glancing at his screen, I see twenty missed text messages from someone named Portia.

A hot woman he's sleeping with? Another stalker? How many does this guy have?

"Can you give me a minute?" he asks.

I nod. Instead of doing the polite thing and looking away, I can't take my eyes off his screen as he reads through a series of messages. I can't quite see what they say because I should be wearing my glasses.

When Maverick is done, he catches me standing with my hands on my hips glaring. I should be embarrassed, but I'm irritated he checked messages from another woman in front of me.

"Finished?" I ask.

"Finished." Maverick slips his phone back into his pocket. "What's up? Why are you stalking me?"

My face goes as white as a ghost. "I'm *not* stalking you."

He pats my arm. "Relax. I'm kidding."

"Don't make stalker jokes when you have a stalker." How could he say something like that so calmly to me? I saw that restraining order.

"Are you going to tell me why you're at my office?"

I break eye contact with him. He's going to see right through my bullshit. Avoiding eye contact is one of the most obvious signs someone is lying.

“I just wanted to,” I look down at the cement and back at Maverick, “ask you some questions about real estate and I remembered the name of your firm from our conversation on the airplane.”

That wasn't bad. And it wasn't technically a lie.

Maverick cocks an eyebrow. “Okay. What do you want to know?”

My eyes go wide. I didn't think this far ahead. “Oh, um, I was wondering if you could show me some commercial properties.” Where did that thought come from? My mouth continues to spew lies. “I, uh, was thinking you could teach me how to go about all of this. Maybe you offer seminars? Or something.” I shrug.

This is weird, even for me, but he doesn't come out and call me a dirty liar.

“We haven't done seminars in years. We handle the development side of things, but I can personally escort you to a few commercial properties. What do you need one for?”

“I was thinking about opening a,” I search my brain for anything feasible, “yoga studio.”

At that moment, his phone starts ringing, “Hold on, I'm sorry.”

Before I can say anything he answers his phone and steps away, giving me time to think about what I said.

It wasn't a lie that I wanted to open a yoga studio. It's a lifelong dream of mine actually. However, I'm not that great at yoga or at owning a business. I started a lemonade stand as a kid and nearly went bankrupt handing out cups for free because I thought my neighbors looked thirsty.

This yoga studio has always been one of those “in another lifetime” kind of dreams that people talk about. You know, the “when I retire” fantasies.

“Where were we?” Maverick brings me back to reality.

You were lying to me about the last time you had a seminar.

Unless he's the one telling the truth and it has been years since he's done one. Which would make Jeremy and Judith the liars.

My gut tells me ... *everyone here is lying. Including me.*

"I was asking about your most recent seminars and the yoga studio I am considering opening," I say, wringing my hands in tight fists.

Lying as a journalist.

I've hit a new low.

"I said I haven't done a seminar in *years*." Maverick eyes my fists. "And I'm more than happy to look for yoga studios or what we can turn into one."

"Perfect!" I clap my hands together a little too hard.

Maverick hands his phone over to me with his contacts open on the screen. "Give me your number. I'm going to get you in contact with my assistant, Portia, and then we can go from there." He types a thing or two into his phone after I hand it back. "I'd love to stand here and talk to you, but I have to be going now."

"Okay!" Again, I'm too excited to be believable. "Nice talking to you." I begin backing away in the direction of the subway station.

"Wait a second," Maverick calls out. "*Nice talking to you?* This from the woman who literally *ran* away from me twice at the airport? And you so willingly gave me your phone number after turning me down. Something is up with you. I'm going to figure out what it is."

He laughs as I wave awkwardly and walk away as quickly as I can.

Nice talking to you? What an idiot. What was I thinking coming here? If I do get a story out of all this, I will have lied to Maverick. That's against the journalism ethics I stand for.

If I pass the story along, it could be another journalist's big break. Then I could get into trouble. Especially if that journalist is from one of our competing news stations. Judith

assured me I was the only person she sent that news tip to but, even if that's true, it won't be for long. If I don't act on this, she will send the information to someone else and they'll investigate Maverick.

I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't.



Run until you want to puke.

Do jumping jacks until your arms fall off.

Breathe like you're on the track team without your inhaler.

Why am I submitting myself to this torture?

Why did I *pay* to do this?

"Why did you drag me to this ridiculous boot camp class?" I ask Eve, who is standing next to me with a smile on her endorphin high face.

"Because you won't go swimming with me," she says in between doing jumping jacks.

She's right. I hate swimming. Eve adores swimming. In her past life I bet she was the blonde version of the little mermaid. Me, on the other hand? I technically know how to swim, but I'd prefer to never do it. In fact, in middle school when it was a required class I pretended I didn't know how in order to stay safely in the shallow end of the pool. And because my teacher didn't ask anything out of the students who said they didn't know what they were doing.

"You could always come to yoga with me," I say.

"Not a chance." Eve winks. "That is way too slow for me."

She hates yoga as much as I hate swimming. How are we even friends?

“All right, everyone! Great job on getting through the warm-up,” our drill sergeant, who calls himself our instructor, Liam, says.

Leaning over to clench my stomach and take in gasps of air, I nearly pass out. “Did he say *warm-up*?” I look toward my best friend, who is jogging in place. She hasn’t broken a sweat on her perfectly tanned body.

Liam goes on to show the next set of exercises we all need to perform “at our own pace.” I doubt he means that because I’d prefer to take this whole experience nice and slow. Everyone around me looks like they overdosed on their pre-workout.

I tried a sip of Eve’s and now my lips are tingling and my face itches. I don’t think that was a good idea to mix pre-workout with anxiety.

“Have you heard anything from that airport guy?” Eve asks during a transition from a push-up to a squat to jumping in the air—she makes a burpee look like a piece of cake.

I could go for some cake.

Nearly collapsing onto the floor during my push-up, I stand on shaky legs to squat down. “Why, what have you heard?”

Eve does a double take. “I haven’t heard anything.” She jumps into the air effortlessly as if she has springs in her shoes. “But your answer gave it away that you have. Spill it.”

Sweat flicks off my head and lands on the floor to create a lake around me while Eve is still as dry as the desert. “Okay, so, I have a dilemma about the airport guy.” I take in a deep breath before doing a giant jump into the air. Instead of landing like a graceful ballerina, I come down like a clumsy elephant and roll my ankle upon impact. I crash onto the ground in a loud *thump* and nearly everyone turns to look with wide eyes. My ankle hurts immensely, leaving me no time to feel embarrassed for looking like a jackass.

“Oh my God. Emma, are you okay?” Eve kneels down to look at my ankle, which is growing in size by the second.

Liam rushes over with an ice pack. “Can you stand?”

I attempt to get up but practically fall over. Liam scoops me in his giant arms before I can hit the ground and carries me over to a bench near the doors. If I weren't in such a state of pain, I'd be embarrassed by this whole show of masculinity, but right now I really need his help.

“You should keep ice on there for a little while before you stand again. If you need help, let me know.”

“Thank you.”

“You should probably work on your balance. Maybe try some yoga,” Liam says.

“Good idea.”

I don't have it in me to tell him I already do yoga because clearly my balance still sucks.

He returns to the boot camp class as Eve shows up with two chocolate protein shakes.

“Now you have two dilemmas.” She takes a seat on the floor next to my bench. “Tell me about the guy. What's wrong with him? Gay? I know that happened to you once before.”

I laugh, remembering the horrible date she's referring to.

“No, he's not gay. I went by his work earlier this morning.” As embarrassing as it is to admit, I really need to get this off my chest.

Eve sips on her shake. “Say what? This doesn't sound like you. The girl who avoids men is now chasing one.”

“I received an email from a woman telling me Maverick's company was committing fraud and that they beat up her grandson.”

Eve puts the back of her hand on my forehead. “Are you ill?” She stares deeply into my eyes. “I've never heard of a sprained ankle causing hallucinations.”

I push her hand away. “No.” I laugh. “This happened. I interviewed the grandson the other day. Today I went by Maverick's work.”

“You saw him?” Her eyes go wide. “Did you learn anything?”

“Not really.” I shrug.

“Do you think Maverick’s company is really scamming people? And then beating them?”

“Now that I hear you describe it, it does sound strange.”

Eve nods. “It does.”

“But,” I hold my finger up, “strange things make the news every day. That’s the best news.”

Eve nods again. “Also true.”

Chugging the last sip of my protein shake, I hand my cup to Eve, who throws it away while I sit and stew on my dilemmas with a throbbing ankle.

“What should I do?” I ask when she returns.

“First, you should wipe off that chocolate mustache.” Eve points toward my mouth. I swipe my hand across my face. “Then ... I honestly don’t know. What would you do if this story didn’t concern Maverick?”

“I’d keep investigating it until I decided it was either something worth reporting or not.”

“Then that’s what you should do.”

That’s what I was afraid of. After seeing Maverick again I can’t deny my attraction to him. Now what if I uncover something I’d rather not know?

EMMA

Maverick: Found a few properties. Ready to check them out?

There's definitely something I want to check out ...
Maverick's rippling muscles.

No, get your mind out of the gutter, Emma.

Lying to Maverick gives me stomach cramps. I should put an end to this.

Me: My schedule is a little crazy right now.
Maybe we can push the property hunt back? I don't want to waste your time

Maverick: Getting cold feet? You shouldn't put your dream on hold

Even though my dream is a ruse it still stings he called me out on giving up on it.

Maverick: Here are 3 potential places. Meet me at 2pm at the first location

Flipping through my iPhone's calendar, unfortunately, I'm free at two. Why couldn't I have Saturday plans? I shouldn't have turned down my coworker's invitation to bingo at her

church. That would be more fun than setting up a fake property showing with Maverick.

Maybe I won't show ...

Maverick: Don't be late. And don't ghost me.

He can see right through me. Ghosting him was my plan. Whatever. I'll go. And if I'm going to show up, I'm not going to go ugly. I take my extra free time to get ready and arrive at the location a few minutes early.

Why do I care what his impression is of me? I shouldn't. I'm the one investigating him. But as I get out of the Driver I ordered, I admit I do care. I don't want him to think I'm the kind of woman who ditches her dreams. Even though, it's a half ass dream I blurted out on the spot.

"Look who showed up." Maverick looks down at his gold and diamond Rolex watch.

I glance down at mine too. "I'm early!"

He rolls his eyes but doesn't say a word, which makes me uncomfortable. What is he thinking behind that blue gaze?

A voluptuous woman struts out of the street level building we are standing in front of, swinging a set of keys around her index finger. If she didn't have blonde hair, I'd do a double take this wasn't a twenty-something Sofia Vergara. Holy shit. She's hot. "Ready?"

Maverick looks at the blonde goddess and back at me. "Ready?" he repeats.

No introductions, I see.

Before we walk toward the empty building, I stick my hand out toward the goddess, I mean, woman. "Emma, nice to meet you."

She stares at my hand for a brief second then sticks hers back out to mine. "Portia, the pleasure is mine."

The assistant.

“It’s a former dance studio.” She points to what was once a lobby.

The purple paint is fading from the walls, the carpet has seen better days, and the mirrors are streaked with fingerprints. A twinge of regret touches my heart for the dancers who learned to tap their tiny feet in what is now an abandoned building.

“What happened to the studio?” I ask.

Portia shoots a look at Maverick. He nods. “It went under.”

That’s all they are going to say? Why did she need his nod of approval to answer me? My journalistic senses tingle. There could possibly be a story with this company. My question isn’t crazy. I researched a list of things to ask your agent before purchasing a commercial building and that was one of them.

Not quite sure what I’m looking for, I explore every corner of this building anyway. If I’m going to pretend to want to buy this place, I might as well look around. Right? Maverick points out a few electrical issues and makes note of water damage on the ceiling. He isn’t sold on the property. I wonder if he’s going to try to sell it to me anyway.

Portia hands me a checklist with her remarks on the building. Five out of ten. I don’t want a building, so I shouldn’t be disappointed that this one sucks.

Portia pats my arm. “Cheer up. There are plenty of more properties! Or we’ll develop one from scratch for you.” Her phone buzzes for the millionth time in the last hour. “Looks like I’ve got to go. My boss is a real workhorse.” She winks and then leaves Maverick and me alone.

“Are you planning to partner with anyone for this venture?” Maverick asks. His question echoes around the deserted lobby.

Awkwardly, I fiddle with my hair. “Um, I haven’t really thought it through.”

We both know I’m bluffing, but why hasn’t he come right out and called me on it yet?

“Renting a commercial building in New York City could cost twenty grand a month or more. You might want to think a little harder.”

“Twenty thousand dollars”—I nearly vomit—“a *month*?” If this dream were a reality, it was shot down very quickly. “There’s no way I can afford something like that.”

Maverick puts a hand into his pocket. He looks relaxed despite my breakfast moving up my stomach.

“I’ll partner with you.”

I grip the dusty front desk on the verge of nearly passing out. “What did you say?”

He laughs. “You heard me. I’ll partner with you.”

“Just like that? I’m an unqualified candidate. I have never owned a business and outside of doing yoga a few times a week that’s about all I know on the subject.”

“You really know how to sell yourself.”

Maverick nods toward the door as we walk over together. He turns off the lights and locks up behind us.

“I don’t want you to make a bad decision,” I mumble. It’s the truth ... he shouldn’t bet on me. Outside of my career, I never follow through on anything. One conversation with my grandmother and Maverick would know that too. She won’t let me live it down—I’ve quit ballet and piano lessons, being tutored in French, every friendship I have I let slip through the cracks except for Eve, but I’ve tried to ditch her before. She always comes back.

“Don’t worry about my decisions,” Maverick says.

Without realizing it, we walk side by side down the busy streets toward I don’t really know what direction we are headed. But I don’t question him. I simply follow.

“Because you always make the best ones?” I ask.

He laughs. “Most certainly.”

Now I’m the one laughing. “I don’t believe that for one second.” I skirt around a hot dog stand on a street corner and

nearly step into oncoming traffic. Maverick pulls me back on the curb without batting an eyelash. I collide into his chest. My heart is racing, but he doesn't say a word about what happened. Not even to make fun of my stupidity, which is something I surely would have done if the roles were reversed. "Thanks," I mutter, pushing myself off his bulging biceps.

"Don't mention it."

As the sign for pedestrians to walk lights up, we stride across the street. I dodge around people without my normal surefooted confidence. What is happening to me? I'm the reporter who chases after crooks and scoundrels. And today I can't walk on my own two feet in flats.

"Okay, back to what we were talking about, what's one of your most recent bad decisions?" I ask.

He should say taking me on as a client. A fake client.

When we are safely on the other side of the street, Maverick says, "I invested a great deal of money in a tech startup that plummeted."

"How much is a great deal of money?" As soon as the question leaves my lips, I know it's crossing a line. As a casual acquaintance I should not be bold enough to intrude in his finances like this. "You don't have to answer that."

Maverick smirks and casually brushes his arm against mine as we walk. "Normally I'm a closed book, but you've shared important details about your life with me, so I can do the same. I lost nearly five million dollars."

"Whoa."

Five. Million. Dollars.

This is the second time I've almost puked today. I can't manage to slip anything higher than a twenty into a slot machine and this guy is gambling on startups with five million dollars.

What else does he gamble on? Or throw money at? That's when I remember why I am parading through the city with him right now—to investigate.

“Here we are—location number two,” Maverick says.

We are standing outside of a high-rise in Manhattan. One I know would break my imaginary business bank account.

“Okay, let’s be real. I can’t afford to own a yoga studio. And I am definitely not taking your money. We should cancel the showings until further notice.”

Maverick shakes his head. “No way. If you can’t afford this *now*,” he gestures toward the lavish digs, “you should give it a test drive to know what to visualize when you’re ready to set this goal.” He tugs my arm. “Let’s have fun.”



Maverick stands closely next to me as we walk room to room throughout the vacant space. We are the only two in the building and I’m hyperaware of his presence, and the scent of his clean, yet masculine, cologne. He smells divine.

“I know it’s a former high-end boutique, but walking through it, can you picture your yoga studio?” Maverick asks.

Yes, I could most certainly picture my yoga studio.

My yoga studio?

What in the world is my brain doing?

This is all a fantasy.

Including the fantasy of walking besides Maverick acting as if *we* would buy it together. Partners.

“You could use the dressing rooms already in place for your students to change. And then add a shelf of cubbies for their coats and shoes.” Maverick points to a wall next to the dressing rooms, which are roped off by red velvet curtains.

“Yes!” Rubbing my hand along the cold brick wall, I can’t help the giddiness oozing out of me. Spinning around, I say,

“And here, where the register was, could be the check-in desk, I’d probably set up a tablet for people to check in online.” I nod, really just thinking out loud.

“That sounds like a good plan.” Maverick smirks.

“Crap.” I look down at the ground. “I don’t know why I’m doing this. It’s not fun.” I shrug. “It’s disheartening.”

Maverick puts his arm around my shoulders and gives me a little squeeze. I pretend like that doesn’t send ripples down my body. “Don’t think of it like that. Open your mind to the possibilities. If you are down on yourself, you’ll only attract more negative things.”

Moving out of his grasp before my body overheats, I playfully shove his arm. “Okay, now you’re starting to sound like some self-help guru. Are you going to ask me to join some real estate cult next?” I laugh. “Do you have Kool-Aid?”

He laughs. “We drink coffee. Lots of it.”

“I could go for a coffee.”

Maverick grabs my hand. “Then let’s go.”

“Wait!” I come to an abrupt stop before we reach the stairs. “Don’t you have other work to be doing? Other clients to show around?”

The notifications from two hundred missed text messages on his phone screen have glared at me a few times throughout the day.

“I have hundreds of thousands of clients.” He takes a few steps down and then turns to look back at me standing on the ledge. “I want to have coffee with you.”

A ridiculously cheesy grin erupts across my face I manage to shut down quickly. “Fine.”

When we leave the building, he turns in a direction taking us out of the city.

“Starbucks is over there.” I point behind us.

Maverick shakes his head as a piece of dark hair falls into his blue eyes. It was perfectly styled this afternoon, but all this

walking around in the wind has loosened the tight hold. He brushes it back onto his head.

“We aren’t going to a chain. Trust me.”

Trust. Something I haven’t given a man since Dylan. It’s not something I plan to give again. It’s much too dangerous. What if I trust again and something terrible happens? Then what? Then I go through pure hell all over again. No. I’ve worked hard on myself throughout these years. I don’t want to lose all of that to have to start the cycle over. And not right now, with a guy I should be investigating for fraud and violence.

“Emma?” Maverick asks.

“Um, yes.” I’ve been standing on the sidewalk staring blankly. His hand is reaching out to me. How long has it been there?

“Relax. It’s only coffee.” Maverick laughs, lightening the somber mood I created between us. “Can you trust me to find us a good place to drink coffee?”

Well, that doesn’t sound so scary.

Hesitantly, I slip my hand into his. “This better be good coffee.”

Walking a few more blocks, Maverick doesn’t let go of my hand. Mine is clammy, but I don’t pull it away. He stands closest to the street and effortlessly guides us through traffic.

“Here we go.” He points to an easy to miss wooden door on a street I’ve never been to before.

“We are going to a bar? I thought you said coffee. I really don’t want to drink.”

“Calm down. Jackie’s has the best coffee, believe me.”

I notice he didn’t say the word *trust* again.

Simply shrugging, I follow him inside the dimly lit bar. It’s hard to place this kind of establishment—it’s not high-end, hip or dive.

Maverick finally lets go of my hand when we take our seats at a small, round table right in the middle of the place.

“Something to drink?” a waitress asks as she sits down two glasses of water. It’s the middle of the day and there aren’t too many patrons here, but she scans the room as if there were.

“Two cappuccinos,” Maverick says.

“You got it, bud.” And with that she turns around and leaves.

I don’t see a cappuccino maker at the bar.

“How did you find this place?” It doesn’t feel like the kind of business Maverick would frequent.

“One of my clients brought me here. I made the same face you’re making right now.” He laughs. “But I found myself coming back often.”

Knowing I am not the only one skeptical, I relax into my seat.

“So what kind of stories are you working on now?” Maverick asks.

A cold sweat breaks out across my body. “Why?” A squeak only a mouse should make comes out of my mouth.

Maverick scrunches his eyebrows. “Making polite conversation.”

Relax, Emma. He’s allowed to ask about your job.

“I worked on a story about a funeral home scam the other day. Outside of that, I’m picking up stories day by day. No major investigations outside of the political scandal I told you about on the plane. And there’s no new developments on it.”

I lie, I lie, I lie.

“Who scams a funeral home?”

“The funeral home was scamming its clients. Saying they would cremate bodies, taking the money for it, and then not doing it.”

“Shit.” Maverick scrunches his face. “That’s disgusting. How do you do this job day in and day out?”

The waitress comes to break up this morbid conversation with two cappuccinos in big white mugs. She also sets down a small plate of almond biscotti and walks away. There’s a leaf made out of foam on the top of my drink. It’s almost too pretty to ruin, but Maverick picks up his mug and holds it out toward mine. “Cheers!”

I gently click mine against his. “Cheers!” Then I nearly die from taking a sip of the most perfect cup of coffee. “What’s in this?”

“Honey, cinnamon, coconut milk,” Maverick says.

“That’s what comes in a regular cappuccino?”

“No.” Maverick shakes his head. “That’s what comes in a Maverick cappuccino. I’m a regular and Denise knows what to bring.”

My jaw drops. I knew he came here before, but I didn’t expect him to be on a first name basis. “I guess you do know where to find the best cup of coffee.”

“Glad you trusted me?” Maverick cocks an eyebrow.

Rolling my eyes, I ignore answering him.

Putting my drink down to give myself a moment to savor the flavor, I ask, “So what are *you* currently working on? You said you don’t do seminars, but does your company host events?”

“What’s with you and these seminars? Should I host one so you can attend?” He laughs.

“Just fascinated by real estate.” I shrug and look down at my coffee.

He takes a long, slow sip from his cup. When I lift my eyes to meet his, he answers, “It’s been years since we’ve done any kind of seminars. I’m not interested in teaching. But ... we do frequently attend networking events and fairs, to answer your repetitive question.”

“We as in ... ?” I grab a cookie off the plate.

“My staff. It’s rare I attend functions personally, but it’s good to get my team out there, meeting new people.”

“When was the last time someone from your company went to one?”

I know my questions are now creepy, but I can’t help but get to the bottom of this so I can put it all to bed.

You’d like to put something else to bed.

Maverick scratches his chin. “Probably last month. I’d have to ask each of them individually because they don’t often report in to me about it.”

“Anyone ever meet someone ... sketchy ... at one of these things?”

Maverick’s face takes on a different look.

Is he on to me? For goodness’ sake, I’m paranoid. Too much caffeine.

“You’ll have to ask my agents. I personally have never come across anyone *sketchy*.”

Before I can open my mouth to spew more lame questions, a man walks over to our table.

“Maverick!”

“Clark!” Maverick stands as Clark pulls him into a one-armed bromance embrace.

Maverick has his arm around Clark’s shoulder as he turns toward me. “Emma, this is Clark, the client who introduced me to this fine establishment.”

“You don’t like Jackie’s?” Clark smirks.

“Want to join us?” Maverick pulls a chair over from another table.

“Only for a moment. I’m waiting for Juliette.” Clark sits down. The small table suddenly feels much smaller. “How’d you two meet?”

Denise slips a whiskey in front of Clark without a second glance. Everyone is a regular here.

When I realize Maverick isn't going to answer his client, I say, "We met on an airplane. He stole my seat."

Clark lets out a boisterous howl. "Sounds like Maverick."

"Does he steal things often?" I ask.

"Usually all the attention in the room." Clark slowly sips his drink.

"He's a ladies man?" I raise my eyebrows at Maverick, who smiles at the both of us.

"I can't spill his secrets." Clark holds up his hands. Both of these men are extremely handsome; I'd guess Clark gets as much attention.

"How do you two know each other?" I ask.

Maverick chimes in. "We met at a charity function and then I helped him with a few properties and investments."

"Best development firm in the country." Clark nods in Maverick's direction.

"Are you two going to kiss already or ... what?" A very pregnant woman nearly knocks into Clark with her belly as she pulls another chair to our table. "Hi, I'm Juliette, Clark's ball and chain." She sticks her hand out toward me.

Clark mumbles something about balls under his breath, which makes Juliette blush and roll her eyes.

"Emma, nice to meet you."

Denise puts a glass of water in front of Juliette. Plus, she loads our cookie plate with more baked goods.

"How'd you two end up at Jackie's?" Juliette rests her hands on top of her belly.

"We wanted a killer cup of coffee," Maverick says.

"Let me put this all together. We came here for coffee. But you," I point to Maverick, "came here because of Clark's

recommendation.” I point to Clark. “How did you two find out about this place?”

Clark eyes Juliette and she smirks. The vibe between the two of them is completely comfortable and relaxed. I’d guess they’ve known each other for years.

Juliette takes the lead on answering. “I came here for a first date.”

“With Clark?” Maverick and I ask in unison. We eye each other and laugh that we are on the edge of our seats.

“*Not* with me,” Clark says before finishing the rest of his drink. “However, I was the highlight of that night.”

Juliette laughs as her belly bobs up and down. “It’s true, he was. I accidentally sat down at Clark’s table because I thought he was my date.”

I’ve been on some ridiculous dates myself, but I have never mistaken my date for someone else.

“So did your date not show and you started dating Clark?” Maverick asks.

“Not how it happened,” Clark says.

Juliette fiddles with the water glass. “The date *did* show up. He was not anything like Clark. I left the bar without getting Clark’s information and never planned to see him again.” She smiles over at her husband. “But we kept running into each other everywhere.”

“She couldn’t get me off her mind.” Clark laughs.

“You’re right, *honey bunny*.” Juliette pats his hand. “How long have you two been dating?”

My coffee nearly dribbles out of my mouth as I choke on it. I just gave myself a third degree burn to my esophagus.

Maverick hands me a napkin. “Don’t make it sound so enticing to date me.”

Clark and Juliette eye each other and then look back at us.

“I always assumed Maverick would be hard to date,” Clark says matter-of-factly.

This time I’m the one who laughs. “I assume that about him too.”

“Wait a minute.” Maverick holds his hand to his chest as if in shock. “I am a delight.”

Juliette, Clark, and I all bust out laughing while Maverick sits there with a sour look on his face.

“To be clear, we aren’t dating.” I finish off my coffee. “Maverick and I met on an airplane and now he’s helping me look at properties.” My phone buzzes and I see my News Director calling. I stand from our table. “I’m sorry. I need to take this. It’s work.”

Walking to an empty corner of the bar, I answer.

“Blackstone,” Jennifer says. “I know it’s your night off, but can you come in? We have a breaking news situation and all my reporters are out on other stories.”

“Yes,” I say without missing a beat. “Send me the information.”

“I’ll text it right over. Thanks for always being a team player,” Jennifer says before texting me the first reports and an address.

Even though I’m enjoying this time with my new friends, I secretly wanted an excuse to leave. Maybe my silent pleas for help were heard. Certain situations, especially ones around couples, cause my anxiety to flare up. It’s not nearly as bad in recent years, but after losing Dylan, I saw how the world is set up to favor those who come in pairs.

“I’m sorry to do this, but I was called into work.” I approach the small table. I slip on my coat and grab my clutch. “It was nice meeting you both,” I say toward Clark and Juliette. “And thank you for all you did for me today,” I say to Maverick.

They wish me goodbye and as I’m leaving Maverick joins me. His hand lands on my lower back as he guides me toward

the door. His simple touch sets me on fire. If it lingers much longer, it'll cloud my judgment.

“I had fun with you today,” he says.

“I had fun too.”

Moving slightly closer to the door, he drops his hand off my back and I regain my confidence.

“Ready to go on a date with me yet?” Maverick asks.

“No.” I laugh. My phone vibrates and we both look down at it. “It’s my boss. I should be going.”

I run out of Jackie’s and dash into the nearest cab on the way to the scene—a massive fire is torching a million-dollar mansion outside the city.

Fires, crimes, scandal—this I can handle.

Relationships, men, flirting—not a chance.



Maverick

If that girl runs out on me one more time ... I don’t know what I’m going to do.

Well, nothing because chasing her would be weird.

Why do I care? I’ve never had a woman run away from me before. In fact, I attract stage five clingers I can’t get off me.

But Emma ... she’s fascinating.

I need to know why she’s lying about this yoga studio. I didn’t mind spending my day frolicking around with her, but I’d rather she get to the point of what she’s looking for.

Money?

Can't be.

Emma has a grand idea for this yoga studio, but she has no funding. However, she lost her mind when I offered to partner with her. She pointed out reasons I *shouldn't* give her money. Usually, people are beating down my door because they want some.

Unless that's her power play?

Lead me to believe she couldn't possibly want money to trick me in the end?

Looks like I'll need to investigate the investigator.

The tables have turned, Miss Emma Blackstone.

EMMA

Eve slides into the powder blue Louis XIV chair across from me at the new saloon inspired bar around the corner from the station.

“This place is way cooler than the dive bar by Riverside Academy.” Eve is the school psychologist at Riverside, a preppy prestigious high school academy.

“I hear this place is haunted.” I look around the dark, quiet upscale restaurant. The old paintings on the wall are eerie, but they don’t scream ghouls. “See any ghosts?”

Eve turns her head to look for spirits. This is why we are friends; she humors all my musings. “I don’t think so, but don’t look now. That guy over here,” she nods slightly to the right, “looks like a vampire.”

“Like a hot vampire ... or a gross one?”

Before Eve can answer, our waiter comes to our table to get our drink orders. When he leaves, Eve asks, “Did you see the way he was looking at you?”

“Oh please, don’t start with all that.”

Eve tells me every man within a five-mile radius wants to have sex with me. It’s adorable she wants to help me, but she’s clueless that I want nothing to do with dating. However, I can’t

blame her because I go on stupid dates to throw her, and everyone else, off the trail.

“Actually, if you look to your left ... there’s a *woman* who’s been staring at you since we sat down.”

“I’m a catch to everyone.” I laugh. “And you know people recognize me from television.”

Doing the opposite of what Eve wants, I sneak a peek at the man and woman checking me out. But I’m not as casual as I’d hope. Locking eyes with the man staring at me as he’s mid-bite is extremely awkward and I look away quickly.

“What woman?” I ask, not seeing anyone in sight.

“She’s leaving now.” Eve points to the back of a blonde woman’s head who’s walking out of the restaurant. “Her eyes were glued to you. Oh well. Any updates on Plane Boy? Is he really a murderous thief?”

My eyes bulge out. “Keep your voice down.” If anyone else hears, they could ruin my investigation.

“Oh, come on, you can’t believe any of this.” Eve fiddles with the leather-bound menu.

The waiter sets our cocktails down, giving me time to consider Eve’s theory that Maverick is not a scammer.

“Let’s change the subject from Plane Boy.” I take a sip of my vodka tonic.

“I have an idea!” Eve claps. “Will you do something for me?”

She’s never asked anything of me in this way before. In fact, we are always there for each other without having to ask. Now I’m scared and curious.

“Maybe?”

“I’ll accept that.” Eve pushes her menu to the side of the table. “Will you go see a, uh, I don’t really know what to call her, uh, matchmaker for me?”

That’s not what I was expecting. Outside of teasing me, Eve’s never tried to set me up with anyone. I always assumed

on a deeper level she was using her therapist powers to read between the lines of my depressed life. She was around during the Dylan years but she's dropped the subject, like everyone else, assuming I got over it.

Over him.

"How do you know a matchmaker?"

She looks down at her hands, picking at the gel French manicure polish. "I kind of went to her before."

My eyes bulge out. My sweet, innocent Eve was set up?

"For James?"

"Kind of." Eve shrugs.

"What do you mean *kind of*? You met James at my Halloween party. You weren't setup. This sounds fishy."

"Judgment free zone?" she asks. We use that line before we say something truly weird.

I nod. "Judgment free zone."

"She's not really a matchmaker, per se. She's my coworker's aunt and she helps you get in touch with the higher powers to ask about your love life."

In all my years knowing Eve, I never thought she'd utter a sentence like that. Part of me wants to laugh because that's the most ludicrous thing I've ever heard and part of me wants to quiz her further.

"And you did this? You spoke to the *higher powers*?" I try not to mock her but it's nearly impossible.

Eve sits straighter. She's a former debutante through and through. "Yes."

"And she told you to marry James?"

"No."

"Then what did she tell you?"

"She didn't tell me anything. I, sort of, asked for guidance. She pointed me in the direction of it."

Ask for guidance.

I could really use some guidance right about now—on many topics. From what to do about this investigation, to what to do about the burning feeling in my nether regions when I'm around Maverick, and what to do about the hole in my heart from Dylan.

“How much did this cost?”

“No.” Eve holds up her finger. “You will not be investigating Aunt Edie. She is not a scam artist. And she didn't charge anything.”

“She helped you for free?” Nothing is free in this world. Everything comes with a price, whether you want to believe that or not.

“You really need to get over your phobia that there aren't people in the world willing to help you. Trust more, jeez.”

Now I'm the one who holds up her finger. “Wait a damn minute. Don't you turn that therapy around on me.” I put my finger back down as to not look deranged. “I do understand there are wonderful people in this world. Once in a while, I get to go out on 'feel good' stories for the station. The other day we did a story about a youth group tying scarves around light poles for homeless people who might be cold.”

Eve pauses for a moment too long. “Emma, I know you don't see the world negatively. You do understand there are kind people, I just don't think you understand they can be kind *to you*.”

Well, shit.

“Judgment free zone?” I ask after she gives me time to reflect on the bomb she dropped.

“Always.” She nods. “Judgment free zone.”

“Damn you for being right.” I laugh.

She laughs too as the waiter comes back with our dinner plates.

The rest of the evening is much lighter. I don't feel as if I need to send her some kind of payment for the therapy session she gave me. I'm happy when I attempted to push Eve away in college, she came barreling her way back into my life.

When I make it back to my condo, I'm disappointed we didn't see any ghosts. I settle into the couch with my laptop and a cup of herbal green tea when my phone vibrates.

Eve: In case you change your mind about asking for guidance. ;)

She's attached the name and phone number to a contact she has saved in her phone as Aunt Edie. Who is this mystery woman? What kind of aunt is she? This sounds nothing like my "by the rule book" Enneagram One friend Eve. I'm the friend more likely to do something outlandish. Crystals, ghosts, talking to dead people, saying affirmations in the mirror ... I'm not against any of it. I'll try anything ... once.

But Eve? Not a chance.

Why am I suddenly drawn to calling this cryptic number?

It has to be because I'm a journalist.

Yeah, that's it.

I'm looking for my next potential story. But it can't be a story if she's not charging people. Unless! She secretly lures in desperate women looking for love, promises them some magic, doesn't charge them but instead hypnotizes them into being her minions.

What in the actual fuck is wrong with me?

Sniffing my own tea, I double-check that I didn't unknowingly spike it with some vodka.

My phone vibrates yet again after I didn't reply back to Eve.

Maverick: I get it. You don't want to go on a date with me. You don't trust me ... yet. How about one evening out ... as friends?

Evening out? Friends?

I reread the message a hundred times as if it's going to suddenly say something different.

This night is getting stranger by the minute.

Before I can reply to Maverick, I drift off to sleep on the couch, hunched over my laptop, like I've done many, many times.

Alone.



Maverick

Sending that text message was a stupid idea.

When did I become this softhearted man-child?

I'm not a "feelings" kind of guy. Not in the slightest.

It's been years since I've tried to win over a woman. They flock to me.

Yet here I am sending corny text messages basically pleading a woman who has said "no" time and time again.

She didn't reply.

What in the actual fuck is wrong with her?

My phone vibrates. My stomach drops and I boil over in disappointed anger.

Unknown #: Why are you fighting this? We could be magical! xo K

Is this how I'm coming across to Emma? Like Kate comes across to me?

My mistake. I won't text her again.
Either of them.

EMMA

In the newsroom, I'm working in the editing bay piecing together a very choppy segment on kindergarteners given puppies as a surprise during recess.

Why did they assign me this soft and fluffy story?

I cover murders, scandals, destruction—and that's the way I like it.

Puppies? Don't get me wrong, I *love* puppies, just not when it comes to hard-hitting news. No one is going to take me seriously.

This will end my career.

You can't win an Emmy covering puppies.

Walking out of the editing bay, there's no sign of life anywhere. It's eerily quiet in an environment usually louder than life.

Everyone went home. Already? Looking down at my watch, I see it's well after midnight. But the morning show team should be here. Newsrooms are never empty. Writers and producers working the overnight shift should be writing, editing, and producing our three top-ranked morning shows right this minute.

Something is off.

Walking back into the editing bay, I stumble back in fright.

“Maverick! What are you doing?”

He’s sitting in my editor’s chair, looking over the computer. My feel good piece for tomorrow’s show is on the screen. “This is your work?”

“Yes, I mean, no, well, it’s my piece, but I normally cover other stories.”

Maverick nods.

Suddenly, he’s out of the chair and has me pushed against the door. His arms enclose around my face as the front of his body presses into mine.

He’s one solid block of muscle.

“I want you,” he whispers.

“Good God, this is the hottest thing that’s ever happened to me,” I mumble as I melt into a puddle on the floor.

Okay, I don’t literally melt because that would be odd. Why is my brain narrating like I’m inside a romance novel?

“I know you want me too.” Maverick brushes a piece of hair out of my face and ever so slowly brings his lips close to mine.

As I pucker my own to meet his juicy ones ... an alarm clock goes off, bringing me back to my cold, harsh reality.

I jolt from the couch. My body sweat through my blanket. Goodness, do I have a fever?

I have never ... and I mean never ... had a sex dream before.

Another harsh reality hits me. I want to have sex with Maverick.

My body hasn’t desired a man since Dylan.

I’m screwed.

Well, again, not literally. Unfortunately.



“Did you have sex?” Phoebe asks as I FaceTime with her and Mom.

“What?” I nearly drop my phone. “No, of course not.”

“She’s never having sex again, remember?” Mom looks at Phoebe when she mocks me playfully. I’ve never spoken it out loud to anyone—except for Maverick on the plane—I know Mom and Phoebe are aware I sabotage my dates.

“I don’t understand why she doesn’t want to have sex,” Phoebe says to Mom. “It’s healthy for a woman her age to want to get out there and use her—”

“Hello!” I wave the hand not holding my phone at the screen before she can finish that sentence. “Didn’t you two call to speak to me?”

At this point they are both looking at each other and completely ignoring me.

Taking a nice, long sip of my tea, I wait for them to stop talking about me right in front of my face.

“Sorry, Em,” Phoebe says.

The three of us FaceTime every Sunday while we eat breakfast. It’s been a tradition since I went away to college and we haven’t stopped. In the first few years, they saw me pretty much hungover from sorority house parties, then with Dylan, and then alone in my empty condo.

“So if you didn’t have sex, why are you glowing? Your face is completely flushed,” Mom says.

“What’s with the third degree?” I exclaim.

It’s only been a few hours since I woke up from my dream about Maverick and outside of the initial reaction of pure

shock, I do agree with them, I've been extra perky. There's a pep in my freakin' step.

"Something's up." Phoebe cocks her eyebrow.

These two have telepathic radar on me. They always have. As much as I love them, it freaks me out. They never had to read my diary growing up because they knew what I'd write, probably before I wrote it. Or thought it. Or lived it.

"We called to tell you something important," Mom says.

Her serious face causes my stomach to drop. "Is everyone okay?"

"Yes, Em, jeez." Phoebe turns to Mom. "You could have said that in a lighter tone."

"Sorry." Mom shoves a bite of a waffle in her mouth.

"Are you stalling?" What could possibly be so bad Mom is shoveling food in her mouth at a high rate of speed? It has to be dreadful. "Oh, please don't tell me this has something to do with Grandma."

They both scrunch their faces.

If my stomach wasn't already in knots from thinking my mother had cancer one minute ago, it would surely be screwed up now.

"She's coming to New York for a few days." Phoebe stuffs a piece of bread into her mouth.

Before I can protest, my mom speaks up, "She's staying at her New York penthouse, but she wants to go to dinner with you."

"When?" This time they both shove food into their mouths. "You've got to be kidding me."

"She's already here," Mom says.

"Your dinner is tomorrow night." Phoebe can't make eye contact with me.

No warning. These two dirty rats did this on purpose. Dad is not off the hook either. He called them to deliver the bad

news because he gets extremely uncomfortable when I'm upset.

"Send me the details." It's all I can say and it's not their fault they were forced to be the bearers of bad news.

I could never stay mad at them for long. I love my moms.

Mom claps her hands and smiles. I'm sure she's happy I'm not crying.

"Okay, I'll send you a text with the restaurant name and time."

"Now we'll leave you to go back to ... whatever it was you were doing." Phoebe winks.

"Stop. You two are the worst!" I laugh as we hang up.

Dinner tomorrow with Grandma. I need to rummage through my closet and find whatever lame yet conservative outfit I left in there that does not spark joy. I kept those for events with Grandma.

I can't wait to hear what part of my life is disappointing her now.

EMMA

The waiter rolls his eyes as he turns from our table and walks back to the kitchen with Grandmother's filet mignon ... for the third time. Doesn't she realize at this point that thing is going to come back with someone's spit in it? Or worse.

I nearly gag thinking about it while I delicately take a microscopic bite out of my scallops. I've already been reprimanded for "eating like a cow" tonight. I know better than to do it again. She doesn't say the word *cow* with her mouth; her whole elderly body gets involved. Everyone in the restaurant knew I was repulsing my dearest grandmother.

She steepled her fingers in front of her in a power pose. "Emma, we need to talk about what you are doing with your life."

"Okay ..." I dare to dart a glance at Dad. He has been no help tonight. "What about my life?"

"What's your purpose?" she asks.

That's the kind of question my moms would ask me, not my stick-up-her-ass grandmother.

"Uh..."

"Once we get to the bottom of your purpose, we will also need to work on your poor vocabulary."

“What would you like to know about her purpose?” Dad finally speaks up. He’s a momma’s boy, that’s for sure, yet I’m his daughter and he loves me too. It’s an awkward dynamic when the three of us are alone together.

“With Ted gone, I want to leave my legacy to you and your father,” Grandma says.

“What about Marvin?” Dad asks. Uncle Marvin is Mark’s father and my dad’s other brother.

“Marvin is *already* a multi-millionaire. He doesn’t need it and he knows I plan to do this for you.”

“Well ... that’s extremely kind of you.” Dad smiles.

“But!” Grandma pauses dramatically as she points her index finger high into the air. “As things currently stand with Emma, I will leave you both ... nothing.”

“What?” Dad and I shout in a shocked unison.

“Not a dime.” She drives her point home.

I don’t want anything to do with “her legacy.” Sounds like a lot of hoops to jump through. But its obvious Dad does by the way he smiled at the news of his inheritance.

“What do you need me to do?” I ask hesitantly. I can’t believe I’m asking her to rip me apart limb from limb. I’m ordering a drink tonight when the waiter comes back with the new steak, soaked in spit I’m sure.

She folds her hands. “Get married.”

“What?” Again, from both Dad and me.

“You can’t ask her to do something like that. Can’t you see she’s already trying? She goes on these ridiculous dates out of pure desperation!” he shouts.

Everyone in the restaurant looks at us.

When the word *desperation* leaves his lips, none other than Maverick shows up at our table.

Great. What’s he doing here?

“Emma, nice to see you,” Maverick says. From the mischievous look in his glistening blue eyes, he heard what Dad shouted.

Pure desperation.

But he’s in on the truth ... I’m not looking to date.

“You too, Maverick,” I say, wishing he’d disappear.

“Introduce your friend, Emma,” my grandmother commands with a nod.

Before I can speak, Maverick sticks out his hand and introduces himself.

“How do you two know each other?” Dad asks.

I side-eye glare at him. He’s in on this interrogation now too? I expect it out of Grandma but not from him. Dad, like Mom and Phoebe, has always been my ally.

“This is my, uh, my ...” I draw a blank.

What is Maverick to me?

The dude who sat next to me on a plane twice.

My fake realtor.

The man I never texted back after he asked me out as friends.

The man I had a sex dream about.

Memories of last night’s dream suddenly cloud my brain and I’m practically drooling while I mumble the word “my” over and over again like a stumbling idiot.

“Friend,” Maverick chimes in. “I’m Maverick Stern. Nice to meet you both.”

Grandma eyes him up and down. When she’s had enough of taking in all of his handsome features, she turns her attention back on me. “Well ... ?”

“Well ... what?”

“Aren’t you going to ask Maverick to sit with us?” Grandma commands.

Absolutely not. The memory from my dream of him pushing me against that door while I could feel his massive, rock hard ...

Did they turn the heat up in here?

“Emma?” Dad brings me back to reality.

“I’m sorry. What?” My cheeks are surely on fire.

“Thank you for asking, Ruby, but I can’t join you tonight.” Maverick nods in the direction of another table. “I’m here for work.”

Grandma, Dad, and I turn our heads to see a brunette in a skintight red dress with the biggest, plumpest lips you’ve ever seen matched with the biggest, plumpest breasts nearly spilling out of that dress. A centimeter lower and her nipples would be exposed.

Work, huh? She looks like she’s on a date. She’s ready to put in some work ... on her back.

“Well then, good night.” Grandma dismisses him after she sees the woman he’s with. And, at this moment, I couldn’t be happier that this ill-mannered lady is my grandmother.

When Ruby Blackstone dismisses you, be gone.

Maverick eyes me but I remain silent. Instead, I shrug.

Go back to your lady in red.

The smirk that takes over his face is hard to miss. Maverick says goodbye and it takes everything in me not to turn around and see how he is engaging with that woman.

The waiter makes his way back to our table with my grandmother’s new steak. After she’s done cutting into it to be sure it’s cooked to perfection, she dismisses the waiter, like she did with Maverick.

Then she returns to laying into me. “Back to the matter at hand. You need to get married. *You*, as a single woman, will not be inheriting anything. And if you aren’t inheriting what I leave behind, your father won’t either. Package deal.”

Can she do that?

I guess, it's her money and she can put whatever kind of stipulations on her trust she wants.

Would she really punish my father for my life choices?

"Mother, this is a ridiculous thing to ask of Emma. She has her life in order, she's bright, has a good career, does volunteer work. I mean, that's the best thing a parent could ask of their child," Dad says, which nearly brings me to tears.

I've never been the "daddy's little princess" kind of daughter. My parents are extremely kind to me, especially because I'm an only child, but they don't baby me. Not even after the loss of Dylan. They never told me to "suck it up," but they never coddled me.

Grandma slowly chews her filet mignon. "No." She properly puts her fork down. "My decision is made."

"Mother, you can't be serious?" Dad hasn't touched his sirloin since this conversation started. To tell the truth, his face looks a little green. My father is not poor, by any means, but I guess he's also not rich. Why does this matter so much to him?

Is there something about his financial situation I should know?

"Have you known me to joke?"

That's the comment that shuts us both down. No, we've never known her to joke. I'm not sure I've heard her laugh.

"She'll see what she can do," Dad says.

Am I in the Twilight Zone?

What does "she'll see what she can do" mean? I don't go on dates and now Dad is telling her I'll get married to get an inheritance.

How much are we talking? It better be *millions* for Dad to throw me under the bus. He must need it more than I imagined.

"I'll see what I can do," I say quietly.

Why am I uttering this bullshit now? Who is in charge of the words coming out of my mouth?

“And that *boy*”—Grandmother nods toward Maverick —“he is trouble. He’s up to something. I can see it in his eyes. He has shady eyes.”

My stomach drops.

The kind of shady eyes capable of hiring a hit man to beat up a guy who accuses him of scamming other people?

That’s still my mission to find out!

Let’s add another mission to the list: find a husband.



Maverick: Your grandmother is a real piece of work

His text message arrives shortly after I flop down in my bed after the life-changing dinner from hell.

The evening ended with Grandma sending back the crème brûlée twice. Apparently, there was too much crème and not enough brûlée, or some ridiculous nonsense like that.

Followed by her pushing the check to my dad to pay. Dad didn’t mind, whatsoever. I find it ironic after she let him know we’d be cut out of her trust if I didn’t land a man suitable to marry. We might need all of the money we currently have to get by.

After Dylan’s crash, I never wanted to marry again. It’s too painful. My dad, bless his heart, reminded Grandma I was engaged prior. She dismissed the subject. There was no wedding, it doesn’t count to her.

Her decision stands ... if I don’t get married, no money for Dad.

Me: She’d say the same about you

Maverick: What did I do?

Me: I think it was your choice in “work” companion that turned her off

Maverick: Turned her off ... or you? Someone’s jealous

Me: My grandmother doesn’t do jealousy

Maverick: I wasn’t talking about your grandmother ...

I toss my phone on my nightstand and slip my satin eye mask on. I’ve had enough with everyone’s nonsense for tonight. Especially Maverick’s. Me ... jealous? He’s out of his mind.

Closing my eyes, I plead with my brain to let me dream about something nice and sweet ... like cute bunnies hopping through a meadow.

But my brain does not comply. At 3:00 a.m. I jolt up, covered in sweat, with an ache in my pussy from a second sex dream about Maverick.

This time we were going at it in the restaurant’s bathroom. He pushed my dress to the side and ...

Oh forget it. There’s no point in reliving that.

Thinking about the restaurant only reminds me of what happened.

Am I really supposed to get married?

To who?



Maverick

My phone has one hundred unread text messages and I keep checking it, hoping a certain someone writes back.

“Boss man,” Portia greets me as she enters my office. We both work too many late nights. “Here are the documents you need to double-check and sign.” She places a giant stack of papers on my desk. “And this also came for you.” On top of the papers she places a red brick with a note tied around it with a rubber band.

“What the fuck?”

Portia shrugs her slender shoulders. “I was tempted to take off the note, but I figured you should do the honors. My money is on Kate.”

This feels weird, even for Kate.

I slowly remove the rubber band and the note. When I flip it over, it reads:

*You've screwed over enough people.
Prepare to meet your fucking match,
Maverick.*

Not Kate's style. She's intense but not threatening.

Handing the note over to Portia, she reads it and has the same puzzled look on her face. “Who did you piss off?”

“Apparently, some angry second grader by the looks of the penmanship.”

Portia laughs. “Should we investigate?”

Turning the brick over in my hand a few times, I don't have time for these games. “See if you can figure anything out.

Besides Kate, I don't know where to look.”

When Portia leaves my office, I look back at my phone.

Emma: I need your help

Well, well, well. The tables have turned.

I wonder what this is about.

EMMA

I'm going to kill Eve.

I don't need a best friend.

Do I?

What good is she to me?

Right now ... she's not at all. Eve sent a text message to Maverick last night while we were out to dinner. I never saw her take my phone, which is my most prized possession. I must have been really drunk. I was, actually. Eve took me out after I told her about the marriage predicament my grandmother cornered me into.

Maverick instantly texted back with a creepy, "Your wish is my command."

I can't believe she did that.

Shouldn't she realize how this could damage someone's mental health?

"What are you working on today, Emma?" Kreepy Karl struts into my office.

"Whatever I'm assigned at the morning meeting."

Karl slides a chair close to mine.

“Are you ill?” He sticks his hand close to my forehead as if to check for a fever.

“What are you doing?” I swat his hand away. “I’m not ill. What are you talking about?”

“Are you still upset about your dead relative?”

Turning my attention back to my computer screen, maybe if I ignore him, he’ll leave. “Where is this conversation going?”

“You aren’t on top of your game anymore, Emma. Since you came back from your trip it’s like you lost your spark.”

My heart sinks. No one has ever said anything like that to me before about work.

That’s because I’m always on top of my game.

Until ... now. I have been caught up in this ridiculous story about Maverick’s company that I haven’t been actively seeking out new stories to cover. I usually have multiple stories going at once and they are always the juiciest scandals.

“You don’t look good,” Karl says.

Now I’m sweating. Maybe I am sick?

No, you are slipping.

I turn off my computer, push my chair back, and dash out of my office into the nearest bathroom.

Facing my reflection in the mirror, I take in my eyes. They look their normal green. Everything looks normal on the outside, but everything is crumbling with anxiety on the inside.

My phone beeps, which I assume is my alert about the morning meeting, but instead I find a text.

Maverick: we meeting up or not?

Me: yes

I send him the location of a diner and the time I’ll be there.

Maverick confirms.

I'm going to get to the bottom of this ridiculous scam. I'm going to put it all out on the table and see what he says. Then I can move ahead with my career.



“You would pick a restaurant where the servers sing while they deliver food.” Maverick sits down across from me in our red booth. I bet a billionaire does not frequent places like this. What’s his normal dining experience like?

I don’t have time to contemplate his lavish lifestyle.

Instead, I launch into what I want to know. “Have you ever hit anyone?”

Maverick’s face normally has a relaxed expression like a California surfer with not a care in the world, but right now, he’s stoic. “Yes.”

Before I can ask a follow-up question, a waitress shimmies toward us wearing a 1950s bellhop outfit. She pulls a pen from behind her ear. “Howdy! What can I get you two to drink? A musical milkshake?” She tilts her head.

Before I say no because that’s a childish thing to do while out with another grown-up, Maverick says, “Yes, we’ll take two vanilla shakes.”

She sings the word “perfect” as she roller skates away from our booth.

I don’t say anything about the milkshakes because I secretly wanted one. Instead, I jump right back into giving Maverick the third degree.

“Who did you beat up?”

Maverick folds his hands on top of the table. “Mike Miles.”

That's all he's going to give to me? Fiddling with my napkin, my nerves are getting me all out of sorts. I've interviewed murderers, crooks, and crying parents grieving the loss of their children, but Maverick is freaking me out.

"What did Mike Miles do to you?"

"Stole my girlfriend."

The waitress slides over to our table with our shakes. She places them in front of us with the biggest smile I've ever seen. I can see every one of her pearly white teeth.

"How about some food?" She pushes her fake plastic glasses down on her nose and pulls out a pad to write down our orders.

I haven't had a chance to look at the menu.

"We'll take an order of the mac n' cheese bites, potato pancakes, steak quesadilla, and spinach salad." Maverick hands his menu toward her.

I love ordering a bunch of appetizers as my meal. He does too?

"Perfect!" Again, she sings as she glides away.

Right back to the interrogation I go. "Why did he steal your girlfriend?"

"Because he was a jerk." Maverick takes a long sip from his milkshake and my eyes narrow in on his full lips around the green straw. "We were in tenth grade and it was right before a big dance. Homecoming or some shit. I found out he fingered her in the locker room and I was pissed. I broke up with her and I punched Mike right in his freckled face."

"You let a guy with freckles steal your girl?"

This gets a laugh out of him.

I use this time to take a sip of my own milkshake. The vanilla is creamy and rich as it slides down my throat. Which reminds me about something else that did that in my dream last night. My face heats up from the luscious memory.

"Why are you asking me these questions?"

I dab my mouth with my napkin. “I’m figuring out if you are a bad guy or not.”

Again, stoic. “Ask me whatever you want.”

“Have you ever stolen from anyone?”

“Yes. I stole a pair of Nikes from a store. That was also in high school. Probably around the time I hit Mike. It was on a dare.”

All of these high school stories are cute, but they aren’t cutting it for my investigation.

“What about something more recent?”

Maverick narrows his eyes. “No. I haven’t stolen anything recently. Unless your heart counts.” Then he winks.

This gets a laugh and an eye roll out of me. “Oh, please. You are a cheese ball. My heart still belongs to me.”

His jaw drops. “I’m insulted. But I will give you credit. No one has ever called me a *cheese ball* before.”

“What about asshole? Anyone ever call you that?”

His jaw perks back up to his rightful place and he laughs. “Yes, I’ve heard that before.”

“So you’ve never been in trouble with the law?”

“What kind of guy do you think I am?” Maverick asks. “Wait. You told me to come here because *you* need some help ... and now you want to know if I know how to break the law. Are *you* in trouble?”

I’m trying to solve a case.

I shrug. “Answer the question.”

“No, no trouble with *the law*.” He laughs as if I am ridiculous to ask him that. “Can you say the same? Are you on the straight and narrow?”

“Yes, I mean, no. I mean, yes, I can say the same that no, I have not been in trouble with the law. Or anyone.”

Our singing waitress interrupts my ramble with a tray full of our many plates. When she’s done spreading them out on

the table between us, Maverick grabs a mac n' cheese bite and pops the entire thing into his mouth.

He closes his eyes and moans. He actually moans at our table ... in public. I blush. I am extremely uncomfortable with public displays of affection or displaying any kind of pleasure in public. It wasn't loud enough for anyone else to hear, but I'm assuming Maverick couldn't give two shits if they did.

Before my cheeks get any redder, he picks up a second bite and leans across the table toward my mouth.

"You have to try this," Maverick says when the fried ball is nearly touching my closed lips.

No man has ever fed me.

Is this normal behavior?

Normal or not, it's been a long time since I've done anything of the sorts.

Maverick eyes me as if silently asking me if I'm going to leave him hanging there.

Am I?

No. Ugh. Opening my lips just enough, I take a bite of the most delicious thing I've ever tasted. But unlike Maverick, I didn't shove the whole piece in my mouth and now hot cheese is sliding down Maverick's hand and my chin.

He takes his clean hand and wipes the cheese oozing down my face. I fight the urge to pull my head back—not because I'm uncomfortable but because I've never had someone touch my face like this.

You can't remember the last time Dylan touched your face?

Maverick's hands are now on his side of the table. And I'm over here having a panic attack about losing the memories of my dead fiancé.

It's as if I suddenly can't remember anything:

What did he smell like?

What did his voice sound like?

His laugh?

How did his hands feel on me?

What was his favorite food?

“What just happened?” Maverick asks.

My palms cradle my head while I close my eyes.

Five ... Four ... Three ... Two ... One.

“Nothing.” I pull my shoulders back and take on my reporter body language. Regal, emotionless, all business. “Sorry about that.”

Grabbing a piece of steak quesadilla, I take a bite and pretend everything is okay while Maverick stares. He can see through my facade and it irritates me. Most people cannot read me.

“I’m not accepting that. What happened? Tell the truth.”

Fiddling with the quesadilla now falling apart in my hand, I look up to meet his soft eyes. “I’m forgetting Dylan. Our memories, the basic everyday stuff is slipping from my mind.”

Maverick doesn’t say anything. Instead, he reaches across the table and takes my hand. Not the one with the death grip on my crumbled food.

He doesn’t say I shouldn’t feel bad.

Or that this is what happens.

Or that it’s all part of the grieving process.

Or shame me about being hung up on a relationship that happened years ago.

None of that stereotypical garbage I’ve heard before, time and time again. Usually people tell me how I am supposed to feel—whether that’s my parents, friends, coworkers, therapist, teachers, yada yada yada. It comes from a place of love and that’s why I don’t ever correct anyone.

However, sitting here with Maverick, not being told what I said was stupid relieves the ache in my heart. It’s not gone,

probably never will be. But it's not as overwhelming as it felt minutes ago.

"Thank you," I whisper. Hoping it's loud enough for Maverick to hear across the table.

He nods as the waitress approaches. She notices our handholding, but she misses our somber faces.

"Well, aren't you two the cutest couple!" She sings that too.

Before I can mutter something about us not being a couple, Maverick thanks her and pulls his hand back. Mine suddenly is empty and cold.

"Can I get you two anything else?" our waitress asks.

"Dessert?" Maverick asks.

"I'm stuffed." I wave my hands in defeat.

"All set then," Maverick says.

The waitress slips the bill onto our table and winks at me before leaving.

What was that about?

Maverick puts his card into the billfold and argues with me when I offer to pay for half.

"Do I get to ask you some questions now?" Maverick asks.

"What do you want to know?"

"What was your grandma talking about the other night? Everyone in the restaurant could feel the tension at your table."

I choke on my milkshake. "Family drama."

I roll my eyes at the memory of that awkward dinner. What am I going to do if she takes away the inheritance from Dad? Mom informed me he spent the majority of his savings on her mortgage. And he drained his retirement fund for my college education. He's practically broke. Apparently, he was counting on this money one day.

Looks like the pressure is on me.

“Anything I can do to help?” Maverick asks.

“You can marry me,” I joke halfheartedly.

“Okay.”

“What?” It’s more of a shout than a question.

“I accept your proposal,” he says.

My eyes blink about two million times while my brain blanks out.

Marry Maverick?

That sounds like an awful idea.

But is it? I’d change Dad’s life.

I didn’t plan to get married ever again because I already lost my one true love. But if this marriage wasn’t for love and, instead, it was to help my dad ... that would be different, right?

Right?

I explain my grandmother’s crazy demands to Maverick and expect him to say how ridiculous it all sounds and to take back his offer to marry me.

Instead, he shocks me. “So when do we have to do this?”

Can I do this? Have a fake marriage to allow my dad to finally retire? He did put me through college. I was lucky to graduate without student loans. I didn’t know he spent his money banking on an inheritance. There’s no way I could pay him back if I wanted to. And all the years he paid my mom’s mortgage. She doesn’t have extra money for him either. Dad is amazing. It’s not his fault his mother is an asshole who hates me.

The words leave my lips before my brain can come up with a way to shut it down.

“In a few months?”



“You’re getting married?” Mom shouts through the screen on FaceTime as she puts her toasted bagel down. She misses the plate and it lands on the floor.

“To who?” Phoebe hands Mom half of her own perfectly good bagel. “We didn’t know you were dating.”

“Do you think it’s that Jason fellow from her work?” Mom asks. “He really likes her.”

Again they are doing that thing where they look at each other and completely ignore, but discuss, me.

“You know it’s not an actual wedding? Just to get Grandma to shut up.”

I’m comfortable telling my moms this, but I plan to keep the rest of the world in the dark, including Dad.

Rushing around the condo cleaning up, I’m hosting a spa themed girls’ night this evening with Eve and it needs to look spectacular. I’m known as the “Hostess with the Mostess” among my friends because I always throw lavish parties. It started as a way to distract myself after Dylan’s death. Friends and family would see me at a big party, but they wouldn’t notice I’d slip away into solitude. Kept people off my back. Eve met her soon-to-be husband, James, at one of my epic Halloween bashes.

“This isn’t a good idea. I don’t like it,” Mom says.

“I don’t think I have any other choice.”

“Emma, that’s not—” Phoebe says before I hold up my hand.

“I don’t want Dad to work to the bone for the rest of his life because he has no retirement or savings. I don’t want this to be on my head. That’s it. End of discussion.”

Mom and Phoebe sit silently. With them currently at a loss for words, I mop the kitchen.

“What about if you fall in love and want to be married *for real?*” Mom asks.

I shake my head in frustration. “I’m not going to fall in love with Maverick.” I huff.

“I wasn’t talking about Maverick.” There’s a long pause on the other end of the phone. I look up from the floor I’ve been aggressively pushing my mop back and forth on to see if they have been disconnected. No, they are still there.

“What?” I shout from across the room.

“You *like* him!” Phoebe shouts.

“No, I don’t.” I accidentally drop my mop onto the ground and it causes a loud crash into the bucket of water that knocks over and spills onto my floor. “Damn.”

Grabbing a handful of towels, I work on cleaning up the mess.

“Oh man, she’s got it bad for Mavey,” Mom teases.

“No, I don’t!” Not bothering to look up at them from the ground. “And don’t call him Mavey.”

“You like your soon-to-be fake husband.”

I don’t know which one said that because they both sound identical now, spewing this nonsense.

“Enough!” I yell.

I’m sick and tired of explaining myself to everyone. They laugh and let me get off the phone to finish cleaning. I need to get myself ready as well. Eve is going to lose her mind when she finds out she’s not going to be the only bride.



Eve nearly spills her detox water all over my tan living room carpet. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“I’m getting married,” I whisper for the second time, pouring myself a glass of lemon water.

“Speak up! We can’t hear from the back,” Aaliyah, my coworker, teases.

Trying to light the millionth floating candle to set the ambience of gentleness, I throw the lighter on the table when it won’t start.

“Married!” I scream loud enough for people down the block to hear.

“To who?” Eve’s eyes scan my face. She’s determining if I’ve gone insane. Can a psychologist do that simply from a look?

I bet a best friend can.

“Maverick.”

Eve is stunned silent.

“Who is Maverick?” Aaliyah asks.

“A guy she’s investigating for fraud,” Eve mocks.

My heart stops. I haven’t told anyone about this at the station and I don’t want Aaliyah telling our News Director. Luckily, she works in Human Resources and does not meddle in the newsroom drama.

I realize I let this detail slip from my memory the minute Maverick pitched the idea we get married. I could very well be marrying a criminal.

“Fraud?” Aaliyah looks to me. “What’s the deal, Emma? This doesn’t sound like you.”

“Don’t listen to Eve, she’s making a *poor* joke,” I say, shooting Eve a look.

Handing the women hot towels for their hands, a knock at the door interrupts the firing squad from ripping me apart. The

massage therapist waltzes in and I'm thankful for her. I need a stranger in the room so these women leave me alone.

"Hey, everyone, this is Anita." I introduce her to the rest of the ladies.

Anita sets up the massage bed in one of my bedrooms and Aaliyah is the first to go in for her massage, which leaves me trapped with Eve.

Going into the kitchen to get our cucumber sandwiches, I stall. I don't want to go back out there. I don't know how to explain myself because it's all screwed up. I was honest with Mom and Phoebe, but I'm not sure it's smart to run around telling everyone I'm getting myself involved in a fake marriage. I haven't had a conversation with Maverick about that yet. Did he want to tell people it's fake?

For the hundredth time, I move one of the vases holding red roses.

"How many times you going to do that?" Eve walks into the kitchen.

I take a seat on a bar stool and slump forward with my elbows on the marble island. "One more?" I reach out to move the roses again, but Eve pushes them out of my reach.

"So what the fuck is going on?"

My jaw drops. "Did you just swear?"

My best friend is a classy woman. I can't remember the last time I heard a foul word slip from her poised lips. Me, on the other hand, I'll let choice words fly when they are needed. It's part of working in a newsroom. The F-word is in every other sentence and you don't even think of it as bad. It's another word at this point, but not when it comes from Eve's mouth.

"Answer me."

"Fine. My grandmother won't give my dad his inheritance if I don't get married. I have no time to find a husband, but Maverick offered. So ... I accepted. I don't want my dad to have nothing."

Eve fiddles with the massive engagement ring on her finger.

Will Maverick get me a ring? Are you allowed to have rings for fake marriages? No, that would be silly. Would it?

“Can you get a divorce when she dies?”

Never thought about that. “I guess I could. I’d need to check her trust with a fine-tooth comb to make sure.”

Does Maverick know what he’s really getting himself into? Grabbing my phone off the counter, I shoot him a “we need to talk” text message. With my phone still in my hand, I find the “Chill Out” playlist I created for tonight. I’m not close to chill.

“Have you thought about going to the woman I told you about?” Eve asks while opening a face mask. She slops the goopy mask onto her already flawless skin and then hands me a package.

“Did you miss the part where I said I have a husband lined up and I don’t have much time?” I sass.

She needs to lay off this matchmaker nonsense.

Eve purses her lips, which looks ridiculous with the gold mask on. “You could go and ask for guidance about the situation.”

Again with this guidance.

“Who is this lady?” My fingers run over my face to push the wet paper down.

“You do all kinds of weird things already.” She eyes me as if giving me the opportunity to question her true statement. “I told you that you couldn’t research her, but if that’s the only way you’ll go ... fine. Think of it like an assignment for work.”

The tables have turned. And she’s never going to give this up.

“Fine. I’ll go.”

Eve squeals and claps her hands. As she tries to smile, her face mask cracks, which makes her laugh. And then I laugh,

which hurts my face because of my own tight mask.

I laugh hard enough for tears to slip from my eyes but get caught on the mask, which burns my skin.

“We need to get these things off now!” I run to the sink with my face on fire.

And my heart. It’s burning too.



Maverick

The four words you never want to hear from a woman ... we need to talk.

I didn’t realize she could pull a “we need to talk” in a fake relationship. *Fake* is her word when she agreed to marry me. I haven’t told anyone about this agreement yet, but I doubt anyone will question me. I jump into opportunities whenever I can.

Well, except for relationships. That’s where I draw the line.

I’ve never wanted to be married.

That’s why this isn’t a big deal. It wasn’t something I was going to do in the first place, but if I am I might as well do it to help someone out. Like a civic duty?

My brain is insanely curious what we’d need to talk about already. Emma hasn’t replied to my text and it’s been hours.

She can’t possibly want to ask me for a prenuptial agreement because she made it clear she doesn’t have much.

Should I ask her for one?

Certainly.

I’m worth billions.

But Emma doesn't strike me as greedy. She's put this agreement together to get someone else's money.

What could it be?

I have a few choice questions for her too.

Well, just one.

Do I get to fuck my wife?

EMMA

Pulling up in front of a yellow house in an otherwise dull looking subdivision outside of the city is the first sign I should turn around.

Eve really came here? This is wild. Eve stays within her safe bubble of the Upper East Side ... but this ... *this* is weird. And I do odd things for a living. I once hopped a fence in high heels to question a cop about a body lying in the middle of a vacant lot. Right now ... that seems normal.

Spa night was when I texted the infamous Aunt Edie, as I was advised to call her. Eve told me I wasn't allowed to go another day without coming here. Her threat was real.

Ringling the doorbell, I stand back and wait. While contemplating if I really am going to go through with this, the door swings open and a familiar face greets me.

"Emma Blackstone?" the pregnant woman asks, looking equally surprised.

"Yes." I point, still trying to place her name. "And you're ... ?"

"Juliette Chambers." She pushes the door open.

"Yes! Maverick's friend." I can't believe I forgot the pregnant woman I recently met at a bar. That's not a sight you see every day. "What are you doing here?"

“Aunt Edie is my aunt.”

“Isn’t she everyone’s?” I laugh. This is all too much.

“No.” Juliette chuckles. “She’s my *actual* aunt. My mother’s sister.”

“Then you must know my best friend ... Eve?”

“Yes! Eve is my coworker at Riverside Academy.”

Full circle. We are all connected.

Juliette guides me into a living room and points to the sofa. Now that I’m thinking through all of this, Juliette must have been the one to start this whole *thing* with her aunt. I say *thing* because I still have no idea what I’m about to do. Before I can ask further questions, a real life fairy with flowing silver hair practically floats into the room with her emerald green skirt swishing around her ankles.

“Hello, dear, you must be Emma. I’m Aunt Edie.” Her voice is sweet. Too sweet.

“Nice to meet you.” As I stick out my hand to shake hers, she instead pulls me into an embrace. Before she lets go, she gives my body an extra tight squeeze.

“I should leave you two alone,” Juliette says as she makes two attempts to lift herself from a chair she’s sunken down into.

“Wait!” I hold my hand up. “Stay.”

Moral support doesn’t sound bad. I don’t know anything about Juliette, but if she’s a friend of Eve’s, she’ll do.

“Are you sure?” Juliette cocks her head to the side.

“Positive.”

Juliette flops back down into the seat and shrugs.

“Oh, goodie! A threesome.” Aunt Edie claps.

My eyes widen as I slowly sit down opposite the two of them. My butt sinks right in. This must be Aunt Edie’s favorite seat.

“Can you tell me what it is you do?” My journalist instinct kicks in. I need to focus on the task at hand. My original mission was to find out if this woman is a con artist.

I’d hate to expose someone related to Juliette, though.

“I don’t *do* anything, dear.” Aunt Edie smiles. “It’s all your own doing.”

My scam artist radar is on high alert. Flicking my gaze over to Juliette, I find her staring at her aunt adoringly. Is she buying this nonsense?

“Okay ... so ...” I pause to contemplate my next question without offending her. That’s when I see a brochure on her table. Stern Development Firm. “Do you know these people?” I point to the pamphlet.

“Oh yes!” Edie scoops up the brochure. “I know Maverick through Juliette and Clark. He helped me find a commercial location recently.”

“For your ... *services*?”

I hold back from saying ... for your mysterious sorcery.

“Yes. I’m done doing accounting out of my front den. I need a designated place for it,” Edie says.

“Accounting?”

Did I hear her right?

“Yes, I’m an accountant, dearie.”

“You’re an accountant and a ... ?” I don’t know what else to call her. “Matchmaker?”

Aunt Edie and Juliette both laugh.

“Oh my gosh. I think I’m peeing.” Juliette laughs uncontrollably. I can visibly see her belly moving around.

She heads to what I hope is the bathroom to check on her urine situation. I’ve had enough pregnant friends to know that babies do a number on your bladder.

I’ll never know because I won’t have a baby of my own.

I'll be in fake marriage and couldn't bring a baby into that bizarre situation. Who would be the father? I'm not having sex with Maverick. Only in my dreams. Sex would complicate the agreement.

"I'm not a matchmaker." Aunt Edie brings me out of my spiraling thoughts. "I don't know what the girls have told you, but I can't guarantee anything. You seem nervous and a bit high-strung."

Nervous—check.

High-strung—check.

That is exactly how I would describe myself. Not normally, but between my grandmother's demands of a marriage and Maverick's offering ... I'm in a limbo of conflicting emotions.

"So ... then what exactly takes place here?"

So far, she can't be considered a scammer after saying the magic words ... I can't guarantee anything. Plus, she's asking for no money. But I'm still not sold on what's about to go down.

"With the other girls, I had them pick a crystal and ask the Universe for a sign about their love lives."

"And?"

"That's it!" Aunt Edie walks over to a cabinet. Coming back toward me, she dumps the contents from a purple velvet pouch onto the marble cocktail table.

Crystals.

Being in the world of yoga, I have seen crystals before. Many studios have crystals for sale in their lobbies. Now that she's explained asking for a sign, I have heard of doing that as well, but I'm still a skeptic.

Evidence.

Proof.

Facts.

That's what I thrive on. Concrete details.

"My situation is a little more complex than some rocks dumped out onto a table." My hands fly up to cover my mouth. "I am extremely sorry. That was incredibly rude. I can't believe I said that."

Aunt Edie picks up one of the crystals. "No offense taken, chickie. I do get a feeling your situation is more complicated than the others."

Well, crap. I wasn't expecting her to confirm my suspicions.

I fidget in the seat. "Why do you think I'm different?"

Being different from Eve and Juliette is not what I wanted. I was secretly hoping she'd tell me my feelings weren't true.

Aunt Edie looks from the purple crystal in her hand back to me. "Your heart chakra is closed. There's a steel gate forcing everyone to stand back—imagine piercing spears and thick chains. Very unwelcoming, dear. No one is going to approach you and if they do, they are at the risk of being stabbed."

"Well, that sounds ... lovely." Years ago, I took an educational course on chakras, energy, and Hindu yogic philosophies. My instructor was a magnificent Indian woman named Sarita. She taught us we have seven chakras in our bodies and they all have to do with energy. I can't guarantee Edie is going to believe the same principles—as they are often changed in the West—but I'll hear her out. "How do I open a closed chakra?"

Edie squints. "Do you want to, truly?"

Without knowing how to answer, I stare at her in silence.

Do I want to?

"I don't know."

She nods a few times. "You've been through pain." It's a statement, she's not asking me. And, again, she's correct. I nod. "And you're afraid. You have an inability to give or receive love."

No one has ever said anything as blunt to me before.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Even though you said you don’t know if you want to open your blocked heart, I believe you do.”

Relief courses through my nerves. Hearing her say that, though untrue, brings me a little hope.

Hope for what?

For the sad girl who closed herself off from love. I made a choice to shut my heart off after Dylan’s death. I never knew I would let all these years pass and never open it back up. Can you flick a switch and turn a closed heart back on?

But that leaves me exposed, vulnerable, and weak. I am not in the business to feel weak ever again. That was the worst time of my life. And now I’ve learned how to live without the love of a significant other. I don’t want to get close to anyone. Why am I entertaining the notion of it?

I stand abruptly.

Edie watches but doesn’t say a word. Instead, Juliette waddles into the room. It’s hard not to stare at her giant belly, but the scent of warm chocolate makes its way to my growling stomach. She has a chocolate chip cookie in one hand and a plate full of them in the other.

“Did you finish? That was quick.” Juliette holds the plate in my direction. “Don’t worry, these ones aren’t laced with drugs.” She laughs as she thrusts the plate closer. “Not this time anyway. Poor Eve.”

Staring awkwardly at the cookies, I slowly take one and sit back down.

Why am I sitting down?

Get up, Emma.

Juliette lowers herself to the chair and again sinks in. She laughs. Her heart chakra has to be open. Both times I’ve seen her, she’s beaming happiness. She has the kind of energy that welcomes you in. Not kills you with spears.

“So ... what’s your sign?” Juliette takes a bite of cookie. “Unless that’s too personal. You don’t need to tell me.”

“We haven’t gotten there yet,” Edie chimes in. “Emma wants to leave.”

Juliette’s face falls. “Oh. Are you sure? It could be ... fun.”

I let out a sigh of ... frustration? No, that’s not right. Defeat?

If I don’t go through with the experience, I won’t collect all the data I need to prove this is foolish. Right? And if I don’t go through with it, Eve will be disappointed. She’ll never let me live it down. In the entirety of our friendship, this is the only thing she’s repeatedly asked me to do.

“Fine. Let’s get this over with.”

Edie nods. “If I knew more about when your heart closed, I could help you with some steps to open it.”

Now she pushes cookies toward me. I prefer salty over sweet, but I never turn down anything homemade. I’m going to let the odd drug comment go. They seem harmless. And the very pregnant Juliette seems to be eating them.

“You don’t have to share if it’s personal,” Juliette adds again.

For the second time in a month, I am going to speak about something I have spent years avoiding. Keeping it locked inside—where I like it.

Why has meeting Maverick made this come spilling out of me?

What’s the point of talking about it?

No one wants to hear your sob stories. No one wants to watch you cry. No one knows what to say when you drop a depressing bomb.

Even the most social extroverts clam up when I mention Dylan’s death. Shutting down the conversation was the only

thing that made people stop staring at me with pity, dread or suddenly flee.

Juliette and Edie remain silent as I decide whether I am going to share why my ridiculous chakra is closed.

“When I was in college, I was engaged.” Inhaling a deep breath, I close my eyes before slowly pushing the air out through my mouth. Looking at my bare ring finger, I remember the simple solitaire diamond I used to wear. It’s now tucked away in a memory box. “Dylan was my first love, my first kiss, my first ... everything. I couldn’t wait to be his wife. I truly felt I was put on this earth for that. We were the couple that would make everyone nauseous because of how cute we were.”

I laugh thinking about the girls in my sorority constantly teasing me for all the times Dylan climbed up the fire escape to get into my room.

“He sounds lovely,” Aunt Edie says.

I nod. “He was.”

Was.

Years later and talking about him in the past tense still makes my chest heavy.

“The wedding was planned. I kept making jokes about how my second marriage I would elope because it was too stressful.” I look down at my hands in my lap. “That was a stupid joke looking back.”

“I think it’s pretty funny.” Juliette smiles and brushes cookie crumbs off her belly into her napkin. “Weddings are awful to plan. Eve is pulling her hair out.”

Eve is going to need to give herself a therapy session when this is all over. Weddings will do that to you. I don’t ever want to do that again. Yet, here I am. Fake engaged.

“The day I had my final dress fitting, I was over the moon excited. It came in early—two months before the big day. I planned a dinner in my tiny apartment on campus for the two of us that night.”

More fidgeting. I've never shared this part of the story with anyone. These tiny details.

"I was taking the honey glazed salmon out of the oven when my cell phone rang. It rang again and again when I was busy cooking. On the third call, I rushed over to see who was blowing me up. Normally, I don't answer unknown numbers, but something inside of me said pick it up."

Slowing my breathing down, I fight back tears.

Don't cry.

Eddie rushes to the kitchen, and emerges carrying a tray with a pitcher of water and three glasses. She also pushes a box of tissue toward me.

I take the much-needed moment to collect my scattered thoughts. Taking the glass, I chug the water at rapid speed and fill it again to down another.

"If you don't want to finish, you don't have to." Juliette's normally bright eyes look like they could shed tears. A reflection of what mine must look like.

Oh great. I'm depressing everyone ... again.

"You should finish the story," Eddie encourages.

Juliette turns to look at her in shock.

"You're right," I say. As much as I hate that. This random accountant, who doubles as a matchmaker, getting me to spill my guts in front of a table of gemstones irritates me. "It was a stranger's voice. A young woman. Her voice was high-pitched and shrill. She said she was calling the last number on the phone. She wanted to tell me Dylan was in an ambulance. He was hit by a car on the way to my apartment."

Juliette covers her mouth.

"By the time I made it to the hospital, Dylan's parents were notified. We were all standing in the emergency waiting room. Time stood still until someone came out and told us ... Dylan was dead. Killed by someone at the hospital ... still alive."

“Oh, Emma. This is the most cliché thing to say, but I am sorry for your loss.” Juliette slowly gets up from her seat to engulf me in a hug.

Edie is next in line for a hug. “Sharing your story with us was brave.”

“My chakra unblocked yet?” I laugh.

Edie laughs without answering me. We both know it’s not that easy.

“There are some things you could work on that might *possibly* help you. Meditate, mantras, therapy, and my personal favorite,” she does the weird eyebrow wiggle thing again, “orgasms.”

“What?” I shout. I don’t remember that lesson in my workshop.

“Oh chickie, from that reaction I’d confirm my guess that it’s been awhile.”

My jaw drops.

Juliette giggles but doesn’t add to the insults.

“You need to get laid.” Edie does some kind of perverted hand motion.

Cue the jaw dropping for the second time.

I should be offended she’s telling me to have sex right after I told her about my dead fiancé but I’m not. Her offhanded remarks break up the depressing thoughts on the verge of controlling my brain.

“What would getting laid solve? Men only bring complications.” I laugh. I can’t believe I am asking this crazy old lady about sex.

Edie does a little shimmy in her chair. “Orgasms move stagnant energy and help you reconnect with your body. Ground you while grinding you.”

“I don’t really know about all of this ...” My stomach does somersaults at the thought of grinding on Maverick’s hot body.

“Chickie, you deserve an orgasm.” But, then she drops another bomb on me. “Sadly, your third eye is blocked too.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“What does that mean?” Juliette asks.

Eddie and I both point to the spot on our foreheads between our eyes.

“You think you are a bad judge of character,” Eddie says.

I shake my head. “Impossible. That’s one of my best attributes. I read people all day for work.” I’m awkwardly tapping my forehead and immediately pull my hand away from my face.

“Reading people is different from *knowing* if someone is good for you or not. The third eye is the wisdom and intuition. You don’t trust others, but you equally do not trust yourself.” Eddie doesn’t seem to sugar coat my flaws.

Standing up from the couch, I pace around the coffee table. Who is this woman? Yoda? I didn’t come to have my mind fucked with. I already have enough insecurities without her adding to the list.

You don’t trust others.

You equally do not trust yourself.

Fine. She’s right. When I’ve nearly put in ten thousand steps lapping the table, I stop. Standing still in the middle of the room, I look at the two women staring at me with wide eyes.

“I don’t want to talk about me anymore.” I return to my seat. Put this third eye bullshit to rest while I get this over with. “Let me do this crystal thing so Eve doesn’t scold me.” I wave my hands over the rocks.

Juliette smirks.

Eddie nods then gets straight to business. “You’re going to pick the crystal you are most drawn to and then you’ll admit to the Universe what you are having a problem with, ask for a

sign about what you want to know, and surrender to the answer.”

“How’d you learn the crystal thing?” I ask.

“Woodstock.” She was a real hippie!

“Fine.” I pick the crystal closest to me.

“Wait!” Juliette waves her hands in the air before making her first attempt to get out of the chair. Then her second. Finally, she’s up on her third. “You should do this part by yourself. It should feel intimate.”

Fighting the urge to roll my eyes, I simply nod.

The wacky duo leaves me alone with the purple rock glistening from my open palm. Closing my fingers around it, I squeeze. Lying down on her couch, I stare at the ceiling and think about putting “my problem” into words, but nothing comes to mind.

Instead, my chest tightens as I shiver.

Fighting off my anxiety responses, I get up from the couch and return to my laps around the coffee table, crystal still clenched in hand.

What’s my problem?

Having too many problems to count?

Get this over with, Emma.

Fine.

My problem is ... I have to marry a man who could potentially be a scammer because my rotten grandmother wants to strip my kindhearted father from his rightful inheritance. I don’t want my dad to be broke as a joke especially after he gave me and my moms great lives.

My problem is ... my heart is closed. From the minute I told Maverick about Dylan, I knew there was something I felt differently for him. He creates some kind of stirring ... I can’t believe I said “stirring” ... inside of my chest. And it’s not acid reflux. I like Maverick. There I said it.

So ... what do I do?

Lap after lap after lap I'm now sweating as I pick up speed. When I round the corner a little too quickly, my shin hits the pointy edge of the table and I stumble. Pain shoots through my leg.

Crumbling over onto the chair, I rub my shin as if that's going to do anything.

"Everything all right in there, dear?" Edie shouts from the kitchen.

"Yes!" I scream. "A few more minutes."

I don't need her coming in here when I still have to pick "my sign" or whatever. Juliette was really adamant about this sign business, same with Eve. But why do I still feel like it's bullshit?

Leaning over, I find the crystal I dropped on the ground.

Ask for a sign about what you want.

Okay, my question is about Maverick. Putting the fake marriage aside, do I give having an honest relationship with him a try? He's asked multiple times now for us to go out. Despite my grandma thinking he's shady. If I should give him a chance, can my sign be ... um ... this is so dumb ... okay, sorry for bashing this if someone is really listening. I'm on a roll with insulting people today.

Looking around the room, I hope something sign-worthy jumps out.

Nothing. A whole bunch of nothing. Well, there's plenty of stuff in Edie's living room but nothing feels right.

Closing my eyes, I conjure up the first image I see ...

A white feather.

Okay ... there it is.

A white feather. Bingo, bango. I'm done.

"All set," I say to an empty room, hoping I'm heard from the kitchen. Putting my purse strap around my shoulder, I

stand from the couch.

“Leaving already?” Edie asks.

“How did it go?” Juliette asks with eager, wide eyes.

“I did it.” I shrug.

“I hope you see your sign.” Juliette’s smile is contagious enough that it forces the downturned corners of my lips to lift into a smile.

“What if I don’t see it?” I edge closer and closer to the front door with them following behind me.

“That’s also an answer,” Juliette says.

Her aunt turns toward her. “Someone was paying attention to my hippie dippy. Your mom is going to hate me more.”

Juliette laughs.

I stare at the two of them, confused why Juliette’s mom would hate her own sister, but I am in no mood to get into their family drama. Not today.

“Well ... thank you.” I put my hand on the doorknob. “For everything. Really.”

When I’m out the door after their sweet goodbyes, I lean against it for a moment to catch my breath. My chest is pounding rapidly. My anxiety is on steroids. What does a heart attack feel like?

Frantically searching for the Driver app on my iPhone, I click the button to notify someone to pick me up. Instead of having them meet me at Edie’s, I set the pickup location to a coffee shop around the block and begin my walk over.

Stride for stride, I increase my pace. When I push the door to the coffee shop, I forcefully knock into the glass face first. My sunglasses shatter upon impact.

“The sign says *pull*.” Turning around, I’m shocked to see Portia, Maverick’s assistant. “Are you okay?”

I let out a short huff. “It’s not my day.”

Finally pulling the door, I gesture for Portia to go in before me. There's a short line, which leaves us standing next to each other waiting.

"You want to talk about it?" Portia doesn't look me directly in the eye and her voice sounds a bit strained.

I'm not picking up on the vibe she does this often ... talk about feelings. It's something I equally do not do. My stomach is already in knots thinking about all the beans I spilled to Edie and Juliette. Why did I tell them all that I did? Was that a mistake? Why do I suddenly need to vomit or hide?

"No, sorry."

"I accept that." She looks relieved.

The barista calls us ahead and we place our orders. Portia pays my tab and I graciously thank her. While we are waiting for our drinks, her phone rings. I spot Maverick's name on the screen.

"Boss Man, what's up?" Portia answers.

Her talking to my future husband does something to me I can't quite put into words.

Jealousy?

No, no, no.

This day can't get any worse. I don't want to contemplate these emotions toward Maverick. He accused me of being jealous and I thwarted the notion.

My head pounds.

"Can we get her some ice?" Portia asks the barista.

She's off the phone already? I must have missed the conversation.

Portia hands me an ice pack and nods toward my head. I don't question her because she scares me a little with her intensity. Pressing the pack to my skin, a chill runs down my spine.

"Thank you."

“Have we put your yoga studio search on hold?”

“Right now, it’s not in the cards for me. Sorry I wasted your time.”

Even though my brain is on ice, I can remember all the shit swirling around inside of it ... grandma trouble, boy trouble, work trouble, and asking for signs trouble.

“Maverick respects you.” Portia’s eyes roam my body. If I had to guess, she doesn’t understand why her boss *respects me*. I wonder what she’ll say when she finds out we are getting hitched. We’ll have to tell other people, right? I need to ask Maverick when we have our talk. Can we keep this thing under wraps?

“Maybe he’s a bad judge of character.” I laugh with a slight shrug.

Apparently I am.

“He’s generally not.”

Well, okay. My phone vibrates, notifying me Keith, the driver I requested and forgot about, is waiting at the curb for two more minutes.

“I should be going. Thank you again for the drink.”

Portia smiles as I hobble out of the coffee shop with a splitting headache.

Slipping into the backseat of Keith’s black Jeep is the first time I relax all day.

That’s the last time I take advice from Eve.

Mark my words.

MAVERICK

Our talk is tonight.

I've never had a "talk" with a woman before. Guy code tells me I'm supposed to hate the idea of this. She's clearly going to lay down some law and, to be honest, that turns me on.

Everything she does turns me on.

It's a curse because she's grieving. It's been years since her loss, but the pain looks fresh in her eyes.

It's a curse because she can't be a quick fuck either.

She'll be my wife and that could be 'til death do us part.



Emma

Our talk is tonight.

In fifteen minutes, to be exact.

As I pace around my condo, I've never had a "talk" with a guy. Dylan was my first boyfriend and everything fell into place with us. Our relationship progressed like it naturally should. But what's going on with Maverick is not natural because it's not real.

Never in my thirty years of life did I imagine a fake marriage would be in my future.

The buzzer rings to my place and I jump in panic.

Game time.

Grabbing my purse, I fly down the stairs to the lobby where Maverick is standing with his back to me while talking to my neighbor. She openly rakes her eyes over his body and leans into him. And did she ... touch his arm? Yes, yes, she did. I know because she did it again. That's right before she throws her head back and laughs the fakest laugh I've ever heard.

I can't blame her. Maverick is a stud.

He turns to find me standing on the last step.

"Emma." His wide grin brightens his handsome face.

"Maverick." I smirk. "Maddison."

My neighbor's face turns red for a second before going back to its spray tan orange color. "Emma, it's *so* nice to see you."

Maverick winks at me out of view of Maddison.

"Well, my beautiful *bride*, are you ready to go on our date?"

Bride.

He went there. It's as if the word echoed down the streets of New York City in a stunned silence.

Maddison's eyes widen, not in a coy way but in pure shock.

I'm equally shocked he threw our secret out there casually, but it feels good to watch her jaw drop.

“Hubby, let’s go.”

As we are walking out the glass double doors, I squeeze Maverick’s firm butt.

Enjoy the show, Maddison! I know she’s watching.

“You plan to leave that there all night?” Maverick laughs.

We are now standing on the sidewalk and without realizing it I hadn’t removed my hand from its grasp on his behind.

I pull my hand back as fast as possible and drop it at my side.

Maverick extends his hand toward the street and a yellow taxi stops for us.

“Not what you were expecting?” Maverick climbs in beside me.

“To be honest, no. I figured a billionaire like Maverick Stern had a private driver ... or ten.”

“I do. But sometimes I give them the night off.”

Maverick tells our cab driver an address I’m unfamiliar with and off we go.

I’m not going to start “the talk” in the cab. Looks like my nerves will sit lodged in my throat for a while longer.

And damn, how often does he do squats? His ass felt better than in my wet dreams.



Walking into a dark and empty room after stepping out of a rickety old elevator makes all the hairs on my arms stand straight up. This building seems deserted. My nerves, formerly in my throat, ripple through my body.

“Where are we?” My words echo around the room. The ghosts lurking inside this place can hear me, I’m sure.

“Just wait. You’ll see.”

“Wait for what? You to murder me and ditch my body here?”

Maverick laughs. “Are you afraid of me?”

“Should I be?”

Before he can say yes, I hear a woman’s voice. First, a shadow walks toward us then with a clap the room lights to a dim glow.

Blinking a million times, everything slowly comes into focus, but I still have no idea where I am. Nothing looks familiar and I’ve been in many sketchy locations.

“Maverick!” The perky teenager smiles when she sees us. “You guys ready to paint?”

Paint? I’m really not good at crafts. To be honest, I hate making things. Maverick doesn’t know me at all.

Of course, he doesn’t, dummy. This shouldn’t surprise you.

“We’re ready, Kyle!” Maverick exclaims before I can slowly back out of the room.

We follow her from one dark room into another. This time when she claps her hands, a black lit room lights up and neon drawings glow in the dark on the walls.

Kyle stands in front of a small table where I spot containers of neon paint, brushes, and water. Looking around the room, I don’t see any canvases. The art on the wall looks professional, so we can’t be painting that either.

“Here are all of your supplies. I’ll turn on the music, leave the room, and you’ll undress to where you’re comfortable and paint!”

“Undress ... what?” I ask.

“Each other.” Kyle giggles. “You are each other’s canvases.”

Maverick is going to paint ... my body? Oh, hell no.

That's easy for her to say—Kyle is wearing a white crop top showing off her slim midriff. Her Lululemons are practically painted on skintight.

This is out of my comfort zone.

“Relax,” Maverick whispers into my ear. “It’s going to be fun.”

“Have you done this before?”

This is not the kind of date I want to go on if it’s a recycled experience he’s done with someone else.

A date? No, Emma, you are not on a date. Pull your head out of your ass. You are supposed to be laying down the law about this fake marriage. One of the laws ... no touching.

“First time.” Maverick shrugs. “Thought it would be fun.”

“It will be! You’ll feel empowered about your art and your body.” Kyle hops like an excited cheerleader, which she most likely is. I hold back an eye roll. Before she closes the door, I hear her say, “Have fun, you two!”

Suddenly loud rock music pumps through the speakers, causing me to jump.

“Chill.” Maverick grabs a paintbrush and turns to me. “Take off your shirt.” He smirks.

I laugh. “Fuck off.”

This gets a laugh out of him. “I knew you’d say that. I’ll go first.”

Maverick removes his fitted blazer and then unbuttons the dress shirt underneath.

Wow.

His body is next level. Maverick’s chest is firm and, of course, he’d have rippling abs that taper down to that delicious V.

“You’ll get those dirty too.” I point to his expensive designer pants.

Maverick cocks his eyebrow. “Want me to take them off?”

My face heats. Why did I open my big mouth to point out his pants? He has enough money he can buy a new pair. To play it cool, I shrug. “Do whatever you feel comfortable doing.” I mimic the upbeat tone of Kyle’s cheery voice.

I don’t have to ask Maverick twice. His pants are off in a matter of seconds.

The sight of him standing in front of me in a pair of form-fitting boxer briefs nearly gives me a heart attack.

Pull yourself together. You’ve seen a man in underwear before.

It’s been a long time!

“Am I going to be the only one with my clothes off? This isn’t fair.” Maverick nods in my fully-clothed direction.

“Fine.” Before I can second-guess my insanity, I unbutton my red blouse and pull down my pants. I leave the black bra and panties on. Trying to convince myself this is the same as wearing a bathing suit is the only way I can justify stripping down. “This is as comfortable as I’m going to get.”

Maverick’s eyes scan my body. He’s not shy about it. He takes every inch of me in. When I don’t think I’ll be able to stand his lingering gaze for any longer, he breaks his stare and hands me a brush.

Dipping my brush into a blue color, I swirl it around, not knowing what the heck I’m doing. Maverick does the same beside me.

We face each other as I bring my shaky hand to his firm chest and run my brush right down the center. Then I step back to look at what I did.

Letting go of a breath, I square off, ready for him to take his turn on me.

Maverick steps toward me with a much more confident hand. He skims it across my stomach, which sends a shiver down my spine. It surprises me how cold and soft it feels

against my skin. Maverick didn't react when I touched him with the brush, so I keep my feelings at bay.

We go back and forth a few more times. I get brave and explore with my brush around his nipples and then down his six pack. He trails his paintbrush from my neck to the tops of my breasts. I hold my breath. For a moment, I debate whether I should go topless, but I don't. I'm not that kind of girl.

I'm not the kind of girl who lets a man she barely knows paint her body either.

Or marries him.

"Should we have our talk here?" Maverick asks, bringing me back to reality. He dips his brush into a container of water and swirls it around.

"Now or never." I laugh while watching him pick a new paint color.

Pink.

"I prefer ... never," he says.

"I was kidding. We *have* to talk. I have some questions."

Maverick faces me straight on as his gaze rakes my body. I know logically he's looking for the next place to paint, but his stare turns my body to fire.

"Shouldn't I be the one with the list of questions?" He lowers to the ground, brings his brush to my knee and slowly drags it up my inner thigh. The proximity to my needy clit is almost unbearable. My knees buckle but he holds me steady.

I can't believe I want him this badly.

Maverick repeats the motion on the other leg.

Flames courses through me.

Maverick stands and brings his body closer as he paints my collarbones. He's so close I could lean in an inch and place my lips against his. But I won't. If I'm reacting to him like this and we haven't kissed yet, I'm in for a lot of trouble.

Yet?

“I guess that’s fair.” I stand a little straighter. Regaining my composure seems like a bright idea. “You are the one marrying me as a favor. You can start. Do you have any questions?”

I shut my eyes as he drags his brush slowly from my collarbones toward the top of my breasts.

“Prenup?” Maverick asks.

“Okay.”

The brush stops. There’s silence for a moment too long and I open my eyes. They are locked directly on Maverick’s.

“Really?” He cocks his head to the side.

“Yes, I don’t mind. It’s smart for you. Why wouldn’t we get one?”

I am not in this for the money. Well ... not for *his* money. I’m in this for my grandmother’s money and not even for myself.

“Next question.” Maverick drops the topic of a prenuptial agreement. “Can we have sex?”

My eyes bug out as I take a step back and nearly take down the table of water and paint. It shakes but nothing falls.

“No.” The sentiment was not convincing. “We cannot have sex.”

“We’ll be having sex with other people?”

Is he out of his mind? No husband of mine is going to cheat. Fake or not.

“No.” I stomp my barefoot.

“So ... we can’t have sex with each other *and* we can’t have sex with other people. That’s not going to happen,” Maverick says.

“Why not?” My hands fly to my hips, but I quickly drop them not to ruin his paint.

Maverick squints. “Correct me if I’m wrong ... we are going to be married until your grandmother dies and leaves her

money to your father?”

“Right.”

“What if that’s ten to fifteen years from now?”

“Ten years!”

Oh, fuck. My mind spins worse than the time I got vertigo on a cruise ship and walked right into a wall. Ten years. Knowing my pesky grandmother, she’ll live for another twenty years at minimum. I did not think this through.

When was the last time I had sex?

It’s been years. The notion it could be another decade ...
no.

“Maybe you should reconsider the sex thing.” Maverick shrugs his blue-painted broad shoulders. “Looks like it’s something you need.”

His smirk takes on a cocky tint as he points toward my chest. Looking down, I find my nipples erect through my bra. I want to slap the smug look from his face. Instead, I cross my arms over my chest.

“I need time to think about it. Any other questions?”

Like the twenty questions on the plane, he rapid fires them at me.

“Where are you going to live?” Maverick asks.

“My condo.”

“You don’t want to live with me?”

“No.”

He nods. “Do you want me to get you a ring?”

“No, I mean, uh.” I look at my hand. “Maybe. I don’t know. For the charade.”

I didn’t expect him to ask that.

He nods yet again.

“When do you want to get married?”

“Never.”

We both laugh.

The music gets louder as the song changes and I’ve answered all these questions standing in my underwear. When did I get so comfortable with him? This is not me in the slightest. I’m an anxious prude most of the time.

“We should finish while we still have the room,” Maverick says.

This time I’m the one who nods.

Without speaking, we get back into the routine of painting each other. Our hands explore each other’s bodies separated by a paintbrush. A stroke against his six-pack abs ... a swirl around my belly button ... dashes on his muscular thighs.

“What’s with the scar?” Instead of running his brush along my body, he runs his finger. “An old injury. It’s very faint.”

Most of the time I hardly remember it’s there. I have a scar across the palm of my right hand. Yes, it’s quite old, and now white to match my fair skin.

“I fell off a bike as a kid. I caught the weight of my body on my palm, but I landed hard on the cement. Split my hand open. My mom freaked out when I came home like that.”

“Did you cry?” Maverick asks.

“Nope.” I smirk. It’s the truth. “I wanted to be tough. But it hurt like hell.”

He smiles.

“Do you have any scars?” I ask.

I haven’t spotted any on his perfect body, so far.

“We all have scars—whether they are on our bodies or not.”

And with that he steps back without another word.

His eyes pore into mine before he breaks our stare to look at my body. Before I can speak, the music drops in volume and Kyle enters the room.

“Look at you two. You look like you are professionals,” she says.

My hands fly up to cover myself. She must see stuff like this all the time. Suddenly I’m embarrassed that I was embarrassed.

Maverick stands in his underwear with his chest puffed out, proud of his masculine body. It irritates me to admit it but I’m jealous Kyle gets to see him too.

Why should I care?

He’s going to be my husband, sure, but we aren’t a couple. A real couple, anyway.

He clearly wants to have sex with anyone because he immediately asked about other people after I said I was off the table. That asshole.

Kyle leads us to a mirror around the corner to admire what we painted on each other. I basically did a hodge-podge of swirls and shapes all over his body, but Maverick took the time to paint hearts, a cloud, and a rainbow. I wasn’t expecting that. I don’t know what I was expecting, to be honest.

We thank Kyle as we are leaving and redress. The paint is now dry and besides what I have on my neck, you’d never know what was lurking beneath our clothes.

Our little secret.

Just like what our sham of a wedding will be.

EMMA

My live shot in the 11 o'clock newscast isn't for another ten minutes. With time to kill, I aimlessly scroll social media. Nothing, nothing, and more of nothing. Until a text appears on my phone.

Maverick: I have something for you! Meet me tonight

Uh, what? We've never met on a spur of the moment encounter before. Our meetings have always served some kind of purpose. Meeting late at night feels ... booty call-ish.

Me: This better not be some kind of sex thing. I haven't had time to think about that. How do you know I'm up this late?

Maverick: I'm watching the news. I saw you tease the story you are about to do.

He's watching my show? That's nice of him. Most of my friends stopped watching my segments years ago.

Holy guacamole. *He's watching my show.*

Live.

Right now.

Any minute.

I put my phone back into my wool coat pocket. From my earpiece, I hear the anchors talking about the story before mine. I have less than a minute to compose myself.

I've never been nervous before. Okay, that's not true. In the beginning of my career, I was always nervous.

Nervous I would be staring at the camera without knowing I was live.

Nervous to accidentally swear while my microphone was rolling.

Nervous to call the person I was interviewing by the wrong name.

Nervous I would slip while walking in heels and break my face during a live shot.

Nervous someone is doing an inappropriate sexual gesture behind my back.

And ... some of those things have happened which has killed my fear.

But these nerves tonight are fresh. If I wasn't wearing a coat, I would be panicky that all of New York would see me sweating through my silk blouse on live television.

In my earpiece I hear, "And tonight we're talking to our Emma Blackstone about this new social media scam in The Bronx. Emma?"

That's my cue.

Holding my microphone toward my mouth, my reporter voice takes over.

"That's right, Todd and Laretta. Police want you to be on the lookout tonight for three men accused of luring victims to this apartment complex before robbing them. Take a look at your screen." This is where I pray the producer at the station is showing my surveillance video. "These men are using the new marketplace and dating app called MatchMarket to arrange dates. When the victims arrive, they are robbed. One victim, Moira, suffered a severe head injury."

This is where I pray the video of Moira is now playing on viewers' screens. I can hear it in my earpiece. I share more information about who we are looking for and how to get in touch with NYPD's Crime Stoppers before tossing it back to Todd and Laretta in the studio.

When I'm no longer on the air, I take out my earpiece and turn off my microphone. My cell phone vibrates in my pocket.

Maverick: You're very good at what you do

Stupidly, I smile. Well, shucks. I'm not normally the kind of girl who needs words of affirmation, but I do appreciate a pat on the back from someone I respect.

I respect him?

Me: Thank you :) So ... you have a present for me?

I'm definitely not going to be going to sleep anytime soon. Excitement and endorphins are pumping through my body after his compliment about my piece.

Whatever he has better be good.



The diner is old, but the warm smell of breakfast foods at midnight welcomes me. I'm here fifteen minutes early because they didn't need me back at the station after my live shot.

"Anywhere you want, sugar," a waitress says as she approaches a table of what look like rowdy drunk college students.

Spotting a booth near a window in the back, I slide in and let the weight of the day sink into the seat with me.

"Rough day?"

Looking up from my phone, I watch Maverick slide into the seat across from me.

“Aren’t they all?” I laugh.

“No.” He crinkles his face. “I love what I do.”

Why is he in such a good mood? On the table he puts a gift-wrapped package and pushes it in my direction.

“It’s not my birthday.” I reach for the package.

He pulls it back quickly. “You don’t want it?”

“Wait!” I grip the package. “I do want it.”

Ripping the gift open, I find a black box. When I open the lid, what I find shocks me.

“It’s a quill. I know you type everything for your stories, but I thought it was classy ... like you. Think of it as an engagement gift.”

A quill and ink.

My stomach drops.

A white *feather* quill.

“You don’t like it?” Maverick interrupts my thoughts. His face flashes a tint of disappointment before masking itself with a stoic appearance.

“I love it! I’m sorry. I was stunned. It’s so thoughtful. Thank you for thinking of me.”

He smiles but I’m not sure he’s buying it.

Thankfully, our waitress interrupts our moment.

Maverick gifted me my sign. I completely forgot about the feather thing—it’s been nearly a week since I went to Edie’s.

Maverick must have ordered our food while I was in my own brain freaking the fuck out because the waitress walks away.

“You think those guys are going to get caught?”

I bite my lip. “What guys?”

Maverick sips from the glass of water in front of him. “The ones from your story. The scammers.”

Not only did he watch my piece but he also wants to talk about it. What a turn-on.

You can't be turned on by your fake soon-to-be husband if you don't want to have sex with him. And he could be a scammer himself.

This inner voice shit is getting real old, real quick.

“Yes, definitely.” I drink my water.

He fiddles with his fork. “Why are you so sure?”

“Surveillance video is gold to reporters. Whenever we can show what someone looks like, they'll be caught. Usually, their own grandma turns them in.”

“Are you serious?” He laughs.

“One hundred percent.” It's the truth. “Speaking of grandmothers, mine called me the other day.”

Our waitress is back carrying a tray full of food. Dish by dish she unloads ... mozzarella sticks, chicken tenders with a side of ranch dressing, French toast with powdered sugar, and chocolate chip pancakes.

“Lastly, the food that makes me nervous I'm going to burn off my eyebrows.” She lights a flame and holds the saganaki above her head. “Opa!”

Luckily, her black eyebrows remain intact.

This guy has an obsession with ordering a million different dishes. And I kind of like it. And who can turn down chicken tenders? He knows the way to my heart is through my stomach.

Maverick picks up a cheese stick. “Cheers!”

I grab a warm morsel of cheese and lift it toward his. “Cheers!” I laugh as we click them together.

“This is one of my favorite places.” Maverick pulls a long string of oozing cheese away from his face. I can't help but to

laugh at the sight of this. He's a billionaire and he's sitting in a diner eating fried foods. I would have assumed he'd be eating caviar and escargot. "What? You see something you like?"

I roll my eyes at the cheesy mess. "Yes, that cheese stick."

"All for you, my lady." Maverick pushes the plate in front of me.

Even though he was the one to bring us together and this is a lot more fun than I thought it would be, I am the one who has to be the bearer of bad news.

"My grandmother called me the other day," I repeat.

Maverick's gaze lifts from the French toast he was cutting into bite-sized pieces for us to share. "What did that charming doll have to say?"

"She wanted to know if I was taking the terms of my father's inheritance seriously." I stick my fork into the pancakes and watch the chocolate melt out onto the plate. "I told her I am now engaged."

"What did she say about that?"

"If her heart wasn't stone-cold, I'd guess she would have felt ... shock." I laugh. "She wants to meet you. I'm supposed to get the details about a dinner she wants to host at her penthouse this weekend."

"This weekend?" Maverick pulls his phone out of his pocket and flicks across the screen.

"I'm sorry. You're insanely busy. I didn't think about that. I wanted to get it over with. Let's pick a different day."

But if he doesn't go, Grandma will think I'm making up this engagement.

Which I am.

Moving his fingers around on his phone, I have no idea what he is rearranging. "I'll be available. Tell me the details as soon as you know."

The rest of the meal goes off without a hitch. We chat easily like two people who've known each other for years,

though it's only been two months. Maverick pays the bill and we leave the diner. Standing on the sidewalk waiting, loud shouting catches our attention.

"Hey! Hey, you! Aren't you the news lady?" A heckler charges at me in a drunken sway.

It's hard to charge *and* sway at the same time, but some drunks can pull it off. And that makes them dangerous.

"Oh jeez. Here we go," I mumble under my breath.

Maverick steps in front of me. "Does this happen often?"

"People approach me all the time, but usually they are cool, not like this."

"News cunt!" Even though he's feet away, I smell the alcohol sweeping out of every pore in his dirt-covered drunken body. "Can you hear me?" His volume reaches another level while I ignore him. Everyone within a fifty-mile radius can hear him. "News cunt. I'm talkin' to you."

As I back up, Maverick takes a step toward this man. Grabbing his arm, I mutter, "It's not worth it."

The man trips over his own two feet and falls to the ground.

"You all right?" Maverick bends down to offer him a hand up when the heckler spits on him.

"Fuck you," he shouts from the ground. Fumbling around in his jacket, he pulls a dull knife from his pocket. He's waving it around in a sloppy manner with zero control.

Pulling Maverick's arm yet again, he doesn't budge.

"Let's go," I say.

"Yeah," the heckler coughs, finally steadying his shaky hand. "Run off. Listen to your bitch."

Maverick pulls the man by the front of his coat. He gets right in his face. "If you ever come near her again, I'll make sure it's the last thing you do."

Before the guy can do anything hasty, I pull Maverick away with a force that makes him move. I don't know what direction we are walking in, but the first taxi we spot we climb in.

"Where to?" the driver asks, looking at us in the rearview mirror.

Maverick and I stare at each other.

I should say ... back to my place, but that's not right.

"Want to get a drink?" Maverick asks.

"Yes!" It's nearly two in the morning and I should be going home like a proper lady, but ... I'm no lady. Not after what I just went through. It happened quickly, but it's not every day a knife is pulled on me.

Maverick tells the driver a name of a bar and off we go.

"You're shaking." Maverick puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into him. He's right. My hand now resembles the drunk guy's unsteady one.

"You provoked a man with a knife. Are you out of your mind?"

Maverick laughs.

Laughs.

That damn idiot!

"He wasn't going to do anything with that dull knife," Maverick says.

"Why are you so sure?"

"Instinct."

That's easy for him to say.

"Next time a lunatic approaches with a knife ... don't get in his face."

He turns toward me. "There will be no *next time*."

And that's that. I've never found myself in a "defend my honor" type of situation and surely a man never rose to that

occasion until now.

The taxi pulls up outside of a red bricked building tucked on a corner down a street I've never been down.

“Ready?” He raises his eyebrows. Is this a challenge?

“Let's roll.”

Loud rock n' roll music hits me in the face as we walk into The Jig. It's the dive of all dives.

Maverick swaggers to the bar like a man on a mission. He sits down on an open stool and pats the one next to him.

“How do you find all these cool places?”

First Jackie's then the body painting and now this dive bar—when I go on dates, it's usually for drinks at normal places.

The bartender slides over two shots without a word. Just like with Jackie's, Maverick's a regular here too. I don't question it this time.

Lifting the shot, I take a whiff like I'm some kind of alcohol connoisseur.

“What is this?”

“You'll have to throw it back and find out.”

The last time I did shots escapes me. Not from blacking out or anything, just because it's not something I do.

Clicking my glass with Maverick's, liquid drips down the edge and on my hand. I don't clean myself up before I “throw it back” and nearly gag.

“That was awful.” My face contorts into a grimace and Maverick laughs. His reaction was the complete opposite of mine.

A glass of water comes flying down the bar in my direction. I catch it and look over at the Hulk-sized bartender, who hasn't smiled once since we sat down. I lift my glass in the air to acknowledge my gratitude and the man wearing a cut off leather jacket nods.

“Court house or banquet hall?” Maverick asks.

“What?”

“What kind of wedding do you see yourself having?”

The question throws me for a loop even though it shouldn't.

“Wherever you want.” I shrug.

“If you are going to want this to be more believable to your grandma, you're going to need to act like you care.”

Damn. He's right. She will ask a plethora of questions.

“Banquet hall, I guess.”

Maverick flashes the bartender two fingers and it's as if two drinks magically appear. This place is packed, but the emotionless bartender is on top of his game.

“What about a destination wedding?” Maverick asks between chugs. “We can invite less people and go on vacation at the same time.”

“That's not a bad idea. I could use a vacation.”

“That's because I was the one to come up with it. All my ideas are brilliant.” Maverick smirks. “Where should we go?”

I'm not ready to have all these answers. I want to talk about anything besides our sham wedding.

“What's your horoscope?” I ask.

“Scorpio.”

“Ugh. That explains everything.”

“Explains how amazingly sexy I am?” He intently stares into my eyes without a hint of a smirk. Totally something a mysterious Scorpio would do.

“Don't put words into my mouth.”

“I'll put something into your mouth.”

I choke on my cocktail. We haven't really crossed this line. I haven't crossed this line with anyone in years, to be honest.

“Uh ...” I mutter.

“It’s been a long time, huh?” Maverick asks.

“Long time for what?”

“Since you’ve had sex.”

My mouth drops. “I can’t believe you said that.” I down the rest of my drink in one swift chug.

“Because it’s true.” He pushes his empty glass away from him on the bar. “I wasn’t sure at body painting, but my suspicions are now confirmed.”

“You don’t know that.” I fold my arms across my chest which only draws his gaze there. “Shut up.”

“Truth or dare?” Maverick asks.

“What’s with you and these seventh-grade sleepover games?”

“Truth or dare?” He repeats.

My stomach ties itself in a knot. I finish off my drink. “Dare.”

Maverick’s eyes widen. We are both surprised I didn’t settle for the comfortable choice of truth. But, to be honest, they are both uncomfortable. He’ll want to get some kind of deep confession out of me with a truth. A dare could be anything.

“I dare you to kiss me.” Maverick turns his body toward me on his stool.

“No.” I shake my head.

“I didn’t take you for someone who loses at games.”

“I never lose!”

I always want to win. For the most part, I do.

“Looks like you’re going to today.” Maverick shrugs.

“Fine.” I lean in a little more toward him. “Give me your stupid face.”

Maverick laughs. “Don’t make it seem like a chore.”

I hope the death stare I give him penetrates into his soulless Scorpio body.

Leaning in closer, I practically hover in between us with my face inching closer to his. But he keeps his back rigid, in an upright posture.

“What the hell?” I ask.

“Do you want to kiss me?”

Sitting back in my rightful position, I say, “You dared me.”

“Do you want to kiss me?”

“Do you have a habit of repeating yourself?”

Maverick leans in and gently cups my face in his hands and ever so slowly brings his full lips to mine. Electricity shoots through my body. His kiss starts calm but quickly becomes powerful and intense. Maverick moves his hands from my cheeks to cup the back of my head.

My mouth devours his just the same. I don't ever want this kiss to stop. From the top of my head to the tips of my toes—his energy is all-consuming throughout my body.

“Get a room,” a loud woman shrieks near us as she giggles.

Remembering I'm in a public place, I quickly pull apart from Maverick.

He smiles as I automatically bring my fingers to gently press my tingling lips.

“That was one hell of a *dare*,” Maverick says.

I don't have it in me to confess that I revealed a bigger *truth* than I ever meant to.

EMMA

This dress is not my style and that's exactly why I'm wearing it. Grandmother will love it. Out of sheer desperation, I put on pantyhose and a slip.

If she does not believe in my engagement with Maverick then I'll have to start over from scratch. And that is ... single with no potential man to convince to be my fake fiancé.

Until today I never thought about her saying no.

Can she do that?

My phone vibrates, indicating there's someone ringing my condo's buzzer. Maverick is on time. My suggestion was for us to meet there, but he pointed out if we arrive together it would be more believable.

"That dress is ... something," Maverick says as we wait for the elevator. His eyes roam my body, taking in the glory that is this hideous dress.

"The evil queen will love it."

This gets a laugh out of him.

As if my ugly dress moment couldn't get any worse, we run into Maddison in the lobby. She struts her stuff into the building wearing a gorgeous dress. She does a little wave toward Maverick, completely ignoring me. That is until she takes in my dress. And then ... she laughs.

This makes me hate my grandma more.

Maverick grabs my hand and squeezes it as we leave the building. “You make everything look hot. I’d rip that dress off you right now.”

My skin flushes under my nun-like ensemble.

What would it feel like to have Maverick rip it from my body?

I’m ready to mutter something back about Maverick’s sarcasm but he ushers me into the backseat of a luxurious town car as if he didn’t just turn me on with his words.

“No taxi?” I ask.

“Not tonight.”

He’s taking this whole Grandma business seriously, which I appreciate because I’m all over the place with worry. Everything is on the line for Dad. I’ll have to start playing the lottery in an attempt to win a ton of money if she disapproves of my engagement.

Fiddling with my fingers before moving them down to pull on the hem of this hideous dress, Maverick picks my hands up. “Relax.”

“Easy for you to say.”

He has met my grandmother one time. One. And he picked up on how irrational she was then. How can he tell me to relax?

“You need to calm this anxiety or she’s not going to buy our charade.”

Maverick traces circles around the top of my hand. Tingles ripple up my arm as I watch his index finger move across my skin.

“She stresses me out.”

“Why do you let her get on your nerves?”

“I didn’t realize I had a choice.” I laugh awkwardly.

“We all have a choice.”

More of his ridiculous self-help jargon. “Easier said than done. You try being related to her.”

“Don’t roll your eyes at me, missy.”

I didn’t realize I did that.

“Don’t tell me what—”

Maverick interrupts me by pulling my face into his to plant a kiss on my lips. His tongue slowly moves into my mouth. Holy shit. A simple kiss added on top of my earlier arousal and I’m ready to come undone.

I circle my tongue around his and let out a delicious moan as the car slams on its brakes, causing me to fly forward in my seat and smash my face into the glass divider.

“Shit.” I rub my stinging forehead.

“What happened?” Maverick lowers the divider to reveal our driver—a young woman in a chauffeur tux and hat.

“I’m sorry!” she shouts before turning around to look at us with wide eyes. “Are you all right? What was that noise?”

“The sound of Emma’s skull smashing into the glass.”

“It’s okay.” I pat his hand.

“Oh my God. I’m sorry about that, miss.” Her face searches mine. “Look!” She points directly in front of the vehicle. “I must have run something over. I hit the brakes. But there’s no animal in sight! No blood either.”

Inching forward to get a better look out of the windshield, I see white feathers scattered all over the road.

“Are you sure you didn’t kill anything?” Maverick doesn’t wait for a reply. He’s out of the car in an instant and I follow suit behind him.

Gorgeous white feathers litter the road. There are no animals or blood in sight. Thank God. I’d faint if I saw my sign in a massacre in front of me. Nothing screams *grave mistake* like death.

Where could the feathers be from?

The Universe sprinkled them along your path, dummy. Wise up.

“You are getting a knot on your forehead.” Maverick cups my cheeks in his hands as he studies my face. “We’ll stop and get you ice.”

Stop on the way to ... Grandmother’s. Crap. I forgot what we were doing prior to this mysterious feather fiasco.

“No, we should get going. We are late and she’s going to scold us.”

“No one is going to scold me. I’m a grown man.” Maverick holds the car door open for me.

“You wait and see.”

He’s about to experience the wrath in less than ten minutes.



“What the hell happened to your face?” Mark asks as soon as I enter the formal sitting room in Grandmother’s penthouse.

She rarely visits this property because she prefers California but a full staff is always on hand to keep everything spotless for her arrivals.

“Language, Marcus.” Grandmother sits in her regal chair and eyes us without getting up. “But answer his question about your face. I want to know.”

“You mean this bump ... or in general?” I laugh and rub my forehead before winching from the pain. The ice pack I applied in the car is starting to numb my skin but not quick enough.

Looking around the room for someone to come to my rescue, it’s empty. Where’s my family? Mom, Dad, and Phoebe should be here. They would never show up late.

“We had an incident on the way over. Sorry we’re late.”
Maverick follows alongside me.

Grandmother presses her thin lips together in a tight expression. Her signature Chanel Rouge Coco lipstick perfectly in place. “You look familiar.”

“He’s Maverick Stern.” Mark fawns over Maverick in wonderment—like a boy looking up at a superhero. “He’s a fucking legend. What are you doing with ... *her*?”

“Language,” Grandmother repeats herself.

Why is Mark here in the first place? No other extended family was invited.

Maverick puts his arm around my waist and pulls me in snugly to his side. “Because she’s incredible.” He plants a kiss on the top of my head.

Did he really do that?

I melt into his safe embrace. A warm buzz trickles down my body from my head and I can’t decide if it’s from his protective kiss or ... a potential concussion.

Mark looks like he’s ready to diss me but for once remains quiet. If I’m lucky, he’ll be on his best behavior in front of his legend.

Grandmother looks like she’s peering into Maverick’s soul with a twisted look in her hazel eyes.

Remembering this is all a façade, I stand up straighter. That’s right, in this fake fiancé scenario I get to be the *incredible* trophy on Maverick Stern’s arm.

Eat glass, Mark.

“Emma! Maverick!” Mom rushes into the room from the kitchen carrying a wine glass that’s almost empty. Sometimes even my sweet mother has to get drunk to tolerate my grandmother’s comments. “What happened to your head?”

“They never quite explained that.” Grandmother eyes Mom’s wine glass but doesn’t say a word.

She doesn’t have to.

Her facial expressions say it all.

Phoebe and Dad follow Mom into the room and gather around my face to study my head. Maverick doesn't move away from me. He's planted firm against the side of my body.

"I'm fine. I'm fine." I swat my parents away. I don't need all this extra unnecessary attention with tonight's main task at hand—get Grandmother to buy this relationship with Maverick in order for her trust to be written correctly. "Maverick's driver saw something in the street, she slammed on the brakes too quickly, and I hit my head."

"Maverick's *driver*, huh?" Mark doesn't hide his jealousy. "Must be nice."

Mark and his father make enough money that if they wanted drivers, they could have them too. Everyone in this family is rich except for us.

"Do you want some ibuprofen?" Phoebe asks.

"I'm fine!" I shout a little too loudly.

"Maybe some wine." Mom heads over to the bar. "Let's get you a glass."

"Dinner is served," Doreen, Grandmother's maid, announces before returning to the kitchen.

Mom hands me a wine glass along with a wink. Oh man, my number one ally is drunk already. This is not going to go well.

While everyone walks into the dining room, Maverick and I bring up the rear. He whispers, "Are you okay?"

Nodding as quickly as possible, I plaster on a fake smile and go to my assigned seat next to Maverick's. Sitting across from me is Mark. At the head of the table and directly next to me is my grandmother. There's no escaping what is about to go down.

"How did you two meet?" Grandmother places her napkin on top of her lap.

“Oh, this is such a cute story.” Phoebe claps her hands together.

Is she out of her mind? Why didn't I come up with a lie for our cover story?

I can only imagine the deer in headlights look on my face. Before I can spew out a lie, Maverick comes to my rescue.

“We met on an airplane. It was fate because we were on the same arrival flight *and* the departure. Sitting right next to each other both times.”

He went with the truth. I guess that's not bad. Easier to remember.

“Lucky you, cuz.” Mark shoves a dinner roll into his mouth. “Did you try to pick his brain for some ridiculous column or something?” He turns to face Maverick directly. “She's *always* doing embarrassing things like that.”

I have never, and I repeat *never*, been anywhere outside of family functions with Mark. He has zero clue what I am like.

“No. She was quite charming.” Maverick holds my hand on top of the table. “She was going on and on about how the plane was going to crash. I found her neurosis hilarious.”

“Please, you found my neurosis obnoxious and you ordered me not to die.”

The majority of the table laughs except for Mark and Grandmother. I am instantly embarrassed I let my real personality slip through. I'm supposed to be on my most loving behavior.

“You need someone to boss you around a little.” Maverick smirks.

My jaw drops as my mom laughs harder than I've ever seen.

“I've been telling her that for years!” Mom looks at Phoebe. Oh great, they are going to double team against me now.

“Have you?” Maverick asks. “Tell me more about how you agree with my theory.”

Before I can interrupt my mom, she says, “Emma, my darling daughter, is the most careful planner in every area of her life. If she had a dog she would schedule time to pet him.” Phoebe nods in agreement. “I just think ...” Mom pauses while facing me. “Emma, don’t be mad, that you could use someone in your life who takes over a little bit and does some of the controlling. Take a little off your plate. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Where in the world did all of that come from?

That’s really what Mom thinks about me?

And right now is the time she wants to tell me.

“Men don’t like controlling women,” Mark chimes in. “Right, Maverick? They’d be a total drag. A nag, actually.” He laughs while crumbs of bread fall out of his mouth.

I wish he’d stuff a napkin into it.

Grandmother hasn’t said a word. Something isn’t right. And, she’s a very controlling woman—how does she feel about this conversation?

Doreen interrupts my rambling thoughts by clearing our salad plates to make room for the main course—prime rib.

When we all have our meals in front of us, Grandma raises her glass. “To the *happy couple*.”

Everyone toasts us and clinks glasses. That “happy couple” line was complete mockery. I can sense her disbelief. I’m going to need to make this more convincing. But ... how? I haven’t been in a true relationship in years. Naturally, I don’t remember how to act as part of a twosome.

As if sensing the anxiety radiating off my body, Maverick puts his hand on top of my knee under the table. No one can see this gesture, so what gives?

“Relax,” he whispers into my ear yet again.

I smile and nod; as if to say *thanks again for trying to calm me.*

“Maverick,” Grandma says. All eyes turn to her. “When is Emma’s birthday?”

A pop quiz!

Fuck. I never told him my birthday. What else is she going to ask? He only knows what we covered on the plane, which was my favorite sexual position.

“Emma’s birthday is April 21.” Maverick locks gazes with Grandmother. “She’s a Taurus, unfortunately.”

I scoff at his cheap shot about my zodiac sign after I shit on his.

Mom and Phoebe both shoot me looks across the table. He got the answer correct. How did he know that?

Grandmother nods. “Where did she attend university?”

“Harvard.” Maverick, yet again, answers correctly.

How in the hell? Did I tell him this stuff and forgot?

“What about her first dog’s name?” Mark joins in this quiz because he’s an asshat.

“She’s never had a dog,” Maverick answers, folding his hands on top of the table. He means business. “But she really wants one. We plan to rescue when we start our family. I own a local shelter.”

My eyes would be popping out of their sockets if I weren’t playing it cool. I have never had a dog but always wanted one—also true. Mom is allergic to dogs, so I couldn’t have one growing up. Today my schedule is much too hectic to be a good fur mom.

And he *owns* an animal shelter? Shut up. That’s incredibly kind. There’s no way a business like that is profitable with money going right back into the animals.

Could be a front for a shady businesses on the side?

“Start your family,” Grandmother repeats his words in a monotone voice. “How many children will you be having?”

“Two.” His answer is matter-of-fact.

My dinner goes down the wrong pipe and I choke. I can’t stop. Everyone is looking at me like I’m crazy.

“She’s seriously choking!” Phoebe screams.

I bring my hands up around my throat as my airway closes. Trying to give the international cue for “someone help me.” I might die here after my fake fiancé brought up our fake two kids.

Maverick’s chair falls to the ground as he stands up in a flash. His arms are wrapped around my waist as he thrusts his fists into me two times, giving me the Heimlich. Before I can think about how utterly ridiculous we must look, the piece of prime rib flies out of my mouth and hits Mark directly in the face.

“What the fuck.” Mark pushes his plate away as he stands up. “That’s fucking disgusting.”

“Language,” Grandmother scolds.

Maverick puts my feet back down on the ground as I catch my breath. My ribs ache as the panic inside my body subsides. Turning in toward him, I wrap my arms around his waist. “Thank you.”

He kisses the top of my head yet again as a rush of comfort soothes me.

As I pull away from Maverick and return to my seat, I spot Mom and Dad giving each other a look. I can’t bring my eyes to meet Grandmother’s. I’m sure they are mortified at the scene I created at her uppity dinner.

I know, I know, I’m the family embarrassment.

Grandmother doesn’t miss a beat. “Do you know what you’ll name your children?”

This time, I’m the one who answers. “No. We aren’t sure about that yet.”

“I kind of like Finn and Olivia,” Maverick says.

He’s thought about baby names? With me or in general?

“Those are beautiful names.” Mom beams toward us. She’s smiling wide enough that her cheeks are scrunching up her eyes as she’s on the verge of tears.

Someone needs to remind her drunk ass these are make-believe grandchildren.

“We had the hardest time naming Emma.” Dad pushes the food around on his plate. “We couldn’t agree on anything.”

This is the first time Dad has chimed into this conversation. He must be as nervous about Grandmother denying my engagement as I am.

Mom cackles. “Remember some of the awful names you came up with?”

“They weren’t so bad.” Dad laughs and shrugs.

Grandmother claps her hands. “I know exactly why you look familiar.” Maverick and I turn to face her end of the table. “You were the man at the restaurant with the *hooker*.”

Now Mark nearly chokes on his drink. “Hooker?”

“Everly is a business associate.” Maverick’s playful demeanor changes as he regains his stoic expression.

“How many *business associates* do you have like her?” Grandmother asks. Not a bad question.

I’m on the edge of my seat waiting for his answer.

“If you’re still implying she’s a prostitute ... zero. If you are wondering how many women my corporation does business with ... thousands.” Maverick answers without a hint of friendliness in his tone.

He means business.

Mom, Phoebe, and Dad all drop their jaws. No one comes back at Grandmother when she’s sassing them—it’s unheard of. They shut up and take it. Mark smirks like he’s ready for the fury about to erupt.

I place my hand on Maverick's thigh under the table.

His firm thigh is tense under my hand.

Damn. This is one powerful thigh.

Can you imagine the kind of thrusts from these powerful masculine thighs?

Focus, Emma.

I'm holding my breath waiting for Grandmother to acknowledge Maverick's response in any way.

Maverick's hand meets mine under the table and gives it a reassuring squeeze. He's not afraid of her, but why should he be? He's a billionaire. His inheritance isn't on the line. I need to have a word with him later about this.

Finally, The Queen of the Underworld speaks, "Emma, I said he was *not* the one."

Someone gasps—I don't know if it came from Mom or Phoebe.

Maverick turns to me. I didn't quite tell him Grandmother found him to be untrustworthy. But I really didn't think she'd care if I were honestly in love with him.

In love with him?

No, girl, you calm those ovaries down. Finn and Olivia are not coming into this world. At least not with you as their mommy.

"You don't know Maverick," I say.

"Do you?" Her eyes laser into mine.

"Awkward," Mark mocks.

Doreen walks into the room carrying a tray of decadent desserts—vanilla bean ice cream topped with Italian black truffles and Iranian saffron. Is she using her Versace bowls tonight?

Wow. Grandmother was ready to roll out the big guns tonight.

"Ruby, what is your problem with me?" Maverick asks.

Dad runs his fingers through his hair—his sign of distress.

Mom and Phoebe send nervous looks back and forth between them.

I sit here numb. Grandmother will not approve of Maverick now, I know it. How am I going to find someone else willing to be my fake fiancé?

It's going to be taxing because it will take a ton of time to find someone willing to do this if it's not him.

I'll have to explain the whole debacle.

Hoping whoever he is doesn't want a cut of the inheritance.

Oh my God. Maverick is truly a saint. He's agreed to a wildly crazy harebrained scheme and he hasn't asked anything of me.

Money is involved and he could have asked for some in exchange.

Why is he doing this? Why doesn't he want anything in return?

He asked for sex. Now who's the hooker?

“Maverick is the one for me. He's kind, ambitious, accepts me for who I am, hasn't tried to change me in any way, makes me laugh, has weird taste in coffee shops, but oddly he knows what he's talking about.” I pause to quickly catch my breath. “He's always helping me and supporting my dreams. Heck, he even watches my news segments. None of you do that.” I've been awkwardly staring at my napkin in my lap. Now I trail my eyes up to the rest of the table.

Mom's eyes are watery. She's either a phenomenal actress or she's gotten drunker since dinner started.

“Fine.” Grandmother cuts into her truffle with her fork and slowly brings it to her mouth. She chews for what must be a decade while everyone else remains silent. “You can marry him.”

Phoebe hugs Mom. Dad smiles widely and shakes hands with Maverick before clapping him on the back. Mark pouts like the child that he is. Everyone is celebrating, but I am not sure Grandmother isn't done ruining my life.

“Thank you.” I don't really know why I'm thanking her, but I couldn't come up with anything else to say.

I appreciate your approval of the marriage you are forcing me into so that my dad doesn't end up in the gutter.

Thank you is a safer choice.

The rest of the evening goes by without any more quizzes or talks about our wedding. Mark pivoted the conversation to interviewing Maverick about his business philosophies and ended the evening saying he can't wait to have “someone like him” in our family.

Back in Maverick's private car, I relax for the first time in what feels like weeks. My shoulders are no longer hunched up around my ears and my headache is slowly receding, even though there's now a bruise on my face from the window incident.

“Now what?” Maverick asks.

“Now what ... what?”

“Do we plan a wedding?”

“Oh, uh.” I really don't have a clue. “I guess now that she approves, we could wait a little bit. Why rush it?”

With Grandmother's approval, we can postpone getting married until she causes a scene about it. With me “engaged” that might be enough to hold her off for weeks, months, maybe years if I'm lucky.

Maverick nods. “It's your world. I'm just livin' in it.”

I laugh. That's the farthest thing from the truth. The way Mark was fangirling all over Maverick, it's clear this is *his* world and we mere mortals are just living in it.

And that freaks me out a tad bit.

EMMA

I'm truly unlucky.

My eyes do a double take at the postage I received in the mail moments ago. On luxurious black and gold stationary I found an invitation...

You are cordially invited to the engagement party of

Mr. Maverick Stern

&

Miss Emma Blackstone

There's a time, date, venue—the works. This engagement party is in ... two weeks! My grandmother has lost her mind.

Before I can call her, my phone rings.

"Hello," I answer Eve.

"Were you going to mention your *engagement party*?" She practically shouts on the other end of the line.

"Oh my God. Did you get an invitation?"

I haven't had the time to contemplate she sent these out to others. Who all knows about this party? She outed my private

business.

“Not only did I get an invitation, but you and Maverick are on the cover of Page Seven.” Her words are a bit clipped.

“Shut up.” Page Seven reports on the juiciest gossip among the who’s who of New York. My chest gets tighter and tighter. This engagement is more public than I ever wanted it to be. “Can you send me a text with the link?”

The incoming photo message is worse than I imagined. Our engagement announcement is not on some smaller corner with the other engagement announcements ... it’s a whole page plus the cover!

“When is your wedding?” Her words are taking on an edgier tone by the minute.

Why is she madder about this than I am?

Oh no. Grandmother is going to rush this wedding. I could possibly be getting married around the same time as Eve and her wedding planning has been a cause of great stress to her.

“I have no idea. Is there a date in the announcement?” I ask, now scanning every word for any detail about what The Evil Queen has up her sleeve. Nothing about a date. She’s kept it short and sweet in terms of wedding details, but she’s giving plenty about our upbringings, our careers, and our photos are larger than life.

“Can you find out?” Eve asks.

“Of course. Are you mad?”

Eve lets out a sigh. It nearly breaks my heart.

“No. Ugh.” She sighs again, but then she surprises me with a laugh. “It’s taken me so long to plan my wedding and I’m kind of jealous that your fake one is getting thrown together much quicker. And it’s going to be as spectacular, which I’m very happy for you about.”

She doesn’t sound very happy.

“Is there anything I can do to help you with yours?” I ask for the hundredth time since she got engaged.

“There is one thing you could do.”

My ears perk up. She’s never given me any responsibilities! But now I’m sweating at the idea of messing up whatever task she’s about to lay on me.

“Can you plan my bachelorette party?”

“Yes!” I shout the word louder than I needed to.

“Thank you so much! I’ll send over a PowerPoint with my ideas.”

PowerPoint? She made a presentation for her party planning?

What did I sign up to do? I’m surely going to ruin this.

“Perfect!” I say, hoping she can’t hear my expression through my tone.

“Sorry, I have to go. There’s a student knocking at my door. Talk to you later!”

She’s off the phone before I can say goodbye.

This morning was weirder than I ever imagined. I need to go do some yoga. Downward dog might be just what I need. Or a mimosa. Or three.

Someone end this misery.



Maverick

The door to my office flies open with such force that it ricochets off the wall before Portia can push it back open and storm into my office.

She throws one, two, three, four, five magazines on my desk with as much force as she used on the door.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I scoff.

Portia is a feisty woman, but this, this is next level sass and I’m not in the mood for it.

Flipping the first magazine over, I see myself on the cover ...

Billionaire Bachelor Lands A Bride!

The next magazine looks similar ...

New York’s Most Eligible Billionaire To Wed TV News Reporter!

“How did this get out?” I’ll find out whoever tipped off these vultures and put an end to this.

Portia’s hands fly to her hips. “You mean ... this is *true*?”

“Yes.” I scan through the articles to see if I can pick up on who leaked what information. I know Emma did not do this; she wants to keep me hidden, which is the opposite of every other woman I’ve been with. They want to parade me around.

“I believe this is the original source.” Portia hands me the newspaper. “They wouldn’t print something on Page Seven without a good reliable source.”

Upon looking at the article, I know exactly where it came from. I send Emma a quick text.

Me: Ruby was busy with the press today

“Were you going to tell me about this engagement?” Portia ruffles through the papers.

“Do I need your permission?”

Portia rolls her eyes. “I’d like to bring your attention to this as well.” She pushes a heavy envelope in my direction. There’s two ... one addressed to me and one to her.

Opening our envelopes, we find invitations to my very own engagement party. A party I was unaware of.

“Are you kidding me?” Portia shouts. “This is in two weeks!”

“Looks like I need to clear my schedule,” I say, rereading our invitation.

Mr. Maverick Stern and Miss Emma Blackstone.

We do look good together in our individual photos printed side by side in the magazine articles.

“What’s the deal?” Portia pulls over a chair. “You knock her up?”

I fake a gasp and put my hand over my chest. “How dare you question my honor?”

Both of our phones vibrate before she can interrogate me further. Glancing down, I see there’s more text messages and emails than ever before, but nothing from my darling bride-to-be.

“If she’s not pregnant, why are you doing this? You barely know her.” Portia flicks through her text messages until her gaze snaps up at me. “Does she have something on you?” Her head tilts.

“Like what?”

“Like something she could be blackmailing you with. You make a sex tape or something? Does she need your money? We can blow her off like we do with Kate.”

I laugh. Yes, Emma does need money, but she’s practically a saint. She’s giving it all to her father. Also no man cares about a sex tape leaking. I don’t give a fuck if the world saw me thrusting into Emma’s pussy. Plus, we still haven’t had sex. And I can’t believe I haven’t thought about Kate in weeks. She’s been entirely too silent. The thought instantly makes me uneasy.

“No, nothing.”

“So ... you love her?” Portia’s eyes scrunch up.

I pause. “Don’t you have work to do? We have a firm to run.”

“That’s what I thought.” Portia gets up from her chair and folds her arms across her chest. “I don’t know what’s up with this, but if you need my help, tell me. And yes, I’ll go to your engagement party. I wouldn’t miss it.”

With that she turns and hightails it out of my office as the incoming text I was waiting for arrives.

Emma: I’m so sorry! Are you mad?

Me: No. But I bet you are. Now everyone knows your dirty little secret ... me ;)

Emma: My phone has been blowing up all day! Bad for you too?

Me: I let Portia handle things like that

Emma: Do you let Portia handle other things?

Look who’s feeling sassy today. I didn’t expect that from Miss Emma Blackstone. She scoffed at the idea of being jealous about me with Everly when I called her out on it.

Me: Would that bother you?



Emma

“Would that bother you?” I mutter under my breath while not concentrating on my yoga practice. “What a dick.”

This is the least relaxing class I've been to. Why did I look at my phone before we started? Now I can't stop visualizing Maverick with Portia. She's perfect—hourglass figure, extreme confidence, flawless brown skin, and smooth hair. Could they be having sex right now in his office?

"Breath in, breath out. You are all beautiful beings," the yoga instructor says in a soothing voice.

Too bad it's not soothing enough to stop the mental picture I'm having of Portia laid out over Maverick's desk. Pencil skirt up around her snatched waist.

No, no, no.

Yes, it would bother me. It would bother me a great deal.

I've continued to have sexual dreams about Maverick every night since our dinner with my family when he saved my life. And the smug bastard gets right to the point of claiming me and suddenly ... I wake up. Sweaty, horny, and pissed off. The female version of blue balls is exactly what I have.

I'm cock blocking myself in my own dreams.

This was never a concern of mine before Maverick. I've gone *years* without sex and now all of a sudden I'm having nightly erotic dreams.

Get yourself a vibrator, for crying out loud.

"Transition now into a crouching tiger and then extend your back leg up to the sky. Really stretch those glorious muscles."

Bending forward, I do a push-up while my legs are tucked underneath me. Straightening, I extend my right leg up as high as I can. It's not nearly "to the sky," but I'm working with what my body has decided is right for me.

We repeat this move over and over.

Normally, I get in the zone during yoga.

Not today.

My brain needs to ask itself a million questions it has no answers to.

Why do you want to have sex with Maverick?

Why Maverick of all people?

Sure, he's devastatingly handsome but he's got a smart mouth.

What was his reaction to our engagement announcement in Page Seven?

Is he going to be able to make it to our party?

Is he going to invite anyone?

What are his parents like? The rest of his family? His friends?

Why didn't I think about the effects this would have on his life as much as I've been worried about myself?

When did I become this selfish?

"Float freely now. Think of your body as light as a feather. Drift that leg up and down."

Light as a feather.

Now does not seem like the right time to get a "sign" to give Maverick a chance.

Going back to Edie seems like a logical next step. The feathers are few and far between in my daily life, but I do see them.

You're attracting these coincidences to yourself. It's like when you want to buy a new car and you see that car everywhere. Same shit. This isn't magic. Move on.

But ... is it?

It doesn't feel like something I can chalk up to a random coincidence. These feathers show up at the right moments. When I doubt everything about Maverick it's like they slap me in the face.

How did Eve trust her sign? What about Juliette?

“Please transition now to a seated position,” the yogi instructs. I take a seat with folded legs, placing my palms on my knees. “Close your eyes. Before we lie back in corpse pose for Savasana, I’d like to leave you with this. The world is constantly bombarding us with messages. Social media, the news, your friend’s gossip, or your nagging mother-in-law—information overload. We need to get back into our own element and trust in our own intuitions. Within each one of you, you have the answers to your deepest questions. Your deepest desires.”

Easy for you to say.

She continues, “Put your faith into yourself. Ask yourself what you need. And then do the hardest part ... listen.”

Self ... what do you need?

To stop talking to myself, that’s what I need. A stiff drink.

A stiff ...

Stop it.

Maybe I should just have sex. Address the elephant in my dreams and get it over with.

If I were to have sex with Maverick one time it would get the mystery out of my mind. Right? I’ll be able to have a peaceful night’s sleep for the first time in a while. My work might improve because I’ll be able to concentrate. I’m embarrassed by how little I’ve done at the station since my trip to California.

When class is over, I rush to grab my bag. I nearly faint at the number of missed messages I find ... a hundred text messages! Many are from my station. Every reporter and producer wanting to know why all the other stations had the “Breaking News” about my engagement to a billionaire before we did. My News Director texted me a short “Come to my desk first thing tonight” message.

They can’t fire me over something as silly as this, right?

The tension rushes back to my muscles and it’s like I never took this yoga class. Walking out of the studio, I head to the

subway. I need to get home quickly and arrive to work early to put out any fires my fake engagement might have caused.

But before I do that, I do the unthinkable.



Maverick

Emma: We need to talk

Hell yes we need to talk. My firm can't get any work done with every reporter in the world—yes, world—blowing up our phone lines, emails, and voicemails. Paparazzi are camped in front of our main office building harassing my employees as they walk by. Portia told me a helicopter was making its rounds around the buildings as well as CCW 4.

The drama ensuing because of this engagement is next level. I hope Emma is somewhere safe.

The way that belligerent man came at her with a knife on the sidewalk is etched into my brain. All I could see was red before I charged at him.

Paparazzi won't carry weapons but they are handsy and aggressive.

Should I hire some kind of bodyguard to follow her around?

Me: I could think of better things to do with our time

She's rolling her eyes right now at my text, I just know it.

Emma: I have a proposal for you

That was certainly not what I was expecting.

A proposal for me?

This will be interesting.



Emma

Breath like you are in yoga.

Knocking on the door to Jennifer's office, I hold my breath.

"Come in," I hear from the other side of the door. "Emma, thanks for coming early." She smiles which does nothing to calm my nerves. It could be the last smile I see before I'm handed a pink slip. "Have a seat."

"I'm sorry about this whole engagement announcement thing," I spit out in haste.

"I didn't realize you were dating Maverick Stern." Jennifer puts her phone down on the desk to give me her full attention.

"It all happened so quickly."

Part of me wants to tell her it's fake if it will save my job, but I don't want anyone else to know outside of my parents and Eve. Especially a journalist.

"I am shocked you gave this information to other stations and not our own. We would have been delighted to share in your big news first."

"My grandmother is the one who leaked the gossip."

Jennifer laughs. "Grandmothers can be difficult." She pushes some papers around on her desk, closer to me. "This is

the real reason I wanted you to come and speak with me. Have a look.”

Picking the papers up, the first sentence from the email into our anonymous tip line reads: *Maverick Stern scams clients!*

Flipping the page to read the next email, it's more of the same: *Billionaire real estate developer partners with companies to cover for money laundering.*

My hand shakes as I flip to yet another printed email.

Stern Developments pull scam after scam! Unlicensed realtors, duplicated listings.

What in the world. This is out of hand. Putting the papers back on Jennifer's desk, I can't think straight.

“This is all lies.”

Jennifer props her elbows up and folds her hands together in front of her stern face. “I was hoping you *wouldn't* jump to that conclusion so quickly.”

Well, my original reaction was pure panic, which led to an undocumented investigation, but I can't tell her that. She'll know I withheld information from the station.

“I'm sorry. I should have been calmer.”

Jennifer nods. “Do you think you could be?”

“*Calmer?*” Where's she going with this?

“It's not often we get email after email within twenty-four hours to our tip line about one company. Ironically, the day after the CEO's engagement to you is announced. I do understand it's all very fishy. But ... this needs to be investigated. It's either true, partially true, or someone hates your man.”

Someone hates your man.

Fuck whoever is doing this. I need to protect my man!

Wait, my *pretend* man. Why should I care if someone hates him? I'm not usually the “momma bear” type, but an intense

need to protect Maverick engulfs me.

“What would you like me to do?” I lean forward in my seat.

“You are the best investigative journalist we have. Normally, this would be a story I’d give to you in a heartbeat, but ... can you be impartial?”

Looking down at my clammy hands, I don’t quite know what to do.

If I say I can’t cover the story Karl probably will. I don’t want him anywhere near Maverick. And if I do cover the story, I will need to inform the station about my findings regularly.

My findings on Maverick.

With the whole fake engagement I overlooked my current investigation. I assumed it was all bullshit and put it behind me. If I didn’t stall, I would already have answers and none of this would have happened.

“I’ll do it.”

There’s no other option.

“You’ll need to report your leads frequently. It’s up to you if you want your fiancé to know about this investigation. I suggest ... undercover.”

A pit forms in my stomach at the word *undercover*.

I know, I know. I’ve been undercover since I received the first email from Judith about Jeremy, but now things are much more official.

People are counting on me.

My career could depend on this.

So could your marriage.

“Got it.” Standing, I gather the printed emails to keep as my own evidence.

When I’m at the door, Jennifer clears her throat.

“Emma, if Maverick didn’t do these things, I’d really love to find out who sent in all this nonsense. That could be a story

too.”

Me too, Jennifer, me too.

I’ll get to the bottom of this.

EMMA

The elevator dings as I step into the most dazzling lobby. The marble shines brightly I'm nearly blinded. Fresh flowers in tall crystal vases sit atop modern white furniture and a luminous chandelier hangs overhead.

If this is what Maverick's lobby looks like, I don't think I'll be able to handle his penthouse.

Pressing the buzzer, I wait several minutes.

He knew I was coming up because you need permission to take the elevator to his floor. Where is he?

A few more minutes pass and I ring the buzzer again.

Did he have some kind of heart attack between letting me into the elevator and walking to the front door?

When another minute or two passes, I'm frantic my heart attack theory might not be a joke.

Pressing his name on my iPhone, the call is immediately declined.

"What the fuck?" I mutter as the door is opening.

Clearly the woman now standing before me heard my vulgarity. She raises an eyebrow with a look of utter disgust.

"I'm sorry. I'm Emma. Is Maverick here?"

Saying those words makes me feel like a middle schooler asking if her friend can come out to play.

“Emma, do come in.” The elegant woman wearing a tailored designer suit jacket and skirt ushers me into a sitting room. “Have a seat while we wait for Maverick.”

Awkwardly, I sit down on a stiff white love seat in this emotionless white room. I can’t imagine the work it takes to keep this furniture spotless. You definitely cannot eat pizza in front of the television here. One accidental drop and grease is all over this clean fabric.

Looking around, there’s no TV in sight.

“You’re observing like it’s the first time you’ve been here,” the woman says. She reminds me of my grandmother with her perfect posture.

“It is the first time I’ve been here.”

As soon as the words leave my lips, I know I’ve made a mistake.

“You’d think Maverick’s *fiancée* would have been in his house before.” She purses her lips. Her stare is laced with disappointment. Oh yes, Grandmother and this woman could go toe to toe in a scolding battle.

“Mom!” Maverick enters the room. “Emma! This is my mother, Nina.”

For the first time since we’ve met, he’s dressed casually. My eyes comb over his athletic pants, tight in all the right places. His shirt is sticking to his chest and he’s holding a water bottle. Did he just finish up a workout?

Maverick runs his opposite hand through his sweaty thick hair.

I’m nearly drooling.

I’ve got to get laid.

“Your *fiancée* was telling me how she’s never been here before.” The way Nina lingers over the word *fiancée* is nerve-wrecking. Her disapproval is not hidden.

Maverick doesn't miss a beat. "No, she hasn't. Usually, we go to her condo or we like to take in all that New York has to offer."

He takes a seat next to me.

Nina remains seated opposite us in a chair. She crosses her long, tan legs at the ankles. Her eyes roam over me from the top of my frizzy head to the bottom of my average looking sneakers. Instead of drooling, like I did over Maverick, she shakes her head.

Why does it piss me off she's sizing me up?

I am a total catch! Damn it. She should feel lucky to have me as a daughter-in-law. Fake or not.

"I was quite shocked when I heard the news of your engagement." Her comment is directed solely at me.

"Me too. My grandmother was the one to spill the beans. We were planning a long engagement."

Nina's head tilts. Not a single strand of shiny brunette hair falls out of place. "Your grandmother? I see your family is in on this. Ours was the last to know."

I glance between Maverick and his mother, waiting for someone to explain what my family is "in on."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand." I shift, uncomfortable with Maverick by my side.

Unlike at my family dinner, he doesn't offer me a soothing hand on my knee or sweet kiss to my head.

Nina clicks her tongue. "Your intentions with my son are scandalous. I'd guess you're looking for a pay day. If you're knocked up, I will lose my mind."

Maverick puts his hand up. "Mom, cool it, okay?"

Cool it?

That's all he's going to say after she called me a gold-digging slut looking to trap her son with a baby?

Nina gasps. An actual telenovela gasp. I'd bet the muscles in her face are fighting to move but the Botox clearly holds everything in place. "*Cool it?* How can you say that to me? You are letting this floozy come in here and risk all that you've built. All that *we've* helped you build. Maverick, you've always been level-headed. I'm disappointed in you."

"Emma is not a risk. Everything I built is safe. She's signing a prenuptial agreement."

Nina's jaw drops before she quickly puts it back in its rightful place. Her eyes do another once-over of me ... the floozy. "Then you've got something else up your sleeve."

Technically, she's not wrong.

"Enough." Maverick bolts up. The pent-up energy is radiating off his muscular body. Why do I find that sexy? "If you don't want to get to know Emma, you can leave."

Nina grabs her Birkin handbag and stands hastily. "You will regret speaking to me in this tone. I am going to have a word with your father."

She turns on her kitten heels and marches right out of the penthouse without a second glance behind her.

I've never seen anything like this, not even from my drama queen grandmother.

"I'm sorry about her." Maverick turns to face me. "She dropped by unannounced but I thought it would be nice for the two of you to meet."

"Do you think I'm a floozy?" I ask.

Maverick laughs. "Not at all. Don't listen to my mother."

"Easy for you to say," I mumble under my breath.

Even though she's not my real mother-in-law, I cringe at the notion she hates me.

Maverick walks into a lavish kitchen as I trail behind him. "You hungry?"

"Do you cook?" I ask, shocked.

He's the only billionaire I know yet I assumed he'd have a staff of people waiting on him left and right.

"I dabble. Have a seat." He nods to a barstool under the island. Next thing I know he's placing a wine glass in front of me. "I figured you'd like white."

"Am I that easy to read?" I laugh and reach for the glass. "Basic bitch alert."

But he's right. I do prefer white wine.

He takes fresh vegetables out of this refrigerator. "You are far from basic."

"Wait a second!" I nearly spill the wine in my excitement. "You never told me how you found out all that stuff about me when my grandmother was quizzing you."

He doesn't come off as a stalker, especially since I know how much he hates having one.

"Portia did her research." Maverick's skilled hands chop a green bell pepper.

Research. Something I should be doing if I don't want Jennifer to fire me.

"How does she conduct her research?" I take a sip of wine.

"You're a public figure. She printed off your company's bio for me. And the other stuff she probably picked up on social media. I didn't really ask. The dog thing was a lucky guess." He shrugs as he pushes the pepper to the side and slices a tomato. "You seem like a dog person."

Another correct assumption.

"Does she need to conduct research on people often?"

"She does. We do high volumes of deals and I always want to know who I'm getting in business with. I won't work with just anyone."

I really need to know who I'm dealing with as well. Maverick does not seem like the kind of man committing frauds. Why would he risk a billion-dollar company? One his

mother is adamant to protect from floozy women like myself. She's not wrong about my intentions being dishonest.

It's the people you least expect.

"Can I come in and watch you work one day?" I need to do a little research of my own. "Like a take your fiancée to work day."

"I didn't realize 'Take Your Fiancée To Work Day' was a thing." Pushing a tomato to the side, he's now dicing an onion. I didn't realize watching a man around the kitchen would be such a turn-on.

Across the island, my eyes water as the scent of the onion fills the room. "It could be." I sniffle. "How is this not affecting you?" Not one tear has been shed. "You some kind of masochist?"

"I do like spanking." He shrugs while continuing to dice. "And choking."

"Uh ..." is all I can manage to mutter.

Spanking? Choking? What happened to regular ol' sex? Has sex changed since the last time I had it? The memory of Maverick explaining how any sexual position can be hot with the right person flashes back into my mind.

My cheeks heat at the idea of being spanked by Maverick. Would he put me over his knee? Or do it from behind?

What about choking? How would it feel to have his hand against my throat?

My panties drip at the thought alone.

"Whatever it is you're thinking about, I'm going to need you to tell me. I want in on this fantasy."

"Hell no." I sip my wine.

Well, *technically* that's why I came here.

My proposal.

"Then you have to stop thinking those thoughts because you're distracting me."

The sight of him knowing his way around a kitchen distracts my pussy.

Making a pile of vegetables, he throws them into a large bowl with lettuce for a social media worthy looking salad. I'm totally guilty of buying premade salad kits from the grocery store. Or skipping salads in general. Rabbit food as my dad likes to joke.

"You like pasta?" Maverick cleans off his counter and grabs a bag of flour.

"Who doesn't love pasta?"

Maverick takes out a pasta maker from one of his cabinets. Wait a damn minute. He's going to make us pasta from scratch? Who is this man?

"You want to help?" He strains flour until he's made a mound, which he pats his fingers around to make a dome shape on top in the center.

"Cooking isn't really my forte." I admit.

He comes around to my side and extends his flour-covered hand. When I stare at it for a moment too long, he says, "You aren't going to get hurt."

I'm not worried about getting hurt. My concern is making a fool of myself when he sees how badly my cooking skills are.

Pushing down my anxiety, I place my hand in his and hop out of my chair.

"Don't laugh when I mess something up."

"I've got your back."

Quickly washing my hands, I then stand in front of the flour looking volcano having no idea what to do next. Before I can feel defeated, Maverick cracks two eggs and drops them into the flour. He hands me an egg to do the same.

Crack an egg, easy enough.

"*Perfecto!*" He says with a fake Italian accent.

Maverick reaches to grab the saltshaker. His arm barely skims across my chest as ripples of hot electricity trickle through me.

This is not the time to get horny, Emma.

Having no clue the kind of effect he's having on me, Maverick keeps cooking. After adding salt, he whisks the eggs lightly, keeping it in the center of the flour. He's very precise yet relaxed. The confidence he radiates in the kitchen is sexy.

"Ready to mix it?" Maverick asks.

"Mix what?"

He shows me how to mix the eggs with the flour, but I'm a bit sloppy. He doesn't call me out. Instead, he stands behind me, drapes his arms around my body, and we both have our hands in the flour.

I never thought I'd be having my own *Ghost* moment but with pasta instead of clay.

Our fingers intertwine with one another. My skin is feverish at his gentle touch as we work as a team.

Maverick leans down and peaks around my head to get a good eye on what we've turned into dough. His stubble rubs against my cheek. I can only imagine how good that would feel in other places that I almost moan. Almost.

"Now we can knead it," Maverick says.

Oh, I need it, all right.

He collects the dough and moves it to the side to clean up our mess before flouring the counter again.

"Using the palm of your hand, you want to knead the dough." Maverick shows me before letting me have a turn. "You're good with your hands."

I blush, which makes him smirk.

After kneading the dough for what feels like ten minutes, Maverick wraps it into plastic wrap and sits it aside. "We need to let it sit for thirty minutes."

Peering at him, Maverick laughs and brings his hand to wipe my cheek.

“You are covered in flour.”

“How is that possible?” I laugh as his fingers still linger on my cheek. “You aren’t remotely dirty.”

There’s not an ounce of flour on him anywhere. Flour or not—we both wash our hands.

“I’m dirty in other ways.” He cups my face as we gaze into each other’s eyes. Without second-guessing myself, I grab his shirt and pull him the short distance into me. Our bodies knock together as I press my lips to his.

Rocking my body into his firm, masculine chest, I nearly faint when I feel his hardness through his pants. This little cooking class was just as sexual for him. I knew it! I grind my hips into his as he grips my hair and pulls. All the sensations light a flame that’s been dormant in me for years.

Maverick’s palm cups my needy breast as my hands cling to him. “Take off your shirt.”

We are doing this.

Taking things to the next level.

Can I handle this?

I think about the reason I came here. I wanted to ask Maverick to fuck me one time to get it out of my system.

Him out of my system.

This building desire to have his hands all over me will cloud my mind for years to come if I don’t get this curiosity out of the way.

I’m getting what I came here for.

I pull my shirt over my head with unsteady hands. “You too.”

His shirt is off in an instance, revealing the body I painted not too long ago. I can’t believe I was able to contain myself on that date.

In a matter of seconds, Maverick has my bra unclasped and it falls to the floor. The cold air strikes my skin, but his warm, strong hand palms my breast and squeezes my nipple.

My head falls back in ecstasy at his touch.

Maverick brings his mouth to my breast and he sucks.

“Oh my God,” I moan breathlessly.

Grabbing a fistful of his thick, dark hair, I run my fingers through it and pull hard as he picks up the intensity of his sucking. Adding his expert tongue into the mix, I nearly collapse. I have to lean my backside onto the island for support.

Maverick’s lush mouth leaves my breasts and a whimper escapes mine. I should be embarrassed, but I don’t have time to think about that.

“Don’t worry.” He kisses my lips. “I’ll do that again.”

He smirks as I laugh.

Maverick trails his fingers down my body and stops when they reach the top of my jeans. “Are you okay with this?”

I lean into his chest and gently bite his earlobe. “More than okay.”

If I’m going to get this far with Maverick, I am going the whole way. Putting an end to my sex dreams with some reality sex is what I’m interested in.

A one-time thing.

Maverick unzips my jeans and slides them off my legs. Kneeling beneath me, I can’t help but get excited at the sight of him down on his knees before me.

Over my panties, he licks me.

“Oh.” I grab onto the marble edge of the counter to steady my shaky legs.

The slow, lavish licks suddenly stop. I open my eyes and look down at him. The bastard is smirking.

“You sure you’re okay with this?” he teases.

Taking his head into my hands, I grind my hips into his face.

“Finish your job.” I order.

Maverick’s blue eyes turn from playful to intensely dark instantly. With his teeth, he pulls on my panties and they snap off my body.

With my ripped panties now tossed to the side, Maverick stares directly at my pussy.

He rubs my clit with his finger, sending shockwaves throughout my body. Slow circles turn fast before he pushes one finger inside of me. My toes curl as I shut my eyes again. His slick tongue devours my pussy. The mixture of his mouth and his finger is magical. The sensations are almost too much.

Almost.

I want this forever.

Again, everything stops.

What the fuck?

“Open your eyes,” Maverick commands. “Watch as you drip all over me.”

I don’t know if it’s physically possible to keep my eyes open when they want to roll to the back of my head, but I try.

Watching him bury his face into my pussy is a sight I’ll never forget. The muscles in his back flex as he has his way with me.

My legs shake uncontrollably and my grip on his hair gets tighter. At this point, I’m holding on for dear life. Rocking my hips into his face with force, I’m so close.

“That’s it, Emma.” Maverick growls. “I love how you taste.”

And I love how into this he is. Amazing oral is unlike anything else I’ve ever experienced. Maverick’s treating me like I’m the five-star dish on the menu and he hasn’t eaten in days.

When I don't think I'll be able to stand on my own, his tongue picks up speed around my clit. He sucks me hard before he bites down. I never knew that could feel so good.

This is it.

My belly warms in anticipation for what's to come. My toes curl and legs shake as a weightless feeling rocks through my body as I orgasm.

As if right on time with my pleasure, a loud buzzer goes off in the kitchen, which brings me out of my delicious delirium.

"The dough is ready." Maverick stands up from the floor and kisses my mouth before walking away, leaving me breathless, and naked, in his kitchen.

"Um, thank you." I don't have a clue what to say. Do I offer to return the favor? Right now? Later? I can't see straight.

"Time to finish up our meal." Maverick unwraps the dough. "Even though my appetite is now satisfied."

I blush. Scanning the kitchen, I find all my clothes except my panties, while he's again fully clothed. Quickly dressing myself, I hope wherever those ripped panties are they aren't discovered by Nina.

"I'll feed the dough through and you catch it while it's coming out," Maverick says.

Standing on guard for the pasta, he places the dough into the machine and turns the handle. My breathing is still labored but here we are ... back to life as normal.

Is this what it would be like to be with him?

My thoughts are pushed to the side as I stare in amazement as strands of spaghetti come out of the machine and into my waiting hands.

In our close proximity, the scent of sex radiates off of us.

We repeat the process over and over until all the dough turns to strands of noodles.

“I can’t believe we did this!” I point to the pasta.

Maverick smiles and picks it up to place it in the boiling water.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I ask.

“The cooking?” He cocks his head to the side. “Or what we finished right before?”

“Ha-ha. The cooking.”

“My au pair.”

I nod, hoping that’s the answer for the cooking and not oral sex. “How long did you have an au pair?”

“My entire upbringing. She raised me. My parents were off building their own empire. I didn’t have strong bonds with either of them until I was an adult.”

In doing my research on Maverick, I discovered his parents were self-made millionaires in the pharmaceutical industry. Too bad I didn’t take the time to look up any recent photos. I could have avoided my earlier humiliation with Nina. Every photo on Google was her in her youth. And, truthfully, I was only drooling over the photos of Maverick.

“What’s your father like?”

Please say the opposite of your mother. I’d love for one of Maverick’s parents to like me.

“Meek and timid.”

His back is to me as he cooks the pasta. I can’t tell if he’s joking.

“Nina does not seem like she’d be married to a meek and timid man.” I laugh.

Maverick turns around with a serious expression. “She does her best.”

“I’m sorry. What?” I finish off the rest of my second glass of wine.

“My mother is not always awful. She’s the reason I am the man I am today. Unlike the majority of my friends who had

everything handed to them, she made me work for what I have. I owe her my life.”

Well, well, Maverick *is* a momma’s boy. He keeps surprising me.

I decide to not ask further questions but make myself useful and set the table while he finishes up the rest of the meal.

“*Bon appétit.*” Maverick places dishes of spaghetti aglio e olio and a crisp, fresh vegetable salad on the table.

Twirling my fork around my first bite, I bring it to my mouth and can’t help myself ... I moan. Maverick’s eyes flick up to meet mine. Even though I never told him, weeks ago, I was embarrassed when he did this in a restaurant. But I can’t help it, it’s truly that delicious.

“My compliments to the chef.” I go in for my second bite.

“That would be both of us.” He smiles while twirling his noodles. “We make a good team.”

We eat for a few moments in comfortable silence while enjoying the meal we made together. I’ve never cooked with anyone before. I barely cook for myself. I didn’t have an au pair to teach me and, to be honest, Mom is not the greatest cook. Same goes for Phoebe and Dad. We’re all kind of helpless. I ate mainly carry-outs or frozen dinners growing up.

You’ll be eating frozen dinners again if you lose your job.

Shit. Jennifer knowing about Maverick’s potential scams means I need to pick up the pace on my investigation.

“You never answered if I could come to work with you?” I ask between bites.

“If you’d find that enjoyable, yes.”

“I would find that enjoyable.”

The conversation shifts to what I’m working on at the station, which I lie about. Then we ask each other general questions about how we spend our days.

We make no reference to the looming engagement party or wedding that's probably also being planned as we speak. I'm going to need to call Grandmother and put a stop to her planning. Since it's a fake wedding I don't mind that she's throwing it, but if it were real, I'd assume Maverick and I would want some say.

I also need to plan Eve's bachelorette party. The PowerPoint presentation nearly gave me hives. Luckily, she's laid out exactly what she wants, leaving no guesswork for me. However, if something can't be executed precisely, there was no plan B.

What if one of her options falls through?

Can she whip up a backup presentation?

When both of our plates are empty, I pick them up and walk over to the sink to give them a rinse. Clearing the table is the least I could do after he whipped up this feast *and* gave me an intense orgasm. When I turn around, Maverick has already put everything else away.

"You think any more about your yoga studio?" he asks.

Putting the dishes into the state-of-the-art dishwasher, I say, "No. It's kind of hard to think about that when this whole inheritance and fake wedding thing was dropped on me. And now I'm planning the bachelorette party for my best friend, Eve. There's a lot on my mind."

Plus, I need to know if you are a lying scam artist.

Maverick takes a carton of hazelnut gelato from his freezer and grabs two spoons.

"Are we going to have bachelor and bachelorette parties?" he asks between licking his spoon.

"Um, I, um." My eyes are glued to his tongue licking the ice cream on his lips. Thinking about having that tongue run along the inside of my thighs flushes my skin. I've never eye fucked someone so openly before. I should be absolutely embarrassed but after letting him go down on me in the kitchen, I feel no shame.

Maverick sucks his bottom lip into his mouth and bites down on it. “See something you like?”

“Um. What was your question again?” I shake my head.

“Bachelor parties.”

“I don’t know. Why would we? It’s a fake wedding.” I spoon the gelato into my mouth—trying to cool down the arousal bubbling up inside of me. “Do you want one?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Why aren’t you sure?”

He scoops a big bite onto his spoon. “I still don’t know where we stand on the sex thing.”

I scoff. “Is that all you ever think about? What about what we just did?”

Maverick laughs. “No, that’s not all I think about. But I am thinking about the next however many years with my *wife*. What we just did ... you want to continue doing it?”

“If I say yes to a bachelor party then you will be out having orgies?”

Maverick puts his spoon down and laughs uncontrollably. He’s doubled over laughing. “*Orgies*? Is that what you think I’m into?”

The thought of him having sex with multiple women upsets me. Who am I kidding? The thought of him having sex with anyone but me ignites a volcano of rage inside me. “I don’t know. I didn’t think you’d say spanking or choking earlier. You’re full of surprises.”

“Would I assume you’d be having sex that night too?” He turns the table back around.

“No! I mean ... I don’t know.” I shrug.

“You never seem quite sure of yourself,” Maverick says.

“Um, rude.” That’s a horrible thing to say to someone mustering as much confidence as she can in this strange predicament.

It's then I have a flashback from talking to Juliette's wacky aunt.

You think you are a bad judge of character.

You don't trust others, but you equally do not trust yourself.

Bringing my finger toward my forehead, I tap between my eyebrows. Does this have something to do with my third eye chakra being closed?

"You have a headache?" Maverick grabs a water bottle from his fridge.

"No headache." I grab the bottle and chug down some water without explaining about my third eye.

Maverick tilts his head. "Back to the question at hand ... you do want sex ... just not with me? Your soon-to-be husband."

Calling it quits on the ice cream before I get a brain freeze, I put my spoon into the dishwasher. "Maybe." I shrug. I'd love to continue what we started earlier. But do I want it to be an ongoing thing? That could get dangerous. My body is already craving him and the thought of having him nonstop until ... divorce ... I don't know if I'm cut out for that.

If we spend *years* creating a sexual relationship, will I be able to cut him loose and move on?

"No," Maverick says.

"No?" I'm puzzled.

He rounds the island and stands directly in front of me. "You will be having sex with me ... or no one. This body," he grabs my ass, "is mine."

Look who's back, Mr. Bossy Pants! As Maverick towers over me, I take in the cut of his chiseled jawline, the ocean blue eyes, and the sexy dark five o'clock shadow. He's even better looking than in my dreams.

We stare at each other silently in his kitchen while my inner battle rages within me. What's a girl to do?

Finish what you started before the pasta!

As I'm leaning into his body, he brings his mouth closer to mine. As we are about to lock lips for round two, the sound of a doorbell echoes through the otherwise silent penthouse.

I jump back. Please don't be Nina again.

"I wasn't expecting company." Maverick walks off to the front door.

From the foyer, Maverick's laughter accompanied by another person's laugh radiates throughout the home. A deep male laugh that sounds like a rumble. Both men greet me in the kitchen—they are like a pair of runway models.

"Emma," Maverick points toward me, "this is Logan. We've been friends since college."

"The lovely bride!" Logan beams a wide smile before embracing me with such force that my feet lift off the ground. It doesn't help that he's the height of a professional basketball player.

"Nice to meet you." I can't help but laugh as he places me back on the ground. His energy is highly contagious.

"I was in the building and wanted to stop by. I hope I'm not interrupting anything. Wedding planning, perhaps?" Logan winks.

"No, no, you didn't interrupt anything." I laugh.

Maverick gives me a smirk across the room.

The gods shined down upon me in that moment. Maybe the doorbell ringing was my sign to rethink going any further with Maverick.

"Man, I can't believe you tied down the big dog." Logan pats Maverick on the back.

"What were you doing in the building?" Maverick clearly doesn't want to talk about our wedding.

"Didn't you hear?" Logan graciously accepts a glass of wine from Maverick. "Melissa moved in. She's a few floors

below you. I dropped by to surprise her with a hello but she didn't answer."

Maverick makes a face. "Oh, great."

My eyes dart between the two men.

"Maverick isn't fond of Melissa," Logan says to me. "She's the one who set him up with his ex."

I must have equally displayed my distaste as Logan laughs and slaps his knee. "You two kill me. Already making the same facial expressions."

Maverick and I glance at each other. I do not know him well enough to be taking on his mannerisms. Logan is out of his mind. He clearly can't read a room. *Anyone* would make a face after an ex was brought up.

"Kate is the ex Logan is referring to." Maverick fills me in since we've already discussed his stalker.

No wonder he wasn't happy about Melissa. I wouldn't be fond of the person who set me up with a dangerous stalker either.

"No one knew Kate was going to turn out the way she did," Logan comes to Melissa's defense.

I guess you can't fault someone for something they couldn't have predicted.

"After she announced a fake engagement on social media, Melissa still had her back. She told me it was *kind of cute* how much Kate liked me," Maverick says.

"Announced a fake engagement?" I pour myself another glass of wine. Maverick has been in not one, but *two* fake engagements?

No wonder this wasn't a big deal to him.

I'm not his first.

Real or fake, he's not your first fiancé either.

"But that one didn't make the news?" Not once did Kate appear in my Google search of Maverick.

“She only did it on her private social media and was immediately sent a cease and desist from Nina.” Maverick raises his glass as if to salute that.

Before my own glass can reach my lips, I bring it back down to the table. Suddenly, I’ve lost my desire to drown my anxieties in alcohol.

“She wanted to stake her claim, wanted everyone to know Boo Bear was her man. Of course, as you’ve seen, anyone public with Maverick will make national news.” Logan takes a hefty chug of his red.

I clearly didn’t think the national news thing through when I picked Maverick as my fake fiancé. Which was stupid considering I work for the media. That also means our divorce will hit the headlines. As well as a company scandal, which I could be the one to expose. I didn’t think any of this through. What have I gotten myself into?

If my dad didn’t desperately need this money, I’d back out right now.

“Who told you Melissa moved in here?” Maverick asks.

Logan puts his glass down on the island. “Actually ... Kate. I ran into her on the block a few days ago.”

“On the block?” I trail my inner thoughts out loud. “Do you think she was in the building? She frequents here?” My eyes drift to Maverick’s. Is he safe with her lurking around? “That violates your restraining order.”

Maverick sighs. “I don’t know if it’s worth it to bring it up. That would draw her attention to me and she’s been leaving me alone lately.”

Lately.

“Hopefully she found someone new to harass,” Logan laughs. “Whoever that poor unfortunate soul is, I wish him luck.”

As the guys change the subject about some sports team or whatever, I tap my third eye a few more times.

Hello! Is this thing on? What should I do?

This night has added many unplanned complications to my already hectic life. With the thought of running into Kate in the halls, I'm a little on edge. Plus, Nina hates me. And I definitely want to let my future husband fuck my brains out.

As Logan announces he's leaving, I decide now would be a good time to head out the door myself. I didn't get to uncover any secrets, but I did get confirmation I can snoop around Maverick's office.

"You sure you don't want to stay the night?" Maverick whispers in my ear.

I shove his chest. "Good night, Boo Bear."

He rolls his eyes.

In the elevator with Logan, I'm caught up in my own thoughts that his question throws me off guard.

"Your intentions with Maverick ... are they honest?" Logan asks.

"I'm sorry?"

How many people are going to question my "intentions" in only a few hours?

"Are you looking for something?" He eyes me carefully. Could this elevator go any slower? "Fame? Money? A top anchor spot on the CNN desk?"

"None of the above."

His phone lights up with a few text messages then his gaze is back on me. "Maverick is quick with many decisions, but he's never rushed himself down the aisle. You pregnant?"

My jaw drops. "No." *Do I look pregnant?* Mental note: Get back to boot camp with Eve. "We are in love."

It sounds like bullshit even to my ears.

He scrunches his eyebrows. "What about a stalker?"

"No, I don't have any."

"Listen. Maverick plays it cool, but Kate was out of her mind. She freaked everyone out—including him. He'll sniff

you out if you are up to no good.” He pauses as an older woman joins us on the elevator. “If he doesn’t, Nina will. She’s on high alert now. And she’s already dealt with a crazy woman after her son. She has experience.”

Nina could throw a wrench in my plan to get my father an inheritance. I’m going to need to keep a keen eye on her.

The two of us walk out of the elevator together, and I say quick goodbye to Logan.

On the Driver ride back to my condo, I get a text message.

Maverick: You never told me what your proposal was

Me: We covered it

Maverick: We did?

I don’t bother to text back. Leave him in suspense a little. I was ready to propose we have sex one time to get it out of my system.

Which seems outlandish now.

A fake marriage.

An investigation on his company.

Convincing everyone we are in love when we barely know each other.

“This you?” the Driver asks, pointing to my building. On the inside of her index finger I spot a tattoo of a feather.

“This is me.”

A feather. What’s the point? If my chakras were closed off before, tonight has only sealed them up tighter.

Float away, feather, float away.

Go bother someone else.

EMMA

Eve: You are going to freak out when you get here!

My best friend's text message sends me into a tailspin. I asked her to arrive to my engagement party early to tell me if Grandmother lost her mind. She didn't want my help when it came to decorations or anything. Whenever I tried to ask her, she'd say, "It's handled."

Me: That bad?

Eve: That great! This is the most beautiful event I've ever seen. I'm going to need to talk to your grandma about my own wedding! I see where you got your party planning skills from ;) See you soon!

Not what I was expecting.

Well, I didn't think she'd make it a hoedown considering the black-tie invitation, but I didn't expect it to be something Eve would call "the most beautiful event" she'd ever seen. Also, I've never been compared to my grandmother in any way, but I do know how to throw a good party. Did she rub some random genetics off on me?

Staring at myself in the floor-length mirror, I question my outfit. My evening gown is lovely, but I've worn it on several

occasions when I was the keynote speaker at events for the news station. I didn't have the time or budget to find anything new.

My front door's buzzer startles me out of my anxiety.

No one stops by my place unannounced.

Peeking through the keyhole, I spot a deliveryman.

"Hello," I say through the door. "Can you leave that in the lobby?"

The man stares at the peephole. "I was given strict instructions by Mr. Maverick Stern to *hand deliver* this to Miss Emma Blackstone. There was even a death threat."

I laugh, hoping that last part is a joke.

Opening the door, I take the large package from the man and he leaves without any trouble. "Thank you!" I shout after him.

Sliding the black lace ribbon from the red box, I take off the lid and nearly faint.

He bought me a dress!

And not just any dress ... it's a white dress that has a beaded tight bodice top that flows down to a floor-length white feather skirt.

Feathers!

Maverick keeps gifting me my sign. What would Edie have to say about this?

There's a business card inside. This dress is made with ... *cruelty free feathers*.

Not only did he send me my sign, he made sure no animal was hurt in the process of making it.

This dress makes the one I'm currently wearing look like it came from a trash bin. I only have ten minutes before his driver comes to pick me up, I change without giving the feathers more thought.

Now staring at myself in the mirror, I can't help but smile.

Come on ... feathers?

How does he keep doing this?



Maverick

Waiting for Emma to come out of her building, I stand in the lobby as per usual. Maddison awkwardly flirts with me while checking her mailbox for the fifteenth time. Does she think this is Hogwarts and something new will suddenly pop up?

Out of the corner of my eye, there's a commotion at the double glass front doors, causing me to look up from my phone.

A young blonde woman, who I swore was pushing the door open, is now darting down the street at full speed. I walk out of the lobby to watch her run. Did something scare her?

The blonde pulls the hood to her jacket up over her head to conceal herself.

Her back is to me.

She's Kate's size and has the same hair color but ... was that her or am I being paranoid again?

Taking my phone out, I shoot a text message to Portia to find Kate's current whereabouts. We haven't had a disturbance from her in quite some time. And we never found out who sent me that brick.

"Hey, Maddison," I say, walking back into the lobby.

"Yes, love," she purrs.

"Does your lobby have security?"

Maddison twirls her hair around her finger. "No."

I'm about to change that.



Emma

The ride to the engagement party was a little tense with Maverick. He was extremely polite, complimented my dress, and held my hand, but something is off.

No smirks, no smartass remarks, no sexual advances.

What's the deal?

I didn't have the balls to ask him, though. Maybe he's nervous? Second-guessing going through with this engagement party and fake wedding in the first place? He's wised up to the mistake he's agreed to right before we make our first public appearance as a couple?

Now is not the time for Maverick to back out of this. Dad told me Grandmother made an appointment with her attorney to discuss the changes to her trust. She's not removing the part about me having to be married, but she is adding Maverick's last name to mine in the documents.

Like I'm his property.

"We're here," his driver says as the divider comes down.

"Thank you," I say to her as Maverick nods. He's had his eyes glued to his phone.

Could there be another woman?

No, no, inner thoughts, you quiet the fuck down. The last thing I need is to walk into my engagement party with more doubt displayed across my face.

Hand in hand we walk into the banquet hall and my jaw drops. I can't believe Grandma did this for me! Everything is draped in black, gold, and white—from the larger than life

centerpieces to the silverware, it was all assembled with exquisite care. Not only are the decorations next level, this room is packed with the most beautiful looking people I've ever seen—my family, friends, coworkers, and strangers who I am hoping are Maverick's friends and family.

“Damn.” Maverick finally looks up from his phone. “Ruby did an astounding job. She shelled out big bucks for this. She didn't ask me to chip in either.”

I roll my eyes at his observation, but he ignores it, which irritates me more.

Eve rushes up to us. Before I can say a word, she throws her arms around me. “I'm so happy to see you!” She beams before turning to Maverick and reaching out her hand. “Eve, the best friend, nice to meet you.”

“Maverick.” He places his hand in hers. “The *husband*, the pleasure is mine.”

“Girl!” Eve gives me a thorough head-to-toe look. “You are slaying in that dress. Where'd you get it?”

Looking down at the soft feathers, I run my hands across them gently. “Maverick bought it for me. Thanks.” I turn to him, but again he's buried in his phone.

Eve catches my frustrated look. She loops her arm through mine. “I'm sorry to break the happy couple up right now, but there's a few things you should attend to.”

Maverick mutters something in agreement as Eve pulls me toward my parents.

“First off, that guy's better looking up close. Holy shit. He's so hot. You did a great job landing yourself a fake husband.” Eve whispers. “But is he always like that? On his phone.”

“No, he's usually overly attentive to me.”

“Cold feet?”

“I hope not.” A knot ties in my throat.

“Emma!” Mom and Phoebe shout before pulling me into hugs. They also compliment my dress. Apparently, I can rock some fake feathers.

“Has anyone seen Grandmother?” I scan the room for her. Instead of finding her, I spot Maverick in the cover hovering together with Portia. She’s wearing a tight red dress hugging every curve on her voluptuous body.

“No Grandmother yet,” Dad says, also looking around for her, “but you know she’ll make an entrance when she’s ready.”

My family continues to speak around me, but the sounds of their voices are drowned out. My eyes never leave Maverick and Portia, who are too close for my comfort. He doesn’t have any other family members or friends he wants to speak to? This room is packed to max capacity.

Have they fucked before?

Suddenly, I need to know their back story.

Jealous and paranoid much?

Letting out a deep breath, I excuse myself to hide in the bathroom. Luckily, it’s empty. I take a seat in a plush purple chair in the corner of the sitting area. Even the bathroom is glamorous with better lighting than the television station makeup bathrooms.

A stall opens and I nearly jump up. Shivers erupt down my spine. I swore I was alone.

A redhead approaches the sink to wash her hands. I peek my head around to see if I can get a glimpse of her face in the mirror. Only the side of her face is visible.

She looks familiar, but I’d never forget a ginger. I could have interviewed her for a news segment? The amount of people I’ve come in contact with over the years is through the roof.

Before I can look away and pretend I wasn’t staring, Red turns around. She smiles when she catches me awkwardly gawking.

“Hello, Emma.” She walks closer to me.
“Congratulations!”

The words of celebration unsettle my stomach. She knows my name? Well, duh. Everyone here is for our engagement party. Grandmother rented out the building. She must be connected to Maverick.

A cousin?

“Thank you!” It takes everything in me not to ask who she is, but I don’t want to be rude. If I planned this event, I would have known who was on the guest list.

“When is your big day?” She hovers closer, which makes me look up at her from my chair.

“We haven’t worked through all the details yet.” I fake a smile back. “Wedding planning is a lot of work.”

A memory flashes back of going from banquet hall to banquet hall with Dylan. Nothing felt right—too big, too small, too expensive, too stinky. And one had an awful birdbath in the outdoor ceremony section. No one cleaned that thing in years, bird shit was everywhere. I laugh at the memory. Though it was extremely stressful to plan a wedding on two college students’ budgets, it was fun with Dylan.

“I wouldn’t know,” Red pronounces each word with force to really drive her point home.

Sore subject?

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” I laugh awkwardly, I know that’s not what any single woman wants to hear. If pounds of feathers weren’t blocking me from grabbing my foot, I’d put it in my mouth.

Red rolls her eyes.

Who is this woman? Why is she getting snarky with me at my own engagement party?

Fake engagement party.

“How do you know Maverick again?” I ask.

She makes a face. “I am a friend from college.”

Gripping the arm of the seat I'm in, I use some force to pull my body up despite the weight of the feathers weighing me down.

"Well, it was lovely to meet you," I lie before escorting myself from the bathroom.

Walking back into the elegant ballroom, I notice more guests have arrived. However, Maverick's parents are nowhere in sight. Nina RSVPed "no" after meeting me in the penthouse.

A few of my coworkers come up to mingle and thank me for their invites. A pit sits in the middle of my empty stomach.

I am lying to hundreds of people!

Why did I assume this wedding would go under the radar? That I would go on about my life with a secret husband. I never imagined facing my coworkers with a straight face and gushing about how wonderful my fiancé is.

Where is my wonderful fiancé anyway?

Jennifer corners me when the rest of CCW 4 station employees go to grab more booze. Journalists, we can throw 'em back.

"Find out anything yet?"

She has the balls to ask me this at my engagement party?

I drop my voice. "Still investigating."

And doing an awful job at it. I have to set up that "take your fake fiancée to work" day to at least have a few investigative notes. Bread crumbs to feed Jennifer.

Excusing myself from the conversation, I need to find the man of the hour. Of course, he's in the center of the room surrounded by women.

If Grandmother spots him there's no way she's going to buy his crap about only having one hooker.

Striding toward Maverick, I am cut off abruptly by Mark.

"Maverick's a real ladies man, huh?" He bobbles his head.

“What can I say, I landed a hot commodity.” I push past Mark with my eyes glued to my fiancé, who hasn’t once looked up at me.

“Honey.” I walk into the middle of the circle and loop my arm around Maverick’s waist. Yes, claiming my prize. “Could I have a quick word with you before dinner?” Flashing the fakest smile I can muster, I gently pull Maverick to a private corner.

“What’s up?” Maverick’s gaze avoids my face. He’s looking directly above my head.

“*What’s up?*” I mimic with attitude.

Finally, we lock eyes. “You okay?”

If we weren’t standing in a room with all our closest friends and family, I’d kill him. But everyone who could run my mug shot when I’m charged with murder is standing in this room with their camera phones ready.

“What’s your problem?” I break eye contact to stare at the decorative tiles. “Do you not want to go through with this?”

“Do *you* not want to go through with this?”

Instead of turning the question around on me, I would have preferred for him to tell me of course he wants to go through with this life-altering agreement.

“Yes, I want to go through with this. Do you see money falling from the sky for my dad in any other way?”

Maverick nods. “Then what’s the matter with you?”

“What’s the matter with me? What’s the matter with you? All night you’ve been weird. You aren’t even looking at me. I could be running around the room naked and you wouldn’t know.”

Maverick lets out an exasperated breath and runs his fingers through his hair. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry ... for what?”

“Sorry for ignoring you. I thought I saw Kate in your lobby earlier, but I’m not sure. The woman ran off. Portia and

I have been trying to track down her whereabouts, but we're coming up empty."

When announcing this engagement, I didn't take into account Maverick's enemies are now my enemies and vice versa—stalkers included.

"Holy shit."

"Holy shit is right," Maverick says.

"Are we in danger?"

Maverick's eyes go dark. "I'll keep you safe. Trust me."

That's asking a lot of me yet again. I trusted him enough to find us a place for coffee. I don't know if I'm at the level to trust him to protect me from a mentally unstable woman.

"There you two are." Grandmother approaches. She's wearing a high collared black evening gown with an overcoat. Her hair is pulled back in her usual elegant silver high bun.

"Grandma!" I shout like a giddy schoolgirl. "This place looks beautiful. Thank you."

Her smile is tight-lipped but she nods. I don't dare reach over to hug her. I can't remember the last time I hugged my grandmother.

"Your father will make a toast and then dinner will be served. You should take your seats at the head table."

Ruby is always all business.

Maverick and I walk to the front of the room where the head table is. This feels like an actual engagement party. I need to talk to her before she plans the wedding. We want small and intimate. The least amount of witnesses, the better.

My father stands, clicking his champagne flute. All eyes flock to him.

"Friends and family," he addresses the crowded room, "I'm Tom, Emma's father. On behalf of her family, I'm happy to welcome you tonight. Thank you for coming to celebrate my daughter's engagement." Dad reflects a smile back at me. "I'm sure every dad feels a bit uneasy when their daughter is

getting married.” The room chuckles. “But Emma is the wisest person I know. Every decision she’s ever made, I’m proud of her for. Even that time she let all the birds go in my aviary because she thought they were crying out in despair.”

Everyone erupts with laughter—including Maverick. Mom’s laugh is louder than anyone’s. My parents were still married then and she was the one to find me in an empty room formerly filled with birds.

“Seeing her with Maverick, their energy lights up the room. They are completely smitten with one another. And, as Emma’s dad, I’m happy to see her sincerely smile for the first time in years.” He pauses. Is he tearing up? “Please raise your glasses and join me, her mothers, and her grandmother in toasting to Maverick and Emma!”

“Cheers!” the room joyously erupts in glasses in the air, cheers, and hollers.

I dab at my eyes as tears trickle down my cheeks like a waterfall. Why didn’t I bring tissues?

You had no idea Dad was going to get all emotional at your fake party.

Smitten?

Light up a room?

Sincerely smile?

Did he Google templates on how to do a father of the bride speech? Where did he come up with all that stuff?

Maverick kisses the side of my head, pulling me out of my dilemma and into another one.

I don’t have time to read into what his tender kisses mean because the food arrives. Course after course appear before us. Everyone looks like they’re having a merry time. I’m enjoying the comfort by Maverick’s side. Our conversations flow casually after he put the fear of death in me about his stalker being at my place.

When the food is cleared, the live band picks up the music. I’m shocked by the number of my family members on the

dance floor.

“Ruby really knows how to throw a party.” Maverick gazes out at our guests dancing. “That’s my cousin, Lena, doing the robot next to your moms.”

I laugh. “I had no idea she’d throw a party like this. She’s usually so ... stiff.”

This engagement party is far from stiff. It’s Cinderella’s ball come to life. I never thought I’d have a wedding after Dylan died, but I always secretly dreamed I’d have a lavish one if I could afford it.

“Care for a dance?” Maverick extends his hand.

Placing my unsteady one into his, I join my fiancé on the dance floor as the song goes from fast and upbeat to slow. Dancing is not my strong suit, but Maverick leads me along elegantly. His free hand roams my body before finding a resting place on the small of my back sending a heat wave up my spine.

Everyone in the room fades away as we lock gazes—Maverick and I are all that matter.

Our bodies move in sync with one another and with the music. My heartbeat grows steadily as the intensity between us builds. It’s almost as if I’m floating rather than dancing—his confidence is rubbing off on me.

Among other things.

With his firm masculine body pressed against mine, we glide around the room. I hold onto his back tightly while my other hand rests in his. My body acts without much thought from my brain. I want to run my hands all over him.

Kiss me, you fool.

When the song nears the last beat, Maverick dips me back slowly and brings his soft lips to mine. I hold the back of his head as the kiss intensifies.

Before I can slip my tongue into his mouth, a round of applause pulls me out of my moment. Turning around to see what all the commotion is about, I notice they’re clapping.

“It’s *our* party,” Maverick whispers.

This was all for show?

I fake a smile while doing an awkward wave and curtsy. The family members smiling about my fake relationship gives me a heavy feeling in my chest. I hightail it over to the closest bar.

“Champagne,” I ask the bartender.

He hands me the flute of bubbly. “Congratulations, miss.”

“Thank you.”

Turning away from him, I take my drink and walk out of the banquet room. Twisting and turning down random hallways, I stop when I find a dark, deserted one where I can catch my breath. Leaning against the cold wall, I chug my alcohol.

It’s okay you are lying to everyone you know because your dad’s future is on the line.

Well, technically to the world, because you are a news story now.

But I’m doing this for my dad.

The same dad who gave a heartwarming speech at my party because he believes I’m in love with Maverick.

“Why’d you sneak off?” Maverick’s deep voice reverberates in the dark hallway.

“Needed a minute.”

“You missed some freaky shit happening after you left. Someone is humping the dance floor.” He laughs.

“Someone?”

“I don’t know every crazy member of your family.”

I laugh before turning the conversation around. “Do you feel bad about lying to everyone?”

“No.”

“Why are you so quick to answer?”

“You’re looking out for your family in the best way you know possible. I respect that. Do what you have to do.”

I’m a bit taken aback by his seemingly emotionless answer.

“*Do what you have to do?* That seems rigid. Like my grandma.”

Maverick fakes an exasperated gasp. “Don’t compare me to Ruby.”

I laugh and hiccup before covering my mouth in embarrassment.

If that’s not an unsexy faux pas, I don’t know what is.

“You’re adorable.”

“That’s exactly what every woman wants to hear from her husband. How *adorable* she is.” Another hiccup.

“Was that sarcasm?”

Hiccup.

I really need to get this under control.

“Duh, it was sarcasm,” I sass.

“Your hiccups aren’t going to make me think you are any less ... adorable. Even though I can barely see your face, I know you rolled your eyes.”

He’s right.

“Can you see what I just did?”

I stick out my tongue.

“I’ll give you something to do with that tongue,” he growls.

Hiccup.

Not now, hiccups. I want to see what he wants me to do with my tongue.

“Oh yeah? This *adorable* tongue ...” I mock.

Maverick shoves me up against the wall and I drop my glass. The sound of its fall echoes in the pitch-black hallway. “That sexy tongue.”

Every muscle in my body tenses in eager anticipation. Maverick lifts me and I wrap my legs around his waist.

His lips press against mine before he slides his tongue into my mouth. We tease each other as our tongues dance around in circular motions.

Hungry possession comes over me.

I want my fiancé. Now.

My nails rake through his hair before I pull it, hard. He moans into my mouth and his fingers grip my thighs through my dress. Moving his mouth away from mine, he sucks on my neck before nibbling down to my shoulder.

Grinding my hips into his waist, I trust he won't drop me, as need tingles throughout my body.

Maverick puts my feet back on the ground before spinning me around. As he starts to unzip my dress, I turn back. “Wait.” I grab his hands. “Let me.”

Pushing Maverick against the wall, I rake my nails down his hard chest. Stopping at his belt buckle, I stare deeply into his eyes before my knees hit the ground. The buckle comes off, followed by undoing his zipper and dragging his dress pants to the floor.

Maverick's eyes never leave my body as I lace my fingers in the top of his black boxer briefs and pull them off. His thick cock jumps out. It's been years since I've done something like this, but I don't remember erections being this large, ever.

“Wow.”

He grabs my head and pushes my face against his cock.

Running my tongue along his long shaft, I spit onto him. I want him slipping with saliva. Putting his length into my mouth, I work him up and down with a combination of tongue and hands.

“Fuck,” Maverick hisses. Cupping his balls, I massage them gently in my other hand. “Oh, Emma.”

Hearing my name while he growls drives me wild.

Over and over, I give his cock my full attention and he pulls my hair as hard as I pulled his. Two can play at this game.

“This is it.” He thrusts his hips into my face while tears stream down my cheeks. I gag, but I won’t quit. I grip onto his firm thighs to hold me steady as his thrusts pick up the pace.

With one final suck, Maverick finishes in my mouth.

With both of us out of breath, we take a moment to collect ourselves.

“That was fucking fantastic,” Maverick huffs.

I stand up. “Did my tongue live up to your expectations?”

Maverick laughs. “Best blowjob I’ve ever had. Your turn.”

“No, no.” I shove his chest. It’s not the time or place. “We need to get back to the party.”

“The party?” His eyes go wide. “I completely forgot. Fuck the party. I want to devour your pussy *now*.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. “As much as I’d love that, someone is bound to notice we aren’t there. I don’t want it to be Ruby.”

“You’re right. I don’t want to piss Ruby off.” Maverick rubs the back of his neck. “But I’ll be feasting on your pussy later tonight.”

I’m not arguing with that.

He slips his hand into mine and as we round the corner a bright flash out of my peripheral vision startles me.

“You saw that too?” Maverick squeezes my hand tighter. “Stay here.”

“No.” Pulling on the back of his black tux, I whisper, “Don’t run into danger ... again.”

“Give me one minute.”

Before I can argue, he's taking off after the mysterious flash of light.

Should I stay here? I've chased after plenty of bad guys for work. Nothing dangerous has happened ... yet.

Tiptoeing in the direction Maverick went, I silently pray nothing freaky is waiting for me. A second dark hallway runs parallel to the one I gave Maverick a blowjob in. Was someone watching us? Filming?

The invasive and disgusting thought stops me in my tracks.

Turning a second corner, my body slams into a wall, and I stumble backward and land against ... another wall? What in the hell?

That's when what I thought was the original wall turns around ... Maverick.

He really is a solid piece of man.

"Are you okay?" He grips my shoulders to steady me.

"No." I catch my breath. "I just ran into two walls."

Maverick's devilish grin lights up the otherwise dark room. "There's no one to be found around here."

"Think we imagined it?"

He shakes his head. "No, we saw something."

"Think it was Kate?"

Maverick's grip on my shoulders loosens as he pulls me in for a hug. "I'm not sure but I've already requested all video footage from tonight's party."

Pulling out of his hug, I gasp. "Did we just film a sex tape?"

"If cameras are turned on in these dark hallways, maybe."

As someone who works in the media, I should have thought about that before I sucked Maverick off in a public place.

"You better burn that footage."

“Don’t worry.” Maverick squeezes my ass and whispers into my ear, “I’d never let anyone else see what’s mine.”

His.

The idea of being his confuses me. I’m not his—this is fake. But his protective need to claim me turns me on.

“Now that we aren’t making out, we might as well stop lurking in the corners and get back to our party.”

“Good plan.”

Maverick escorts us back to the party. I’d like to think we snuck out unseen, but Eve is the first to call us out.

“What were you two doing?” Eve wiggles her eyebrows.

“Nothing,” I chirp.

“Your tousled hair says otherwise.” Eve winks.

I pat my hair down to the best of my ability without a mirror.

“Did you see anyone else come from this direction?” I nod toward the hallway we emerged from.

“Nope,” Eve says.

The rest of the night goes smoothly—dancing, laughing, and getting to know each other’s coworkers and family. Unlike Nina, Maverick’s extended family seems perfectly okay with me becoming his wife. I’m going to guess I’m not the first gold digger to join the Stern clan.

EMMA

He owns how much property?

My eyes bulge out reading the stats on the report Portia brought in for Maverick.

Shopping centers, hotels, warehouses, cinemas, storage units, and health care. United States, Canada, Mexico, France, Italy. You name a country; you'll find it on one of these impressive lists.

I don't think I should be looking at these sheets, but Maverick hasn't withheld anything while I've been shadowing him at work. Portia, on the other hand, has side-eyed me all morning.

Nothing seems out of place, but I'll search everything when I get home. Some of these terms are unfamiliar, but they don't sound illegal. Outside of reading documents hoping some kind of scam jumps out, I have no idea how to research if Maverick's company is setting up beatings.

Jeremy's claims sound crazier by the minute. Why did I meet him in that shady diner?

"Emma."

Looking up, the gazes of Maverick, Portia, and her assistant, Monroe, are glued to me. "I'm sorry. What?"

Maverick laughs, but Portia does not utter the same chuckle.

“Do you want anything for lunch?” Monroe pushes his chic black framed glasses up on his nose. “I’m going to go make a run.”

Jumping up from the chair with enough excitement, I knock it over. “I’ll go with you.” Bending down to pick up the chair at the same time as Maverick, we collide, bumping our heads together. “Sorry.”

Calm down, Emma. Your paranoid look is not cute.

Following Monroe out of the office, I plan to dig a little deeper, asking him questions on the walk. However, he walks faster than a gazelle. Sweat is dripping from my forehead as I barely keep up with him.

Monroe is striding as I’m practically jogging at his side.

“So,” out of breath, I huff, “have you worked at Stern Developments for long?”

“Four years. I interned for them for about six months before that.”

“Nearly five years. That’s quite a long time.” He’ll know if they were doing some shady business deals. “What’s your favorite part of working there?”

Entering the Indian restaurant, I finally catch my breath and hold my side. I’ve got a cramp worse than when GI Liam works me out in boot camp.

“All the dorky stuff. I like reviewing the commercial leases, assisting Portia in finding land to develop, and pretty much watching Maverick turn a dream on paper into someone’s reality.” Again he pushes the glasses up his nose.

“Have you ever gone to any of the seminars they run?” I ask.

Monroe scrunches his eyes. “Uh, I don’t think we’ve done seminars in years. Before my time.” He shrugs. “Seems like something old dudes would do.”

“Do you know if there are any lawsuits against Stern Developments?”

“Plenty.” He laughs. “However, our legal team is better than any in the industry. When lawsuits pop up, they shut that down quickly.”

On our sprint back to the office with bags full of chicken tikka masala, lamb karahi, garlic naan, and vegetable samosas, I figure out I need a way to get myself into the legal team’s room.

Where do those guys hang out?



Maverick

She’s out of her damn mind. If I had enough time to figure her out, I would, but I’m too preoccupied with these latest developments. There are more contracts than I’ve ever had at once. Plus, no one has heard from Kate since her last set of stalker emails ... weeks ago. Portia wants me to hire a private investigator to follow her around.

She’s right.

I left a voicemail for my friend, Jerry, a retired Marine to call me back. He owns the most elite surveillance firm in New York. If he can’t find Kate, we’re all screwed.

Back to the other chaotic woman in my life. After returning with Monroe from fetching lunch, Emma awkwardly asked to see the other departments in the building. When I walked her from room to room, her fidgeting got worse. I had to come right out and ask her what she wanted to see.

And that’s how I left her with the legal department. Maybe it’s her journalist curiosity that finds sitting around with the

suits and talking about laws interesting? The process puts me to sleep but in a few short months ... what's mine is hers, so she can look around.

I haven't told her yet, but I'm not going to move ahead with the prenuptial agreement. That was a test to see if she'd throw a fit or not.

"What is your *fiancée* really doing here?" Portia hovers over the front of my desk.

"What do you have against her?"

"I never said I had anything against her."

"Portia," I look up from my contracts, "it's not like you to hold back your thoughts. Spit it out."

"She's up to something."

Emma is hiding the fact that our wedding is a sham, but I agree ... something else is up. Something to do with her yoga studio, possibly? She could be trying to figure out how to make that dream a reality without my help? Finding a legal loophole right now?

"She's harmless."

Portia purses her lips. "I'll figure her out."

"Have at it."

Portia leaves me to ruffle through the mound of documents on my desk. Buried deep in paperwork, I don't hear Emma walk in until she clears her throat.

"What are you working on?" Her candy sweet voice causes me to look up. Her beauty stuns me.

Stuns me.

Who in the fuck have I become?

But it's true. It takes everything for me not to reach across my desk and grab her. Her eyes widen as I gaze at her glowing face. Oh yeah, she's thinking the same thing.

"Find what you were looking for?" I ask.

Her eyes drop, but she picks them up quickly. “There’s still plenty for me to see here.”

“Something in this office perhaps?” I stand.

She blushes, batting her eyelashes. “Yes.”

Game on.

Walking around the desk, I stand before her. Extending my hand, she places hers inside my grasp. Lifting her up, she grips her legs around my waist.

“Is this what you had in mind?” I ask.

Face to face, I stare into her glistening green eyes. I could bite her rosy red cheeks as another blush spreads across her face.

Instead of answering, she bites down on my bottom lip then sucks it in her mouth.

Fuck. She drives me wild.

Gripping her firm ass, she rolls her hips into my cock. A few more thrusts and I’ll be hard beneath these pants.

Slowing her down, I place her on top of my desk and hitch her dress up around her waist.

Black lace stockings await me.

She sees my stare. “Do you like them?”

“Fuck yes.”

Running my fingers along the top of the lace, she squirms a little before laughing.

“I’m ticklish.” Her infectious laugh fills the room before she quiets down. “Sorry. We don’t want people to hear us.”

“Don’t apologize. I don’t give a shit if the entire city hears me fucking you. I want them to know you’re mine.”

“Maverick,” she whispers.

Her lips part slightly before she sucks on her bottom one.

Pulling her by the back of her head toward my face, I kiss her soft, wet lips. Ravenous kisses consume us. We’re a messy

mix of lips, tongues, fingers, and teeth as the intensity of our desire takes over.

Running my fingers up her laced thigh, I rub along the outside of her matching black lace panties. Emma grinds her body against my hand. I pinch her clit through the barely-there fabric before she throws her head back and moans.

“That’s it. Be a good girl and feel your pleasure. I want you dripping.”

I’m going to bust the zipper on these damn pants if my straining cock doesn’t calm down. Watching her come undone is intoxicating. Even the subtle non-sexual things she does gets me harder.

The way she ties her hair up into a messy bun but those little curls hang down around her neck.

When she runs her finger across her collarbone when she’s deep in thought. I don’t think she realizes she does it.

How she let me teach her to cook without acting embarrassed. She sinks right into my side like she’s belonged there her whole life.

“Maverick,” Emma’s moan pulls me out of my thoughts.

Fuck. Focus.

Continuing to tease her, she takes matters into her own hands and pushes her panties to the side.

“Someone’s impatient,” I tease.

Emma leans forward to rub the outside of my pants, giving me a taste of my own medicine. Removing her hand from my body, I begin to kneel down before she stops me.

“No.” She eyes my cock with her greedy gaze. “I want you. *All of you.*”

We haven’t taken this to the next level *yet*. We’ve gotten pretty damn close but here doesn’t feel right.

“I’m not going to take you on my desk for our first time.”

“Why not?” She pouts those swollen cherry red lips that drive me crazy.

“You deserve better.” My thoughts are scrambled all over the place. This is not how I saw this day going. “Something classier. A bed, at least.”

Emma laughs as she unzips my dress pants and drops to her knees. “I appreciate your chivalry, but this is what I want.”

Who am I to deny a beautiful woman peering up at me with my cock in her hands what she wants?

“Are you sure?” I ask.

Emma has been through so much. I’m not about to take something she’s not willfully giving.

She has my pants and briefs down around my ankles before she strokes my shaft with her small, warm hand. With every stroke, the sensitivity increases.

“I’m sure,” she purrs.

It’s when she licks my balls, I nearly pass out. I can’t control myself. If she wants it, I want it too. I always envisioned fucking her in my office at some point, so why not now?

Letting her continue her blowjob, I watch her every move until I can’t take it anymore. I pick her up and place her back down on my desk.

“Lean back,” I command. The beast inside of me ready to come out to play.

Emma puts her arms behind her on the desk as I pull her ass to the edge. Running my fingers across her slickness, I heat up at how turned on she is for me.

“Ready?” I eye her.

Emma grinds her wet slit against me and bites her lip.

Don’t you blow your load early, Stern.

“Please,” she moans. Her grinding picks up speed. “I want you inside of me.”

She won't have to ask me again.

Positioning myself at her entrance, we lock eyes as I slowly push inside of her. It takes everything in me not to ram into her. Hard. She's the snuggest fit I've ever experienced. Her pussy feels like a warm hug around my cock.

Emma's mouth forms a perfect "O" that nearly makes me ejaculate now.

Don't be a little bitch.

Her legs wrap around my waist and she grips my shoulders to bring us chest to breasts. Pulling out, I thrust back in over and over as tingling sensations shoot down my cock. She's soft and warm in all the right places. The intensity is out of this world.

Gripping a handful of her dark hair, I steady myself. She leans her head back for me to suck on her neck.

"Oh, Maverick," Emma moans.

Hearing her say my name brings it to another level. Nothing else exists except for her.

Her sharp nails grip into my biceps as she steadies herself. Hurts like hell when she scratches me but drives me wild at the same time.

My thrusts pick up speed rapidly and she meets me pound for pound. Tensing my muscles is the only logical thing I can think to do to keep this building.

The items on my desk crash onto the floor from sliding off. Anyone within a short distance from my office has to know what we are doing inside.

I fucking love that.

Emma is mine and I want *everyone* to know how she screams for me.

Emma bites down on my shoulder. Her legs shake around me. I hope she's on the high of her life.

"Oh..." Her body tenses.

Continuing to thrust, I work her clit at the same time causing her legs to quiver around me.

“That’s it, baby.” I’m not going to be able to last much longer but I’d never finish before my woman. This is unbelievable.

“Harder,” she hisses.

She wants it harder?

Fuck. It’s sexy hearing her make commands.

“Oh, baby girl, I’ll give it to you harder.”

Emma’s body bucks against mine. Both of my hands grip the bottom of the desk as I lose all control and thrust into her harder than I could imagine. She brings her delicate hand down to rub her clit—it’s truly a sight to behold.

Our thrusts are rough and demanding before we black out against one another. Coming undone in each other’s arms. My legs and arms are weightless. After the endorphin rush of a lifetime, a wave of relaxation engulfs my body.

Spying a red marker in my pencil holder, I eye Emma’s luscious body and do what I should have done on our body painting date.

I remove the cap and bring the tip to the inside of her thigh—just above the top of her stockings. Her eyes remain closed as I write on her body.

I can’t believe I fucked my fiancée. And the lustful, dreamy look in her eyes is a sure sign this is going to complicate things for her too.

But damn, it was well worth it.

She feels like coming home.

That can’t be good for either of us.

EMMA

I stole from him. And I had sex with him.

Chills sweep throughout my body. Both experiences are new for me.

I've never stolen anything before. Not even a pack of gum. It broke me when he said he wanted our first time to be meaningful, in a bed at least. I want that too. But that would have been too much for me.

Meaningful is what I need to avoid.

Sex has to be just that ... sex.

It can't be making love or anything gooey like that.

I can't shake the memory of it either. My thigh still reads "property of KM" in red marker.

King Maverick.

Not only did he leave me a little note but he used the nickname for his penis he knows I make fun of.

No matter how many showers I take, the marker isn't coming off.

Right now I need to focus on how unprofessional I've been lately. When Maverick's lawyers took a coffee break, I snapped photos of every document in sight on my phone as fast as humanly possible.

Uncool, Emma.

I want this situation behind me and I want it behind me now. Yesterday would be preferable. If I don't get answers soon, Jennifer is going to demand them. The last thing I want is for another reporter to be on this case.

My phone rings, startling me out of my near nervous breakdown.

Grandmother's name displays on the screen. She never calls me. Something must be terribly wrong.

"Hello?"

"Do you always answer your phone so unsure of yourself?" Her words spill into my ear and down into the depths of my stomach.

"How can I help you?" I muster up my fakest voice. The one I use for doing interviews with people I'd rather punch in the face.

"Your father told me I should run your wedding invitations by you before I send them out."

Her annoyance is obvious in every word.

"Okay ..." I pause. Again showing her how unsure I am of myself. "I'll try to get over to check them out in the next week."

My stellar plan is to delay anything she has in motion.

My doorbell rings for the second startle of the afternoon.

"That should be your invitation now. I had it sent over by carrier. Go see. I'll wait," she instructs.

What the ...?

Leaving my phone on the counter, I find a messenger at my door holding a glistening gold box wrapped with a satin black bow. "Congratulations!" he says before turning around and leaving promptly.

You Are Cordially Invited To

Spotting the date, the invitation weightlessly floats to the ground out of my grasp.

Two months away.

“Emma. Emma.” My phone’s speaker fills the eerily quiet room. “Can I send it out?”

Stall.

“Um, the respectable thing to do is show this beautiful invitation to my fiancé. He needs to be sure his schedule is clear.” Dead air. Checking the screen, I see she hasn’t hung up.

“Fine. That is a wise decision to do as a *wife*.”

Her emphasis on wife grinds my gears.

“I’ll get back to you as soon as possible,” I say.

“You’ll call me back tomorrow or I will call Maverick myself.”

Before I can argue, the line goes dead. I’m back to staring at the photos I took from Maverick’s company on my phone.

I’m going to let her call Maverick herself. I’ll never be able to face him again knowing what I did behind his back.



“How’s your investigation going?” Jennifer pops her head into my office.

“Working on it.” I strain a smile.

She nods. Just as she’s about to speak, Kreepy Karl slithers into my office and Jennifer bolts out faster than a guy who ghosts after a first date.

I wish I could do the same, but this is my office. I have nowhere else to go.

“Do you need something?” In the beginning, I was nice to Karl and that was the biggest mistake of my career. He leeches on to my niceness.

Karl rolls a chair right next to me. His heavy breathing is accompanied by the smell of garlic coming off his breath. He’d surely kill a vampire. The cast of *Twilight* would be sparkling dust bunnies.

“So ... Emma.” He bobbles his head.

“So ... Karl.”

My eyes don’t look away from my computer screen. An email alert comes up from Jeremy. I haven’t heard from that guy since the diner. It takes everything in me to scroll past it while Karl hovers.

“Your engagement party was fun.” He breathes all over me.

“Thanks.” Luckily, I never ran into him. One blessing from that weird night.

“When did you start dating Maverick?”

“We met a while back.”

“You going to quit when you get married?”

“Quit what?”

“Your job.”

For the first time, I look up. “Why would I do that?”

“You’re marrying a *billionaire*. Won’t it look weird if you marry him and keep working? Shouldn’t you launch a charity or some bullshit? High society rules or something.”

“No. I’m not quitting.”

Karl, you aren’t taking me out this easily.

“So ... he usually has a lot of really hot girls on his arm. Over and over. Doesn’t really keep them around long either.”

Again, his hot breath turns my stomach.

When I don't respond, he doesn't take the hint. "You okay with having a 'boys will be boys' type of husband?"

I sigh. "Maverick is not that kind of guy."

If you don't keep having sex with him, he'll surely step out.

Karl laughs. "Oh please. He's had everything he's wanted his whole life. Plus, there's two types of men in this world: those who cheat and those who wish they could."

My jaw drops at his audacity.

Before I can scold him, Karl turns his phone toward me. On the screen is an Internet image search with photo after photo of Maverick with a new flavor of the week for several years.

Each one of them is stunning; if you're into tall, thin models wearing tight designer dresses, with long giraffe legs and glowing voluminous hair. I don't think any of these women are repeated.

I'm not a troll, but this would make *any* woman question her self-worth. As a reporter, we are critiqued quarterly by the network on our physical appearance, clothes, makeup, you name it. I know exactly what my strong features are and I play them up. I also know my weaknesses. And if I didn't, all the lovely emails that come into the station about each one of us female reporters remind us about how we are either ... too fat, too thin, too loud, too quiet, too you fill in the blank.

Karl eyes me curiously to see if I'm going to break. What's he trying to do here?

"Well," I look back at my computer, "he didn't choose to ask any of them to marry him."

Grandmother needs to remove Karl from the wedding invitation list or I will kill her. I wonder if there's a clause in her trust about murder?

That's dark, Emma, even for your twisted self.

Karl sits by my side, heavy breathing for a few more minutes as I click around aimlessly on my screen. When he doesn't see anything to his value, he leaves. Not before loudly

wheeling his chair to the other side of the room in a grand show.

Now I have the time to click on Jeremy's email. I find a series of photos and addresses. Each one is an exterior shot of a commercial building that looks nice with an interior photo of a dump. Ceilings leaking, floorboards missing, water damage, graffiti, and some with dead animals.

But that's it. Only photos. This guy is stranger than strange.

Quickly sending an email back asking him for more details, I get up and go to the morning meeting. Where I'll lie like every other morning about the progress on my investigation and take whatever random daily assignment they have for me. I hate every minute of it.

I've never hated my job before.

Maverick, why are you ruining my life?



Maverick

She's ruining my life. Ruby is something else.

"Two months!" Portia shrieks, holding the mock-up wedding invitation before throwing it down on my desk like its trash on fire.

"I didn't plan it." I shrug casually. I don't mind having a wedding in two months, but having to answer to Portia is getting exhausting. She's worse than my mom, who is currently giving me the silent treatment after telling me I'm making the biggest mistake of my life. She'll come back around. I know it.

“What is wrong with you?” Portia’s eyes bulge out. “Are you sure she doesn’t have something on you?”

“For the last time ... no.” Staring at the invitation, I can’t get over how much work her grandmother is putting in for this. She really wants Emma to be married. And quickly. “Do I not give you enough work around here? Shouldn’t you be making someone else’s life miserable?”

Portia’s hands fly to her hips. “I have plenty to do. And count me in as a yes for your freaky fast wedding.”

When Portia is out of my hair, I text the woman I haven’t heard from since the day we fucked in my office.

Me: You hiding from me?

Emma: No. Sorry I’ve been quiet. Big deadline at work. Did my grandmother get ahold of you?

So she knew about this invitation. Why didn’t she give me a heads-up? I could have at least checked the mail before Portia got her hands on it. That would have saved me a headache.

Me: She did. Ready to be Mrs. Stern in 2 months?

Emma: I’m going to keep my last name

I was joking about her changing her name. I figured she’d keep hers since:

1. This marriage isn’t real
2. She has an established news career with her current name

But the way she quickly dismissed my last name does bother me. My last name can open doors for her like she’d never

imagine. Most of the doors in this city I own or I've developed.

Me: When am I going to see you again?

Then I wait and wait and wait.

Silence.

Seems we're back to square one.



Emma

Every document I stole from Maverick's office, I have been able to fact check. When I gave Jennifer an update she seemed disappointed that he's an honest man but instructed I keep investigating.

Jeremy returned my calls after dodging me for several days even though he was the one to send me those pictures. He claims they are bait and switch. The outside properties are buildings Maverick is selling and claiming are lavish properties. He sells them to foreign buyers in quick deals before they can come to verify the inside, which looks like the damaged photos.

When I ran a search on whether or not Maverick is selling those addresses ... they fact check. Those are his properties. But I can't confirm that the interior photos online, which are gorgeous, aren't real.

Setting up showings is my main objective, but I can't do that myself. I've been able to set up appointments in my intern's name but the calendar at Stern Developments is packed.

And the biggest struggle for me is half a dozen more emails came in from Jeremy, but they are buildings from around the world. One big resort, to be exact. Maverick's company is taking millions from donors to develop a resort in Jamaica, but according to Jeremy it's a sham. He's sent photos and videos of vacant land, dirty fields, and junk. I need to get myself to Jamaica if I really want to fact check.

Just like Jeremy did to me, I've been dodging Maverick's calls.

The knock on my office door surprises me. And the biggest surprise is it's not Karl walking through. Well, not just Karl because yes, he's here too, but he's followed by ... Maverick.

"Look who I found wandering the halls." Karl's grin is from ear to ear. I've never seen his beady eyes so ... beady. "Why didn't you pick up your fiancé in the lobby, Emma?"

"It's a surprise visit." Maverick leans in to kiss my cheek. His tenderness throws off the nauseous pit forming in my stomach. "Hi."

"Hi." I smirk.

Karl eyes the two of us before pointing at my computer screen. "What are you working on, Emma?"

My screen has the resort's main webpage displayed. Leaning over, I exit out as quickly as my computer will allow. What does it feel like to have a heart attack? I might be experiencing one now.

My body blocked Maverick's view, I hope.

"Doing some browsing." I shrug.

"She's got something up her sleeve." Karl wiggles his index finger at me. "She *always* does this. She'll cover a bunch of lame stories before busting something big."

He doesn't hide his jealousy for the cases I cover.

"*She* is standing in the room." I fold my arms across my chest. "And my stories haven't been lame."

“My Grandpa falls asleep during your segments,” Karl scoffs.

My stories are sending senior citizens to snooze-ville.

“I think they’ve been great. I couldn’t get over the one about the subway ninjas,” Maverick chimes in.

Looking up at his blue eyes, I can’t believe he knows about the subway ninjas. Admittedly, it was a lame story I covered yesterday in the four o’clock show. He must be watching all my segments.

Karl breaks up the little moment we’re having here. “So where are you two going on your honeymoon?” He gives an ol’ double gun salute with his fingers.

I stand up from my chair and edge closer to the door. If Karl isn’t leaving, I might as well.

“We haven’t planned that yet.” Maverick pulls me into a tight side hug. “Where were you thinking, babe? Mykonos?”

The show Maverick is putting on for Karl is clearly doing its job. Karl squirms. “Mykonos is the shit.”

The shit? Karl is a dinosaur who shouldn’t be using vocabulary he doesn’t understand to impress Maverick. Actually, no one should be saying “the shit” in general.

“It’s being overrun by commoners, but it will do.” Maverick shrugs, acting like the billionaire Karl wants him to be.

“Oh yeah, yeah,” Karl stutters, looking at the floor, “commoners are the worst.”

Holding in my laugh, I simply nod.

“How about that studio tour?” Maverick asks, eyeing me.

Taking the hint, I loop my arm through his. “Right this way, *babe*.”

Karl waves awkwardly as we leave the room.

When we are in the hallway alone, I ask, “Did you really want a tour of the studio?”

“Yes, I’d love to see where you work.”

Dragging Maverick around the station turns many heads. From the newsroom to the control room and the studio and Human Resources—everyone wants to speak to my fiancé. Maverick takes his time with each of my coworkers, giving them a glimpse into his real personality, not the show he gave Karl.

After nearly an hour and a half of this tour, Maverick leaves because I need to get back to work. Duty calls ... or as Karl would say my “lame” stories need me.

“Trying to figure out what your husband’s development will be worth?” Karl asks, sliding back into my office. “You should ask him.”

“What?”

“I saw your screen earlier. Maverick’s firm is behind that resort in Jamaica. You trying to figure out what your cut will be?” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“You looked at my computer when I left?”

Get the fuck out of here.

And what is he talking about—my cut? He wants me to be a gold digger like everyone else. The sad thing is I can’t defend myself and tell him the truth—that I’m investigating the resort.

“Oh come on. It’s killing me. I need to know what you’re working on,” Karl says.

Powering off my computer, the feeling of being vandalized in my own place of work hurts me.

“I’m only going to tell you this once.” I stand up. “Mind your own business.” Pushing past him, I knock into his shoulder as I leave the building.

Watching my back against one of my own coworkers is not something I thought I’d be dealing with. Add it to the list of things I shouldn’t be worrying about.

Grandmother’s inheritance clause.

My dad working until his death because he has no retirement.

My fake marriage.

My fake fiancé being a potential scammer.

Not any ol' scammer but one costing people *millions*.

The lingering feeling that every relationship decision I make is letting Dylan down.

Getting the best stories for the station or losing my job.

Planning my best friend's bachelorette party.

How damn incredible it felt to have Maverick's cock deep inside me.

No wonder I can't sleep at night.

I'm in way over my head.



How come I've never noticed this before?

On my walk home from the station, Jackie's Bar is right in front of my face.

How many times have I walked past it without noticing? Without second-guessing myself, I push the wooden door open and step inside. It's dark as I grab a seat at the bar.

"What'll it be?" the bartender asks.

"Tequila."

She nods and leaves me to get the booze.

"Damn, girl, you mean business."

Looking beside me, I find ... Maverick.

"What are you doing here?" I ask. He's the last person I want to see.

“I was hanging out with Clark,” he nods to a table where Clark waves, “when I saw a beautiful brunette rush in looking feisty. Then I hear her order tequila. Did giving me a studio tour lead to your drinking?” He laughs.

The tour feels like centuries ago when it was only hours. “No, I mean, yes.” I shake my head. The bartender slides my shot over. “Yes, the tour was fun. It’s just ... I don’t know.”

Maverick eyes me as I down the shot without a flinch.

“Can I do anything to help you?” Maverick asks.

I’m at a loss for words. No, I’m not stunned by his offer. He always seems to want to have my back. No one has in a long time. Not like this.

“Want to get drunk with me?” I hold up two fingers to the bartender and two more shots of tequila slide down the bar.

“I don’t know if this is a good idea.” Maverick laughs.

Before we drink our shots, Clark approaches. “I’m calling it a night, you two lovebirds. Sorry I couldn’t make it to your engagement party. I heard it was epic. I’m looking forward to the wedding.”

“Thank you.” My fake smile can’t reach my eyes.

Clark bids us good night and when we are alone again, I take my second shot.

“Slow down,” Maverick commands. He leaves his untouched.

“Want to sneak into the bathroom and have sex?”

A sultry distraction sounds nice.

“Or ... we could go back to my place and have sex in a bed,” Maverick suggests.

“Uh.” I sigh, looking down at the counter. “Why do you keep pushing sex in a bed like a normal couple?”

Maverick pauses. “I never said like *a normal couple*. Does this have something to do with the engagement?”

“No.”

“You know I like you, right? More than this fake engagement.”

“What?” The tequila nearly works its way back up. “Why would you say that? You don’t know me.”

Maverick smirks. “I might not know what your go-to breakfast order is or who your first grade teacher was ... but I know more about you than you think.”

“You can’t *like* me.” He can marry me and have sex with me, but that’s where I draw the line. No happily ever after for this fake relationship.

“Why not?” Maverick asks.

Looking over at his shot, I down that one too. I’m the biggest lightweight—three shots in a short time frame will turn me into a hot mess. But this conversation is taking a turn I don’t want it to take. I came here to escape making life altering decisions for a moment.

“Because ... you can’t. It’s not ... real,” I mutter.

“It felt real at body painting, in my kitchen, and in my office.” Maverick flashes his wickedly delicious grin. “There’s something holding you back from being with me. Truly being with me. You’re so closed off.”

Just like my chakras.

“Why can’t we go fuck in the bathroom or something?” I purr while running my hand lazily up his arm.

“Does this have something to do with Dylan?”

“No!” My hands quickly drop from his body to form fists at my sides.

Maverick tilts his head. “Why are you shouting?”

“I’m not!” I sigh. Okay, that was a shout. I don’t know why. Maverick hasn’t done anything wrong and I’m losing my cool.

“The person who hit Dylan’s car, you said they survived the crash, right?” Maverick asks.

Why the hell would he ask me that?

My head spins as the bar becomes a bit fuzzy. Now is not the time to discuss my dead fiancé. Clearly I had sexual plans in mind. But those won't be happening. At the mention of Dylan's name ... the flame doused inside of my body. Embarrassment and shame wash over me.

Maverick eyes me. "Can you answer me?"

"Yes." Looking down at my fists, I unclench my hands. "That fucking bastard."

"Have you ever spoken to them?"

My jaw drops. "Why would I do that? That's ridiculous!"

"Maybe you need to. For closure."

"Don't tell me what I need." The words are like ice. "I'm going to call it a night."

"Wait." He grabs my arm as I stand up. "I can't let you run off like this. You're drunk."

Pulling my arm out of his hand, I wobble. "I'm fine. I'm calling a Driver." I wave my phone in front of his face to show him I've alerted the app I need a ride. "Don't follow me out."

Waiting on the curb, I get into the car when the Driver arrives and before we pull off, Maverick taps on the window.

The Driver rolls down the glass.

"I'm tracking this car, if you don't take her right home, I'll find you."

Oh my God. What a crazy person.

From the backseat, I watch the Driver bob his head in agreement multiple times. "Yes, sir, right home."

Maverick doesn't glance back at me as he steps away from the curb.

The drive toward my place is mainly silent. I'm guessing the Driver is shitting his pants in fear of the wrath of Maverick.

When I'm finally home and curled up in my bed, I reflect on the insane day. I can't believe Maverick suggested I speak to the person who killed Dylan. My real fiancé. If I ever saw their face ... I'd end up in an orange jumpsuit right next to them after committing murder.

Maverick should worry about his own orange jumpsuit and get off my back.

EMMA

Avoiding him for days has been easy since work has been out of control. More emails have come in about Maverick's company; especially about the resort he's collecting money to develop.

But everywhere I research, it all checks out. Honest work.

Who hates Maverick enough to bring on this investigation? If I don't clear his name for good, someone is bound to alert the Federal Trade Commission, which would bring hell down upon Maverick.

If he's guilty.

Even if he is innocent, an investigation by the FTC is a stressful process.

My phone vibrates on my desk for the millionth time today.

"What?" I answer.

"Ruby invited me to dinner," Maverick says.

"She did what?" I shout.

"To get to know me better before the wedding, according to her. Probably to ask me more questions to see if I know you well enough." He laughs.

The wedding is nearly a month and a half away. Something else I've been avoiding.

"When is this dinner?" There is no way my grandmother is going to interrogate Maverick without me present.

"Tonight."

"Tonight?" I repeat. I am supposed to be live in the 11 p.m. newscast. There's no way I can leave work. "Can you reschedule?"

"You want to call Ruby and ask her to change her dinner plans?"

Grandmother won't change plans for anyone especially her unwedded granddaughter.

My phone explodes with a series of text messages from my assignment desk editor about a potentially breaking news story I need to rush out the door to cover.

"Well, crap. I have to go. Breaking news. I guess, um," my heart races thinking about how awkward it will be with Grandmother and Maverick, "enjoy your dinner. Good luck. Call me as soon as you leave."

"Don't worry. I'll keep up the charade," he says.

The line goes dead.

The charade.

I'm always the one who mentions how this relationship isn't real. Why does it irritate me that he's playing along?

My phone vibrates about a million more times. I can't sit here ruminating over Maverick after I flipped out on him about Dylan.

I've got to get to work before Kreepy Karl steals my story and my career.



My breaking news alert ended up being a flop.

That's the worst feeling as a reporter.

What we thought was a church shooting ended up being a homeless man making noise when he woke up startled by the church orchestra. A homeless man not being a shooter is not newsworthy. Just like how we do not report about all the planes that land safely. People want the worst of the worst.

And all of this caused me to miss my grandmother getting one-on-one time with Maverick. The man she said had shady eyes once before. Does she still think that?

I don't know because Maverick hasn't answered all two thousand of my phone calls.

Without second-guessing myself, I catch a Driver to Grandmother's building.

It's after 1:00 a.m. when I knock on her door. My fake fiancé is the one who answers it with the biggest smile on his cheery face, holding a glass of red wine, and is that ... yes, I hear Grandmother laughing somewhere inside.

"Did she drug you?" I sniff his wine glass. Why do I always think I can sniff out drugs? This is not one of my skills.

"No." Maverick laughs. "Ruby's hilarious. Come in." He gestures for me to enter my own grandmother's apartment as if I'm the guest.

"Emma, your story tonight was quite dull," is the first thing Grandmother says when I join her in the living room.

Oh yes, she's real hilarious.

And she's sitting in the living room, which has always been merely for show. She's acting casual with Maverick? What's the ulterior motive here?

The man of the hour takes a seat beside me on the couch. “I thought it was newsworthy. Can you imagine how terrifying it must have been for everyone in mass thinking there was a shooter?” Maverick shakes his head. “Good job, like always.”

I wish he’d lean over and give me one of those side of the head kisses right about now. I could use the comfort.

“Too bad it wasn’t anything substantial,” Grandma says.

“So why didn’t you tell me you got your head stuck in the banister when you were a kid?” Maverick laughs. Normally, I’d appreciate a change of subject but not when it’s to humiliate me.

“We had to call the paramedics to cut the bars off.” Grandmother joins in on the laughter. She’s laughing so hard she pats at her eyes with a tissue. I’ve never seen this display of humility before. But it’s no surprise it’s at my expense.

I roll my eyes. “Did you two roast me all night?”

They make eyes at one another and laugh again.

“I was getting to know your fiancé a little better, Emma.”

“You didn’t with the last one,” I mumble under my breath.

Maverick sits up straighter but doesn’t say a word. He’s no longer laughing.

“What was that? Speak up.” Grandmother squares off her shoulders to fully face me.

Standing up from the couch, I speak as clearly as I can, “I said ... you didn’t get to know my last fiancé.”

“You were a child then.”

A stab to my heart as my knees nearly buckle.

“What does my age have to do with anything?” I ask.

She crosses her ankles. “Getting married in college is risky. Most kids can’t commit to a major, let alone a husband.”

“But I’m not most people. I knew my major since elementary school and I loved Dylan.”

“I did not support your foolish decision.” She pauses. “But this one, I do.” She nods toward Maverick.

“You didn’t even like Maverick before tonight.”

Grandma shrugs. “I guess I was a bad judge of character.”

Apparently, that runs in our family.

Without looking back, I storm out of her apartment building. Red encompasses my vision. Without knowing how I managed it, I end up back at my not-so-glamorous bachelorette pad.

My hands shake as tears gush down my hot face.

I did not support your foolish decision.

Fuck off, old lady.

And the fact she approves of Maverick all of a sudden after hating his guts. Warning me against him, to be exact. Shady eyes or some bullshit she said when finding him with that hooker at the dinner she dropped the bomb on my life at.

My feet guide me to my bedroom closet. Pulling out a box I keep tucked in the back, I find my college mementos—something I haven’t looked at in years.

It wasn’t lost. Instead, I purposefully avoided the box.

My fingers brush against the soft cashmere scarf Dylan gave me during a football game to keep warm.

Blushing, I find the tacky red garter belt I wore under my dress the night I lost my virginity to him.

Laughing at the cheesy “Love Coupons” he printed for our first Valentine’s Day together. One night of making smokin’ hot love.

Two tickets to see *Wicked: The Musical* on Broadway. Dylan saved up enough money to get us great seats because he knew it meant a lot to me.

A cheap plastic fork I kept from a midnight picnic. We snuck into the park near my mom’s building to lie under the stars while eating junk food.

The recipe for his grandmother's chocolate chip cookies. They were his favorites, so I made them each year for his birthday.

A crumpled-up piece of paper rests inside the box. I smooth it out and instantly wish I hadn't.

How did this end up here?

This is "the list" I made about the man I want to be with. I made this list a few years ago when Eve wouldn't get off my back. I must have tucked it in here accidentally.

The list reads: tall, dark hair, mesmerizing eyes, highly ambitious, trustworthy, makes me laugh, calms my anxieties, puts up with my crazy family, supports my career, doesn't try to change me, generous, fiercely and loyally looks out for those he loves.

My hand shakes as I crumble up the white college-lined piece of paper yet again. This list, which I made and quickly regretted, represents ... Maverick.

Looking back in the box, tucked under a stack of playing cards, I nearly faint when I spot ... a white feather.

My hand shakes as the dense feather weighs me down as if it's the size of an elephant.

What is a feather doing in my memory box?

Why did I keep this?

Why can't I remember what this represents?

Where did this come from?

Dropping the feather, I sprint to the bathroom as it floats to the floor. Leaning over the toilet, I vomit as tears stream down my face. Continuing to dry heave, I clutch my chest until I collapse and curl up in the fetal position.

Surrender. If I could wave my white flag, I would.

Tears fall for all the years I've lost with Dylan.

Tears for the diploma in criminal justice he was a semester shy of earning.

Tears for the wedding plans canceled.

Tears for the memories forgotten in the box.

Tears for the babies we'd never have. The twin boys we dreamed about, who'd run around our backyard in the grass with our family dog when we move out of the city.

The traditions we'd never pass down as a couple, the laughs we'll never share, the secrets we'll never make.

A life supposed to be built together with the man who kissed me in the rain, could make me smile on my worst day, and promised me the world.

The entire world was meant to be mine to share with Dylan.

He promised. That liar! It doesn't feel like I have the world.

I'm empty. And deep down I know, I'm angry. Angry with Dylan for leaving me. Angry with him for dying. It sounds like the most shameful and selfish thing to say and I've buried this deep within me.

Who in their right mind would hate someone who did nothing wrong? Who died?

Me.

All the tears I've never shed for the boy who was my world create a messy pool on my bathroom floor. If it were possible to drown in them, I would.

At some point the bathroom tile floor becomes my bed.

My skin shivering wakes me up from my slumber and I rub my dry eyes. I know better than to sleep in my contacts, but I haven't slept this hard in months. *Years*, if I'm being honest. The sobs of desperation knocked me out cold.

Is that pounding on the front door?

Can't be. Stumbling into my bedroom, I read the clock: 3:00 a.m.

Knock. Knock.

Pinching my own arm to wake me from this freakish dream, I bruise my flesh. Ouch. Not a dream.

Peering through the peephole, Maverick is on the other side. The man I ditched with my grandmother.

“Emma! Are you okay?” He pounds on the door.

“I’m fine.” I swing it open.

“Why haven’t you answered your phone?” He pushes his way inside past me.

“I didn’t hear it,” I mumble, utterly confused by what’s going on. “Did you call?”

“Are you drunk?” Maverick holds on to my arms as he scans my face. “Were you crying?”

It all comes flashing back—my grandmother’s harsh words, the memory box, the feather, the tears.

Pulling my arms free of his hold, I go to the kitchen for a glass of much needed water. “Why are you here?”

Maverick follows on my heels. “After you didn’t answer all three hundred of my calls, I needed to see if you were okay.” He rubs his eyes. “Especially after that man on the street the other night.”

Downing a bottle of water, my mouth is still dry. “I’m fine.”

Pushing past him, I round the corner and curl up in my bed.

“What are you doing?” Maverick follows me into the room.

“I’m tired.” Pulling the covers up toward my face, I stare into Maverick’s blue eyes as he stands in the doorway. “Just shut up and lie down.”

Nodding at the spot next to me, my eyes go heavy with sleep before I see if Maverick does what I told him.



Is that what I think it is?

No. There's no possible way.

*Keep your eyes closed. Maybe it's another sexy dream.
Let's finish it!*

Maverick stirs in his sleep, pressing his hard morning cock right against my rear.

My eyes fly open. Yes, it definitely is what I think it is.

Moving with the ease of a ballerina, I slide out of bed and hightail it to the bathroom to have my panic attack in peace and quiet.

Maverick slept with me.

*Don't tease! He didn't "sleep with you" sleep with you ...
in the way we'd like.*

Another man hasn't spent the night with me since Dylan. Yes, I've had sex with a few others, but it was a quick thing and it was never intimate. Spending the night in bed with someone is intimate. It's something I've been openly avoiding.

Splashing my face with ice-cold water, I stifle a scream.

"Everything all right in there?" Maverick asks.

Oh great, now he's going to assume I have bowel problems by the length of time I've been having my mental breakdown.

"Peachy keen!" I shout. Bringing the palm of my hand up to smack my forehead, I can't believe I said that.

Not bothering to fix my messy face, I walk out of the bathroom.

Maverick is sitting up in my bed. I avert my eyes from the sight.

“You sure you’re *peachy keen*?” He smirks.

I hold my arms across my chest. “Why are you here?”

That should have been the question I got to the bottom of last night, but I was too exhausted and devastated to care.

“Wanted to check on you after you bolted out of Ruby’s.”

“You didn’t seem to have anything to say in the moment.” My foot taps to a silent beat in annoyance.

“I know.” He looks down at his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry ... exactly?” I shouldn’t push it, but I’m not used to people apologizing to me.

“You seemed upset.”

Turning around, I leave the bedroom in haste. I don’t have time to explain to him all the reasons why what he said was bullshit.

Maverick’s out of the bedroom and following me into the kitchen.

“What’s wrong now?” he asks.

“*Now*?” I spit the word. “I was upset. I didn’t *seem* upset. I had every right to be upset. My grandmother shit all over my first marriage.”

“Technically you didn’t marry him.”

Visions of red flood my eyes again. Déjà vu from last night.

“How can you both be so ... so ... ah!”

Skirting around Maverick, he grabs my arm to stop me from leaving the room.

“Say it.”

“Say what?”

“How you feel. What is it holding you back?”

“If I move on ... what does that say about the love I shared with him?” Staring at the floor, I can’t maintain eye contact.

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean *nothing*?”

“If you move on, it doesn’t change a single thing about your love for Dylan.”

A tear slides down my face. “But if I move on ... he gets left behind.”

Maverick pulls me into a hug. “You don’t have to move on, but you could move forward. You don’t have to stop talking about him or sharing his memories. I don’t feel threatened.” He squeezes me tight against his firm chest.

I don’t feel threatened.

Hearing those words slightly relieves an ache in my heart. Falling in love after the loss of Dylan sounded unthinkable when he passed. And over the years, I never met anyone I would consider.

But from the moment on that stupid plane when Maverick told me not to die and held my hand ... something was different. And I couldn’t quite place my finger on it.

Simultaneously I did not want to disrespect the memories of my late fiancé, but I also did not want to hurt anyone new by idolizing a ghost.

“Thank you,” I muffle the words into his chest while he holds me as firmly as humanly possible.

“What your grandmother said was wrong. I should have stood up for you right in that moment. When you stormed out, I gave her a piece of my mind. You might want to check that your dad will get his inheritance if you marry me. She might make some kind of clause ruling me out now.” He laughs.

“Thank you.” A mix of ugly sobs and laughter leaves my body. “She might rule you out if you spoke up in my favor. I’ll need to double-check.”

“If she rules me out ... would *you* rule me out?”

Pulling my face out of his chest, we lock eyes.

Hiding behind the notion this is a fake relationship has made it seem less stressful. Pretending the feelings I've developed for Maverick aren't real.

“No, if she rules you out, I'd still keep you in the game.”

Maverick brushes my hair back before pulling me into a tender kiss.

Gripping his dress shirt, I bring us closer and slip my tongue into his mouth.

“Are you sure now is a good time for this? Once you get me started ...” Maverick says between kisses.

No, now is definitely not a good time for *this*. But, to be honest, I don't see there ever being a good time to take a risk on the unknown. And that goes for any relationship. It's scary to put your heart into someone else's hands. To blindly forge ahead into territories you've never explored. Especially when the past is a murky one filled with despair. But it wasn't entirely heartbreaking and my memory box is a reminder of that.

A reminder of all the beauty that comes from relationships. The laughs, the love, the adventures, the secrets shared, the hopes and dreams we were robbed of but also the ones we lived out to our fullest.

Without a crystal ball, I have no idea when my last moment will be. Or Maverick's. And instead of wasting one more minute scared, I want to live.

For myself and for Dylan.

Pulling apart from our kiss, I say, “It's time to move forward.”

That's all Maverick needs to hear.

Placing my hand in his, I lead us back to my bedroom. Maverick's eyes read my face, but I appease his worries with another kiss. What started as gentle in the living room quickly takes a heated turn in the bedroom.

Maverick rakes his hand to the back of my head and pulls my hair, exposing my neck. He trails kisses and sucks down

until he reaches my collarbone. Gripping onto his strong biceps, I claw into him with my nails before he releases a growl against my throat.

“Those claws are a weapon,” he says.

“I want you to know who’s in charge,” I tease, knowing I’d bend to his command at any moment.

“You don’t have to tell me. I already know who’s in charge.”

Before I can say another word, he pulls my tank top over my head and tosses it to the ground.

Maverick cups one breast before leaning in to suck on the other. He circles his tongue around my perky nipple and the sensation of joy spreads throughout every ounce of my being. He pinches me hard and twists my nipple between his thumb and index finger. The pain mixed with his tongue super charges my body.

Breaking free from his grasp, I rip his dress shirt open, losing some buttons on the way, and shove him down onto my bed.

Maverick’s sky blue eyes go dark in an instant as he watches me hastily remove his pants.

Kneeling before his massive erection, I run my tongue up and down the length repeatedly. I want him dripping when I’m finished with him.

“Emma,” Maverick growls.

I let all inhibitions go and release the woman lurking in my shadows.

Sucking his cock into my mouth only adds to the growls and moans from Maverick. “Oh, fuck.”

Licking, sucking and cupping, I devour him while he grasps my hair and thrusts himself deeper into my mouth. Tears prick at my eyes as I choke on him.

“Come up here,” Maverick commands.

Getting in my last few sucks as his cock twitches in my mouth, I climb up his body as his mouth engulfs mine.

I've never been kissed so perfectly. He doesn't rush it along or drown me in saliva. Our lips tangle in just the right dance to make me melt.

Maverick's firm hands explore my body—caressing the length of my neck, around my heavy breasts until he reaches where I've wanted him the most. The slightest brush against my eager clit and I nearly jump out of my skin in built up anticipation.

He grins. "Oh, this is going to be fun."

"Don't tease me." I pout. "That's not gentlemanly."

"I'm no gentleman."

His finger works back and forth over my clit in a variety of paces to only leave me guessing. When it's nice and slow my hips circle fast and furious, causing my legs to shake uncontrollably. He changes the tempos and my body can barely keep up.

Letting out a sigh, I surrender to his control.

When I can't handle much more, he slides his finger inside of me, curling it up to a spot I thought was only true in fairy tales.

"Oh, wow," I breathlessly moan.

Maverick sucks on my neck while his fingers take me on what I'm sure will be the ride of my life. With my eyes clenched together, colors dance around my vision. Vivid blues, reds, oranges, pinks, and purples—they dance in the rhythm of his fingers on my body.

From around my clit to inside my entrance, Maverick takes his time with his hands. Slow and sensual set the tone.

When a rainbow encompasses my sight, it feels like my body lifts outside of itself and the colors explode into fireworks behind my eyes.

Shaking uncontrollably, I have the most vivid orgasm of my life.

And he isn't even inside me yet!

Maverick climbs on top of me as my body quivers in its aftershocks. His muscular arms enclose me beneath him.

Looking up at him before he enters in, I study his features. He's so fucking handsome.

And all yours.

Positioning his thick cock at my entrance, he slowly pushes his way inside. After the orgasm I experienced with his hands, this creates a fullness I've craved.

What start as slow thrusts as we lick and suck on each other's mouths, picks up the pace. My hips thrust into his, matching the rhythm pound for pound.

"Maverick." I slam my eyes shut.

Moaning his name encourages Maverick to thrust harder. My legs quiver beneath him. He lifts one and places it on his chest then does the same with the other. A new angle changes everything. The depth at which he hits inside my cervix gives me an out of body experience.

Glancing to the side, I catch a glimpse of us in the large floor-to-ceiling mirror in my room. My brown hair is all over the place, and my legs are up in the air, his muscles rippling as his hands grip into my flesh.

It doesn't even look like me. This woman ... she's different.

The sight of this luscious couple devouring one another turns me on even more.

When I'm panting, Maverick seamlessly switches positions and now I'm on top. For a brief moment, I pause. It's not my favorite position. To be honest, me being in control was a joke. I'd rather be led. I'm not good at this.

"You should see yourself." Maverick flashes me a wickedly devilish grin. "You're so fucking sexy."

Glancing over yet again at the goddess in the mirror, I confirm ... she's hot. We are hot.

I reach over into my nightstand and pull out a sleek bottle of warming CBD lubricant. Droplets fall into my palm smelling like peppermint which I rub over my clit while Maverick watches me with hungry eyes.

I'm going to ride this man like there's no tomorrow.

Because ... you never know, there might not be.

I position myself over his cock but before I can slide in, Maverick stops me.

"Put your fingers back on your pussy."

I tilt my head. "Isn't that what *you* should be doing?"

"I want to watch you touch yourself."

Before I let my judgmental thoughts run the show, I shove them down and run my fingers over my clit in just the way I know how. Maverick watches as I use the tips of four fingers to press into myself. The warming buzz from the lube increases all my senses as I continue to pleasure my clit.

"Enough," Maverick finally calls out.

He grips my wrist and guides my hand to his cock.

I sit my wet pussy on top of him and circle my hips. His body rubs against my clit in the most jaw dropping way, I fight to keep myself upright. When I don't think I can take much more, I slide him inside me. A sense of euphoria fills me up along with his length.

Maverick's grin is gone and his eyes reflect heat. He bites his lower lip, which gives me the confidence to keep going. My circling hips pick up speed before I bounce up and down. My hands rest on his firm chest while he cups my breasts.

When I'm going to explode, I collapse onto him. Chest to chest, we thrust in unison.

I quiver against his body as yet another orgasm rocks through me as he holds me tightly.

How can I have multiple orgasms yet he hasn't had one?

"There's something I'm dying to try." Maverick scoops me off the bed and over to the aerial yoga sheet I have anchored to a sturdy ceiling beam. "Have you ever fucked in this?" He holds up the gray silk sheet.

I shake my head. "Never."

His eyes light up like a kid in a candy store.

I've only ever used it to practice yoga or as a hammock to curl up in to relieve stress after tough nights at the station. It won't come as a shock that I've never used a sex swing either—which is basically what this resembles minus the chains and restraints.

"Get in," Maverick commands.

Hearing him tell me what to do turns me on.

Sir, yes, sir.

Slipping into the sheet, it opens to cocoon me as I lean back inside. My body hangs back freely creating a delicious release for my muscles as my spine decompresses. As I hang upside down with the benefit of gravity on my side, I can only imagine how great sex will feel.

"Spread your legs," Maverick commands.

Oh wow.

Taking his orders, I spread my legs wide. With my body fully supported in the sheet hanging from the ceiling, my legs can go wider than normal.

For a moment, Maverick simply stares.

I stare back as the sight of him standing over me naked is jaw-droppingly hot.

He breaks the stares by running his fingers gently up my inner thighs. A shiver runs through me before he replaces his fingers with the grip of both hands. My thighs in his grasp warms my core for what's to come.

Surely, a third orgasm.

Maverick teases my clit when he skims his hands around it to work them up my stomach and toward my breasts. He massages along my arms and neck. Every muscle deeply relaxes with his touch yet.

“Fuck me,” I moan.

Maverick pulls the sheet toward him in a quick motion and leans over my upper body to lick my pussy.

Oh my God.

In this position, my head falls back as his massive cock rests in my face.

Sixty-nine midair.

As Maverick treats my pussy like a five-course meal he can't get enough of, I suck his cock into my mouth. With the gentle rocking of the swing, I deep throat his length in my dripping wet mouth.

He growls into my pussy before nibbling on my clit. It's hard to concentrate on giving him a blowjob *and* receiving the deliciously sloppy oral he's giving. The warm pleasure intensifies as he laps over my clit. If I wasn't in this swing, the lightheadedness consuming me would make me fall over.

Before I orgasm again, Maverick steps back from standing over me. His cock dripping with my saliva.

Our eyes search each other's in a love drunken way to confirm we both felt it.

The intensity.

The overwhelming passion.

Mixed with the all-consuming lust to fuck each other's brains out.

Oh yes.

His gaze reflects the thoughts swirling behind mine.

Maverick steps forward. My swing is at the perfect level for him to thrust inside of me. Adjusting my body to get into

the most comfortable spot, I wrap my legs around his tapered waist and pull him toward me.

“Your body was made for me.” Maverick grips my breast.

It’s crazy how I feel the same—we fit together perfectly.

“I need you inside of me ... *now.*”

Enough playing around. I don’t have to ask him twice. Maverick slips himself inside my pussy. His fingers caress my clit while he pumps me. The pace of his hard thrusts rock the sheet back and forth which creates a rhythm between us out of this world.

Never. And I mean never. Have I felt something like this before.

I can’t believe I’ve had this amazing sex toy hanging from my ceiling this whole time.

My legs spread wide with the added flexibility only the sheet could allow me. The softness of the swing against my skin mixed with the roughness of his hands creates a delicious combination on my already overwhelmed senses.

“Oh, fuck,” Maverick hisses.

He’s hitting spots inside of me I never thought possible.

My hands clench in fists around the sheets to hold myself steady.

“It’s going to happen ... *again,*” I breathlessly whisper.

“This is it.” Maverick rocks one final thrust into me before growling out an animalistic moan of euphoria.

Watching his body convulse—knowing that was because of me—is the thought I need to lose myself. My thighs quiver and my vision blurs as a volcanic eruption pushes me to the edge.

“Whoa,” I say.

“Whoa is right.” Maverick kisses my forehead. “Was *Your Majesty* pleased?”

“Your ... *what?*”

“Your Majesty—the name I gave your pussy.” He chuckles.

I laugh hard until he carries me back to the bed where we both drift to sleep wrapped in each other’s arms, coming down from our orgasm high.

Hours later, when my phone nearly falls off my dresser, I notice it’s been blowing up—fifty missed notifications. What in the world? This hasn’t happened since our engagement news broke.

Eve, Dad, Jennifer, Karl, entertainment news stations, many unknown numbers.

Eve: Oh girl. How’d he take it?

How’d who ... take what?

Jennifer: Word got out! I’m pissed it was Page Seven that reported it first but it still seems like a half ass story.

Reported what first? Did my grandmother announce something again?

Clicking the link Karl sent me, my blood runs cold.

Billionaire’s Investment Firm Reported For Fraud. Fiancée Leads Investigation.

Is Their Relationship All A Sham?

The gossip column has photos of me snooping around several of Maverick’s properties. There’s an incrementing one of me peering through a window. Great, just great. It mentions how I’m the “lead investigator” on an “undercover operation” to expose the billionaire for shady business practices and bring down his corrupt plans. They claim my marriage is also a sham. Actually, the reporter says she applauds me for the length I went in order to find out this information. The line reads: “In the name of journalism, Blackstone will stop at nothing.”

My good name is being dragged through the mud.

And so is Maverick's!

This looks awful.

He's going to freak out when he sees this. Currently, he's sleeping soundly beside me. When he wakes up, I'll calmly explain everything about the original emails and Jeremy. He needs to know I'm not trying to "bring him down" in any way.

He'll believe me. I know he will. Especially after what we just shared.

Drifting back to sleep, I dream of our lavish wedding.

A real wedding.

Dad walking me down the aisle toward Maverick's smiling face. If I'm lucky, maybe he'll shed a tear or two because he's the happiest he's ever been and my beauty leaves him stunned.

Yeah, yeah, cheesy. I know, but I said it was a dream, okay.

But I never get the chance to calmly explain the shit show that's now only gotten worse because when I wake up, the bed is empty.

And the news stories have only gotten more outlandish.



FaceTiming my moms, they immediately pick up. Upon seeing my expression, Phoebe says, "Oh, girl. You got laid!"

The smile I was faking slips from my face and the sobs are back in full force.

"Are you okay? Did he do something inappropriate?" Mom grabs the phone with her hands and intensely eyes me through the screen.

"No," I sob.

"What's the deal, sweetie?" Phoebe takes the phone back.

These two were the only ones who did not text me about the articles. They must not have seen them yet. While waiting for my coffee to brew, I send them a few of the links. I watch as they both put on their glasses and read the screen.

Mom's hand flies up to cover her mouth. Phoebe's jaw drops.

"How'd he take it?" They repeat Eve's question.

"Not good." I grab a mug from the cabinet. "We spent the night together and when I woke up he was gone. I've called him a million times, but it goes straight to voicemail." The tears pick up their pace.

Between last night's sob fest and today I'm surprised my tear ducts can even produce any more water. Is it possible for them to dry up?

"You need to talk to him immediately," Phoebe says.

Pouring the coffee, I take my first sip. Fuck. It's too hot. "And say what? Most of that stuff is true ... in some way."

Mom's arms fly up. "Are you kidding me? These articles paint you out to be a jezebel looking after her career and sleeping with the enemy before you plan to crush him like a bug beneath your shoe."

Well, when she sums it up like that, that's what I need to hear to dig myself farther into the hole I want to crawl into.

"Your mom didn't mean to say that so harshly." Phoebe eyes Mom. "You can explain the situation to Maverick. Tell him the truth. The real truth, not this garbage."

"But what if he doesn't want to hear me out? Oh my God." My stomach drops. "If he calls off the engagement ... that means no inheritance for Dad. Unless I can find another husband." Now I'm pacing around the kitchen with the phone still in my hand. "But who would marry me? Especially after they know I'm an untrustworthy jezebel gold digger. And then, oh crap, what if I'm hunting down a husband and Grandmother drops dead or something? I need to do this sooner rather than later. And then, and then, and then ..." My

brain is on auto pilot, consumed with thoughts of doom and destruction.

“Earth to Emma!” Both Mom and Phoebe are shouting. Looking up at my screen, their faces reflect shock. “Get a grip. We do not want to witness you having a heart attack *and* a nervous breakdown.”

“What do I do?”

“You focus on Maverick.” Mom turns to Phoebe. “We’ll focus on Ruby. One thing at a time.”

Okay, I can do this. I’ve gotten coldblooded killers to spill their guts to me. I can get Maverick to come around and see the truth. Right?

“Thank you both. I’m going to take a shower and get to work.”

Mom and Phoebe smile. Before I can end our FaceTime, Phoebe asks, “So ... was it good?” She winks.

The sex. A flashback from last night floods my memory.

“You two are ridiculous.” My blush spreads from my cheeks to consume my face.

Mom and Phoebe high five each other. “We knew it!”

Figuring out a way to get my fiancé back has to be my main focus right now.

My fiancé. Real or fake?

MAVERICK

Billionaire To End Up Behind Bars

Portia throws countless newspapers on top of my desk, all bearing similar salacious headlines.

Undercover Fiancée Exposes Billionaire's Secrets

“Told you she was up to no good.” Portia crosses her arms over her chest and glares down at the papers. “What were you thinking proposing to this lying, no good whore?”

“She’s not a whore. Don’t call her that.” Technically, I never proposed to Emma, but I don’t tell Portia that. No one has deemed our engagement fake for the reason it truly is—for Emma’s inheritance.

Was this about her career the whole time? Something isn’t adding up. When I saw the news articles in bed next to Emma, I was fuming. My blood boiled beyond the point of no return. I couldn’t believe I’d been blind to her antics. She’s always been a bit ... off. But I chalked that up to her quirky personality. I love that about her.

Love.

I fucking loved her.

And she betrayed me.

“Are you kidding me? You are going to defend her, after all of this.” Portia waves a newspaper in front of my face.

“Calm down, Portia.”

“Calm down! What kind of spell does this witch have you under?”

“Enough!”

I’ve never yelled back at her. Normally, we see eye to eye on everything, but not when it comes to Emma. Clearly, I fucked up, though, because Portia was right. She did need me for something ... the scoop to a story that’s taken on a larger than life persona. Is this why she’s been covering lower-level stories? Behind the scenes she’s clearly been investigating. Now I can’t take a step out of this office without being trailed by paparazzi who won’t let me forget I’ve been sleeping with the enemy.

“Just great.” Portia scans her phone. “The Federal Trade Commission is on the case. They are coming here to investigate.”

She turns her phone toward me to confirm what she read.

“Let them.” I motion for her to get the phone out of my face. “We have nothing to hide.”

Even though we have never lied, it’s going to take an incredibly long time to prove that.

“Clearly, I know that. Someone should have told your good-for-nothing fiancée before she stirred up all this trouble.”

That’s the thing that bothers me the most. Emma didn’t ask me. Looking back over our conversations and interactions, they all feel empty and fake now. Was everything all a ruse to get me to come clean on what she thinks is an illegal operation? What does that say about her? Asking a man she deems a crook to be her husband? I know she didn’t do that for the story. She does need me.

I have a track record for attracting women who are out of their mind.

First Kate and now Emma.

“Wait,” I say to Portia as she turns around from my office door. “What’s the deal with Kate? Any update from the surveillance firm?”



Emma

It’s been days since Maverick disappeared from my place. It’s been days of me dodging the press as they camp outside of my building, the news station, and lurking behind the corners to crash the stories I’m trying to cover for my job.

I didn’t realize how annoying journalists could be until this moment.

Not journalists, *paparazzi*.

Maverick hasn’t answered a single call or text.

Why would he? I violated the one thing he asked from me ... trust.

Without being able to explain myself, I take matters into my own hands. I’m going to clear his name! I don’t care if it means ruining my own in the process.

Other journalists have blown up the stories about Maverick’s “shady” business deals, but they’ve done absolutely no fact checking. Everyone is repeating the same fake news from Page Seven’s article about my search.

What ever happened to innocent until proven guilty?

That’s not the case with these vultures writing smear campaigns about the billionaire who will end up behind bars.

This is serious. I’ve gotten word the Federal Trade Commission has begun their own investigation into Stern Developments. I can’t imagine what Maverick must be going

through. When the FTC steps in, they'll go over every document, contract, and signature your business has dealt with. The law team at Stern Developments must be pulling their hair out.

All because I couldn't finish my research quick enough to clear his name.

Who leaked the information about my investigation?

Finding the original news article, I see the reporter's name: Kristin Mayfield.

Of course! Our stations have put us in competition with each other for years. Going head-to-head to break hard-hitting stories first. Our segments have ended up in the same categories for Emmys.

Not only is Kristin great at her job but she's impossible to hate. She runs a local charity helping empower Black teenagers to become future leaders, she volunteers at soup kitchens, and she's stunningly beautiful.

She's a literal saint.

How the heck am I going to convince her to help me though?

A billionaire corruption scandal could skyrocket her career.

Looking up her station's phone number, I call her line and wait until she picks up.

"Mayfield." Her tone is quick and serious.

"Hello Kristin, this is Emma Blackstone."

"I was not expecting this call. What can I do for you, Emma?"

"I'd like to know how you were tipped off about my investigation."

"Why should I tell you that?"

I knew this was how this conversation would go, but it was worth a try. I'd ask the same question if I were in her shoes.

“Honestly, you have no reason to help me. But I’d like to know who is after my fiancé. I believe he’s in danger.”

“Hmm ...” she draws the word out. I imagine her scratching her chin, deep in thought. “Are you saying the investigation isn’t true?”

I’m careful with every word I say. She’s going to quote me in another article, I know it. “Yes, I was investigating Stern Developments, but I found no wrongdoings. Everything I researched was factual.” I’m sure to speak the last sentence as slowly and carefully as possibly. Quote that, Kristin. “But it seems as if someone is out to get Maverick with a fierce intensity to bring him down.”

“Fierce intensity, you say,” Kristin repeats the juicy phrases I feed her. “To tell you the truth ... I received several anonymous tips with some photos.”

“As did I. Did you take the photos of me at Maverick’s properties?”

“No, those were the ones sent to me as well.”

Another suspicion confirmed.

“Yes, it seems someone is playing us. *Both* of us.”

And it’s just the sentence I need to say for her to pick up what I’m putting down. It’s creepy to know someone is also following me around.

“Who hates you two this much?” Kristin asks.

“I’m not sure.”

Investigating who hates Maverick *and* clearing his company’s name before the Federal Trade Commission deems him a crook will take up too much time. They could be investigating him for years and in the meantime no one will want to do business with him. And he surely won’t want to do business with me.

“I’ll do a little extra digging myself,” Kristin says the words I’ve been waiting for.

“I’m going to investigate this as well. If you’d like to share information, I’m open to it.”

Obviously, I’ll pick and choose the information I spoon-fed her, which I know she’ll do right back for me.

“Let’s catch this asshole. I hate being played,” Kristin says.

Me too, Kristin, me too.

EMMA

On the plane ride to Jamaica, I have a panic attack. This was no ordinary plane ride. To get the station to pay for my investigative trip, they not only booked me the cheapest flight, but this is the smallest plane I've ever been on. It's rattling in the air as if it's going to fall apart any minute.

Gripping the armrest, I nearly rip it off when the plane dips low in a bout of turbulence.

The man sitting next to me is sleeping and he has been since the minute we took off. He's snoring incredibly loud and every few minutes he lets out the most horrendous cough, breathing whatever sickness he has into my face.

Great. I'm going to catch the black plague.

Trying to sleep ends up being a disaster. Looking through the files on my computer, I face the reality that the original investigation I was working on while flying with Maverick was pushed to the wayside.

I'm failing at everything.

My career is on the line, everyone thinks I'm a backstabbing gold digger, my relationship is over, my father is going to end up broke in the gutter, and my grandmother told me I better "fix this promptly." She's refusing to cancel any wedding plans until she confirms with Maverick that he

“wants nothing to do with me.” But he won’t answer her calls either.

Contemplating unpleasant thoughts about my meek future takes up the nearly four-hour flight.

As our rickety plane prepares to land, my neighbor wakes up from a coughing fit where I swear I saw him hack up a lung. “Man, it’s been a bumpy ride.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are preparing to land in Jamaica. Please take your seats. The seat belt sign is now on,” the voice over the speaker announces.

Get me off this death trap, stat.

Luckily with a tiny plane, the deboarding process is quick. We step off straight onto the tarmac and make our way back into the airport. Sensing planes nearby triggers heart palpitations.

With this being a short and last-minute trip, I didn’t check a bag. Wheeling my carry-on out into the taxi waiting area, I stand with a line of happy-go-lucky tourists ready to take in all that Jamaica has to offer.

There’s absolutely nothing “happy-go-lucky” about this trip for me.

My first stop: what I hope is The Giselle Resort. I need to confirm the money Maverick’s company is collecting from investors is being used for what it’s claimed. In recent years, other companies have been exposed for collecting millions of dollars from investors and pocketing it. Sending them plans, photos, and updates from “resorts” that are dumps, landfills or the addresses do not exist. Even locals have been paid off to continue the scams.

I know without a doubt Maverick is not running a scam. Using the phrase *without a doubt* is not taken lightly in my career. It’s as if my intuition has finally spoken up loud and clear that this investigation is bullshit. To be honest, I knew from the moment I sat down with Jeremy in that sleazy diner.

But like crazy for Coco Puffs Aunt Edie said, I wasn’t believing I’m a good judge of character.

That's how I end up standing in front of the most beautiful resort I've ever laid eyes on.

The Giselle.

It's exactly where the contract plans say it should be. It's not even finished with construction and the glitz and glam is already obvious.

"Emma, you made it," Riley, the station's best photographer, says as he walks up to me. He flew in a few hours before me on a separate flight. Apparently, the station had a bigger budget for his trip. They don't hate him like they do me. "I've taken video footage of the resort. This place is insane! I'd stay here if I could afford it."

He turns his camera around to show me some of the video he's already taken to prove that The Giselle is real.

"I'd stay here too." I watch his footage, knowing well enough I'll never stay on any of Maverick's properties. I'm sure he has a list of banned visitors and my name will top it.

"Want to go speak to the locals?" Riley asks.

"Let's do it!"

Before we can leave the resort, out of the corner of my eye, I spot a familiar face. A face that should be nowhere near this property. A face that should be back in a sketchy diner in New York.

"Jeremy!" I sprint in his direction as he takes off around the building. "Wait!"

He has no reason to run.

Riley dashes past me to block Jeremy from running any farther. "Hey man! Didn't you hear her calling you?"

Jeremy's hands form fists at his sides. "Sorry, didn't see you there."

"Then why did you run?" I ask when I finally catch up to them.

He shrugs. "What are *you* doing in Jamaica?"

He's going to be interviewing me now? I don't think so.

"I want to ask you the same thing," I say.

"No journalists have come to The Giselle yet." He looks up toward the sun and squints his eyes. "I figured I'd do your job and come see if it's real."

"You flew all the way to Jamaica to be an unpaid journalist?" Riley chimes in.

"Are you selling stories?" I cut right to the chase.

As a code of ethics, journalists are not allowed to pay for any kind of information for news stories but the paparazzi do not abide by these same rules. Jeremy could make a quick buck for any news on the infamous billionaire Maverick Stern. Considering the length he's already gone to slander him, if he had actual proof Jeremy's quick buck could be thousands.

Jeremy's fists tighten. "I'm not selling stories."

"Then why are you here?" I ask.

"I don't have to tell you shit." Jeremy nearly knocks me over as he pushes past me and collides with my shoulder.

Regaining my balance, I stare in shock as he gets into the passenger side of a small white car across the street. The car squeals its tires in a pursuit to get as far away as possible.

"Who do you think was driving that car?" Riley holds up his iPhone to capture video of the car.

"That's a question I'd love to know the answer to. Let's hope your phone's zoom is good. Did you get the plate number?"



Riley and I spend the rest of the afternoon speaking with local workers about their treatment, their pay, and their thoughts on

The Giselle. Everyone sings praises to Maverick's company about what a great experience it's been.

The contractors give us a list of local investors and I call to see if they'll speak with us on the record. Many agree and they say even with the bad news reports, they aren't pulling out their investments in The Giselle. They are sure it will bring them lucrative dividends. The international investors spoke on recorded calls uttering the same sentiments. They've never physically seen The Giselle yet trust Maverick and his team who have never let them down.

Trust.

Seems to be the common theme of my stupidity.

Looking at my phone while we stop to grab a bite to eat in an ocean front bar and grill, I flip through a few photos from my engagement party. Maverick and I smiling in the cheesiest selfie snapped a few moments before we snuck off for alone time.

You weren't entirely alone.

The memory of the camera flash sends goosebumps up my arms.

"He's still avoiding your calls?" Riley eyes my phone as I daydream about that night.

"I stopped calling." I close the photo app and put my phone in my purse. "I can take a hint, that's for sure."

"I don't blame you for trying."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, in our world," Riley picks up his camera, "everything is usually bad news. The people we give the benefit of the doubt to usually do screw us over in the end. If I were you, I would have investigated the anonymous tips too. If you didn't, another journalist would have, and we both know they wouldn't have Maverick's best interests at heart."

Ain't that the truth.

“You know when I report on his innocence that will not get the kind of coverage the initial reports did.” I flip the laminated menu around in my hands. “No one is going to pay attention to a billionaire who is *not* scamming others.”

“Maverick will pay attention,” Riley says.

I hope that’s the case.



Nothing scandalous reveals itself in Jamaica except for my run-in with Jeremy who has been avoiding my text messages.

Otherwise, the trip resulted in love and support for Maverick. It’s news I’m happy to hear, but the rest of the nation will not. They want drama, gossip, and bad-mouthing. They want to see the billionaire fall to his feet.

At least someone does.

Kristin and I have been emailing back and forth, but we are still in the dark about who sent us both all the anonymous tips. I gave her Jeremy’s contact information and she reached out to him. She confirmed my gut instinct that he’s creepier than Karl. At least he’s answering someone’s calls. However, we can’t confirm any kind of setup. Jeremy’s lips are sealed on where his information is coming from or why he came to Jamaica.

He’s clearly in on something but it could be a few options: planting information to tarnish Maverick’s name or he’s investigating to sell stories for money.

Breaking up my thoughts on slimy Jeremy, an incoming text message grabs my attention.

Eve: Did you see this? He’s hosting a charity gala in honor of rescue dogs. You should go!

Me: He's going to think he's attracted another stalker if I show up unannounced

Eve: Him not answering you, even just to tell you to fuck off is kind of rude.

Me: You want me to crash this gala to be told to fuck off?

Eve: I'm hoping it doesn't end that way. Want me to go with you?

Maybe if I had one minute I could clear the air. I could come clean about my wrongdoings and explain all the lies.

Me: I'll go.

But there's something I need to do before confronting Maverick. Something I should have done years ago.

EMMA

New York State Correctional Facility.

Driving through the gated entrance and into a visitor's parking spot, my heart races at an uncontrollable speed. My hands shake as they grip the steering wheel.

Calm down.

Easier said than done, inner thoughts.

Step one: Get out of the car.

Check.

Step two: Walk one foot in front of the other until you get in line outside of the prison.

Hours pass as I wait. Generally, on a work assignment, I'm immediately taken to the inmate or the officer I need to speak with. That's not how it will work today.

Other visitors surround me in the long line. We pass a set of lockers where we're instructed to leave all of our belongings except for IDs.

Once inside the prison, everything moves in slow motion—from showing my ID to signing a statement agreeing to the rules and regulations. Next, I hesitantly walk through the metal detectors without my shoes on and then I'm searched.

“Think of it like the airport,” a guard jokes.

I fake a laugh, but this is nothing like the airport. The trip I'm about to take is no vacation at the beach. It's a trip right to the pits of hell.

Another guard hands me a white card with my name, the inmate's name, and my photo on it. More waiting as I'm instructed on which bus to take to get to the area of the prison where the inmate I'm visiting will be.

After the bus it's another visualization inspection including lifting up my shirt to prove I'm not hiding anything underneath my breasts. My emotions are completely numb, I don't realize how awkward and exposing this is. It's as if I'm the criminal.

Then it's back to more waiting until the last name of the inmate is called.

"Hill," a guard calls out.

My legs stick to the plastic chair as I peel myself up. Into another room, I follow the guard and sit down in front of a glass barrier. Within a matter of minutes, the shuffle of plastic sandals dragging across the floor fills the room before a middle-aged woman sits down in front of me in an orange jumpsuit.

Her bloodshot eyes face me before she reaches her hands, still cuffed together, to pick up the black phone connected to the wall. I do the same ... minus the cuffs.

We sit in silence, listening to one another breathe.

"I was surprised to see your name on my visitors list," Lori, the driver who killed Dylan, breaks the ice. I've never heard her voice before. It's much softer than I imagined.

"I was surprised you agreed to my visit."

She nods as dirty blonde hair falls into her face. Gripping the phone between her ear and her shoulder, she struggles to use her hands to push the hair back. "His parents came a few years ago."

This is news to me. I'm not quite sure how I feel. Or how she does.

Without a nudge from Maverick, I would have never made the trip here. I've never considered it.

"What happened that day?" My voice comes out hoarse and dry.

Before coming, I told myself I'd approach this sit-down like a journalist—get the facts and be out of here before any emotions arose inside of me.

"I was rushing home from taking my daughter to ballet." Lori's eyes glaze over. "It was raining hard. Pounding on my windshield. My husband told me time and time again that my wipers were old and I needed new ones. But I was too busy to get them. Between taking the kids to school, dance lessons, and catechism to working full-time at the hospital," she pauses again without making direct eye contact, "you don't want to hear my shit."

"No, I don't."

My eyes are like ice. I don't want to know that she's a wife and a mother. That she had a hospital job and took her kids to extracurricular activities. I don't want to know she was too busy to get some new goddamn windshield wipers.

"Okay." She pauses yet again, which is getting on my last nerve. Spit it out already. "My daughter was screaming something about a missing shoe from the backseat. I turned my head for just a second, literally felt like a second," tears stream down her ghostly white face, "a split second. And that's when I hit his car. We were both going too fast." She looks down at her cuffed hands. "I hit him directly on the driver's side."

I can't look away. My eyes won't leave the glass. Peering directly into her sorrowful face, I wish this glass wasn't here so I could reach across and smack the life right out of her. For Dylan.

For yourself. Don't lie. Dylan wouldn't hurt her. You need this more than he ever would.

"Then what?"

Her green eyes peer up as she lets out an exasperated sigh. “There was screaming. A lot of screaming. I don’t know if it was me or my daughter. The next thing I remember was waking up in a hospital bed. *Chained* to a hospital bed.” She lifts her handcuffs. “A police officer came into the room with a nurse and they told me what happened. That I, that I,” Lori sits up as straight as she can, “I killed someone. I was read my rights.”

“You weren’t drunk?”

“No.” Lori tilts her head. “Distracted.”

“What happened to your daughter?”

The fact she wasn’t drunk and that there was someone else in the car with her is new information to me. I’m sure that was in the police report and news articles, but that was a dark time in my life. I tuned it all out. I knew what I needed to know—Dylan was gone.

“She broke a few bones. She survived.”

“Thank God,” I mumble and I mean it.

“Elise, my daughter, wants to become an emergency room doctor. She saw your husband on the scene and she’s never been the same since.”

I don’t correct her choice of the word husband.

“She’ll save lives,” I say.

Lori nods. “She’ll save them because I took them.”

“Took *one*,” I correct. Looking across from her, I know I’m not staring into the eyes of a coldblooded murderer. My intuition has been questionable lately, but I’ve sat across from guilty killers and terrorists. Lori’s eyes do not reflect the same sentiment. “What’s it like for you?”

“Prison is awful.” Lori looks around the room toward one of the burly guards at the door, who’s watching us like a hawk. “But being in here is not the worst part. It is not knowing how to live every day with the grief that I unintentionally killed someone. They don’t have any self-help books for that.”

I've never thought about this. About the feelings she'll carry with her for life. "It was an accident."

I can't believe those words leave my dry throat.

Lori's quiet as she stares down at her hands. Finally looking up, she says, "I'm extremely sorry." The tears gush like waterfalls down her splotchy face. "Truly remorseful. There hasn't been a day that's gone by I haven't thought about it. About the life I took."

The person I was when I walked into this prison would piss all over her lame attempt at an apology. I didn't come here for that. Did I? I don't really know what I came here for, to be honest. To pick the pieces of my life back up? The pieces that have been on hold for years. To seek forgiveness for the closure I desperately need. To right the wrong I've caused with Maverick.

To open all your closed chakras.

Lori will be in prison for the next twenty years. She'll never have a true relationship with her daughter. These four walls are all she'll know because she looked away for one split second in a chaotic but everyday moment.

Something I'm guilty of myself.

Being in a rush. Being too much in my own head. Never slowing down. Not focusing on the present because there's just too much.

"You have to forgive me." Lori clasps her hands together. "Please. Find it in your heart."

That crazy old lady Edie told me my heart is closed.

And cold.

And angry as fuck.

But it doesn't need to be. A cold, angry, and closed heart hasn't led to anything good for me. My track record of a lack of relationships proves that. Wanting to keep everyone at a distance and having no one to turn to in my moments of need are a reflection of my choices.

Except for Maverick. He wanted in and it felt nice to share my vulnerable moments with him.

“I accept your apology. I forgive you. And I know Dylan would too.”



This is the weirdest day of my life. From the prison visit this morning to the cemetery now, I’m standing at Dylan’s grave. And it makes me a shitty person to say this, but I’ve never been here. Not one time. I couldn’t bring myself to do it. To see his name carved in granite with years of birth *and* death.

Fresh flowers are laid at the site. I bet his mom still visits weekly. We never formed a relationship after his death. The few times I saw his family, it felt like we were triggering new wounds each visit. Until we lost touch.

This is awkward. I don’t know what to do at a cemetery.

Taking a seat on the cold grass, I face the headstone.

“I’m sorry I’ve never been here before.”

Is it weird to speak out loud?

I’m the only person in sight. I guess it’s okay. Who is going to judge me?

“I’m sorry I stopped speaking to you when life got hectic. I’m sorry you’re not here. I’m sorry I can’t remember everything about you and our relationship.”

Plucking a piece of grass from the ground, I fidget with the blade between my fingers.

“I’m sorry for everything.”

Closing my eyes, the tears I kept inside at the prison now come rushing out. I drop my head into my hands. Time passes as I sit here. The tears dry up, but I remain with my head in my

hands, eyes closed. Thinking of the memories I shared with Dylan.

“Can you forgive me?” I repeat the words Lori pleaded to me. I was able to forgive her. Would Dylan make the conscious decision to forgive me too?

He was always a better person than me. Yes, I know he would forgive me.

“I met someone.” I fidget with my hands. “But I bet you already know that. You probably know everything.” I lift my eyes toward the headstone then at the clouds. “His name is Maverick. I keep him at a distance, but the jerk weaseled his way into my life.” I laugh, thinking about the multiple plane rides. “He agreed to do a huge favor for me. I’m talking humongous.” I stretch my arms out as if he could see me. “Then I did wrong by him. I was afraid he’d hurt me, that I ended up hurting him.”

What do I do now?

Standing up from the grass, I place my hand on the cold granite and say my goodbyes.

“I’ll visit again soon. I promise.”

It’s like I hear him say, “Don’t be a stranger.”

Weirder things have happened than me hearing the dead.

Turning to walk back to my car, I nearly trip over my own feet when out of the corner of my eye I see it behind Dylan’s marker.

A white feather.

Leaning down, I pick it up.

“Are you serious?” I wave the feather in the air as I look up at the clouds. “Real funny, Dylan.”

This guy, he’s got jokes.

That’s something I’ll never forget.

EMMA

This was a mistake. On top of it being the longest day of my life, I agreed to come out to this gala with Eve.

After avoiding the red carpet and attempting to sneak into the side entrance, I'm standing out in the cold waiting because we were both turned away. Our names were not on the list. Apparently, this dog gala is only for the who's who to attend. But thinking quickly, Eve put in a call to Juliette. She and Clark will be attending and said we can walk in with them. Eve told Juliette I'm not a scumbag and not to believe everything she reads.

Lovely.

"We could call it a night," I say, pulling Eve's arm. "I'm tired."

Eve rolls her eyes. I didn't tell her or anyone else about my busy day.

"No." She pushes my arm away. "We didn't get all dressed up for nothing. We are getting into this event. Plus, I want to play with some puppies."

We wait a few more minutes before Eve gets the text from Juliette that she's walking to the backdoor to let us in.

I can't believe that not only am I going to ambush Maverick, but I am breaking into his event. This is a new low

for me.

Juliette swings the door open and ushers us inside. “I left Clark mingling up front, but I haven’t seen Maverick yet.”

What if he doesn’t show up?

“He’ll be here,” Eve says as if she’s read my thoughts.

“How do you know?”

“It’s his event. Why would he miss it?” Eve looks around.

Juliette guides us into a large room decorated for a black-tie affair, but there are dogs everywhere. Men and women in their best tuxedos and gowns playing with dogs.

“Isn’t it cool?” Juliette sees me eyeing the event with envy. “Maverick’s team does this every year. They’ll raise millions for local rescue shelters and all of these dogs plus many other animals will be adopted.”

Maverick with his heart of gold.

All I can do is smile even though my heart is jammed up in my throat.

What if Maverick doesn’t hear me out?

What if he doesn’t want to have anything to do with me?

“There he is.” Eve grabs my hands. “Go!” She practically shoves me.

Trying to go under the radar is nearly impossible as I make my way toward the man of the hour. I notice cell phones suddenly pointed at me as I finally stand before him.

“Can we talk?” I ask.

Maverick gently places his hand onto my elbow and leads me out of the main room and away from the cameras.

“What are you doing here?” he asks when we are alone in yet another hallway. I have a feeling this one won’t be as fun as the last.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

“And you can’t take a hint?”

I wince. “Apparently not.”

Instead of backing down, I square off to face him directly.

“I asked you for one thing and you couldn’t even do that,” Maverick scoffs.

“I knew from the start you were innocent. I do trust you.”

Maverick looks away, but I cup his face with my hands and force him to see me.

“How am I supposed to believe that? There are photos of you trespassing all over my properties. Clearly investigating. My reputation is on the line. And my *wife* doesn’t trust me.”

Before I can speak a word in my defense, he walks out of the hallway and leaves me standing alone.

Following him back into the main banquet room, I spot a microphone on stage. It’s now or never. Right your wrongs.

On my walk up to the stage, I stop a teenager and ask him to put this on social media live for the public to see.

No one really notices I’m standing there until I turn the microphone on and it makes the loudest buzz. People in the audience cover their ears.

That’s one way to make your presence known.

“Hello,” I say as the microphone’s audio levels out and my voice booms. “My name is Emma Blackstone, but you might know me as the gold digging whore going behind her fiancé’s back to dig up dirt on his company.”

An older woman near the front gasps and spits out her drink.

Apparently, I’ve got everyone’s attention now.

“Some of those things are true.” A few more gasps from the audience and more phones pointed my way. “I’m *not* after Maverick for his money. I’m signing a prenuptial agreement. Not that that’s any of your business.”

The older lady nearly faints upon hearing that. She sits down in a nearby chair and fans her face with her hand.

“But I did go behind his back. And for that, I want to tell Maverick I am sorry. From the moment that anonymous tip came across my desk I felt conflicted. I met Maverick on a plane ride to California and even though he was too bossy, I was instantly captivated by him. And not just for his obvious good looks.” A few women nod. “But because of his heart. I shared something very deep and vulnerable with him. Instead of shunning me, like most people do, he embraced me.”

My hands shake around the microphone. “I did not believe Maverick was scamming anyone, but the journalist in me was foolishly chasing the facts. It’s more than obvious now I should have asked him. Like with everything else, he would have told the truth because he’s an honest man.”

My eyes scan the room until they lock with Maverick’s. His expression is hard to read.

“Maverick’s company has done no wrong. I’ve personally verified every claim against him as false. I’ve gone to Jamaica and seen The Giselle myself. It’s gorgeous. I’ve verified every document, contract, signature, and business deal. This investigation was a setup and I fell for it to chase a career.”

I place the microphone back onto the stand. “For that I am sorry. The Federal Trade Commission will find nothing in this investigation either. We all know that. My mistakes not only cost Maverick the time it’s taken to sort this all out, but it cost me the love of my life. I’m sorry.”

Turning away from the audience, I rush off the stage and out of the room. It’s quiet for a moment and then the DJ turns the music up.

Standing in a hallway yet again, I catch my breath as I’m on the verge of hyperventilating.

“The *love* of your life?” Maverick’s deep voice fills the enclosed space.

“The love of my life,” I repeat.

“Can you love someone you don’t trust?”

“I do trust you.”

Maverick pulls my face into his for a long, dreamy kiss.

When we finally pull apart, he says, “I love you too.”

Jumping into his arms, I wrap myself around him and we stand there holding on to one another.

Deciding to break the silence, I ask, “Can you forgive me?”

“Yes.” Maverick kisses me. “Forgiveness is an act of love.”

It’s a full circle moment and the theme of my day.

“You sure know how to cause a commotion.” He laughs and puts me back on my own two feet. “You’re going to break the Internet with your confession about the prenuptial agreement. My aunt nearly fainted. My mom is somewhere around here. I’m sure she’s stunned too.”

Before I can make a smartass remark, Maverick pulls me down the corridor. We duck under a velvet rope we clearly are not supposed to cross.

“Do you know where we are going?” I whisper.

“No.” Maverick laughs. “Far enough away from watchful eyes and smartphones.”

My core buzzes with excitement.

Maverick points to a door. “Let’s check here.” Twisting the knob, the door hinges squeak loudly as an empty office space is revealed. “Perfect. Isolation.”

I laugh. “You’re too much.”

There’s not even a window in here. This is the saddest little office I’ve ever seen. A desk, a file cabinet, and a calendar hangs on the wall with a photo of a duck on it.

“Prepare to beg for it, Your Majesty.” Maverick pushes me up against the door for a hot kiss. His tongue tangles with mine. There’s no softness to his kiss like when he told me he loved me too, instead, it’s harsh and possessive. All consuming.

I grab onto his jacket and pull him in as close as possible. I ran my hands down the hard bulges of his biceps.

Maverick palms my breast over my gown and squeezes hard. I arch my back off the door to place my body deeper into his grasp. It drives me wild when he firmly holds on to me like I'm the prize.

“Oh,” I whimper and go lightheaded. “Just like that.”

Again, his mouth is back on mine. Maverick's hands trail from my breasts down to my ass and over my sex. I grow hungrier with every caress. When he brings his mouth away, I gasp in disappointment.

“Just wait.” Maverick wickedly grins.

He drops to his knees, lifts my gown and crawls under. I can no longer see his handsome face but as soon as his warm tongue licks over my silk panties my knees buckle. He moves my panties to the side and licks my clit before blowing on it. Electricity runs down my nerves. The sounds coming from underneath my dress of Maverick lapping up my need sets me on fire.

He slips two fingers inside of me and expertly curls them, I see stars. Closing my eyes, I rock my hips forward on his hand.

“Right there,” I moan before biting my lip.

He takes me to the point of orgasm and suddenly he's pulling himself out from under my dress. I pout in frustration.

“I could get drunk off your taste,” he growls.

The next thing I know Maverick pulls the front of my dress down and my breasts spring free. He takes a moment to savor the sight of me before he rubs his thumbs over my nipples.

When my need takes the reins, I push Maverick back and practically rip his tuxedo jacket off and pull the dress shirt out of his pants. I work quickly to undress him before taking my own time to marvel in the sight of his naked body.

Marveling is something I've never done. I want him, badly. His firm muscles are chiseled and statuesque. I

immediately desire raking my long nails down his chest.

“If you keep staring at me with fire in your eyes, I’m not going to be able to control what I do to you.” Maverick growls.

“Bring it,” I purr.

Maverick closes the short gap between us and pulls my dress completely off before tossing it to the floor. He spins me around so my back is to his chest and then pushes me down. I’m folded forward, knees bent with my hands touching the ground.

“This ass.” He slowly rubs circles around one cheek then over another.

I rock my hips around enjoying his touch until he startles me by spanking me, hard. I nearly collapse onto my face but I leverage my weight on my hands. The initial sting brought pain but this after-effect is pleasure.

I jerk my head to the side and see he’s holding a blue ruler in his hand.

How can he make office supplies so kinky?

“Again,” I beg.

I don’t have enough time to be confused by my body’s reaction because he does what I say as the ruler comes down on my flesh for a series of quick slaps. The sound of the thud is wickedly arousing. And is my pussy vibrating? Is that possible?

It’s possible! I’m vibrating all over.

Maverick gives me a moment to catch my breath when the ruler comes down hard on the fleshy underside of my ass.

“Next time I’ll have a proper paddle,” Maverick says.

A paddle?

My body desires whatever it is he wants to give.

When I expect another smack, he surprises me by rubbing over the spot where he’s been spanking. Maverick’s hands

move from my ass to grip onto my hips.

When he slips his cock inside my all-too-ready entrance, I bounce back and forth off his pelvis while keeping my hands flat on the ground. My arms burn with pain from holding myself up but I'm too caught up in pleasure to stop. Every inch of my body will be sore tomorrow.

Reaching through my legs, I grip onto Maverick's ankles to deepen the penetration. Every motion, every pound, and every thrust—it's all heightened from this angle.

"Oh, fuck," Maverick hisses. "You're flexible."

Shifting my hands from his ankles, I reach up with one hand and gently cup his balls.

An animalistic grunt escapes Maverick's mouth. Knowing I did that to him makes me wetter.

When I'm on the edge, I bring my hands back to my own ankles, afraid I'll collapse when my mind blacks out in bliss.

Maverick slows the pace to extend this delicious torture.

"You sure you trust me?" Maverick asks.

Moments ago, when I wasn't in a compromising position, it was easier to agree. "Uh, I, um," I look down at my hands on the ugly beige tiled floor, "yes. I'm sure."

He lifts up my legs. They are now on each side of his waist as he holds my hips. My hands are still on the ground supporting my upper body.

The wheelbarrow.

Maverick's thrusts are slow and deep. If he went too fast, I'm sure he'd knock me over. When my forearms burn beyond relief, he puts my legs down for a moment before spinning me around, lifting me off the ground, and sitting me on of the desk.

Sitting—now this I can handle.

Being face to face with him, I lovingly peer into Maverick's ocean blue eyes. They captivated me from the moment I locked on them on our first airplane ride.

“These lips.” Maverick runs his tongue across my mouth. “They make me want to do bad things.”

Making his way down my body, he trails his mouth to my neck, bites my shoulder, and then runs his tongue across each nipple.

I arch my back in delight. “Do all the bad things you want.”

Maverick smirks. And it’s just the permission he needs, to slide into my wet entrance.

A delicate moan leaves my lips. I grip onto his shoulders and rock myself forward on the desk and take him deeper.

Maverick picks up the pace from slow thrusts to hard pounds, which drives me wild. He pulls my hair back to expose my neck and then nibbles on it until he gets to my ear. “I love the way you clench around my cock.”

His dirty talk could make me orgasm alone.

Closing my eyes, I pull myself directly against his chest as the intensity picks up throughout my body. When I’m nearly at my breaking point, Maverick rubs circles over my clit and I swear, time stops moving. It’s as if the world is at a standstill.

“This is it,” I moan.

Maverick picks up the pace with his finger while continuing to thrust his hips.

Warp speed brings me back to reality as I experience the most delicious orgasm of my life with my man.

Maverick is mine.

We hold each other in sweaty embraces without a single word exchanged between us—the unspoken words of apologies and forgiveness lingering in the air.

When I’m afraid I’ll drift off to sleep in this random office, I search for my dress.

“I’d hate to fight with you again.” Maverick pulls his dress pants up. “But that was the hottest makeup sex.”

I'll need to pick more fights if this is what it leads to.

ONE MONTH LATER

MAVERICK

“Let’s pop champagne!” Portia rushes into my office.

“There’s no drinking on the job,” I say.

She drops a stack of papers onto my desk. “The Federal Trade Commission closed their investigation. We are clear.”

I smile. “Of course we are.”

“I knew we would be. It just feels nice to have them out of our hair.” Portia skims through some of the documents. “They included testimony from your fiancée in here too. A few of her documents came in handy, I guess.”

Our wedding is days away. After Emma’s very public apology at the rescue dog gala, we agreed to continue on with the wedding for her father’s sake. To be honest, I don’t mind the notion she’ll be my wife. She drives me insane, but I don’t want to be bothered by anyone beside her.

“Also, I bought those tickets you wanted.” Portia winks. “You’ll see them in your email.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.”



Emma

Grandma needs to be stopped. She's thrown a larger than life rehearsal dinner the night before our wedding that's bigger than the size of most people's actual weddings.

"Who are all these people?" I ask Maverick.

He shrugs. "I have no idea. I figured they were your family."

"And I thought they were yours!"

"Well, don't you two look like you've kissed and made up." Kristin approaches us with a mega-watt Hollywood smile. I've never met her in person, but like all other television journalists in the city, I feel like I know her. When you watch someone on screen for years, a sense of familiarity takes over.

But what is she doing here? Did Grandma invite her? She knew better than to invite reporters from competitive stations.

"Kristin, this is Maverick." I motion to my fiancé.

"I'm sorry for crashing the party, but I have something you'll want to see right away." She takes out a stack of photos from her purse and thrusts them into my hands. "It took me a while, but I found the person investigating you while you were investigating Maverick."

My cheeks flush red at the reminder of going behind Maverick's back.

"Isn't that your friend from college?" I recognize her from the bathroom at our engagement party. The hot redhead.

"My ... *what?* I've never seen this woman before," Maverick says as Portia joins our huddle.

Flipping through the photos, it makes me sick to see everywhere I've been, this woman has been there too. Lurking two steps behind me. Where was my gut instinct during all of this?

"This one is my favorite." Kristin pulls a photo from the stack.

"You've got to be kidding me!" I shout.

A petite woman in a black hoodie and sunglasses larger than her face is handing cash to Jeremy. He shows up in multiple photos with this woman.

"These two were in Jamaica." My stomach somersaults. "This really was a setup." As I flip through more photos, I can't forget her face. "She was at our engagement party. She spoke to me in the bathroom."

"You spoke to this person?" Kristin seems shocked.

Portia grabs the photos and peers at each one carefully. "These are not always the same woman." She flips until she lands on the clearest photo. "But this is Kate wearing a wig and a ton of crappy makeup."

Maverick grabs the photo and holds it up to his face. "It is. How could I be this stupid? To put your life in danger." He turns to me.

"You didn't know I was lurking around Jamaica. This isn't your fault."

"Does she know that you've followed her?" Portia asks Kristin.

"No."

"Are you sure?" Portia eyes her.

Kristin laughs. "Honey, I've been doing this for years. No one is as good as me."

Portia's fist balls up at her side. "I'm going to kill this bitch. I've had enough of this!"

Note to self: don't mess with Portia.

Maverick pats her on the arm. “How about we let the police handle this?”

“The police!” Portia shouts, getting a few glances our way.

“Haven’t we had enough *undercover* reporting for a lifetime? I sure have. Let’s call it in.” Maverick eyes the photos in my hand once more.

Kristin and I glance at one another before we bust out laughing.

“I’ve had enough too. Can we give these to the police?” I ask Kristin.

“Most definitely,” Kristin says. “Good luck, you two!”

The rest of the night goes off without a hitch.

It’s not until we are walking inside the parking garage of my condo’s building, I get that feeling I’ve been missing this entire time. We’re being watched. Someone’s prey on the cusp of being eaten alive.

“Slow down,” I whisper, pulling on Maverick’s large hand, which is tightly in my grasp. “Someone is watching us and I want to know who.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Maverick whispers back. “Run into the elevator and I’ll search the garage. Get inside. *Now.*”

I shake my head. Does he really think I’m going to leave him alone to face whatever danger is lurking in the shadows yet again? No. We are in this together—for better or worse.

Car headlights shine directly on us, nearly blinding me with their brightness. I can’t make out who is behind the wheel with the high beams in my eyes but the sound of tires squealing as the car speeds directly in my direction freezes me in place.

I’m the target!

My mind screams for me to move out of the way but fear holds me in my spot.

Move, Emma. Move your goddamn legs!

Maverick pulls me out of the way as the car nearly misses me and rounds the descending loop of the parking garage toward the exit.

“They are making a run for it!” Maverick drops my hand and sprints after the black BMW coupe.

“Wait!” I dash after him.

As I turn down the ramp in the fastest speed these stilettos will carry me, I scream in horror as Maverick dives onto the hood of the car like a superhero. Or a lunatic, you decide.

The driver loses control upon impact and then crashes the car into a concrete wall. Maverick’s body knocks against the wall and ricochets back onto the hood.

“Maverick!” My heart races at lightning speed. He sits up, holding on to the side of his face where, luckily, I only spot a small cut with blood trickling down. He could have been knocked unconscious ... or worse. “Are you okay?”

“Just peachy keen.” He rubs his head.

Slowly, I approach the driver’s side door. The hit was not hard enough to cause the airbag to deploy but a woman is knocked out and leaning her body against the steering wheel. I can’t get a clear look at her face as she’s wearing the hood of her sweatshirt up.

“She’s unconscious.” The door won’t budge when I pull the handle.

Maverick puts his phone down. “Police are on the way.”

“It’s Kate, isn’t it?”

I don’t need to see her face but for once I’m confident in my prediction.

Maverick nods. “I don’t recognize the car and without clearly looking at her face, I can’t say with one hundred percent accuracy, but it has to be Kate.”

As we wait for the police, a loud groan from inside the vehicle startles me.

“Fuck.” The driver picks up her head and looks into her rearview mirror. The sunglasses on her face are broken in half at the bridge of the nose; she tosses them to the passenger seat.

It’s not until she turns her head that her eyes widen. Maverick and I are staring at her.

“Kate,” Maverick confirms. “Are you hurt?”

Before she can answer, flashing red and blue lights brighten up the otherwise dim garage. The loud screech of the police siren is a welcoming sound to the formerly eerily quiet accident. Law enforcement will put an end to this madness.

Two police officers get out of the vehicle as an ambulance pulls in directly behind them.

With my eyes on the first responders, I miss Kate opening the door of the busted up BMW.

“Is she armed?” The male officer asks his female partner as they draw their weapons.

Kate stands in front of us, her hands at her side, as blood trickles out of a cut on her cheek. With the hood of her sweater down, I see her long blonde hair is a greasy matted mess, her eyes are bloodshot, and her leggings are filthy with holes in them.

She’s a different woman than the bright-eyed bombshell who leapt into Maverick’s arms at the airport welcoming her boo bear. Or the fierce intimidating redhead who bamboozled me at my engagement party.

“Put your hands up!” The female officer shouts with her gun pointed directly at Kate who does not comply.

Instead, she glares in my direction with a blank look in her eyes. Void of any kind of remorse for what she was about to do—run me over with her car.

Everyone stands frozen in place. Maverick and I are in the middle of this situation—Kate near the wall at the back and the police blocking the ramp.

“Why won’t you go away?” Kate’s words are clipped and laced with anger. “*You* are ruining everything.”

“Kate, are you armed?” Maverick steps in front of me, acting as a shield.

The police call out for Kate to put her arms up once more, warning that they’ll shoot as they slowly step closer.

Kate finally listens and holds her bare hands up but her eyes do not leave us. Maverick is now the object of her attention.

“Why is *she* still here?” Her tone changes when she speaks to him. What was harsh melts into a sound as sweet as honey.

“Emma is my fiancée.”

“But it’s all a ruse,” she calls out.

How does she know?

The police move in closer but Maverick holds out his hand as if to ask them to halt.

Is he crazy? Get her out of here. Immediately.

“Why do you say it’s a ruse?” Maverick walks toward her.

It takes everything inside of me to not pull him back. He wouldn’t approach his stalker if he didn’t have a plan. Right?

“Because *we* are getting married.” Kate twists a strand of hair tightly around her index finger. If she pulls on it any harder, it’s going to rip from her scalp. “You’ve been sending me all those messages. You want to marry me.”

“What messages?” Maverick asks.

“In secret,” she whispers.

Inch by inch, the police move in closer. They are now standing directly beside me.

“What secret messages?” Maverick’s rigid body language does not escape me.

Kate softens upon Maverick’s approach. “You know,” more rigorous hair twirling, “the ones on social media, and in the news, and ... everywhere. I’ve seen your clues.” Her eyes dart to me and quickly back to him.

This woman is delusional.

“If you love me, why are you trying to kill me?” Maverick nods to her car.

Kate walks closer toward him without glancing at the police. It’s when she places her hand on his chest that my nerves rattle. What if she hurts him? I step a little closer to the police.

“I would never kill you, boo bear. I’m trying to,” Kate glances at me, “remove her from our lives.”

“By running Emma over with your car?” Maverick asks.

“I didn’t mean to hit you. I didn’t realize you would be here together. I thought you’d sleep separately before *your wedding*.” Kate rolls her eyes. She’s not buying our fake wedding but for different reasons than most.

Maverick tilts his head. “Are you attempting to murder Emma?”

Kate looks at the ground. “She won’t go away. She won’t let us be together like we are destined to be. You love me and I love you. I don’t understand why you are going through with this wedding when you could marry me? Like you want to.”

“Because I love Emma.”

“No, you don’t!” Kate pulls a chunk of hair directly from her head so roughly there’s blood on the end. Getting a closer looker at her, I notice other bald patches on her scalp. “At first, I thought you were over me. I was furious. That’s when I sent the brick.” Kate clenches her hands. “But then when I did a little more digging, I saw your clues. I was extremely happy you sent them to me! I knew you’d reach out.”

“Kate, you crossed the line. You broke the restraining order a million times, you are attempting murder, and you need help,” Maverick says.

“No, I don’t!” Her scream hits a high, frantic pitch that echoes around the garage. “You love me! Me!”

Police quickly rush behind Kate and put her in handcuffs. She thrashes her small body to put up a fight but they overpower her.

As they walk her toward their patrol car, she's read her Miranda Rights but Kate keeps screaming about how much Maverick still loves her, how our relationship is a cover, and how she's done all she can to bring them together.

When the officers have her in the backseat, I stare for a moment as she peers out at me with malice in her gaze. Looking away, I can't imagine all the crimes she's committed up until this moment.

What else has she done?

Will we ever know the length she's gone leading up to this moment?

Maverick slips his arm over my shoulder and pulls me in close as the police car backs down the ramp. He kisses the top of my head. "I love you."

Those are the only words I need to hear to make the nauseating pit in my stomach dissipate.

"I love you too." I sink into his side more as the weight of the day absorbs me.



When we are finally in my bed, I reflect on what an unbelievable night we had. If I didn't report about crazy people every day for a living, I wouldn't believe this was my reality.

And tomorrow is the big day to get hitched. Our happily ever after and our 'til death do us part. Death almost came tonight.

If this marriage wasn't tied to my dad's inheritance, I would be calling off the wedding after a night like this—a night where I was nearly murdered by my fake fiancé's delusional ex-girlfriend.

But my dad will not be written out of the will because I'll be marrying Maverick, no matter what. I want this whole thing behind me.

Maverick walks into the bedroom while ending a phone call.

“That was the police,” he says and I sit up in bed. “Kate’s apartment has been searched. Turns out it wasn’t Melissa who moved into my building. It was Kate. She lied to Logan to throw him off her case when he questioned her. Melissa has been out of the country for months doing volunteer work. Kate set up a crime ring with multiple computers to send the news tips and anonymous complaints. There’s proof she’s paid Jeremy to stalk us and sent bricks with death threats to my office.”

“All in the name of love?” I ask.

When Maverick was talking to the police, I was texting Eve. Since she’s not her therapist, she cannot diagnosis Kate. But when I told her about Kate believing Maverick’s been sending her clues, Eve told me about a rare condition called erotomania. It’s when someone becomes fixated on the idea another person obsessively loves them. Often times, celebrities face this with stalkers or “fans” that take it to the next level.

Even in my line of work, I’ve seen viewers become obsessed with reporters. Security guards stand outside our station as we’ve had attempted break-ins before.

Tonight, Kate could have experienced a psychotic break.

Maverick climbs into the bed and pulls the covers to his bare chest. “According to police, Kate hasn’t caved from her belief that I’ve been sending her messages. But *you* seem to be a sore subject for her.”

“What did I do?” I roll my eyes. “I didn’t want to like you.”

Maverick laughs. “Tell me how you really feel.”

I shove his chest. “Don’t get off track. Tell me what else the police said.”

I could read about the police findings from the press release they'll send out tomorrow but I want to hear it directly from Maverick.

“That’s really all they said. No motive yet behind all the craziness with my company and the news tips. She’s being charged with attempted murder and they set no bond. There’s surveillance footage inside your parking garage, it was clear she was trying to run you over.”

Kate is staying in jail, for now.

Even without a police motive for Kate’s behavior, I know why she put a target on Maverick’s company.

My instincts are screaming at me to listen and I am finally going to.

Kate was leading me on a wild goose chase about Maverick. She wanted me to think of him badly after hearing he was a criminal. If she did a quick Google search about me, she’d know I’ve spent years exposing criminals and putting them behind bars.

The kind of man I would report on but *never* date. Kate wanted me to lose interest. And when I wasn’t taking my private investigation seriously enough, she turned up the heat and leaked the news about me investigating him to the world which did exactly what she hoped ... turned Maverick against me.

She’s brilliant in an evil genius kind of way.

Which is extremely dangerous.

I’m sure Kate thought Maverick knowing about my secret investigation would be the final nail in our relationship coffin. But it wasn’t. It was the fire I needed to get me out of my head and into action to fight for the man I love.

So, thanks for that Kate. You managed to do some good after all.

Now stay away from my man.

EMMA

“Oh, Emma, you are stunning.” Eve cries as she tightens me into my wedding dress.

“Oh my God!” Phoebe and Mom shriek in unison.

“Remain calm, this is still a *fake* wedding.” I spin around to make sure my grandmother hasn’t entered the room to hear that.

“Come on, you two are in love. Why can’t this be a *real* wedding?” Mom asks.

It’s a question I’ve asked myself over and over since the minute Maverick agreed to keep the charade going. We’ve never spoken about taking it from fake to real because we both agreed marriage was not in the cards for either one of us. After last night’s fiasco, I contemplated bringing it up but it felt like one life changing event was enough for the night.

A loud knock on the door to the bridal suite interrupts everyone fawning over my dress.

“Is everyone decent?” Dad shouts from outside the door.

“The coast is clear.” Phoebe opens it.

Dad doesn’t walk in alone. A man I’ve never seen before trails behind him.

“Who is this?” Mom asks.

“I found him outside looking for Emma,” Dad says.

My skin breaks out in chills. Did Kate send someone from inside a jail cell? What kind of connections does she have?

“You let a random man who was looking for Emma in the room?” Mom shrieks. “He could be a killer!” She turns to him. “Are you a killer?”

“He’s a lawyer. I asked him that much,” Dad says.

Mom and Dad are at a standoff while the rest of us stare at the older man awkwardly.

“I’m Emma.” I extend my hand to shake his.

“Mr. Jacob, and yes, I’m a lawyer with Stevenson & Co. You’ll want to sit down for this.”

We do as instructed by the random lawyer in my bridal suite, who no one has ever heard of before.

“What’s this about?” Dad asks.

“I’m here on behalf of Mr. Ted Blackstone’s estate.”

Uncle Ted?

“Okay ...” I trail my thought out loud.

Mr. Jacob passes a document over the table toward me.

“Ted Blackstone left his estate to you, Miss Emma Blackstone.”

His estate? Meaning ...

“Holy cannoli.” The number of zeros after my name on this check are astronomical. “This is all for ... me?”

Passing the document around the table, each one of my family members has a similar expression of absolute shock.

“If you could sign the pages I highlighted, we can move forward,” Mr. Jacob instructs.

“You’re loaded!” Eve shouts.

With this kind of money that means Mom, Dad, and Phoebe are also rich. That also means my father does not need

my grandmother's inheritance because I have one of my own to share.

"I don't need to get married." My eyes glaze over as I stare at the number on the page. "We're rich!"

No one says anything. All of the air from the room feels as if it's been sucked out.

"Oh dear," Mom says.

Oh dear is right.

THREE MONTHS LATER

EMMA

“Did you bring your anxiety medication?” Maverick asks as we take our seats.

“Crap!” I smack my forehead. “I completely forgot.”

“This is going to be a long flight.”

I laugh. “Don’t you know it, baby.” I lean over to kiss his cheek.

We’re on our way to The Giselle to check out the finished resort. When Maverick asked me, I was hesitant to agree. The last time I was there, it was part of my investigation.

We called off our fake wedding after the news about Uncle Ted’s inheritance. Grandmother lost her mind and threw a huge scene, in private, of course. However, she didn’t have anything to hold over me anymore. Maverick and I agreed it was best to put this ruse to an end.

The news went wild with their accusations about our canceled wedding and with Kate behind bars.

Now we’re ... *dating*? I’m not quite sure. We don’t really have a label and I’m not about to push for one. The last three months have been smooth sailing.

The plane taxis down the runway as all thoughts of where our relationship stands fly out of my brain. Gripping the armrest, you know the drill.

Please don't crash. Please don't crash. Please don't crash.

“Are you going to be muttering the entire flight?”
Maverick remarks.

I'd bet all Uncle Ted's money Maverick's smirking, but my eyes are glued shut, so I cannot confirm or deny that.

“Yes, I'm going to be muttering the entire flight and all other flights. Forever. Get used to it.”

He's quiet. No smartass remark? Did the use of the word “forever” freak him out?

Slowly opening my eyes, Maverick's seat is empty.

“Attention, ladies and gentlemen,” a man's voice comes over the speaker.

Maverick steps out from behind the flight attendant's first-class curtain.

“Hello! My name is Maverick and I'm traveling today with the love of my life, my darling Emma.”

His darling Emma?

His gaze locks to mine. The same pair of blue eyes I marveled at on the original flight.

“Emma, from the moment I heard you muttering about your fear the plane was going to crash, I knew you were crazy.” A few passengers gasp at the mention of a crash. “But I also knew, it was love at first flight. You are wild, reckless, and yet the most caring woman I've ever met. How you fiercely love your family and friends is admirable. Pretending to be your fiancé was the best time of my life.” He laughs, as do I. “Let's make it real.” He hands the speaker to the flight attendant and approaches my seat before dropping down to one knee. “Emma, will you marry me?”

“Girl! You better say yes or I'll marry him,” a woman shouts from the back of the plane.

“Yes!” I scream before planting the biggest kiss on his lush lips.

“She said yes, for anyone listening in the back,” a flight attendant says before popping a bottle of champagne.

My smile must stretch from ear to ear as I devour Maverick in kisses.

Once everyone on the flight has champagne, we all lift our glasses in a unified toast. I’ve never felt as comfortable on a plane in my life.

My grandmother is going to freak when she hears the news about an actual wedding. So will the rest of my family. And every entertainment news reporter who made our canceled wedding a “breaking news alert” on their stations.

It’s not until we hit a patch of turbulence I’m reminded of my fear.

Please don’t crash. Please don’t crash. Please don’t crash.

“Here we go again.” Maverick rolls his eyes. “Let’s go get ourselves in the mile high club.”

And we do. More than once.

TWO MONTHS LATER

EMMA

It's the day we've all been waiting for.

“Let us welcome for the very first time as husband and wife, James and Eve Croft! Please give them your heartfelt applause!” the DJ announces over the microphone as the music pumps up the crowd in the glamorous New York Public Library.

Eve stuns in a floor-length beaded mermaid gown that hugs her in all the right places. She's a Barbie doll brought to life; the most beautiful bride I've ever seen. And James, who normally looks a tad grumpy, smiles as if it's truly the happiest day of his life. I cried when he choked up upon seeing her walk down the aisle.

Clapping and dancing with Eve's bridal party, I search for Maverick amongst the rest of the impressive guest list. When my eyes land on him, I smile. He's as devastatingly handsome as he was the first day on the plane. And we'll be married in a few months ourselves!

Doing it the right way this time. I wanted Eve to get married first. I'm not about stealing my best friend's thunder when she's had her big day in the works *legitimately* for much longer.

After an extravagant ten-course dinner, it's time to dance the night away. Eve has both a DJ and an orchestra. Juliette,

Eve, and I dance to a Backstreet Boys song when none other than Aunt Edie shimmies her way over to us.

“Chickies! It’s so great to see you all together. My signs girls.”

“Aunt Edie!” Juliette and Eve pull the witchy accountant into a three-way hug. I stand awkwardly near them and wave.

“Juliette, why didn’t you bring that beautiful baby of yours? I miss my great-nephew,” Edie says.

“This is our first night out since having Oliver two months ago. I can’t believe I squeezed myself into this bridesmaid dress.” Juliette laughs, pointing toward our matching maroon gowns.

“I can’t believe this.” Eve smiles with stars in her eyes.

“What?” I ask.

“Look at our men over there.” Eve points to Clark, James, and Maverick laughing together across the dance floor. “Our signs worked!”

The signs nonsense again.

I’m not convinced feathers had anything to do with my relationship with Maverick working out. Yes, I will acknowledge feathers conveniently showed up in my most vulnerable moments of doubt. And yes, they were reassuring to my anxiety. But did they make me fall in love? Not sure I buy that.

“What signs did you guys pick?” Juliette asks.

“You don’t have to share with my nosey niece, if it’s private,” Edie says. “Same with your actual privates. Don’t share those with people if you don’t want to.”

The girls laugh. Again, more awkward fidgeting from me.

“Eve, you already know mine, but I’ll share with the group.” Juliette smiles. “Mine was ... bunnies.”

An animal. I never thought of that.

“Rabbits are a sign of prosperity, creativity, and ... fertility.” Edie nudges her niece and wiggles her eyebrows.

“I just popped out one kid, that’s enough for the moment.” Juliette laughs.

“You’ll have to take that up with the bunnies.” Edie pulls her in for a side hug.

“Mine was bees. Stupidly.” Eve laughs before covering her face with her hands. “They landed me in the hospital.”

My jaw drops. I’m glad I didn’t end up in the hospital because of my sign. Eve now carries an epipen but I had no idea the bees meant something about James.

“Bees represent dedication, hard work, sexuality, and wealth.” Edie pulls Eve into a tight hug next. “Bees are also a great reminder to balance your work life with some fun.”

Juliette holds Eve’s hand when Edie lets her go. “That’s definitely you. My little worker bee. Actually, all of those things represent you. It’s like you unconsciously picked a message accurate for you.”

How does Edie know this about each of our signs off the top of her head? Does she have a signs rolodex?

All three women stare at me when I’m silent for far too long.

“Well ...” Juliette places her hands on her hips.

“Don’t hold out on us,” Eve says. “I’m dying to know what you picked.”

Edie remains silent while watching me carefully.

“A feather. A white one, specifically.”

Edie nods.

“Well ...” Juliette looks at her aunt. “What does Emma’s sign mean?”

I brace myself for the answer. Honestly, we all could have searched online what our individual signs meant. Couldn’t we? If I wanted to know, I would have looked it up. But I haven’t.

Edie hasn't said anything yet. The dampness between my palms makes me uneasy.

Edie brings her hands together in a prayer like motion. "White feathers can mean a few things." Her long pause nearly gives me a heart attack. Spit it out, lady! "First, finding white feathers is often a gift from a loved one who have passed on; letting you know they are safe, well, and near you. Whether to be in your presence or to protect you."

"Whoa." Eve's jaw drops. "Dylan."

My body remains as stiff as a board, waiting to hear what else she'll say.

"White feathers are also a sign you're on the right path to the questions you've asked. I'd look at them as comfort or validation."

"Dude." Juliette grips my forearm.

"I'd like to note, your heart seems very open now. I'm not sure what you did, but good work, girl." Edie winks. "I know it didn't come easy for you."

She's right about that!

Reflecting on what she said brings me ease. Knowing Dylan could be near is comforting. I've pushed him away for long enough. After visiting both Lori and his gravesite, my anxieties have taken a backseat to the joy I've allowed myself to experience with Maverick. Finally letting myself love.

"I can't believe I'm going to say this, our signs all worked out!" Juliette beams. "Thanks, Aunt Edie!" She pulls her aunt into a hug.

Laughing, Edie says, "My dears, it was never the signs."

I knew it! She put some kind of spell on us or something.

"What?" Eve shouts.

"Inside each of you is a knowing." She points to our hearts. "You didn't need *signs* or synchronicities. Your encounters and your hunky beefcake husbands, they all would have come about, no matter what. Your signs were pointing

you in the direction of what your inner voices knew all along. To trust your guts. You are three powerful women, with or without your signs. I'm proud of you."

All three of us stare misty-eyed at the ol' witch in shock. She makes a wise point. The things I've been through in my life before *and* since Maverick led me to this point today, but it simply feels right. As if I would have ended up here with or without feathers.

Probably would have taken you much longer, though.

"You hens going to stand there and chit chat all night long?" Clark joins our huddle with James and Maverick.

"Who you callin' a hen?" Juliette playfully punches her husband's arm.

"You all look quite lovely," James says before kissing his blushing bride.

"Don't suck up to them." Clark laughs as he pulls Juliette snugly into his side. "You're already married now. She can't run away."

Juliette rolls her eyes. "We can all run away."

Clark smirks as she blushes.

"When's your wedding date?" James nods in my direction.

"Six months from now," Maverick answers. "We are going to take our time to plan it right."

While the happy couples talk and laugh amongst themselves, Maverick whispers in my ear, "Want to go find a place in this great big library to fuck?"

Without saying a word, I grab his hand and quickly lead us out of the reception room. We find a quiet corner near the romance section to appropriately turn up the heat, rattling hardcovers right off the shelves, they tumble to the ground in loud thumps.

"We gave those romance novels a run for their money," Maverick says.

I laugh. "Yes, baby, we did."

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

MAVERICK

This isn't my first time at a grave, but it is the first time with Emma. Every few weeks she goes to the cemetery to place flowers on Dylan's plot. It seemed like something she'd want to do alone, so I never bothered to join her, but today I asked to tag along. Her reaction went from startled to agreement.

After removing the old bouquet and replacing it with a fresh one, Emma stands by my side, holding my hand while we stare at Dylan's name. Like I told her on the night I put her grandmother in her place for dismissing Emma's feelings, I am not threatened by her love for her former fiancé.

I admire her—for being brave enough to love Dylan, to honor him long past his passing, and to open her heart up to me.

Emma looks deep in thought. I don't bother to ask her any questions or make a fuss.

"Ready to go?" Emma smiles up at me after we've stood here about fifteen minutes.

"I'll meet you back at the car," I say. She looks skeptical but leaves me alone.

Okay, I don't know if this is weird or what ... I think in my head. But I want you to know I'll take care of her. She's my world. I don't mind if you're around to provide extra protection for our girl. Our girl. In any other circumstance, I'd

never share. That's not my style. *Thanks for loving her first. I'll continue to do so.*

Walking away from the grave, a white feather floats in front of my face. I swat it away, but another appears as if out of thin air. Strange.

Getting into the backseat with Emma, she smiles.

“What were you doing?” she asks.

“Talking to Dylan,” I say.

She smiles wider. “No, I meant just now. Looked like you were karate chopping the air?”

“Oh.” I laugh, pulling her in closer to my side. “Swatting at something in my face.”

“What was it?”

“Feathers.”

Emma's green eyes widen before she regains her composure. I love how she always tries to act tough and unfazed around me. She's a softy though. Emma places her hand in mine. “I love you, Maverick.”

I don't know what the feathers have to do with love but I'll take it.

“Love you too, Emma.” And I mean it. I never saw love or marriage in the cards for me but Emma changed my life completely. When she cuddles into my side, I ask, “Want to go have sex in your new yoga studio?”

“I'm sure that's what my uncle wanted me to do with my inheritance.” She squeezes my upper thigh while laughing. “And yes, I'll show you my downward dog, if you show me yours!”

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading Emma & Maverick's story! If you enjoyed it, I'd greatly appreciate an Amazon and GoodReads review. It helps like-minded readers find stories they'd love too!

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